

Abbey Church

Partly rebuilt in 1882, the church retains many of its Norman features. It is unusual in having a separate bell tower, the lower 2/3rds of which were built in the 13th century and the top section, housing the belfry, was probably added in medieval times. The Bell tower's wall is marked with a cross, denoting the boundary of a place of sanctuary. More information about the Abbey and Church can be found in the booklet "Elstow Abbey" (on sale in Moot Hall).

Elstow Place

The ruins of the Abbey's inner cloister and Hillersden's "Elstow Place" stand just south of the Abbey Church. The once grand porch is thought to have been designed by Inigo Jones. The contours of the meadow in front of the mansion clearly show where a driveway once ran, from the High Street, to that porch.

High Street

The most striking feature of Elstow's High Street are its row of 13th, 14th and 15th century timber-framed buildings, which once incorporated shops and several inns. Further south are more timber-framed houses, of somewhat later dates, the most southerly being late 15th or early 16th century. Swan House was, until 2014 a pub and stands on the site of a much earlier inn, called the Black Swan. The Swan is mostly Tudor but the northern wall and chimney stack may have been added later, using stone from the former Abbey buildings.

Beside Church End - the road into the green- stands "The Green Corner" - the remaining half of a 13th century hall house. This was divided into two dwellings, the northern one housing an inn called "Le Chequer". Le Chequer was replaced in 1806 by the present red brick building and was renamed "Pilgrim House" in 1988. Immediately to the north of Pilgrim House, on its short garage drive, once stood a cottage in which John Bunyan's grandfather, Thomas, lived with his third wife, Anne Bidkin. This cottage was demolished between 1910 and 1925. The cottage where John Bunyan lived, from 1649 to 1655, stood about 100 yards north but was demolished in 1968, after being damaged several times by passing heavy goods vehicles. All of Elstow's historic buildings are now listed and the High Street, School, West End, the Green, Abbey church, Elstow Place ruins and Moot Hall form a conservation area. Moot Hall is a designated Ancient Monument and is owned by Bedford Borough Council.

For more information and pictures;

moothall.weebly.com Elstow.weebly.com Bunyan Bedford.weebly.com

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Elstow & Moot Hall

- A Brief History

Elstow village is best known as the birthplace of 17th century preacher and author John Bunyan. But its history stretches back thousands of years before his birth - probably to the Bronze Age. The discovery of the base of a carved Saxon Cross and evidence of a Saxon burial ground, confirm that there was still a settlement here in Saxon times.

However, the timber-framed buildings which make up the 'old' village of today were only built following the establishment, in 1078, of Elstow Abbey, a Benedictine nunnery. Elstow Abbey existed for 452 years, growing to become the 3rd largest and 8th richest nunnery in Britain. The present-day Abbey church, whilst still impressive, is less than half the length of the 16th century building.

In the early 12th century, Henry I granted a charter permitting the nuns to hold an annual fair, from 2nd to the 5th May. Unlike modern fairs, these were mainly commercial events, where livestock and all sorts of products - clothes, food etc., were sold. Elstow fair was large, occupying the village green and the surrounding fields. The Abbey raised a quarter of its annual income from its fairs - by charging rents for stalls/ booths, levying tolls for entry and collecting taxes on sales. They would also have had their own stalls, from which the nuns could sell fish and produce from the Abbey's lands.

As the Abbey grew, cottages to house tradesmen and other lay workers were built as well as several inns to house the many visitors to the Abbey and its fairs. All of Elstow's properties were owned by the Abbey, which also owned numerous other buildings and land - in Bedfordshire and 10 other counties. The rent from these properties generated the bulk of the Abbey's substantial annual income.

Perhaps the Abbey's most unusual building project was the "Green House" (known from the 1880s as Moot Hall). Designed to serve as a market-house and courtroom, it was built around 1450, possibly by the Abbey's then carpenter, William Arnold. The ground floor of the Green House was divided into bays, most being used as shops. The upstairs was used for the "court of pie powder" - for hearing disputes arising at the fairs, examining merchant's

credentials and testing weights and measures. As 'Lord' of the Manor, the Abbess or her steward would have presided over these and the Manor and the Judicial Courts.

