

Elizabeth McKellar - Walton Hall, Milton Keynes

ELIZABETH MCKELLAR: Hello, I'm Elizabeth McKellar, and I'm an architectural historian. I'm most interested in everyday buildings and cities, and the people who inhabit them and how we understand them.

Today, we're going to be looking at Walton Hall, which is the focal point of The Open University which moved here in 1969. But the house itself has a much longer history, and that's what we're going to be investigating today.

So Walton Hall, as it's called, is now a Grade II listed building and it once was the manor house for the Manor of Walton. Now it sits within The Open University, which is a collection of modern buildings. This kind of incorporation of the old within the new is very typical in Milton Keynes, which as a new city swallowed up lots of older villages itself. So The Open University site echoes the larger city in that way.

There's a medieval church on this site, and that's discussed in another of these videos. So we know that originally there would have been a much older house on this site. But the present house, now, the first part of it dates from the 1690s and was built by the Gilpin family, who were related to the famous highwayman, John Gilpin.

They were succeeded by the Penfold family, who built the front part of the existing house in 1830. So to summarise, when we look at Walton Hall today, we would probably call it a small country house which has been converted to institutional use.

Now let's have a look at the outside of the building and see what it's made of. Well, if we take a look, we can immediately see that it's a house of two parts. To the rear, we have the older, 1690s building, and to the front, the creamy white, 1830 building.

We start with the rear building. We can see it's made of brick with a tiled roof, and the only relief in the brick is the white painted wooden windows. And behind the brick, wood was used to make the interior of the house. The roofs, the floors, the internal walls. So although it looks like a brick house, it's really a brick and wood house.

The front house is rather different. We can see it's creamy white, it looks much smoother, and it's actually made of stone painted white. Apart from in parts like the steps here on the side of the building, leading to what originally would have been a door. The front of the building provides a complete contrast in terms of colour and texture, particularly with the stone of the porch with its four columns.

So now let's think about the look and style of the building. The brick building to the rear would originally have some kind of door case or frontage. And obviously when that was removed and this new addition was made, the front becomes really the most imposing part of the building.

In this case, it wasn't just a new entranceway that was added, but really almost a whole new house with this really imposing frontage. So the most imposing part of the new entrance way was

this porch or portico, as it's called in architectural terms, with these four Doric columns. And these columns are classical columns drawn from the architectural antiquity.

So this building is what we would describe as a neoclassical building, or in layman's terms, a Georgian building. And Georgian architecture ran really right through the 18th century up until about the 1840s.

Now, Georgian architecture is characterised by fairly plain facades with the detail limited to the entrance way and the windows, and not much ornamentation. It can be quite different inside, as we'll see. But both parts of the building are really fairly plain. They're very geometric and rectangular, and this feeling is increased on this front building by the fact that we can't see the roof.

When we come into the building, we can see that it has a symmetrical layout with two rooms either side, front and back, of a grand central hall. And so the symmetry and regularity of the outside is echoed on the inside, where there's a symmetrical plan and a great interest in proportion.

We can also see, once again, the importance of the entrance way with this arch, two Doric columns echoing the portico on the entrance. The grand staircase behind leading upstairs, and down the far end, a door through to the old part of the house, which is again framed by two Doric columns.

Today, Walton Hall houses the Vice Chancellor's office, the chief executive of the University. And the hall and staircase are lined with portraits of all the Vice Chancellors of The Open University since it was founded in 1969.

So in this way, the house and the hall continue to be at the centre of an estate. But in this case, an estate of university, modern buildings as opposed to the agricultural buildings it would have been surrounded by in previous centuries.

So what was Walton Hall's purpose? Well, of course, it was a house and we know what a house is for. They're for shelter, comfort, and the centre of family life. But country houses or manor houses like Walton Hall had wider functions than that.

It was the centre of an agricultural estate, and so it had a business function as well as a residential function. We can see from the imposing entrance that it was also intended to signify the owner's social status in the area, and it had an important function in entertaining visitors here.

Another way in which country houses differ from our own houses today is, of course, that they had a division between areas for the family and servants. And the servants in this house, once the new extension was built, were all housed in the older, brick building to the rear.

So we can see that historic buildings are rarely static and can go through many phases in their life history. Walton Hall began as a medieval manor house. It then was rebuilt in the late 17th century as a large brick house. It then became extended with a grand classical frontage to

become a small country house, and it survived in that form, really, until World War II when it was taken over, like many country houses, and used by women working at Bletchley Park nearby, the code breaking centre.

After the war, the family did move back in briefly, but then it was sold and The Open University moved in in 1969.

So like many country houses, it's no longer a private house but it's found a new use in the modern age. Some are hotels, some are business centres or educational establishments like this one, and this proves the vitality and adaptability of old buildings in the modern age.