

A New Life for the St Mary Redcliffe Staircase

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As I write, early in February, it is the end of a momentous period for the small team that has undertaken the task of re-housing the grand staircase from the Great Hall in Taunton Castle. Had we known the scale of this task...!

The stairs were made for the St Mary Redcliffe vicarage in Bristol in c.1701, its quality of the best and its style right up to speed. The best quarter-sawn English oak was used for most parts but the landings were floored with walnut and hornbeam marquetry in dramatically striking geometric patterns. The balusters are in groups of three, and the open-tread ends are bracketed with fine carvings.

The vicarage was demolished to make way for the Great Western Railway in the 1860s but a new vicarage was built immediately and the staircase saved and moved into the new house. It was photographed before that building was demolished in 1938, and the stairs again saved but this time put into store. Through the war and after until the 1950s it mouldered there, until Philip Sturdy of Sydenham Manor, Bridgwater, bought it for £200 and presented it to SANHS. At the time SANHS, owners of Taunton Castle since 1874 to the present day, ran its museum there. The staircase provided a grand new ascent to the upper galleries of the museum which were about to undergo a fundamental refurbishment.

As we all know, it served perfectly and gracefully for all those years, stewarded by Somerset County Council, until 2008 when great works commenced once again to rejuvenate the museum and its exhibits. It was decided after many designs and much debate that the new layout simply could not accommodate the wonderful old stairs. An expert team carefully recorded, dismantled and packed each part for storage again. As a museum exhibit in its own right, a procedure to find a re-use was undertaken, first by looking at other museums that might take it free of charge, then at other organisations with public use and benefit at their heart. Even after broadcasting widely for many months there were no positive responses, so we looked then for an owner of a suitable private house who might buy it. Christopher Chanter, a SANHS trustee, wrote an engaging article that was published with a colour photograph in *Country Life*. The response this time was impressive. Over thirty people, all delightfully well-informed and interested, rang in for a chance of acquiring 'the real thing'.

Many respondents owned houses that the stairs would not quite fit, some that would require too much change for the planning authorities to

accept. Others were proposing new extensions designed especially for the stairs and one even considered an entirely new mansion to encompass it. Finally our man came forward, Nigel Howard of Elibank House, Taplow in Buckinghamshire. His house was home to the Jacobite Elibank Plot of 1752 and dates from the very early eighteenth century like the staircase. But the remarkable coincidence was that the dimensions of its empty stairwell matched exactly those of the St Mary Redcliffe staircase. Nigel embarked on the voyage to obtain listed building consent and after many months was successful. At the Taunton end permission to move the staircase was also granted and it is now at Taplow. We know that it will be restored and re-used by a caring family that understands the project and that its protection in the future is ensured. Nigel has given £30,000 to the Society which we intend to use to augment and support the Museum collections. It is hoped that research commissioned by the Society will be published in our next volume of Proceedings.

Many thanks to everyone who helped to achieve this happy ending.

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