

CLAREMONT, POPULARLY KNOWN AS
'THE CAPTAIN'S HOUSE', MAIDENWELL,
ISLE OF PORTLAND, DORSET.



The Captain's House had lain a romantic ruin for a little over a hundred years when work to restore it began in 1997. Solitary and magnificent when first constructed, it had been slowly encroached upon by terraced housing which robbed it of its views along the length of Chesil Beach, leaving only its westerly aspect uncluttered.



Local legend held steadfastly to the notion that it had never been finished, for a variety of reasons to do with death and broken hearts and the ruin was inevitably said to be haunted.

Its last known resident, in fact, was John Comben Lano. He was quarry agent to the Weston family who had almost certainly built the house sometime after 1666, when the quarry for the stone from which it is constructed was opened, following the Great Fire of London. The listing had held the house to date from the 1750s, largely on the basis of the Gibbsian portico, a pattern for which appeared in a book printed in 1738, and the two storey canted bay window.

It quickly became apparent, however, that these features as well, quite possibly, as the vernacular palladian door and window to the west elevation, had been added after the construction of the main body of the house.

Indeed, the bay had been introduced into the remnant of a probably late mediaeval farmhouse, as evidenced by the large lateral chimney stack to the north wall.

The quality of the build had been of the highest order.

Much original lime pointing remained sound. The walls were constructed of fourteen inch thick hand-squared blocks of Portland Roach stone ashlar, the most arduous to mason, each block being the full width of the walls.

The central lobby was constructed of birdsmouth-jointed, 8 inch thick slabs of Portland Whitbed freestone which formed the ceiling of part of the cellar. A stone staircase had been removed, probably whilst the house was still occupied.

Comben Lano died in 1866, two years after having been given the house by the Westons (who had long since moved to Wolfeton House, near Dorchester), and archive photographs of Maidenwell seem to show a limestone slate and plain tile roof still intact in 1870.

By 1895, however, the roof had gone, probably sold for its timbers and the loss of stone to the gables was the same then as when work to the house began in 1997.

In between times the shell accreted a variety of lean-to structures and its rooms were variously used as stables and a forge. The cellar was filled in.

Nigel Copsy and Oliver Coe became involved in the project in October 1998, initially to work upon the palladian window, which had suffered serious deflection.

Their involvement grew thereafter to include the reconstruction of the bay window and the wall to its north, as well as of the portico and the build of the stone chimneys and the amended gables, until they became the main conservation and masonry contractors, carrying out the repointing of the walls in lime mortar and the building of the roach stone and rubble stone walls and the hard landscaping to the front of the house, as well as promoting the use of lime plaster and limewashes throughout the house interior and supplying and fixing of stone chimney pieces.

Their control waxed and waned and they were unable to change some of the more regrettable decisions taken prior to their involvement (the brick chimney stacks, for instance), and they opposed some of the proposed alterations to the historic fabric on ethical grounds, finally

departing the project over these issues and their refusal to carry out works in contradiction to their strongly held conservation ethic.

The project has been much applauded locally and regionally and led to the training and, as crucially, the education in best conservation practice and philosophy of a broad body of craftsmen and women most of whom continue to work in the industry. For some, the Captains House project was a formative experience; for everyone a unique opportunity and a challenging learning curve.

The debate as to whether or not it might better have remained a romantic ruin, gazing forlornly from the heavily populated heart of Underhill upon the ever shifting landscape of the Atlantic Ocean rages on, as much among those that carried out the work as among more casual observers.

Claremont has provided a more than comfortable home for the Bedford family, who financed the project, using traditional materials and construction techniques and stands as testimony to their value and validity, if not indeed to their indispensibility when working upon a traditionally constructed building.

