

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 added in medieval times. The Bell tower's wall is marked with a cross, denoting the boundary of the place of sanctuary. More information about the Abbey and Church can be found in "Elstow Abbey", on sale in Moot Hall's reception area.

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.

Elstow 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 several inns. Further south are several more timber-framed houses, of somewhat later dates, the most southerly being late 15th or early 16th century. The Swan public house 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 "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 renamed "Pilgrim House" in 1988. Immediately to the north of Pilgrim House, on the short garage drive, once stood the cottage in which John Bunyan's grandfather, Thomas, lived with his third wife, Anne Bidkin. This cottage was demolished sometime between 1910 and 1925. The cottage where John Bunyan lived (from 1649 to 1655), was demolished in 1968, after being damaged several times by passing heavy goods vehicles.

All of Elstow's historic buildings are now listed, the High Street, School, Green, Abbey, Elstow Place ruins and Moot Hall forming part of a conservation area. Moot Hall is also a designated Ancient Monument.



Elstow & Moot Hall

A Brief History

Elstow village is best known as the birthplace of 17th century preacher and author John Bunyan. But Elstow's history stretches back many hundreds of years before his birth. The discovery of the base of a carved Saxon Cross and evidence of a Saxon burial ground, indicate that there was an early Saxon settlement here.

However, all of the ancient buildings which make up the village of today were 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 in Britain. The present-day Abbey church, whilst still impressive, is less than half the length it was in the 16th century, when there were plans for it to become a cathedral.

In the early 12th century, the Abbey was granted a charter by Henry I, permitting the nuns to hold an annual fair, from 2nd to the 5th May. Unlike modern fairs, these were commercial events, where all sorts of products, livestock, clothes, food etc., were sold. Elstow fair was large, occupying not just the village green but several adjacent fields. The Abbey raised almost a quarter of its income from these fairs; by charging rents for stalls/ booths, levying tolls for entry and taxes on sales. They probably also had their own stalls from which the nuns could sell produce from the Abbey.

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

Perhaps the Abbey's most unusual building project was the "Green House" (otherwise known as Moot Hall). Designed to serve as a market-house and courtroom, it was built in the late 15th century, 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 would have presided over these and Elstow's local Manor Court sessions.

Two years after the 1539 Dissolution Act, Elstow's green and Abbey were leased to Edmund Harvey, whose daughter, Isabel, subsequently married Sir Humphrey Radcliffe. In 1553, Edward VI gave Radcliffe all the former Abbey's Elstow estates and its manorial rights. Sir Humphrey died 13 years later. In 1616, his son Edward sold the Elstow estate to Sir Thomas Hillersden, who formed a grand manor house, named "Elstow Place", incorporating walls from the former Abbey's inner cloister. Fairs continued to be held throughout this period, though on a smaller scale and the Green House continued to be used for Manor Court hearings. In 1554, Thomas Bonyon (John Bunyan's great, great Grandfather) was a member of the "homage" (the Court's presiding jury) when his wife was fined 1 penny for 'breaking the assize of ale'. She also appears in subsequent court records, for committing further offences involving the sale of ale or bread!

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, some Elstow properties were sold to private owners. In 1773, the Hillersdens, their finances dwindling, let the Green House, its equipment and fair tolls to Thomas Coleman. In 1792, they sold the Elstow estate to Samuel Whitbread and "Elstow Place" was left to fall into ruin. The 1800 Enclosure Act allotted Elstow Green to Whitbread, who subsequently purchased privately-owned houses in the village. (The numbers on houses in High Street, Wilstead Road and West End today are still Whitbread Estate, not street, numbers.) During the 19th century, the Whitbread Estate used the Green House's ground floor for storage and permitted the upstairs to be used as a National and a Night School. In 1812, The Green House also became home to Elstow's Congregation of the Bunyan Meeting. The school continued in the Moot Hall until 1873, when it moved to new, purpose-built premises in Elstow's High Street. The Bunyan Meeting continued worshipping in Moot Hall until 1910, when they also moved to a new chapel in 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 for this building, but it seems appropriate - 'Moot' being the medieval word for "meeting".

Fairs continued to be held on Elstow green but sales of cattle ceased during the First World War and afterwards only a small pleasure fair continued, until that too ceased during the Second World War. The stump of the original Market

Cross - which denoted Elstow Abbey's Fairs as having 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, Moot Hall was made a permanent museum, to illustrate English 17th century life and the life and works of John Bunyan.

Construction of Moot Hall

When first constructed, 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 western-most two bays each containing two small shops. Each of these had a separate door with a broad window, with a four-centred arch above. These 'windows' may have consisted of 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 shops remain and slots in the ceiling and floor timbers show where the remaining uprights stood. The timbers have numerous nails in them, from the original wattle and daub partitions.

The fourth bay contained a separate room, with an east-west ladder stairway to the upper storey, which consisted of one large hall. The external door to the fourth bay was probably at the southern end of the east wall.

Within 100 years of the building's construction, a fifth bay was added to the east end, including a large chimney breast. This extension contains fireplaces on both storeys, suggesting that it was designed as accommodation for important visitors to the monastery. Probably at the same time; the window in western wall was moved to a higher position; a cellar was excavated under the fourth bay; a north-south staircase erected; an Elizabethan doorway (now removed) inserted into the north wall where the eastern-most shop stood and all of the external wattle and daub in-fill replaced with bricks.

During the County Council's renovations, the original mediaeval form of both floors was restored and the window in the western wall moved back down, but the external walls' brick in-fill was retained. The Mediaeval roof was also left largely intact, with new rafters being laid over the originals.

Similar late-mediaeval market houses, with shops below and a long chamber above, are rare. Two others survive in Buckinghamshire - at Long Crendon and West Wycombe and a similar, but later, example is to be found in Bedfordshire - in Leighton Buzzard. However, Moot Hall is the only known example of market house to have been built for an Abbey.