



The Summerhouse at Homme House

the restoration of a folly

This is the story of the Summerhouse, set in the Walled Garden of Homme House, and the rescue of a building thought both beyond reach and repair. It is a story of what is possible with belief, perseverance and the

incredibly generous support of UK heritage organisations. The Summerhouse is an enigmatic structure, the date, development and purpose of which has been the subject of delightful debate over many years, with conflicting theories and, indeed, many different names. It has been called watchtower, summerhouse, gazebo, observatory, pigeon house, dovecot.

From the available documentary and architectural evidence it appears to have been built towards the end of the 17th century and is of national significance as one of the most important pioneering examples of the Gothick style.

Archaeological History

An inventory of the late Sir John Ernle (1620–1697) contains what is believed to be the earliest reference to the Summerhouse. Dated 11th November 1686, it lists the contents and value of a “Banquitting House” as “one table & carpett four chairs six pictures £1”.

A full architectural and archaeological assessment was carried out by Richard K Morriss, MA(Hons) SocSc in May 2010, who asserted that the Summerhouse “may be one of the most important buildings of its date and type in the region and is also of national significance”. His investigation confirmed that there is very little documentary evidence related to the building, but that the earliest incontrovertible evidence of something on its site is a map of 1733. The map shows that by this date a walled garden had been laid out to the west of the house, with a saltire of paths within; in the north-western corner of the garden was a small structure on the site of the present Summerhouse - almost certainly the same building.

The two-storey Summerhouse is set right into the corner of the Walled Garden; the rubblestone and brick walls are actually canted around the building, leaving a narrow gap between it and them. It is unclear which of the two elements was established first. The building itself is in two interconnected sections - the main octagonal body and a semi-octagonal stair turret containing the main

entrance projecting from the south side. It is built of thinly coursed local sandstone rubble, only crudely dressed, with better quality ashlar sandstone used for the surrounds of windows and doorways.

In contrast to previous suggestion that the building was originally built as a pigeon-house and later converted with the addition of the polygonal stair turret, Richard Morriss’ analysis concluded that the Summerhouse was built in a single phase and subsequently remodelled only slightly. The existing doorway and window openings all appear to be primary to the masonry and the only significant external alteration has been the careful infilling of one of the windows on the south side of the stair turret.

The ground floor room has a brick floor and is lit only by a glazed window in the north wall. However, it has a large fireplace on the west side so was a room of fairly high status and not a service room, and would have been the warmer space in winter months. The first-floor room was clearly of yet higher status, with a near complete arcade of Gothick windows, originally glazed with leaded lights in frames fixed to horizontal saddle-bars and set into glazing grooves. Its fireplace and doorway are similar in size and form to those on the ground floor but the mouldings are also slightly more sophisticated. This room is well-lit, offering views over the gardens of the house and to the countryside beyond. The status and comfort of the two rooms and the spacious stair access to them suggests that it was built as a garden building of sorts for the owners of the house. It would have offered suitable accommodation for both winter and summer use, a little removed from the main house and yet conveniently still within the walled garden, and may have been used as a Banqueting House or simply a space for ‘peaceful bucolic contemplation’.

Stylistically, elements of the building suggest two distinctly different periods which paradoxically contradict the evidence that the building appears to be of one build. The three and four-centred headed doorways and fireplaces all suggest a very broad 17th century date, and the distinctive oval windows of the stair turret are typical of the later-17th century. However, the detailing of the windows of the main part of the building is a feature usually associated with the Gothck style popularised only from the mid-18th century onwards by architects and writers such as Sanderson Miller and Horace Walpole. There is thus a stylistic dichotomy within the design.

Richard Morriss concluded that the map evidence, and the stylistic evidence indicative of the 17th

In account of Wood & Mill	52 00 00
In the Mill-house	
In the Banquitting-house	05 00 00
In the Banquitting-house	
In Table & Case of four Chairs & Signatures	01 00 00
Wells in several places	
In great well containing three & thirty sheep	
and other well containing nine & thirty sheep	
Eight wells containing eight summs	38 05
In and twenty six	
Two & three and two Signatures	
Eighty eight & one of Wells	

In the presence of Mr. Simon
 In the Banquitting-house
 Diaper Napkins five damask Table Cloths three
 Diaper Napkins five damask Table Cloths three

Reference to 'the banquitting house' in Madam Ernle's account book, concerning the estate of the late Sir John Ernle of Homme House, Much Marcle, Herefordshire, 1686

