

# Astley Castle wins RIBA Stirling prize

27/09/2013

The prestigious architectural competition, run by the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects), showcases the best building in the UK by RIBA chartered architects.

Astley Castle was rescued from dereliction by the Landmark Trust, a building preservation charity, in 2012 who worked with architects Witherford Watson Mann (WWM) on a bold and original scheme blending old and new in order to save and protect the ancient castle.

The project was made possible thanks to the support of many individuals and institutions, including Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and English Heritage. The castle has been saved from ruination and can now be enjoyed by everyone, through short stays within the castle itself, and permanent public access to the site.

The RIBA's choice of a historic building for its most prestigious prize is highly significant, and an endorsement of an approach in which imaginative contemporary architecture has been woven into the fabric of an outstanding ruined structure.

Dr. Anna Keay, Director of the Landmark Trust, commented: "We are absolutely thrilled that Astley Castle has been awarded this most prestigious prize, and hope it will encourage others to consider imaginative solutions for important historic buildings. Congratulations to all at WWM and to everyone who worked on the project."

"Astley Castle is a new departure, both for the Landmark Trust, but also in the approach to ruined historic buildings. We are tremendously proud of a scheme which represents an original way of reviving a ruined building. Neither a traditional restoration, nor a brutal modernist juxtaposition, WWM's approach is utterly contemporary and yet in real harmony with the medieval castle. As a result a historic building that seemed completely unsalvageable and close to collapse has been given a whole new life."

Since the Stirling Prize shortlist was announced Astley Castle has established its place as the 'people's winner' having won polls run by the BBC, and The Guardian.

Stephen Witherford and William Mann, of Witherford Watson Mann, comments: "Astley shows that working with historic buildings doesn't just have to be about repair or reinstatement. It can be a reinvention or reimagining, making something richer and more engaging than what was there before. The house is a modernist house in an ancient shell: an upside down, inside out patio house, filled with light. Its ancient shell brings warmth and softness in place of coolness, crispness and hardness.

"The architecture of the new work is historically literate. It doesn't detach or exempt the present from history. This isn't an intellectual exercise; it's an emotional and social one. People respond emotionally to this house. Seeing and experiencing change prompts us to reflect on the continuity and change in our individual lives, generations of family, friendships or society. It's a pleasure - or a need - that both our fast-moving, free-for-all urbanism, and our freezing of buildings and areas, generally deny us. It's a prototype for time, leftover matter and social capital (or soul) in our cities."

## Notes to editors

## About Landmark Trust

Established 1965, [The Landmark Trust](#) is a building preservation charity that rescues and restores historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. They have a collection of over 190 buildings including castles, forts, towers and follies.

### **About Astley Castle**

The site at Astley Castle has been in continuous occupation since the Saxon period. By 1420 it had passed through marriage to the Grey family and became entangled with the succession to the throne of England, thus earning its association with three queens of England.

The first Yorkist queen, Elizabeth Woodville, probably lived at Astley in the mid-15th century as Sir John Grey's wife. Grey died fighting for the Lancastrians at the Battle of St Albans in 1461 during the Wars of the Roses. As a young widow Elizabeth caught the eye of Edward IV, the Yorkist claimant to the throne. She became his queen and bore him the ill-fated young princes who later died in the Tower. The second Astley queen was the daughter of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville, known as Elizabeth of York, who became wife of Henry VII and matriarch of the Tudor dynasty.

After the death of Edward VI in July 1553, Henry Grey, Duke of Suffolk, lord of Astley, supported the initiative to put his daughter, Lady Jane Grey, on the throne. Jane's reign lasted just nine days, before Mary I's superior claims prevailed. Both Jane and later her father were beheaded for treason – Lord Grey rebelled a second time in January 1554 and was captured in a hollow oak tree at Astley.

Requisitioned during the Second World War for convalescing service men, a dilapidated Astley Castle was restored by in the 1950s as a hotel. The hotel was gutted by a mysterious fire in 1978, just days after its lease had expired. Vandalism, unauthorised stripping out and collapse made its plight still worse. For many years, no solution could be found to give it a future and Astley Castle became a ruin. By 2007 English Heritage had listed it as one of the sixteen most endangered sites in Britain and a solution was urgently needed.

### **Background to the project**

In 2007, an architectural competition was held, the brief accepting that some parts of the castle were now beyond restoration, but which sought to create good modern accommodation within the ancient ruins. The winning scheme, by architects Witherford Watson Mann, maintains the sense of life and living within the castle, while making the most of the views both into and out of the site.

### **About WWM architects**

Stephen Witherford, Christopher Watson and William Mann began collaborating in 1997, following weekly walks through London's former and current periphery. Their winning European 5 competition entry established the principles of their approach, based on careful observation, recognising the often surprising relation of city and landscape, and the mutual dependence of public buildings, collective space and everyday activities. They established [Witherford Watson Mann Architects Ltd](#) in 2001 after winning European 6 with a commitment to explore how architecture can support social engagement. The practice has a staff of twelve people with two Associate Directors, Freddie Phillipson and Arthur Smart.

### **About the RIBA Stirling prize**

The [RIBA Stirling Prize](#) is for the best building in the UK by RIBA chartered architects and International Fellows, or in the rest of the EU by an RIBA chartered architect. The RIBA Stirling Prize is chosen from a shortlist drawn up by the RIBA Awards Group following visits to eligible schemes. The shortlisted buildings are judged on a range of criteria including design vision, innovation and originality, capacity to stimulate engage and delight occupants and visitors, accessibility and sustainability, how fit the building is for its purpose and the level of client satisfaction. The RIBA Stirling Prize jury determines the winner on the day of the prize's presentation and its votes remain confidential. Full details about the prize can be found at

This is the 18th year the RIBA Stirling Prize has been presented. Previous winners of the RIBA Stirling Prize include: Sainsbury Laboratory, Cambridge by Stanton Williams (2012), Evelyn Grace Academy, London

(2011) and MAXXI Museum, Rome (2010) both by Zaha Hadid Architects; Maggie's Centre at Charing Cross Hospital, London by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners (2009); Accordia housing development by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios/Alison Brooks Architects/Maccreanor Lavington (2008); The Museum of Modern Literature, Marbach am Neckar, Germany by David Chipperfield Architects (2007).

[The Royal Institute of British Architects](#) champions better buildings, communities and the environment through architecture and our members.

### **Further information**

Ailsa Roworth-Stokes, the Landmark Trust: [astokes@landmarktrust.org.uk](mailto:astokes@landmarktrust.org.uk) or 01628 512 128

Ed Percival, the Landmark Trust: [epercival@landmarktrust.org.uk](mailto:epercival@landmarktrust.org.uk) or 01628 512 103