

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 with the top section housing the belfrey being added in Mediaeval 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 Inago 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 in fact only less than half of the length of the 14th century Abbey. During the 16th century, there were even 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. These were not like modern day fairs, but were commercial events, where all sorts of products, livestock, clothes food etc., would have been sold. Elstow fair was large, occupying not just the village green but several adjacent fields. The Abbey gained a considerable income from these fairs; they charged rents for stalls and booths, levied tolls for entry and probably also had its own stalls where the nuns might have sold produce from the Abbey.

As the Abbey grew, cottages to house tradesmen and other lay workers were built and also several inns, to house the many visitors to the Abbey and its fairs. Probably all of these properties were owned by the Abbey. The Abbey owned numerous other buildings and land in Bedfordshire, as well as in 10 other counties and the rental from these formed a substantial part of the Abbey's income.

Perhaps the Abbey's most unusual building project was The Green House (Moot Hall's former name). Designed to serve 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 this building was divided into bays, most being used as shops. The upstairs was used for the "court of pie powder" - for the hearing of

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 Manor Court sessions.

Two years after the 1539 Dissolution Act, the green and Abbey were leased to Edmund Harvey, whose daughter, Isabel, subsequently married Sir Humphrey Radcliffe. In 1553, Edward VI gave Radcliffe the former Abbey's estate with all its manorial rights. Sir Humphrey died just 13 years later. In 1616, his son Edward sold the estate to Sir Thomas Hillersden, who built a grand manor house, named "Elstow Place", incorporating walls from the former inner cloister.

Fairs continued to be held throughout this period, though on a smaller scale, and with The Green House continuing to be used for Manor Court hearings. In 1554, Thomas Bonyon (John Bunyan's great, great Grandfather) was a member of the "homage" (the Manor Court's presiding jury) when his wife was fined 1 penny for 'breaking the assize of ale'. She also appears on subsequent records for committing further offences involving the sale of ale or bread!

In 1773, the Hillersden family, their finances dwindling, let the Green House, its equipment and fair tolls to Thomas Coleman. In 1792, their entire estate was purchased by Samuel Whitbread and "Elstow Place" was left to fall into ruin. The 1800 Enclosure Act allotted Elstow Green to Samuel Whitbread, who subsequently purchased other houses in the village. (The present-day numbers which appear on some houses in Elstow's High Street, Wilstead Road and West End are Whitbread Estate, not street, numbers.)

The Whitbread Estate continued to use The Green House's ground floor for storage and allowed 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 building in the 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 seems to be the earliest recorded use of that name for this building, but it seems appropriate as 'Moot' is the medieval word for "meeting".

Fairs continued to be held on Elstow green until the 20th century. Sales of cattle ceased during the First World War and then only a small pleasure fair continued, until that too ceased during the Second World War. The stump

of the original Market Cross - which denoted the Elstow Abbey Fair's Royal Charter status - still stands, some 50 yards west of the Green House.

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, in particular, 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 three western-most each containing two small shops. Each shop 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. Parts of the partitions between the shops remain - slots in the ceiling and floor beams showing where the other vertical timbers once stood.

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 contains fireplaces on both storeys, suggesting that this extension 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 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.