Mill and the privileges belonging to the said Woods & Mill
 same are excepted in and by our Indenture of Demise heretofore made
 in the late Grandfather of the said John Kytle Ernle bearing date
 the 26th of June 1686 And also the Summer house standing or being in or near
 the messuage To have and to hold the said Capitall messuages
 Orchards arable Lands Meadows pasture grounds
 and other messuages and intended to be in and by those parts
 appertaining (except before excepted) unto the said John
 in the third day of february last past before the date
 full end and term of one and twenty years from the
 date Unless either the said John Kytle Ernle or the said John

Reference to 'the summer house', Lease to John Elton, 1704

century, tend to suggest strongly that the Summerhouse was built very early in the 18th century, if not towards the end of the 17th century, and represents a very early example of a Gothick garden building, pre-dating Miller's work at Radway Grange in the late-1740s or Walpole's work at Strawberry Hill. This makes "what is already a delightful, important and little altered example of its type even more historically and architecturally important". Even he, however, was unable to determine the date and/or significance of the lantern at the apex of the roof.

20th Century Decline

Photographs show that the building had started to deteriorate by the early 20th century, even before its designation as a Grade I listed building in the 1950s. By the 1980s its condition was beginning to cause serious concern following decades of neglect and decline, and when the current family moved to Homme House its decline was such that the building was unsafe to enter. By then the Summerhouse had been placed top of English Heritage's Register of Buildings at Risk in Herefordshire, with its restoration hampered by two seemingly insurmountable challenges. The first was the ownership of the building, as in 1994 it had been sold out of the Estate to an owner who subsequently moved away and could not be located. The second was a lack of available funds to complete the necessary repairs to a Grade I structure under such threat.

In 2001 Herefordshire Council's Conservation Officer was approached about the deteriorating state of the Summerhouse and the problem of the absentee owner. Thus began a long process of complicated negotiations which stretched across the entire decade and several incumbents of the post of Herefordshire Conservation Officer. Thankfully in 2009 this process culminated in Herefordshire Council agreeing to compulsorily purchase the building, after which it finally became part of the Homme House Estate again on the 14th February 2011. This drawn out process included a legally binding obligation to complete full restoration work within two years.

In 2006 English Heritage generously agreed in principle to fund 50% of the cost of repairs up to an agreed maximum, subject to ownership having been

regained. Over the course of the next five years the Estate faced the ongoing and very real concern that the grant offer would be withdrawn, along with the escalating cost of restoring a building in fast deteriorating condition.

That the grant offer was still available when the Summerhouse returned to the Estate over 4 years later is a testament to the historical importance of this unique building and the generosity of English Heritage as an organisation. A further generous grant from the Country Houses Foundation covered the remaining cost of the project, which was estimated at just under £200,000.

Restoration

By the spring of 2011, the Summerhouse was in danger of catastrophic collapse, and it was clear that complete restoration would require replacement of lost features or fabric that had become damaged beyond repair. Fortunately, photographic records from the late 19th and early 20th century were

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available that showed the configuration of the building prior to the partial collapse of the roof structure and lantern, and removal of windows and chimney shaft. Equally fortunately, fragments of the lantern, parts of the chimney shaft and all of the 19th century metal casements had been preserved in storage. Despite the dangerous condition of the structure it was possible, with care, to carry out a detailed dimensional and photographic survey of the building to accompany Richard K Morris' analysis of the architectural significance and possible development of the building. The octagonal structure was constructed from locally quarried silt and sandstone slabs with carboniferous sandstone from the Forest of Dean for dressings to window and door openings. Substantial sections of a thin lime render remained on the external walls and it was evident from them that the mud and silt stone walls were originally rendered throughout. Locally quarried sandstone tiles, many of which survived, had been the original roof coverings but it was evident from earlier glazing grooves in the jambs and mullions of the upper and ground floor windows that the side



The Summerhouse, early 20th century

hung, metal casements, were a later modification. The structure was unstable because it had never been fitted with rainwater goods so storm water fell directly onto the ground from the roof slopes causing the walls to 'overturn' at the outer edges of their bases. Furthermore, the configuration of the eight faceted roof is unrestrained so created an outward thrust to the walls at their heads. Finally, roof leaks caused the first floor 'diaphragm' to decay, become structurally unsound and cease to provide lateral restraint to the walls at mid height. Inevitably, therefore, the walls buckled and cracked vertically as they overturned and were 'pushed' by the roof structure and its heavy loading of tiles. All this presented a unique challenge for the restoration process.

