

Archaeological Service, Suffolk CC

Abbot's Hall, Stowmarket, Suffolk

Historic Building Evaluation

Report No 2005/140

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& Archaeological Service, Suffolk CC)

Introduction

This report briefly describes and assesses the historic features of Abbot's Hall, and summarises the building's development. It is intended to inform proposals for possible alterations, and is based on a site visit of 22nd August 2005 in company with Mr Tony Butler, Director of the Museum of East Anglian Life. Additional documentary information is derived from a portfolio of sale particulars in the possession of the Museum and a privately printed pamphlet entitled 'The History of Abbot's Hall, Stowmarket' by Pip and Joy Wright (undated). Abbot's Hall is a Grade II* Listed Building.

Summary

Abbot's Hall is a fine Queen Anne country house, probably of 1709, which retains much of its external integrity despite extensive internal alterations. The building was substantially extended in at least two phases during the late-19th and early-20th centuries, and is of historic interest as much for its Edwardian redevelopment as its 18th century origins. Architectural features of note include a particularly good staircase with barley-twist balusters, ceiling cornices and a panelled closet, while the Edwardian service stair and fireplaces are also of interest. Two original rooms on the upper storey are currently sub-divided by secondary partitions, and the Edwardian refurbishment appears to have involved the partial separation of the new extension from the main house. The brick cellar is contemporary with the building, and the widely held belief that it survives from an earlier house on the site is erroneous.

The Queen Anne House

1. Date and Historic Context

The medieval manor of Stowmarket was held of the crown by the Augustinian Abbey of St Osyth in Essex, and was known as the Manor of Abbot's Hall. The nearby barn dates from *circa* 1300, and it may be presumed that the existing house lies on or close to the site of its medieval predecessor. After the dissolution of the Abbey the estate passed through various hands, including those of Thomas Cromwell and Sir Thomas Darcie, but by 1561 belonged to one John Howe, a wealthy local clothier who is likely to have occupied and perhaps rebuilt the earlier hall. In 1681 Alice Howe brought the property to her husband Charles Blosse, the youngest son of Thomas Blosse, Esquire, of Belstead Hall. The Blosse family were highly successful cloth merchants in Ipswich, and Abbot's Hall was entirely rebuilt as a typical gentleman's residence of *circa* 1700, complete with a garden canal.

The construction of the new house can probably be assigned to 1709 on the basis of a cavetto-moulded brick into which this date has been deeply but crudely incised. This brick is now associated with the property but is entirely detached from its structure, currently occupying an internal window sill, and its precise origins are unfortunately unclear. The Schedule of Listed Buildings, first compiled in 1950 but revised in the 1990s, describes the building as ‘dated 1709 on stack’, but fails to specify which of the four chimneys this might refer to (none appear to contain similar brickwork). A disturbed area of bonding above the entrance door probably held a projecting badge or crest of some kind, but this too seems inconsistent with the dated brick, and in the absence of further information its association with the house remains unproven, despite the undoubted coincidence of its date with the stylistic features of the building.

The Blossie family retained the house for a relatively short period, and around 1750 it was bought by Samuel Rout who engaged in the malting industry. In 1794 his granddaughter Ann brought the property to another maltster, John Rust, who occupied it until his death in 1840 and pursued his business in a large maltings adjacent to the house (described in the sale particulars of 1877). From 1859 until his death in 1877 Abbot’s Hall was occupied by William Prentice, whose various businesses included including malting and the manufacture of fertiliser, and the estate was then sold to a local solicitor, John Hayward. Hayward rebuilt the stables, demolished the maltings, and added a new wing to the west of the house. A further sale in 1903 brought Abbot’s Hall into the ownership of the Longe family, who undertook additional extensive alterations and substantially enlarged the western extension of their predecessor.

2. Description (Design and Layout)

Exterior

Abbot’s Hall is a substantial Queen Anne house of brown brick with contrasting external dressings of red brick and modillion eaves that are very typical of their period. Built in five bays, with two storeys and attic rooms in its hipped plain-tiled roof, it is of symmetrical arrangement with a central entrance, twin chimney stacks to each gable and alternating pedimental and segmental arches to its front and rear dormer windows. A matching extension to the west (right) dates from the early-20th century and is discussed below. The fine stone door surround is set beneath a swan-necked pediment supported by acanthus brackets with cherubs, enclosing a panelled door and doorcase. A plaster-filled void above the door is an original feature that probably contained a date stone or crest. The sash windows occupy their original positions but the existing frames date only from the mid-19th century and contain narrow side panes to the front elevation. The brickwork is tuck-pointed with traces of red pigment to the dressings and is largely original, with the exception of the entrance surround which has been re-pointed and may formerly have been stuccoed. The eastern side elevation contains a central blind window to its upper storey (obstructed internally by an original partition) with a 19th century arch to the ground floor that gave access to a demolished conservatory. The rear elevation retains a large, original first-floor window designed to light the stair, but the fenestration has been disturbed on the ground storey: a hipped single-storey extension to the east appears to be a relatively early addition (its sash windows have subsequently been lowered to ground level) while a rear porch and shallow extension to the west date from the 20th century.

