

# Follaton House Totnes



A brief guide to  
it's history and  
architecture



South Hams  
District Council

# Follaton House

## Its History and Architecture



### **THE MANOR OF FOLLATON**

There has been a settlement at Follaton at least since Norman times. The Domesday Book of 1086 refers to Juhel, a Breton ally of William the Conqueror and the first Baron of Totnes, who owned the manor of "Foletona, which Alvric held in the time of Edward the Confessor". Juhel (or Judel/Judhael) was a devout son of the Church and subsequently endowed his Priory of St. Mary at Totnes with the manor in memory of William's dead Queen.

The name implies that Follaton was even older, being originally a small Saxon stud or foal farm. Vinogradoff, in his "English Society in the Eleventh Century" noted that many of the manors mentioned in the Domesday Book were simply small farms, dignified with the name of manor as they were under unified ownership.

During the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Barony of Follaton changed hands many times, passing through the de Novant, de Valletort, de Braose, de Cantalupe and la Zouche families. As an act of piety, William la Zouche, in 1306, gave Follaton and his other Totnes properties to the monks of Totnes Priory, once again, and it remained in their ownership until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539. The Priory buildings were promptly dismantled for the sale of lead and other valuable materials, and were derelict when Sir Peter Champernowne of Dartington was granted a lease of the Priory lands, including Follaton, in 1540.

He died two years later, and the freehold then passed to the Smyths - father and son who were both Mayors of Totnes.

During the Reformation period, evidence of ownership is uncertain, the next reference being to successors of the local Member of Parliament and Mayor, Leonard Yeo, who owned the property during the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Similarly, records of ownership could not be established during the Civil War.

## **THE CARY FAMILY**

Follaton was sold, in 1788, to Edward Cary (1736-1822) who was from the junior branch of an ancient Devon family which could trace its roots back through 700 years to its origins in St.Giles in the Heath on the Cornish border. From St.Giles, the family moved to Clovelly and thence to Cockington Court, Torquay in 1374. During the Civil War, the family was forced to sell that house, but after the Restoration of 1660, they purchased Torre Abbey where the senior branch of the family remained until 1929.

The family's Jacobite and Roman Catholic traditions were evident when it was involved in the Old Pretender's attempt to win his crown in 1715, and a Royal gift of a silver box containing portraits of a grateful father, King James II and his Queen was kept at Follaton House for safe keeping when there was a threat of a Napoleonic invasion. However, the family history noted that, due to their religion, the Carys were "without opportunity to prove their mettle in affairs of state".



## REPTON AND FOLLATON HOUSE

Judging from an older existing wing to the south of the present façade, the 18<sup>th</sup> Century house was probably a modest stone building which had been described as, 'a comfortable dwelling house with a garden and stable'. On inheriting the building, Edward's son George Stanley-Cary (1777-1858) decided to commission a new house. The architect was George Stanley Repton (1786-1858), the youngest son of the landscape gardener and architect Humphrey Repton whose work can be seen at Antony House, Torpoint. George Repton became the senior assistant of John Nash, the foremost Regency architect, and between them they worked on Blaise Hamlet, Regent's Park, the King's Opera House, Haymarket Theatre. Repton's career blossomed with a series of houses, mainly in the Westcountry, four of which were in Devon at Kitley, near Yealmpton, Follaton in 1826, Peamore House, Exeter and Widworthy Court near Honiton.



The house was built in an austere neo-classical style, and the four columned Ionic portico was considered to be 'remarkable for its simplicity'. The columns were not fluted as they, in common with the rest of the new house, were built of stuccoed rubble. However, during the 1820s, the classical style derived from Greek architecture was being challenged by gothic revival, and Follaton is, therefore, one of the last of its kind in Devon.

The Stanley-Cary family lived at Follaton House for nearly 100 years, until George's grandson Francis sold the house in 1918 after it had been used as a hospital during the First World War.

## **THE COUNTRYSIDE HOLIDAYS ASSOCIATION**

In 1925, the then Totnes Borough Council purchased the property for the water rights, and these were retained when the house and grounds were sold again to the Co-operative Holidays Association (later the Countrywide Holidays Association). The aim of the Association, which had links with the Ramblers Association, was to give people cheap but good holidays, and walks and excursions were organised as part of the holidays. During the period of ownership by the C.H.A., the house was listed by the Department of the Environment, in 1952.

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AT FOLLATON**

In 1965, the house and grounds were sold to Totnes Rural District Council for £25,000 to be used as office accommodation. It is now the headquarters of the South Hams District Council, which absorbed the rural council during the 1974 reorganisation of local government.

The new, and substantially larger district council initially had offices both at Follaton House and in Totnes itself. When the decision was taken to centralise the council's departments on the Follaton site, the old house was substantially extended with new office buildings designed to complement.

Considerable work has been undertaken by the district council since 1974 on both the exterior and interior of the house, notably the restoration of the "Cary" and "Repton" rooms, and the entrance halls.



*Cary Room*



*Repton Room*

## THE HOUSE TODAY

The only obvious changes to have occurred to the outside of the house since 1826 are the haphazard rearrangement of the chimney stacks, and the substitution of large plate glass windows on the ground floor for the twelve pane originals, the latter probably an Edwardian alteration by Francis Cary in 1902.

The Cary Room is now used as a committee room, and its proximity to the service corridor linking with the old kitchen area suggests that it was originally the dining room.

The Repton Room, which is now used as a reception room, is in a very different fin de siècle rococo style, Francis Cary conforming to fashion when, in 1902, he introduced the decorative plaster panels, chimney piece and console table.

The ceiling in the Cary Room, like those in the old reception hall and the Members' Room, is Edwardian papier mache, a material which became popular because of its cheapness. Other Edwardian introductions include the marble fireplace in the reception hall, and the main staircase, although the latter occupies the same layout as in the 1820s. Of a similar period is the large stained glass window, which bears the Cary family coat of arms and the motto "Virtute Excerptae" – (Of Singular Valour).

The new Council Chamber, housed in a building designed in 1986 by Stephen Hitch of Plymouth, replaces an inadequate facility, with tiered seating, which had existed for many years in the Cary Room. The Suite's interior, designed by Martin Payne of Zebra Design, consists of panelled oak veneered walls, pink framed mirrors and polished oak seats.



*Council Chamber*

Interested in hiring a Meeting Room, then pick up a FREE copy of 'ROOM HIRE at Follaton House'.



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