Restoration work commenced in late May 2011. Ian Stainburn, of Ledbury based Stainburn Taylor Architects, directed the restoration, which was carried out by DA Cook (Builders) Limited of Winchcombe with the support of various specialists. The key stages of the restoration were as follows:

- i. Removal of roof tiles & underpinning: the heavy stone tiles were removed using a cherry picker and limited sections of underpinning carried out to stabilise the incredibly fragile structure in preparation for further work.
- ii. Structural bracing: a scaffolding 'corset' was constructed around the exterior of the Summerhouse in order to hold it together in the early stages of the works.
- iii. Stabilisation of walls: it was agreed that no attempt should be made to pull the Summerhouse back into its original verticality but to stabilise the walls, as found, cracks and all. The cracks were stabilised using 'Cintec' anchors and stainless steel 'Helities' before being filled with stone slips and tiles.
- iv. Rendering & repair to plaster work: the outside of the building was re-rendered using an NHL2 hydraulic lime/sand mix, designed by taking and analysing samples of the surviving external render and using locally sourced aggregates to provide the same colour, texture and "gritty" mix of the original. The surviving original render was consolidated in-situ. The internal plaster of the walls, much of which was original, was repaired.
- v. Restoration of ceiling, chimney & lantern: after the building was stabilised, it was possible to examine the roof structure and to consider what the configuration of any original ceiling might have been. There were no traces of fixings to the undersides of the rafters and there was no evidence on the wall plates of any fixings for cross-trees that might have carried a flat ceiling.

The wall plates were, however, stop/chamfered and 'hacked' to carry plaster; furthermore, within the internal angles of the first floor octagon, stone ribs extend up to wall plate level. It does not seem improbable, therefore, that the original ceiling may have been a lath and plaster, ribbed 'vault' carried on timber formers. If so, it may have decayed quite rapidly, susceptible to driven snow and possibly water through the pegged stone tiles.

Further examination of the apex of the roof and the surviving fragments of the lantern demonstrated, conclusively, that it was a later addition to the roof, probably contemporary with installation of the metal casements and other minor 19th century details.

After careful consideration and examination of the photographic evidence, it was agreed to restore the lantern to the roof but to leave the roof construction exposed internally, albeit with a lath and plaster ceiling between the hip rafters for practicality of use of the upper room. Repairs to the roof structure and the new lantern were completed using English Oak and all stone repair and piecings, including new sections of the chimney shaft, were carried out using Forest of Dean stone to match the original.



vi. Installation of 'French' drain: to prevent the same structural problems from arising again, the roof overhang was extended throughout by approximately 75 mm to throw water further away from the walls and their render coating, and a 'French' drain was installed around the entire perimeter of the Summerhouse to discharge storm water away from it.



vii. Minor repairs: 'JOS' stone cleaning was used successfully to remove graffiti inside and the ancient, but not original, entrance door was carefully conserved with the addition of thin slivers of oak and a new security lock with concealing oak lock box.

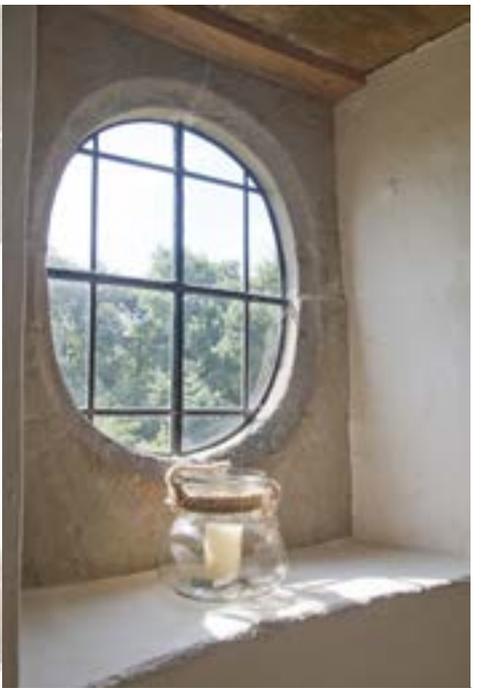


The restoration of the Summerhouse was completed in September 2011.

The Summerhouse prior to restoration, 2011



The Summerhouse undergoing restoration, summer 2011



The Walled Garden

The Walled Garden at Homme House first appears on a map of the estate dating from 1733, at which time it is possible the space was landscaped in a traditional, stepped layout. In the Victorian era, the garden would have been extensively cultivated to supply produce for the household, with the 2 acre area requiring the full time manpower of up to 6 gardeners.

Photographs from the late 19th century and early 20th century show that the area in front of the Summerhouse was planted as an ornamental parterre garden, with half of the wider Walled Garden a kitchen garden complete with glasshouses and cucumber frames. The foundations of the former can still be seen in the patio area on the south facing wall, including the little furnace responsible for underfloor heating set into the wall itself. The remaining half of the Walled Garden contained orchard planting, while a potato store was located through the green wooden door beside the pergola.