In 1541, two years after the Abbey's surrender, it and Elstow green were leased to Edmund Harvey, whose daughter, Isabel, subsequently married Sir Humphrey Radcliffe. In 1553, Edward VI gave Radcliffe most of the former Abbey's Elstow estates and its manorial rights. Sir Humphrey died 13 years later and, in 1616, his son Edward sold the estate to Sir Thomas Hillersden. Hillersden's son Thomas began building a mansion - named "Elstow Place" - incorporating walls from the Abbey's inner cloister. That son died in 1632 (aged just 22) so the mansion was eventually completed by his son (also, confusingly, called Thomas.). The Hillersdens continued to hold Fairs on the green and Manor Courts in the Green House. In 1554, Thomas Bonyon (John Bunyan's grandfather) was a member of the "homage" (a Manor Court's presiding jury) when his wife was fined one penny for 'breaking the assize of beer or bread'. She appears in several subsequent court records when she was again fined for committing further offences!

In 1773, their finances dwindling, the Hillersdens let the Green House, its equipment and fair tolls, to Thomas Coleman. By the 1790s, all that remained of the Hillersden family was two sisters. They moved out of "Elstow Place" (which was left to fall into ruin) into the smaller Elstow Lodge and, over the next five years, bit by bit, they sold the rest of the Elstow estate to Samuel Whitbread. The 1800 Enclosure Act allotted Elstow Green to Whitbread, who subsequently purchased some of the village's privately-owned properties. (Note; numbers on houses in High Street, Wilstead Road and West End denote Whitbread Estate, not street, numbers.)

During the 19th century, the Green House was used both as a National and a Night School. In 1812, it was leased, by the Whitbread Estate, to the Elstow Congregation of the Bunyan Meeting, whose evening services regularly attracted larger congregations than the Abbey church. In 1873, the National school moved into purpose-built premises in Elstow High Street.

In John Brown's 19th century biography of John Bunyan, he referred to the Green House as 'what we may call Moot Hall'. This appears to be the earliest recorded use of this name but it is appropriate - 'Moot' being the medieval word for "meeting" – and this name stuck.

The Bunyan Meeting continued holding services and a large Sunday school in Moot Hall until 1910, when they moved to a new chapel, next to the school.

In 1900, cattle sales moved to a purpose-built market in Bedford, leaving only

a small pleasure fair at Elstow which ceased during WW2. The stump of the Medieval Market Cross - denoting Elstow Abbey's Fairs Royal Charter status - still stands, some 50 yards west of Moot Hall.

In 1950, Major Simon Whitbread gave Moot Hall and Elstow green to Bedfordshire County Council, which restored the building as their main contribution to the Festival of Britain. A year later, it was made a permanent museum of English 17th century life and the life and works of John Bunyan.

Moot Hall's construction

When first built, the timber frame would have been in-filled with wattle and daub, rather than brick. The original building had only four bays on the ground floor, the two western-most bays containing four small shops. Each of these had a separate door with a broad window, with a four-centred arch above. The shops' 'windows' probably had a wooden panel (rather than leaded glass) which could be let down and used as a serving counter. Most of the main timbers between the shop units remain and slots in the ceiling and floor timbers show where the remaining uprights formerly stood. Those uprights would have held intertwined willow whips, covered in wattle and daub plaster.

The fourth bay contained a separate room, with an east-west ladder stairway to the upper storey, which consisted of a 4-bay hall. The hall was, at some point, divided into three rooms. The external access to the fourth bay was probably at the southern end of the east wall.

Within 100 years of construction, a fifth bay was added. This incorporated a large chimney breast providing a fireplace in both rooms, suggesting that it was used as accommodation for high status visitors to the Abbey. Probably added at the same time: a large ventilated cellar under the fourth bay and extending across the full width of the building; a north-south staircase, with an external access doorway (now removed) inserted into the south wall; the external walls' wattle & daub in-fill was replaced with clay-fired bricks.

During the County Council's 1950 renovation, the original mediaeval form of both floors was restored (apart from the partitions between the shops) and the window in the western wall moved back down. The existing roof was left largely intact, with the rafters of a new roof being laid over the originals.

Similar late-mediaeval market houses, with shops below and a long chamber above, are rare. Two survive in Buckinghamshire - at Long Crendon and West Wycombe and a similar, but later, example in Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire. However, Moot Hall is the only known example of a nunnery-built combined courtroom, lodging and market-house.