Ground Floor

The house is of standard early-18th century layout, containing a ‘central entrance passage’ leading to a fine original staircase with barley-twist balusters and carved brackets, the newel posts consisting of four common balusters clamped together (a feature also found in the altar rails of nearby Coddenham church). The balusters alternate between broad and narrow twists.

The partition between the entrance passage and the adjacent north-eastern room has been removed, but moulded ceiling cornices indicate the original arrangement (the picture rails, in contrast, often ignore original features and reveal early-20th century alterations). The north-eastern room is described as the drawing room in the sale particulars of 1877, and was probably designed as such; it contains mid-19th century shutters with a mirror between its principal windows, but has lost the panelling described in the particulars. An additional window to the eastern elevation is now blocked, and an external door in the same wall once opened into the 'vinery' of 1877. The fireplace contains a good Art Nouveau iron grate with Dutch tile surround and reeded oak overmantle of the early-20th century.

The larger south-eastern room was formerly the dining room and retains a good modillion cornice with original wainscot panelling and a late-19th century mock-Regency grate with marble surround (the 1877 particulars refer to 'massive marble mantle-pieces' in each of the four principal ground-floor rooms). The rear room to the south of the axial corridor appears to be the breakfast room of 1877, and retains an entrance door of fielded panels that may be original to the house, a ceiling cornice and a 19th century marble fire-surround. To the north of the corridor lies the library, with cornice, 19th century shutters and a blocked fireplace. A good Edwardian service stair rises from the end of the corridor (as discussed below) with access to the cellar beneath, and the interruption of the cornice in the corridor at this point marks the gable of the original house. The description of 1877 includes a spacious Butler's pantry, lavatory and W.C., kitchen, scullery and Cook's Pantry, but these rooms are not reflected in the inventory of the first-floor and presumably lay in the single-storied range shown in early photographs on the site of the modern western extension.

First Floor, Attics and Cellars

The first floor contained four 'spacious and lofty bedrooms' in 1877, as in the early-18th century, and was reached by the 'handsome principal staircase' and a 'back staircase'. A corridor opened onto an additional W.C., housemaid's closet, linen closet and two dressing rooms as well as further unspecified closets, although it is no longer possible to reconstruct this layout with precision. The two principal bedrooms of the Queen Anne house lay above the drawing and dining rooms and are indicated today by their ceiling cornices, which are interrupted by two later partitions that probably represent the Victorian dressing rooms. The smaller bedrooms above the library and breakfast room lack cornices, and all four are heated by good late-19th or early-20th century fireplaces of varying forms. The best original feature of the upper storey is the narrow walk-in closet that separates the two front bedrooms and retains its early-18th century panelling. Now in use as a bathroom, the panelling of this space is disguised by pink paint but contains framing for two original doors, now blocked, that opened onto the adjacent bedrooms in addition to the present entrance from the stair landing (which is also an original feature). This remarkable room was probably designed as a bathroom and WC, given its corridor access, but may also have operated as a dressing room. The lower tier of panelling is identical to that of the dining room on the ground floor.

The attic storey was divided in 1877 into 'six good and airy bedrooms' for servants, much as it remains today, although the doors and partitions relate to the Edwardian refurbishment. Areas of earlier whitewashed lath-and-plaster are visible beneath these partitions. The existing access stair is also Edwardian, and while the Victorian 'back stair' would have continued vertically before the construction of the new extension it is not clear where the second stair mentioned in 1877 may have been.

The cellar is reached by its original brick stair with timber treads, and is contemporary with the Queen Anne house. The area is described in 1877 as 'extensive dry cellarage and wine vaults'. Relieving arches beneath the gable chimneys contain later sub-divisions but may have given rise to the myth that tunnels extend towards the market place. The principal joists of the timber ceiling contain roll-mouldings and empty mortises, and were re-used from the ceiling

of a high-quality domestic house of the mid-16th century; while they may perhaps derive from a conjectural Tudor house on the same site they are not *in situ* and the cellars do not pre-date the structure above (contrary to popular belief). The various vertical supporting props are later additions.

Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Alterations

Having apparently remained largely unaltered hitherto, Abbot's Hall underwent a series of dramatic extensions and alterations in rapid succession during the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The single-storied garden extension to the south-eastern room appears almost contemporary with the main house, but the straight joint of its brickwork reveals it to be an afterthought. A small single-storied extension also appeared to the front of the western gable, as shown in early maps and photographs, and this may represent the lavatory and W.C. of the 1877 description. The 19th century saw the addition of a large lean-to glazed conservatory to the eastern gable, with a smaller open-fronted example against the southern wall of the breakfast room (both are shown in a photograph of c.1860 (Pip and Joy Wright, p.8) and on the Ordnance Survey of 1880).

The sale plans of 1853 and 1877 show a substantial and apparently detached building to the west of the house, which had been replaced with an attached structure by 1880. The Ordnance Survey of 1880 also shows the existing stable block, which differs from that shown in the earlier plans, and both alterations can be associated with the purchase of John Hayward in 1877. The detached building is partly shown in the photograph of c.1860 and was clearly of only one storey as suggested by the description of 1877. Hayward's reconstruction was of two storeys, as shown in photographs of the early-20th century that pre-date the existing extension (Pip and Joy Wright, p.14), although he retained the earlier, single-storied 'lavatory'. Hayward's work remained unchanged at the time of the 1904 Second Edition Ordnance Survey, but by the time of the Third Edition in 1928 the house had adopted its present form. Soon after his purchase in 1903 Herbert Longe demolished the remaining single-storey structure against the western gable (the 'lavatory') and built the present two-storey range to match the original house. This structure contains the upper section of the service stair, and a bathroom that preserves a good Edwardian mirror and tiles. Part of Hayward's earlier extension was retained, but underwent extensive remodelling, both internal and external, including the addition of a curious linked shed to the front elevation and new single and two-storey wings to the rear. These various changes may not have occurred in the same phase of construction, but were complete by 1928.

The subtle distinction between Hayward's new wing of c.1880 and Longe's of c.1910 is revealed by the outline of a first-floor window in the former's corridor cornice that is now blocked by the cupboard and bathroom of the latter. The same cornice is interrupted by a doorway that was presumably intended to separate the western wing into a semi-independent unit, perhaps for a housekeeper or family member. Anomalies are also associated with the new wing's staircase, which obstructs a window and rises against a first-floor partition that interrupts the cornice of a once larger bedroom. The insertion of this stair and its partition may be contemporary with the existing 'dressing room' partitions of the principal Queen Anne bedrooms, but it is impossible to determine the precise sequence of events with respect to these several late-19th and early-20th century changes.

Historic Significance of Architectural Features

The largely unaltered external profile of the original house provides one of the most historically impressive aspects of Abbot's Hall, although its rear elevation has suffered from the addition of full-height windows and sheet glass to the ground floor. The rear porch, which

appears to date from the 1950s, is especially unhelpful in this respect, but the decorative ridge tiles represent a particularly rare survival, which the builders of the highly sympathetic western extension did not attempt to match.

The fine principal staircase offers some compensation for the dearth of other contemporary internal features, although the panelled first-floor closet is also unusual. Such panelling would have been painted from the outset, and care should be taken to avoid damage in any future refurbishment: traces of early colour and decorative schemes may well survive beneath modern paint and wallpapers.

The internal layout of the 18th century house has been altered by the removal of the entrance passage on the lower storey and by the insertion of 19th or early-20th century partitions on the upper. It may be possible to remove the latter without detriment to the historic integrity of the building. It should be noted, however, that references to first-floor dressing rooms in the sales particulars of 1877 suggest these partitions had already been inserted by this date and form part of the domestic evolution of the house. There may be an option to re-open the internal doors of the panelled closet if desired, but the layout offers little scope for change in other respects.

Although occupying the site of the earlier 'back stair', the existing service stair dates from the post-1903 refurbishment (its upper section is housed in the extension of that period). Despite its Edwardian date this stair is of considerable historic interest, particularly as its banded colour scheme appears to be original. Any proposal to insert a lift access to the upper storey should ideally avoid this space, and perhaps occupy instead the position of the second stair in the extension (which stair has no historic merit and is clearly secondary even to the extension). It may be possible in this respect to remove the dividing doors between the extension and the original structure, which represent Edwardian or later insertions and are also secondary to the first phase of the extension.

The fireplaces throughout the house date only from the 19th and early-20th centuries, and are unlikely to conceal earlier examples. Despite their late origin the various coal grates and fire surrounds form an interesting corpus, particularly given their extensive use of 'Dutch' tiles.

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