The general decline of the Estate during the 1980s and 1990s unfortunately also encompassed the Walled Garden. The loss of the wall cappings precipitated the ingress of water, and the growth of plants in the pointing also contributed to the crumbling of the stone and brickwork. In the 1980s the kitchen garden area of the Walled Garden was also replanted with cider apple trees.

By the time the current family moved to the Estate in 2001, the glasshouses had been dismantled and sold

off, the walls had become dangerously unstable, the orchard trees had been ripped out and in their place the whole area had been planted with Christmas trees destined for commercial sale.

Here began a labour of love to restore the Walled Garden with the limited funds available. First the Christmas trees were grubbed out and brambles tackled, and for a while the walled garden was simply a grass meadow (the few remaining Christmas trees can be seen at the bottom of the garden; they are rather larger now and two are felled each year, one for the house and one for the Church).

In 2003 the area was sown with wild flower seed, which initially produced a beautiful display but ultimately the wild flowers, needing nutrient-poor soil, struggled to compete with the grasses in the nutrient-rich soil tilled for so many years as a productive space.

In 2010 we launched 'The Big Walled Garden Weekend' project, an annual gathering of friends and family to work on the replanting of the Walled Garden (in exchange for a few hearty meals!). In our first year we got to grips with the rotivator and created the herbaceous borders and the espalier walkways, which are planted with ancient varieties of Herefordshire and Worcestershire apple and cider apple. The pergola was also built in that first year and planted up with climbers. In the following years we have developed the planting scheme further with a beech hedge, lavender and cherry walks, and an area for specimen trees.



The Summerhouse & surrounding ground, early 2000s



The Walled Garden, early 2000s



The Walled Garden in the 1970s



The Walled Garden in the late 1980s



Storm damage, January 2012

2012 presented us with a temporary setback, when in a January gale a large section of the west-facing wall was blown down, and bricks scattered as far as the lawn - a real blow as this was the only wall in the whole garden which wasn't in desperate need of repair! The wall was luckily swiftly restored in time for the start of our wedding season, and work then continued to restore the other walls of the Walled Garden, a long and ongoing process. Neil Duggan is a local craftsman who specialises in the use of the lime mortar required to do this work, a painstakingly slow process given its restriction to warmer, frost-free months.

Planting continued in 2012 with the addition of box hedging around the Summerhouse and the creation of two box beds which now contain our 'white garden'. Our measuring and digging accuracy was tested with the planting of 14 hornbeam trees which had to be perfectly aligned for their training as a pleached hedge.

The wildflower meadow immediately below the Summerhouse was also given a boost by the sowing of yellow rattle, a plant which helps to suppress the competing grasses and allows the wild flowers to flourish.

The meadow reaches its peak in late June, when the meadow is full of oxeye daisy, common orchids, vetch and cornflowers amongst other plants, and is then cut in mid July. The arduous process involves turning and shaking the cut grass on consecutive days to release as much of the wild flower seed as possible for the following year's display, before the cuttings are gathered as hay.

In 2013 we turned our attention to the south facing wall where the glasshouses once stood. Unfortunately limited funds preclude the re-instatement of these beautiful structures, but the foundations have been preserved, along with the old furnace used to deliver underfloor heating. The area has now been redeveloped as a herb garden and patio area.

In 2016, Neil Duggan and his son Dave took a break from repairing the walls and replaced the old broken concrete paths with wider gravelled paths leading up to and around the Summerhouse. A new beech hedge has also been planted to back the herbaceous border and the grass path up to the Summerhouse lined with yew for eventual topiary pruning.

The Walled Garden continues to develop and change as funds and time allow. Planned future developments include a parterre garden along the south facing wall immediately below the Summerhouse and a cutting flower garden, with a 'gleam in the eye' of converting some of the space back into a working kitchen garden to provide guests staying on the Estate with home grown produce.



A Sustainable Future

The Summerhouse, now restored to a glory that pre-dates living memory, is a beautiful beacon visible from the surrounding Herefordshire countryside, and one that offers breathtaking views of the Malvern Hills and Cotswolds beyond.



A crucial final step has been to ensure that the Summerhouse has a sustainable future, so that it can continue to be enjoyed by all who visit Homme House in the years to come. This has been achieved by offering the restored Walled Garden and Summerhouse as a magical space in which to hold a wedding ceremony, or to enjoy a romantic overnight stay, generating an income for ongoing upkeep and future repairs.

We hope you love the Summerhouse and Walled Garden as much as we do.



Awards

HHA Sotheby's Restoration Award

English Heritage Angels Award



Big Walled Garden Weekend work