

Moot Hall Curator's feed-back report to Paranormal investigators, re their visit on 25th May 2012

Thank you for the very detailed report of your visit to Moot Hall on Friday 25th May 2012.

One of the problems of researching historical facts about Moot Hall is the scarcity of extant written records about this building. Fortunately, there is quite a lot of other documentation relating to Elstow – firstly, because of the status and wealth of its Abbey and, secondly, because this is the birthplace of John Bunyan

In order to explain some of the connections you appear to have picked up on, I will need to tell you *some* of the history of this place.

Downstairs - Exhibition room.

A man with a parliamentary connection? Bedfordshire seems to have been (mostly) on the parliamentary side of the civil war but I know of no *specific* personal connections between parliamentarians and Moot Hall – apart from John Bunyan who, aged just 16, joined the Newport Pagnell garrison in 1644. John's grandfather, Thomas, lived in a cottage next to my house, adjacent to Moot Hall, so no doubt John would have come into this building at various times. Also, we have various exhibits, relating to Bunyan and the parliamentary army, on display in this room.

You surmised that this room was originally divided into several units. The multiple external doors do rather give this fact away, as does the remaining timber studwork. This room was indeed divided - into 6 shops – and the partitions between them would, of course, have been of wattle and daub - as was, when originally built, the infill between the external walls' wooden frame timbers.

Bunyan Room.

The box - *****

We *think* that this room (plus the one above) were added to provide a hospitium (guest-house) for high-status visitors to the Abbey. All the Benedictine nuns were from wealthy families and joined the Abbey with a dowry of money and/or land - Elstow Abbey, when dissolved in 1539, was the 8th richest in England - so there would have been plenty of wealthy, high-status visitors coming here over a period of 400 years. Moot Hall (and the rest of the old village) was built on the orders of the Abbesses. We think Moot Hall must have been unique even back then - a shopping centre built by a nunnery!

Elstow Abbey was of course Catholic and, even *after* the dissolution, there would almost certainly have been issues regarding Catholicism rumbling on here for a long time afterwards.

I know of no *specific* Elstow band of pike men (although that does *not* mean such a band did not exist!) but it seems very likely that, in addition to John Bunyan, other Elstow men enlisted in the Parliamentary army.

It is interesting that your group picked up a lot of activity in here, as other groups have also found this room particularly active. As for sounds – Southern Paranormal have been here several times and have, on 3 separate occasions, picked up a voice on their digital recorders. No whistles, though.

Children – several investigation groups have sensed the presence of children in here, and in other room. Throughout most of the 19th century, Moot Hall was leased by the Elstow congregation of the Bunyan Meeting, who ran a day school here for kids on Sundays.

Upstairs Hall. We believe that the Abbesses held Manor Courts here - each of them would have held the title of 'Lord' of the manor and, as such, would have acted as magistrate. It seems likely that they would have had a throne-like chair to sit on, to denote their status and authority. We know for fact that manor courts continued to be held here until magistrates' courts were built in Bedford in 1881.

The members (or 'jurors') of the manor court (or 'homage') might well have sat behind a table set widthways across this room, as you describe. Thomas Bunyan (JB's granddad) was a member.

As to the man you describe in a periwig. We *think* the Abbesses would also have used this room to receive high-status visitors to the Abbey – as many of the visitors would have been male, they would not have been allowed into the precincts of the Abbey (other than in to the church) so this may be another reason why Moot Hall was built. Also, we know that one of the stewards (treasurer) to the Abbey was Lord de Grey of Wrest Park, Silsoe - so it seems highly probable that he (and others before and after him) would have attended meetings in here with the Abbess. But did they wear periwigs before 1539? When Moot Hall was restored in 1950, a Charles I gold sovereign was discovered, so there was obviously at least one wealthy visitor to Moot Hall after the dissolution of the Abbey.

Small upstairs room.

Bell – this room was used as a class room during the 19th c, when Elstow school was here, so a bell may well have been used to call the little tykes in from play on the green.

The stairway was never, as far as we know, in this small room. We know that, before the present stairway was installed, the previous access was a ladder orientated west-east, into the main hall. I find it difficult to imagine an Abbess climbing a *ladder* to her courtroom, so it seems likely that in the days of the Abbey there was a proper staircase and it is of course *possible* that, originally, before these two eastern rooms and the chimney breast were added, there may have been an external staircase on the east wall.

I am intrigued by the names you got in this room, particularly as you associated those names with a chapel. Certainly, the main upstairs hall was used through most of the 19th century as a chapel - which attracted congregations larger than the C of E Abbey church – a real non-conformist, anti-royalist lot, us Elstownians! This chapel was for the Elstow congregation of the Bunyan Meeting. So there you have a link with both *chapel* and *John* – Bunyan. And, although there is no record of John's first wife's name, their first daughter was called *Mary* and it was common then for first-born children to be named after their parents.

I know of no Knights Templar connection to Elstow. Doesn't mean there isn't one, though, given the status of some of the people associated with the Abbey.

Pilgrimage –many of the visitors to Elstow are on Bunyan pilgrimages. But this may well also have applied in the days before Bunyan, because of the Abbey and its founder, the Countess Judith, niece of King William. Judith founded the Abbey in 1078. I don't know the name of the Abbess in 1197, but she *could* have been a much venerated woman.

Names.

I have looked up all of the names you mention, in the indexes of both of the major biographies of John Bunyan, the Elstow parish registers 1602-1812, and in the 'Chronicles of the Abbey of Elstow'.

I have also conducted internet searches of those names + Elstow

I drew blanks with the names *William* Beaumont, Richard Pike, Bradley, Fontray and Rainsford. (There *is* a village of Rainsford, near Mansfield in Notts, by the way.)

There are various births etc of Beaumonts, Emery and Coopers recorded in the Elstow Parish registers.

Obviously, it is impossible to find anything definite where only first names are given but, for the name Margaret, for what it is worth, there were two Elstow Abbesses who used that name – Margaret Pygot in 1392 and Margaret Godfrey 1487.

Clive Arnold, Curator