

“Elstow Place” – the Hillersden Mansion

After the surrender of Elstow Abbey in 1539, the manor of Elstow and all its lands and buildings were granted to Sir Humphrey Radclyffe.

In 1616, his son, Edmund, sold the manor to Sir Thomas Hillersden, who began converting the north-western section of the Abbey's former 14th century cloisters into a mansion. He added a wide driveway to the east, linking the site to Elstow High Street and, also on the eastern side of the building, erected a grand porch (possibly by Inigo Jones).

In his August 1632 will, Sir Thomas left his wife £500 to complete the building, known as “Elstow Place” or the “Hillersden Mansion”.

This model shows how grand a building this was and it seems likely that “Elstow Place”, together with “Houghton House”, Ampthill inspired John Bunyan with the idea for ‘House Beautiful’, as described in his book “The Pilgrim’s Progress”.

In 1787, Dennis Farrer Hillersden - the last male in the family – died. His four daughters, being unable to finance the upkeep, sold the mansion and Abbey grounds to Samuel Whitbread of Southill.

By 1794, Elstow Place was no longer habitable, the Misses Hillersden were living in Elstow Lodge (just south of Elstow Brook) and the mansion had been left to fall into ruin.

Those ruins are now a scheduled Ancient Monument and will soon form part of a new community church hall, currently under construction. The ruins may be viewed by walking through Elstow churchyard, to the south-west of the present-day Abbey Church.