

The Landmark Trust

FRESTON TOWER, NEAR IPSWICH, SUFFOLK

Freston Tower, on the south bank of the River Orwell, is one of the most intriguing towers in England. Its purpose and date were always a question of debate, but dendrochronology of selected timbers in the tower has finally dated its construction to 1578/9. We know that the tower was built while the manor of Freston was in the ownership of Thomas Gooding, a wealthy Ipswich merchant and mercer (or purveyor of fine cloths). Gooding, who had bought the manor from Christopher Latimer in 1553, played an active part in the affairs of 16th century Ipswich, a typical Elizabethan 'new man' wanting to leave his mark both in architecture and dynasty. He succeeded in both: Freston manor with its tower was inherited in turn by his son Robert and grandson Thomas. Gooding was also granted the right to bear arms in 1576, which may have provided the excuse to build this fine tower. The plaques on the south elevation probably displayed his arms originally, which showed six red lion heads, separated by a horizontal red bar on a yellow ground.

Other than this, we do not know why Freston Tower was built. It may have been a lookout tower against pirates or returning cargo ships, or an extravagant folly (and if so one of the earliest ones in the country), or part of a pleasure garden. The house that stands near the tower may well have been Gooding's manor house, although it has not yet been fully studied. A well-known but entirely fictional tale is that the tower was built for the education of the beautiful Ellen de Freston who lived in the late 15th century. Each weekday she was supposed to have studied a different subject on each floor - Charity, Tapestry, Music, Painting, and Literature culminating in Astronomy on the top floor. Slightly more plausible is the theory that it was built to coincide with Elizabeth I's visit to Ipswich in August 1579, but the most likely explanation is that it was simply a celebration of wealth.

Freston Tower was originally built to be looked at and out of rather than lived in - it has no fireplaces. Every opportunity is taken to allow the occupants to enjoy the views outside it - even the three-sided staircase has a window in each face on every storey, and the roof was perhaps conceived as a viewing platform from where the visitor can see up river to Ipswich and down the Orwell towards the sea. The fact that the first three storeys on the south side of the tower are windowless suggests that the tower may have originally been joined to another building long gone. Old photographs of the tower show a shadow in the brickwork of such a building in this area. However, all the known illustrations and prints show it freestanding, as it is today, and our archaeological and geophysical investigations revealed no evidence of an attached building. Early photos do show that a simple porch was added later, possibly in the late 17th century, and the remaining stump has been left.

Freston is finely built of red brick with blue diapers (overburnt bricks arranged in a pattern) on the north and west sides which were most visible from the river. The staircase turret against the north wall rises six storeys and opens onto the roof, which has an arcaded parapet, also of brick. There are polygonal buttresses at the four corners which rise to finials, and no fewer than 26 windows (and 33 if you count the blind ones). There is one room on each floor and a clear hierarchy to the windows and their dressings, which become more elaborate as the tower rises. The windows on the top floor are grandest, with six lights separated by transoms. The triangular pediments to the windows on the top three floors were still quite an unusual feature in the countryside by this date, a tentative foray into Classicism.

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Both the hierarchy of the windows and the remains of a primary door on the staircase on the third storey suggest that the tower may originally have been divided between service or utilitarian use on the lower three floors and more polite usage as banqueting house or folly on the top three. These upper floors were probably hung with rich hangings in Gooding's day but no original internal features remain today, other than an apparent hearth on the first floor that turned out to be a blocked doorway to the missing building.

The tower changed hands and fell into disuse in the 17th century and by the time John Ogilby drew his map of the area in 1675, it was marked as 'decayed/ruin', although the then owner, another merchant called John Wright, seems to have carried out work to the tower and house nearby. In 1765 Freston Tower House was advertised as a treatment centre for smallpox (patients had to provide their own tea and sugar and were charged between 3 and 6 guineas a week – a lot of money for the time). In 1771, the house had become an inoculation centre against the disease, 'with opportunities for fishing, fowling etc. ... boats and nets provided.' In 1795, Charles Berners bought the estate and his family were to live at Woolverstone Hall, the main seat, until 1937, when the estate was bought by the Nuffield Trust of Oxford University. Finally, the tower was bought in 1962 by Claire Hunt and her husband, who used it as a holiday home for sailing on the Orwell. In 1999, Mrs Hunt very generously gave Freston Tower to the Landmark Trust so that, in her words, 'lots of people can enjoy a building where I have been very happy'.

RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

The tower had been well cared for by Mrs Hunt over the years but still needed a considerable amount of work to make it into a Landmark. The entire tower was scaffolded for almost a year to repair the exterior. The brickwork required light repointing in many areas, using lime rather than cement based mortar. Originally the brick mullions and surrounds of the windows were rendered to resemble stone - a building material that is so lacking in East Anglia - and this decorative finish was reinstated, using old photos for evidence.

The original window frames were lost long ago and we have installed new leaded lights in bronze casements to recapture the glitter the tower would have had in Elizabethan times. The two plaques on either side of the fourth floor window on the south side may once have held Thomas Gooding's coat of arms. The lead roof was still in good condition, but structural repairs were needed to the pinnacles, the top of the staircase turret and to the arcaded parapet. We have replaced the crenellations to the stair turret, basing the work on early photographs.

Inside, the arrangement of the accommodation is as follows: the top floor, which has the grandest windows and best views, is the sitting room. Below that is a double bedroom then a twin bedroom, then a bathroom and separate loo, then the kitchen, and finally the hallway on the ground floor. The kitchen, bathroom and all services have been renewed. The timber floors have been repaired, and the missing ceilings renewed with traditional lime plaster. Freston Tower has been returned to its original splendour from the outside and is probably more comfortable than it has ever been on the inside. More than four centuries after it was built, it will continue to stand sentinel over the Orwell estuary as proudly as ever.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Freston Tower sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.