



MARKENFIELD ENTERPRISES

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Markenfield in 2,830 words

Markenfield Hall – tucked privately away along a mile-long winding drive, just three miles south of Ripon, has been described as Yorkshire’s best-kept secret. Not visible from the road, a glimpse of the imposing east wall cannot be seen until visitors reach the old Mediaeval road near to the top of the drive. But for a quirk of fate – and a turnpike act of 1777 – Markenfield would be one of the most recognisable houses in Yorkshire and the nearby A61 would run along this now-Bridleway just 100m from its façade.

As it is, the house is approached from the A61 Ripon to Harrogate Road along a humble farm track, past agricultural buildings and farm workers’ cottages. Parking at the side of the moat, visitors approach the building on foot – walking over the bridge that now serves the house in place of the former drawbridge – and the moment the Mediaeval Courtyard opens up as visitors pass beneath the Tudor Gatehouse never fails to astound.

It is the Hall’s sad history that has essentially preserved it in the state of mediaeval magnificence that it is in today.

The first mention of the Hall comes in the Domesday Book of 1086 and a house in one form or another has stood on the site to this day. By 1150 the estate had become the possession of the le Bret family. Whether they purchased it from, or were descended from, the owners in 1086 is unclear. The le Brets were increasingly called after the land on which they lived – de Markenfield – this became the family name and they became one of Yorkshire’s most influential and significant families.

Recent research by the late Prof Andor Gomme shows that the earliest part of today’s house was built circa 1230. Its Undercroft consisted of the three surviving vaulted ground floor rooms and its Great Hall above has now been incorporated in to the Chapel and Four poster Bedroom above. It was much smaller than the Markenfield of today, and this can be seen in the size of the vaulting and the scale of the rooms.

The known history of the house begins in 1310 when Canon John de Markenfield was granted the Licence to Crenellate Markenfield on 28 February. Chancellor of the Exchequer to Edward II, John could and did obtain the funds to build the present

Markenfield – both as a royal foothold in the north and as a noble house befitting what he doubtlessly saw as suitable to his power and significance. The Licence enabled him to vastly extend the smaller house and link it up with other buildings to form the present Courtyard.

The Markenfield family continued to flourish through subsequent generations; until 1569 when the family as we know it was destroyed. Passionate Catholics, the then Sir Thomas Markenfield became a central figure in The Rising of the North – the Catholic rising against Queen Elizabeth I. The Rising gathered in the Courtyard at Markenfield on 20 November 1569 before riding out to Ripon and then setting out for London. But the Rising was thwarted – the lucky ones got away, but the de Markenfields were not amongst them. Sir Thomas fled to Scotland and then to the Low Countries where he died a pauper. Markenfield and its lands was confiscated for High Treason and was acquired from the Queen circa 1570 by Thomas Egerton, who was destined to become a Privy Councillor and eventually Lord Chancellor of England.

So began Markenfield's long period of being owned from afar by an absentee landlord and lived in by a series of tenant farmers. As mentioned previously, the Hall's sad history has been its saviour – the lack of immediate involvement by its owners and the lack of funds, inclination and above all permission by its tenants meant that very few changes were made to the fabric of the buildings between 1570 to recently when a programme of restoration began in earnest.

The Hall's fortunes began to look up in 1761 when it was purchased by Fletcher Norton – later to become the First Baron Grantley of Markenfield and the first of a long line of Lords Grantley to own and look after Markenfield. He had a remarkable understanding of the Middle Ages as not just being a time of barbarism as many of his contemporaries believed, but a culture in its own right. When he bought Markenfield it was structurally in bad condition. He repaired it and made it watertight again by replacing the roof of the Great Hall – at a time when it was all the rage to own a “romantic ruin” his actions essentially saved the house from becoming just that.

Then comes a line of brilliant, often colourful and sometimes eccentric Barons: The Second Lord Grantley was a friend of the wild Prince Regent and his set. The Third (whose full length portrait hangs in the Great Hall) fought at Waterloo at the age of 17 and went on to oversee a great deal of work at Markenfield. The Fourth was a true eccentric and lived on the island of Capri. The Fifth was an outstanding coin collector and it apparently took three days to auction his vast collection after his death. The Sixth was one of the founders of the Pinewood film studios. The Seventh is responsible for the initial part of the restoration of the Hall, starting in 1980 and making the house the home that it is today. He died in 1995 and is commemorated in the Chapel. His son is the Eighth and present Lord Grantley. The 7th Lord Grantley died in 1995 and six years later his widow married the writer Ian Curteis. Together, they are continuing the restoration.

