Guide to Oakwell Hall

Please return this guide to the attendant before you leave.
Thank you

Kirklees Council
Welcome to Oakwell Hall

Oakwell Hall was built in 1583 for John Batt.

John Batt was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant and yeoman farmer from Halifax, who bought the estate in the 1560’s. The hall was owned by the Batts until 1707. During the 18th Century it was owned by Fairfax Fearnley, a rather eccentric lawyer who died in 1791.

For the next 150 years the Hall was owned by absentee landlords who leased it to various tenants. It was being used as a boarding school when Charlotte Brontë visited.

Absentee owners decided to sell the Hall 1928. There were rumours that the house would be transported stone by stone to be rebuilt in the United States of America so a public appeal was launched to save the Hall. Two wealthy benefactors Sir Henry Norman Rae and John Earl Sharman came forward and bought the Hall for £2500.

Oakwell Hall has been a museum since 1929. It is now owned and managed by Kirklees Council and shows what a home of the 1690’s would have been like.
The Great Parlour

Painted panels, an ornate ceiling and a great storm.

When Charlotte Brontë visited in the 1830’s the walls in this room were painted ‘a delicate pinky white’. The scumbled panelling was only found during renovation work in the 1980’s.

This room once had an ornate plaster ceiling which was created by plasterer Francis Lee in the 1630s.

Unfortunately the ceiling was destroyed in a gale in 1883. A tree was blown onto the house and knocked the chimney through the roof into the bedchamber above which then crashed into the Great Parlour. Unfortunately a teacher Miss Carter was in bed in the Great Parlour Chamber at the time. An account of the incident appeared in a local paper and the cost of the damage was put at £168.

“At Oakwell Hall, Birstall, Miss Carter, daughter of The Rev. E. N. Carter, vicar of Heckmondwike, had a narrow escape of her life. The roof fell in during the storm, and she was saved by a beam coming in contact with the wall, and thus preventing the debris from falling upon her. The bed-room floor gave way and the lady was precipitated to the room below. Much damage was done to furniture.”
The Buttery

‘… A gothic old barrack …’

Charlotte Brontë was interested in setting up a school at the Parsonage in Haworth. She visited Oakwell Hall in the 1830s and 40s to see how the boarding school here was run.

Charlotte used Oakwell Hall as ‘Fieldhead’ in her novel *Shirley*.

‘If Fieldhead had few other merits as a building, it might at least be termed picturesque: its irregular architecture, and the grey and mossy colouring communicated by time, gave it a just claim to this epithet. The old latticed windows, the stone porch, the walls, the roof, the chimney stacks were rich in crayon touches and sepia lights and shades.’

Oakwell has a more recent link with Emily Brontë as the Hall was used as the inside of Wuthering Heights in a Mammoth Screen production for ITV.

The filming lasted four weeks in July 2008. It took one week to move our furniture and remove modern objects such as light fittings and radiators. The filming took place over the next two weeks and it took another week to put everything back.
The Great Parlour Chamber

Gentleman’s pursuits

The Batts had financial difficulties after the Civil War. John Batt set up a business venture with Sir Thomas Danby to take settlers to the New World and sailed to Virginia in the 1640’s with three of his sons.

The venture was not a complete success as one of his sons reputedly drowned on his return from Virginia and there was a dispute over the repayment of money. However a branch of the family set up a large tobacco plantation of several thousand acres and kept many slaves.

There is a small clay pipe on the table. Men and women smoked tobacco as they thought it would be good for their health. The pipe bowl is small because tobacco was very expensive.
Little Parlour Chamber

Oakwell Hall has a thriving Friends Group

Formed in 1988, the Friends of Oakwell Hall have undertaken a range of projects around the Park and in the Hall.

The embroidered curtains and bedcover were produced by the Broderers, a group of Friends. Each section of the design was worked individually in wool crewel work on a slip. These slips were then applied to the cover and the curtains.

The Friends are still closely involved in the Hall and Country Park. Each month they undertake a practical task around the Park and they also run events such as ‘Living History with the Friends’.

Please take a leaflet or ask the attendants if you wish to find out more about joining the Friends.
Painted Chamber

The Ghost Story

This is the room where we tell the ghost story…

‘It was a dark and stormy December night in 1684...William Batt was in London and his mother Mistress Batt was sitting in the Great Hall.

Suddenly a horse was heard galloping up the drive followed by a loud knock at the door. A servant opened the door and William strode in. Mrs Batt asked why he was back home but he did not reply. He crossed the Hall, opened the dog gates and went upstairs. Mrs Batt followed him upstairs and into the Painted Chamber… but he had disappeared!

She searched the room but could only find a strange mark on the floor – a bloody footprint!

They searched the Hall and the grounds, but he could not be found. A few days later a messenger arrived from London with the sad news that William had been killed in a duel. So who did walk across the Hall that dark stormy night…?’
The Study

Accounts and Inventories

Paperwork such as the accounts and the writing of inventories may have taken place in the Study.

Inventories list the contents of a house, room by room. An inventory was produced in 1611 by the Steward of the Household, John Matteson. It lists the property in the House which was included when the Hall was taken over by a new tenant.

John Matteson also kept detailed accounts. He paid for various household goods such as six mousetraps for 2 shillings and fourpence for an iron fork to hang on the range to make bread.

