

Washington Old Hall



Washington Old Hall today

A history of the Old Hall

Washington Old Hall was originally built in the 12th century. Although we do not know who built the first house, we do know that William de Hertburn acquired the manor of Washington before 1183. William came from Hartburn, near Stockton-on-Tees, and in the days before surnames, it was normal to take the name of your home village. He dropped the name of "Hertburn" and became known as William "de Wessyngton" after adopting the name of his new estate.

The name Washington is derived from "Wessyngton", which is taken from the Anglo Saxon words "Hwaessa", "Ing" and "Tun" meaning "Hwassa's family's estate". Over time, the spelling changed to "Washington" and it eventually became the family surname.

The house remained with the Washington family until 1613, when it was sold to the Bishop of Durham, who bought it for his son. Some time shortly after this date, the Hall was partially demolished and rebuilt on the original foundations, as a typical gentry house of the period. Later in 1792, further alterations were made to the east wing, and in the 1920s it was divided into tenement flats.

The ground floor plan, which is probably similar to the layout of the original house, comprises a central Great Hall, flanked by an east and a west wing. These house the kitchen and private rooms. The original main entrance to the building was on the north side, but is now located in the stairwell that projects from the south side.

The house that stands today dates mainly to the 17th century, although medieval elements survive in the foundations, outer walls of the west end. The ground floor layout has a central Great Hall, flanked by east and west wings.

The Washington connection

Washington Old Hall is the ancestral home of George Washington, the first president of the United States of America. He was born in 1732 to Captain Augustine Washington and Mary Ball. Captain Washington was a direct descendent of Colonel John Washington who emigrated to Virginia in 1656, and who was a descendent of William de Hertburn.



The re-created Jacobean Garden

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America was a colony of Britain and George Washington had been an officer in the British Army during the Seven Years War in North America (1754-63). He left the army to become a politician, and campaigned against the discrimination of colonial officers in the army and the taxes imposed on colonials. Such taxes were to be the start of the American War of Independence (1775-83) that saw George Washington successfully led the colonial forces against the British Army in a long war for independence from Britain. He was elected as the first President of the United States of America in 1789, a post he held until retirement in 1797. He died on 14 December 1799.



Washington Old Hall before restoration

Restoring the Old Hall

By 1936, the Hall was in such a poor state that it was due to be demolished. It was saved when a local Preservation Committee purchased it and began restoring it in 1937. The house had been divided up into flats and the Committee set about removing the modern partitions and making the building watertight. It was during this work that they discovered that the original house had not been completely destroyed and that medieval foundations and walls, including the arched doorways from the kitchen to the Great Hall, had been incorporated into the 17th century rebuilding.

Work stopped during World War II, but was finally completed in 1955. Two years later, the Hall was given to the National Trust.

Washington Old Hall today

Today Washington Old Hall is still under the ownership of the National Trust. The Trust, with assistance from the Friends of Washington Old Hall, has furnished the property much as it would have been in the 17th century. The Hall is a popular regional visitor attraction and hosts a regular programme of events. It is also the destination of many American visitors, who come to see the ancestral home of their first president. In recognition of the connection with America, the Hall celebrates key festivals and events every year, such as Independence Day and Thanksgiving. It has links with various American organisations and many American visitors.

Inside, there are displays on George Washington and the recent history of the Hall. There is also a fine collection of oil paintings, delftware and heavily carved oak furniture of the period. Outside, there is a recreated 17th century garden, which leads to the Nuttery, a wildflower nut orchard, established with the help of the Friends of Washington Old Hall.

Find out more about Washington Old Hall

For more information, visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre, which has many books on Washington Old Hall and the Washington family, such as:

- "Washington Old Hall" by The National Trust (1988)
- "The Old Halls and Manor Houses of Durham" by Neville Whittaker (1975)
- "The Washington Family in Britain" by Margot Johnson (1985)

Also visit the Heritage area at Washington Town Centre Library.

A further summary of the history can be found at www.theheritagetrail.co.uk. You can also visit the Old Hall and details of the opening times, facilities and events are available on the National Trust website at www.nationaltrust.org.uk. The Friends of Washington Old Hall can be contacted by writing to the Old Hall: the address is on the National Trust web site.