So, returning to the house itself - the main door is at the far side of the Courtyard. The range of buildings on the left (west) side originally provided accommodation for staff that held high office in the de Markenfield household. They now provide storage for the

modern household. It is thought that the long, low building on the right (east) side could have housed a first floor long gallery; one of the earliest to be built if this is the case. It certainly contains an imposing fireplace that was designed to impress. Another theory is that the wing – now the Farmhouse wing – was designed as a guest wing fit for Royal visitors.

Rising above both wings is the main block of the house directly ahead. Dominated by the two arched windows of the Great Hall, it is as imposing today as it was when it was completed 700 years ago. The small arched front door takes modern day visitors in to the Undercroft

The Undercroft

Today the Undercroft greets visitors to Markenfield Hall with a roaring fire and a cosy atmosphere - but that was not always the case. Visitors arriving to see the Markenfield family would have entered the Hall on the first floor - directly in to the Great Hall - and the Undercroft would have been a hive of domestic activity with all the day to day tasks that would have served the family upstairs.

Evidence of the Undercroft's domestic role can be seen in the shallow stone sink set under one of the windows. Water has always been an issue at the Hall, and was a precious resource in mediaeval times. Evidence has recently emerged of a lead *conduit* that ran from Morker Grange at nearby Fountains Abbey to Markenfield, supplying the Hall with fresh water during the Middle Ages.

When the Hall was first built in the late thirteenth century, the whole of the ground floor would have been vaulted and divided into three large chambers. The rooms would have looked much the same as the Cellarium at nearby Fountains Abbey. It is believed that the vaulting was removed sometime after 1570 when the Hall became a tenanted farmhouse, and the farming family required room to carry out their farming activities. The scars of the vaulting can still best be seen on the west wall of the room.

At the same time as the vaulting was removed, the magnificent fireplace that had taken pride of place in John de Markenfields' Great Hall was brought downstairs - stone by stone – and installed where you see it today, to provide warmth and comfort in the now-farm kitchen. As well as providing warmth for the farmer, his family and his workforce, the fire would have been the only means of cooking in the Hall. The range was fitted in Victorian times, and even then it was the only form of heat, hot water and cooking facilities to be had in the house.

The Great Hall

It is currently thought that an earlier Great Hall, along with the smaller rooms below it, was a free-standing structure prior to John de Markenfield's involvement in the property from 1280. Research has recently been carried out on the pre-1310 house, and this continues to throw up fascinating insights in to the history of the house.

When permission was given for the larger, courtyard-based, building was crenellated in 1310 the roof of the Great Hall was considerably lower than it is today and was based on

the kingpost principle – stubs of the original corbels can still be seen on both long walls about 10 feet up. The original mediaeval Hall would also have been painted in rich reds and greens - a small part of which can still be seen along the roofline where the walls meet the ceiling.

The Great Hall would have been the social hub of the Mediaeval house, with all meals being taken there. The staircase, with its barley-twist spindles, is a Victorian addition; it comes up into the Hall where the Medieval top table would have been. The early Markenfield families would have sat on a raised dais or platform, looking out over their staff and their workers. Although no trace of it has ever been found, it is thought that there should have been a doorway leading from the Great Hall into the Solar beyond (see The Four Poster Bedroom for further details).

The main entrance to the Hall would have been to the east of the narrow Victorian window in the south-west corner of the room. The vestigial remains of the porch roof can still be seen outside in the stonework. On the west wall, above the doorway, is a blocked up window. When the Great Hall was first built, this window would have shed afternoon and early evening light across the Great Hall and on to the top table. The window was filled in c 1410 when the previously single storey building next door was extended upwards. The area, now known as West Cottage, was originally the kitchen for the Hall. The first floor provided servant access to the Great Hall directly from the kitchens.

In 1569 the Great Hall lost its role as the hub of a noble house, and indeed by 1855 was recorded - along with the Chapel - as being used as a grain store for the tenant farm. A distinct fall from grace for a room that would once have rung with the sound of men eating, drinking and carousing under the watchful eye of their Markenfield master.

