

Elstow – 1,000 years retold in 1,000 seconds

Elstow's history encompasses two opposites in religion. The Catholic church in the form of Elstow's Abbey and non-conformism – embodied in John Bunyan.

Both the founding of the Abbey and some of Bunyan's works may have resulted from plots against Kings.

We do not know when Elstow was first settled but archeological evidence of a Saxon Settlement was found when excavations were carried out in the churchyard.

Origins of the village's name are subject to some argument. The popular theory is that it was named after the Church of St *Helena* but this seems unlikely, as it was not until 1272 that there was a chapel built dedicated to St Helena – the Abbey having always been dedicated to St Mary. Also, that 1272 St Helena chapel is predated by the entry for Elstow in the Domesday Survey 1087, which refers to land 'held by the nuns at *Elnestou*'. So it would appear that the current name is probably derived from that, the old Saxon, name.

A thousand years ago, Elnestow was just a small Saxon settlement and it may have stayed that way, but for the Countess Judith, niece of King William and her husband Waltheof - Earl of Northumbria.

In 1069, Waltheof had been involved in a plot against King William but had managed to escape any punishment. The same group of men then initiated a second plot.

One version of the story says that Judith heard that the group were trying to involve her husband again, but that Waltheof wanted nothing to do with the plot. So Judith told her uncle (King William) of the conspiracy, probably in the hope that she might thereby save her husband from being dragged into the affair.

The other version says that Waltheof himself confided in Bishop Lanfranc, who then went and told the King of the plot.

Whichever story is true, the result was not good for Waltheof, for he, along with all the plotters, was arrested and all were executed.

Countess Judith is said to have been devastated. Some say that she blamed herself for her husband's death. This may have been true - if it had indeed been Judith who reported the plotters to the king. Some claim that Judith decided to found the Abbey at Elnestowe – in 1078 as an act of atonement.

Exactly why Elnestowe was chosen as the site for an Abbey is uncertain. The only known connection between Elnestowe and Judith is that some of her wealthy co-founders owned land here.

A few years later – 1086 – Judith refused King William's demand that she marry Simon of Selis (Earl Northampton) She stripped of all titles and possessions, flees back to Lens, Normandy – birthright properties there.

The Abbey was of the Benedictine order and members daughters of wealthy families – they came with doweries - endowments of land and income

Abbess had all the rights of Lord of the manor, including ducking stool, stocks and a (never used) gibbet!

1130 Charter for Market Henry 1st – how big market it was initially is not known, but we know that grew into a very big event, providing a substantial part of the Abbey's income. Whether the fair that was held in May *included* the pagan may festival, with its maypole dancing, or whether that was a separate event, we do not know.

Nuns very much part of community – Benedictines role was to be part of the community, so they went out, travelled even.

As the Abbey grew - need for more support workers – trades, shops - Building of Elstow village- 6 inns (my house Chequers)

At least two 13th C properties remain – The Green Corner and timber framed building to left of Jetty

Most of rest of timber framed buildings, including Moot Hall are 15th century

Throughout its history, Moot Hall seems to have been known as The Green House – the name Moot Hall is actually the descriptive term for its *use* - Moot being the medieval word for meeting place.

Purpose – downstairs; shopping centre upstairs Courtroom / village meeting room?

We think it may have been built by the Abbey's carpenter Mr Arnold. Construction type – known as Clasp perlin – no ridge board.

As it is jettied on three sides, downstairs Dragon beams and dragon post

Sometime in next 100 years, extended – accommodation for visitors?

1535 Henry the VIII ordered valuation of the Abbey's properties (8th richest nunnery)

4 years later, the Abbess surrendered the Abbey and all its lands to the king

The 6 remaining Nuns given pension and went to live in Cardington rd

Henry gave all the ex-abbey's property at Elstow to Sir Thomas Radclyffe - he became lord of the manor. Radclyffe died 13 years later

We know that Elstow's manor court was still being held here, twice a year – spring and autumn- in this room. One source claims that Thomas Bonyon, JB's great grandfather was appointed to the unpaid post of parish constable. We do know Thomas was a member of the 'homeage' – ie he was a member of the manor court's bench

Thomas' wife was brought before that court 12 times for breaking the excise of bread or ale! (excessive prices) Mrs Bonyon was fined a total of eleven times for such offenses!

