

The Old Rectory Guide Book



A Tour of the Building

Standing first before the Old Rectory with your back to the Parish Church you are looking at the medieval front of the building. Because it was the front it was built of squared sandstone blocks in tints of cream, buff and grey. The other external sides are built of the local rough Charnwood Stone.

The walls average three feet in thickness. The great pointed 13th century main entrance door still bears traces of the moulded decoration and led into a great hall, open right up to the roof in the middle ages. This hall was lit by two tall windows on the front to the left of the door – traces of one making a ragged gap in the ruined wall can still be seen. Also surviving above it is a little timber of the original roof showing the high pitch it once had.

Originally you would have entered this main door through a porch the foundations of which lie beneath the path. Over the porch was a small room acting possibly almost like a guard room. The nearby Parish Church has such a room over its porch still surviving. This room was entered off a newel or spiral staircase leading off from the main hall just inside the main door on the right. The blocked up entrance to this room over the porch can be seen slightly to the right over the main door on the first floor level outside. Beside it is a small glazed window that gives light to the staircase.

To the right of the main door the building is divided into a ground and first floor level, having now a restored Swithland slated roof that runs at right angles to the main hall. Notice the moulding still surviving on the upper window.

Enter the hall now and stand on the gravel facing the three doorways with the carved decoration infilling between them. Here you are in the great hall that was originally 42 feet long and as now 28 feet wide. Looking towards the domestic quarters with the solar or retiring chamber above it, the small 15th century door to the right led to the room over the porch previously described and also to the solar or bedroom.

The central door led to a passage going right through this building to the single storey wing, now missing, on the other side. The doors to the left and right of the central one led to the buttery and pantry. The sadly mutilated but still beautiful carving set between the three doors is dateable to between 1280 and 1340, being a nice example of geometrical tracery design each different.

It is amazing now perhaps to realize the mutilation that was done in the rebuilding after the 1826 fire. The left door was blocked up by a huge Welsh dresser. The top of the central arch was cut back to fit a domestic square headed door, while a fireplace was built in front of the third arch and the carving was in the actual flue of the chimney which explains the soot traces on the carvings. All

the projecting moulding was hacked off to allow a flush rendering of plaster, where it was to remain hidden and unknown for over 130 years.

From the records we know that a minstrels gallery ran along the top of these doors entered upon from the solar by blocked entrances either side of the solar fireplace. The relieving arch to this fireplace can be seen above the central door. Originally there was another small door on the left balancing in proportion the spiral staircase door by the main entrance on the ground floor. Externally restoration has now hidden it but it may have gone to a yet unexplored cellar.

Opposite the main entrance is the back door as it were. Go through it and observe the back of the Old Rectory. Originally you would have gone through a porch in doing so. In passing through this rear door you could also have turned sharp right and gone up a flight of steps covered by the porch roof to the old original way into the upper solar room. The 13th century or early 14th century timber door now blocked with timber and plaster can clearly be seen at first floor level on this side. Being once under a porch way the timber was well protected. A portion of the roof pitch to this porch can also be seen. The back of the hall was also lit by two tall windows matching those on the front.

Entering into the roofed portion of the Old Rectory now, you will see surviving old timbers of the solar floor above you. You will also see portions of the timber and plaster wall work forming the central passageway dividing the ground floor into two rooms either side of it. This area which is at right angles to the Great Hall measures 28ft by 14ft.

Going up the modern staircase, you enter the solar room once open to a high pitch roof, like the hall would originally have been.

Halfway along the hall-side wall of the solar are the remains of the great 13th century fireplace. Its two pillar responds carved in sandstone still bear faint traces of red medieval paint. The timbers resting on them supported a hood structure originally. When first discovered it had been buried behind a smaller rough 18th century fireplace, which in turn was hidden behind a very small Victorian cast iron excuse for a fireplace. The latter was, of course deemed good enough for the servants in whose quarters it then lay, beside being evidence of rising fuel costs.

The plastering either side of the fireplace indicates the former doors onto the gallery overlooking the hall. In the corner will be noticed the top of the newel stairway discovered buried behind brickwork. The blocked door to the porch upper room can be seen through it. The little window letting light into the stairway has "F.P.1673" crudely cut on one inner side.

In the wall opposite the fireplace survives one simple 13th century cusped window whose leaded lights survived until vandalism smashed them after 1958. Toward the top of the inner splay a simple cross, perhaps a consecration or mason's mark can be seen.

On display will be seen two fragments foliated wood carving that were rescued during the partial demolition of the Old Rectory. The smaller piece formed a terminal stop of the timber wall plate in the solar where the timber met the newel staircase. The larger piece was re-used in the roof structure after the 1826 fire

and is an end fragment of a beam over 15ft long. This probably came from the old hall roof. Together they are all that really give any clues to the former splendid roofs this building had.

Although only a ruined fragment now this building represents a rare survival of an early medieval stone house. The thickness of the walls and the two broad flat buttresses outside, suggest a 12th century start for this building. This suggestion is helped by the discovery of two stone fragments. One is a worn chevron decorated window head in a nearby boundary wall. The second was the discovery of a reused Norman door head lintel, its carving very badly worn, on the frontage of the Old Rectory itself. This was removed for protection.

Parallels are not easy to come by, but the interior of the Guildhall in Leicester could be sited as a timber example of the Old Rectory hall. The restored manor house at Donington le Heath has similar features including 13th century windows like our solar example. The Norman hall at Boothby Pagnall in Lincolnshire has an outer staircase although perhaps a closer parallel may be seen in the hall and outer staircase of Stokesay Castle in Shropshire. As a Rectory this building probably represents one of the oldest in the country.

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