By the early 1700s this roof was in a state of disrepair and the Great Hall was partly open to the elements. When Sir Fletcher Norton (later 1st Lord Grantley) bought the house in 1761 he commissioned the roof that you see today. The great tie beams actually rest on the original walkway around the battlements above, which is why it is so much higher than it was in the time of John de Markenfield.

The painting that hangs above the staircase is a full length portrait of 3rd Lord Grantley, known in the family as Waterloo Grantley due to his participation in the Battle. The portrait is one of a pair, painted as a wedding present by the Court Painter Sir William Beechey when his daughter Charlotte married 3rd Lord Grantley in at the age of 17 in 1828. His military career was not entirely distinguished, and came to an end in 1819 when he was forced to resign from the Grenadiers following a duel with a fellow officer. Norton, it seems, had insulted the officer's wife and had refused to offer an apology. He was challenged to a duel and travelled to France to fight it – knowing that duelling was illegal in England. History does not record the actual outcome of the duel, but Norton returned to this country and was obliged to offer his resignation

The Chapel

The Chapel of St Michael Archangel is at the physical and spiritual heart of Markenfield Hall. St. Michael is one of the principal angels; his name - which means *Who is like God* -

was the war-cry of the good angels in the battle fought in heaven against the enemy and his followers

John de Markenfield, and subsequent Markenfields throughout the following 250 years, would have heard Mass in the Chapel each and every morning - celebrated by the resident Chaplain, who would also have been the Chantry Priest in the Markenfield's Chapel within the Cathedral.

It is obvious, looking at the blocked doorway towards the rear of the Chapel, that there was a first floor within the Chapel at one point. John de Markenfield's private chambers were to the south of the Chapel, and there was originally a squint through the wall, now widened to a doorway next to the piscina, to allow him to observe the Mass by the warmth of his fireside just within.

The double piscina is a rare survival. Dating back to the time when the house was built, it was created at a time when the Priest was required to wash his hands in a separate bowl to that in which the chalice washed - hence the need for a double piscina. This requirement only lasted a short time between the end of the 1200s and the beginning of the 1300s, after that the Catholic Church reverted back to the use of single-bowled piscinas. It is thought that, as it is only the Chapel that is consecrated and not the land on which the Hall was built, the water used to wash the chalice and the remains of the wine drains out of the piscina and into the wall of the Chapel - thus it does not run on to unconsecrated land.

The Chapel pelican is a carved pine figure of The Pelican in Her Piety, probably south German in origin, and dating from C17th. The mother bird stands with outstretched wings as three fledglings peck her breast. It stands on a bramble-carved base with vestiges of gilding.

The Four Poster Bedroom

The Four Poster Bedroom is one of two rooms that have been fashioned out of the original Medieval Solar. It was common in Medieval times for estate workers to be allowed to sleep in the Great Hall at night in harsh winter conditions, but the Lord, his Lady and their family would sleep in the Solar - so named because of the large windows they traditionally had to allow in as much natural light as possible.

The Solar would have been twice its present height, and would have stretched back in to the passage area that now leads off the Chapel. The area now houses the stairs to the attic, the Four Poster Bedroom and a Dressing Room beyond. There would originally have been a doorway from the passage into the Great Hall, but no marks suggesting its original location have been found. The doorway would have led from behind the top table, directly in to the Solar. The current en-suite of the Four Poster Bedroom probably once held the garderobe, which would have emptied directly in to the moat.

The fireplace and the window seats are part of the original 1310 room. Directly in front of the fireplace are some remarkable mediaeval tiles, very similar to ones around the high

altar at nearby Fountains Abbey – thus continuing the strong links between the devoutly Catholic family and the nearby Abbey.

The large portrait depicts Katherine Norton nee McVicar, American wife of 5th Lord Grantley. Katherine was originally married to the cousin of 5th Lord Grantley, but after a family lunch when she was seated next to Lord Grantley the pair eloped together and spent the next fortnight on his yacht in the Mediterranean. The pair eventually returned to England and a divorce ensued. Katherine and 5th Lord Grantley were married on November 5th 1879 and American relatives survive to this day. The painting as you see it is greatly reduced in size, having been cut in half by 6th Lord Grantley. It is believed that he cut the portrait down to fit it over a fireplace following a house move. Looking closely, the viewer will see that the waist of Katherine has been “airbrushed” to reduce its size.