On 12-14th November 1610 he went to Wakefield to fetch a midwife, but this was a false alarm as on 4th December he ‘went for the midwife in haste’. He then ‘carried the mydwif home after Mistress’ delivery’ of her baby Abigail.
The Green Room

Views of the Walled Garden

There is a wonderful view of the Walled Gardens from this room.

From here you can see the lawns and beyond to the parterres planted with box hedging. The box has been planted in patterns based on the lost ceiling from the Great Parlour.

The rectangular beds contain plants typical of the late 17\textsuperscript{th} Century. Plants such as Lavender were grown as they had many uses within the Hall. Lavender was burnt in fume pots and used as a strewing herb to make the rooms smell nice. It was also used in pillows to help people sleep.

The area near the back wall contains a collection of old roses and is full of fragrance in early summer. Apple trees grow along the back wall. Fruit production was important and the amount of fruit a garden produced was a status symbol.

We believe that the boundary wall was built around 1610 as it is mentioned in John Matteson’s accounts produced the following year.
Kitchen Chamber

Servants and Food Preservation

This room was used mainly by the servants of the household. The Batts had several servants such as personal servants, kitchen maids and housemaids.

Most servants worked in the house for a year and received a small wage and wages in kind - their board and lodging. Young people often moved from one yearly hiring to another until they married.

This room is deliberately kept cool as it was used for storing food in the days before refrigeration. There is no heating or a ceiling and the room faces north.

Fresh meat would have been eaten in summer. It was costly to keep animals over winter and most were killed in autumn and the meat put in salt barrels. This dried it out and prevented bacteria growing. The same system would be used to preserve fish.

Fish was eaten by both the rich and poor. Laws were passed stating that fish must be consumed on certain days for religious reasons and to support the fishing industry. Being so far inland the Batts would have relied on dried and salted fish. Before cooking the fish would have been soaked in water to remove the salt but this would also remove its flavour.
The Porch Chamber

Carpenters Marks and Archaeological Finds

In this room you can see how the roof was built. Massive oak beams are held together using wooden pegs. Looking up you can see the carpenters’ marks which show where each piece of timber was to be positioned.

The glass topped display contains items found at Oakwell Hall during renovation work. It contains many things we would recognise today such as knitting needles, combs and bobbins. It is thought that many of the items date from when Oakwell Hall was a boarding school when the children lost their belongings. What items would we find from the present? Keys, mobile phones, money …?
The New Parlour Chamber

Under Lock and Key

The wealthy Batt family enjoyed expensive goods such as tea and spices. Due to the high cost of these imported goods they were kept under lock and key. A locked tea chest can be seen on the gateleg table in this room.

Tea is thought of as a British drink but we have only been drinking it since it was first imported to Britain in the 1660’s. On 21st May 1662 King Charles II married the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza. She loved drinking tea, making it a fashionable drink at the British court and among the wealthy.

Initially tea was promoted as a medicinal drink or tonic. By the end of the 17th Century it was taken as a drink, mainly by the rich due to its high price. Tea was imported by the British East India Company which had a monopoly on importing goods from outside Europe.

Today tea drinking is still very popular and it is thought that drinking four cups of tea a day may help maintain your health.

If you now fancy a cup of tea why not visit The Oak Tree Café for a range of drinks and snacks.
For King and Country

It is thought that John Batt was a captain in Sir William Savile’s regiment. He initially supported the Royalists during the Civil War.

He may have fought in the battle of Adwalton Moor on the 30th June 1643 which is roughly one mile to the north of Oakwell Hall. The Royalists won the battle and parliamentarians retreated down “Bloody Lane” which runs from the moor and past Oakwell Hall.

He continued to support the Royalists until he surrendered to a Parliamentarian general in August 1644. He received an order ‘not to be molested’ for his actions.

His property was seized as the penalty for his Royalist activities and he went to London in the winter of 1645/6 to recover them. Because of his prompt surrender the fine was put at £364, a tenth of the value of the property rather that the usual sixth levied on active Royalists.

This heavy fine caused financial hardship for the family and land was sold and mortgaged to raise money. This may be why John Batt took part in the American trading venture.
The Kitchen

High Days and Holy Days

The kitchen was the busiest room in the house with the Mistress working alongside the servants preparing meals through the day.

The Batts would eat at least 3 good meals a day. Each meal would contain a number of courses with a variety of sweet and savoury dishes served at the same time.

They would end meals with a banquet course of fashionable puddings and sweetmeats. Honey was often used to sweeten foods. Sugar was a status symbol as it was grown in the New World and only available to the rich.

There were “ Ember Days” four times a year. This was a Wednesday, Friday and Saturday when eating meat was forbidden. Cheese and eggs were allowed and people would eat Ember Tart which is like a sweet quiche. The pastry case contains onions, eggs, spices and currants.

Christmas was a big celebration with 12 days of feasting when the only work allowed was the feeding of livestock. Mince pies would be eaten each day for luck throughout the coming year. They contained 13 ingredients representing Jesus and his Disciples. The oblong shape represented the cradle, the lamb the shepherds and the spices the three kings.
The Next Step

We hope you have enjoyed your visit to Oakwell Hall.

A detailed guide book is available in the Hall and Visitor Centre.

Please ask the attendants if you would like further details about

- Volunteering
- Friends of Oakwell Hall
- Weddings and Receptions
- School visits
- Group visits
- The Gardens
- The Country Park

Now you have seen the Hall why not explore our 110 acres of award winning Country Park? Or visit the shop or the café?