Jb's *grandfather* – also called Thomas' - lived very near to Moot Hall – his last home was a cottage on high street, where my drive now stands – Pilgrim house. You find more about Bonyons and Bunyans in exhibition downstairs

In 1616, Radcliffe's son sold manor to Sir Thomas Hillersden.

Hillersden built/ converted Abbess's house into a mansion – Elstow Place - porch Inigo Jones – ruins behind church, model of house downstairs.

Bunyan born a few years after building Hillersden - so familiar with mansion's impressive exterior. People always say he had Houghton House in mind for 'house beautiful' but just as likely Hillersden's mansion.

The brook you are going to walk alongside later, at its far end, is where Bunyan was born - Harrowden. Fields there become waterlogged in winter, quite boggy so probably the inspiration for the bog referred to in Pilgrim's Progress.

Did Bunyan ever come into Moot Hall? Probably - in addition to its use for manor court hearings, used as a meeting place - village gatherings - social events. Bunyan very familiar with the outside - played on the green as a child and had a clear view of the building from grandfathers back garden.

Bunyan also familiar with Elstow's May festival, with its pagan fertility rite of maypole dancing. Elstow was one of the places which, in 1644, ignored an act of parliament banning the use of maypoles. Elstow's fairs were rowdy, boisterous events - undoubtedly the inspiration for Bunyan's Vanity fair.

On his first marriage, John Bunyan moved to Elstow High Street – first, blind daughter Mary born there. But five years later, first wife died moved St Cuthberts, Bedford.

It was a fear of plots against king Charles which resulted in the Proclamation forbidding 'unlawful and seditious meetings and conventicles under pretense of religious worship' resulted in JB's imprisonment and him writing PP.

Why would JB *not* give undertaking to not preach at private meetings?

1773, Hillersden family's finances dwindling. They let the Green House, and rights to hold the fairs and all the stalls etc to Thomas Coleman -who?

11 years later, entire estate purchased by Samuel Whitbread. Mansion was left to fall into ruin.

8 years later, the enclosures act allotted Elstow green to Whitbread

Whitbread subsequently purchased most Elstow's cottages which hadn't previously been part of Hillersden estate. (house numbers are Whitbread/ Southill estate numbers)

Throughout 19th century, Whitbread estate used downstairs of green house for storage. 1817 he permitted upstairs to be used as a Sunday school and chapel - the Elstow congregation of the Bunyan meeting. Eventually leased whole building to them.

School moved out 1873 - new, purpose built -High Street
Bunyan congregation moved 1910 - purpose built chapel High st.
Southill estate gradually let Moot fall into disrepair.

The fairs continued until the 20th century. Cattle sales only ceased WW1 (cattle market built Bedford) But the May fair – with maypole dancing - re-started 1925, continued until mid 1960s - Beds school system changed to 3 tier.

Stump of original Market cross – denoting chartered market - still stands 50 yards west of Moot Hall.

1950, Major Simon Whitbread gave Moot & Elstow Green and all rights of toll and fairs etc to Beds CC (my boss Lord of the Manor).
Beds CC restored Moot as contribution to Festival of Britain - 1951 - opened Moot Hall to public as a museum of 17th century life.
Book published to commemorate Festival, Moot's restoration one of only 3 projects featured - such a good job of conservation.

In 1970s, Whitbread gave many of the cottages he owned in Elstow High Street to N Bedford Borough Council, who restored – *over-restored* them renamed as Bunyan's Mead.

Our latest vicar revived the May fair 3 years ago and my boss, as lord of the manor, kindly allows church to keep all the tolls and stallage fees.

So there you have it – a brief history of Elstow – 1000 years in 1000 seconds!