

Response from Moot Hall Curator 'sto GHT report on visit to Moot Hall Elstow 20th March 2010

I have now had time to go through the various and fairly extensive records for Elstow.

A few initial observations on specific statements made by the observers;

Children. You picked up on the presence of several children in Moot Hall. The building was used as a village meeting place, probably right from when it was first built and certainly there were social events held there during the 19th century, when children would have been present. The building was also used as a school on Sundays throughout most of the 19th century.

Courts. Colin felt that one of the presences was a Justice of the Peace and that upstairs was used as a court. The upstairs room was indeed used as a court. We believe that the Abbesses (who held the status of Lord of the Manor of Elstow) held court there and we know that the manor court hearing were held there from the dissolution of the Abbey until the larger Magistrates Courts absorbed this role.

Fairs. Horse dealers and counting money. Elstow Abbey held bi-annual fairs on the green (surrounding Moot Hall) and the adjacent fields. These appear to have been large, rowdy events, with traders coming from far and wide. These would have included Horse and cattle dealers. We believe that Moot Hall would almost certainly have been used as the office for the paying in of money from the hire of stall pitches and taxes on sales during these fairs.

Saxon Cross. There is ample archaeological evidence in the church grounds of a Saxon settlement. The incorporation of the base of the Saxon cross into the building is not remarkable – the Christian church adopted many pagan symbols (and most of their festivals) and incorporated them into the new religion – it was an effective way of converting people to Christianity - identifying with the adherents of those pagan religions and making them feel that Christianity could be regarded as a development of the old beliefs. The incorporation of this cross base into the walls of the church could therefore have been a deliberate symbolic act. Or it could simply have been pragmatic use of a handy big chunk of hard stone.

Nuns. There is no record of any nun being put to death at Elstow, let alone by sword in the churchyard. The order at Elstow Abbey was Benedictine and made of women from wealthy families, so it is highly unlikely that such a significant event would have gone unrecorded. The Abbey was voluntarily surrendered, so there would have been no conflict with the King's men at the time of the dissolution.

In an effort to trace any of the names you came up with, I have gone through the many records which we and Bedford Record Office hold on Elstow, Moot Hall and the Abbey. These include;

Elstow Baptism, marriage and burial records,

The list of Abbesses and other people connected to the Abbey,

Lords (and Ladies) of the Manor,

School teachers who taught in Moot Hall when it was used as a school during the 19th century and the few extant registers of children who attended

List of Ministers who ran the Bunyan congregation there.

I have come across a few names which *might* tie in with the information you came up with, but it is all somewhat tenuous.

There seem to be some possible transcription errors from the video to the written report.

@8.35pm Wendy is reported to have sensed a child named Hannah but, on the video, the name of the child picked up at this time is 'Elsie'.

Similarly, at 8.39pm, the written record states; 'Wendy feels that the child Hannah' but on the video it sounds more like Wendy says 'Elsie'.

At 9.00pm Denise picked up on the presence of a girl. She seemed to be referring to the girl sensed

earlier, but it is not completely clear if this is the case, nor whether the child is named Hannah or Elsie. Denise then picked up the year 1538. Wendy then picked up on the year 1758. The only reference I have found which could link to any of this data is that on February 13th 1758, a child named Hannah Richardson, daughter of Mary and John was baptised in the Abbey.

8.39pm Shay picked up on the names Howard and Edward, but was not sure if this was one or two men. Then at 8.45 Denise describes him as cruel and doling out punishment upstairs. Colin senses he was a JP in a court upstairs. Here I have found a possible link with fact. Records show that from 1594 until 1616, Elstow was owned by Sir Edward Radcliffe, who would therefore have been Lord of Elstow manor and likely to have acted as 'jp' during those 22 years. There is no Edward or Howard named in the list of teachers who taught in the school held here during the 19th C

9.05pm Liz picked up the name Mary and Elaine then got the names Howard and James, but was not sure if this was one or two men. In the Elstow Abbey records; January 1774 a girl called Betsy was baptised at the Abbey, then in July 1780 Sophia and Francis, then in January 1786 Sophia and Sarah. The parents of all five girls are shown as being Mary and James Howard.

9.10pm Joan got the name Sarah Middleton. I found no mention of this name in any record.

9.12-9.15pm. Denise and Wendy pick up on a 'cruel' man – Syllas – and the smell hay horses, latrines and counting money. It is highly probable that horse traders attending the large fairs at Elstow would have come into Moot Hall to pay their stallage fees and sales taxes to the Abbey's steward.

9.25pm Denise 'overshadowed' by a spirit named as Mary Kelly. I found one reference to this name; a Mary Kellie was baptised at Elstow Jan 6th 1634 – daughter of John Kellie, clerk.

9.45 Wendy says Hannah's father was a cobbler. The birth record for Hannah Richardson (unfortunately) does not state the father's occupation. Hannah describes fairs held on the green and 'carts decorated with flowers'. The May Queens at Elstow May festival have traditionally been conveyed in a coach decorated with flowers. Hannah describes a pig roast and a duckpond. I *think* pig roasts were a common feature at such fairs – certainly we have had them here in modern times. There certainly used to be fish-ponds in the field to the south-west of the Abbey and it is believed that this field may have been one of the fields which these large fairs occupied

10.25pm In the hall upstairs – various members thought they heard footsteps in the rooms downstairs. I think this may have been down to imagination, as one *cannot* hear people walking about downstairs from this upstairs room.

Partying and merriment – this room was (and sometimes still is) used for social occasions

10.28pm Denise picked up on children laughing. In addition to social events held here, this hall was the girls' schoolroom during the 19th C

10.36pm Wendy picks up a nun being put to death in the churchyard by sword I grounds of the generally worn by nuns in the Benedictine order. However, the clothing worn by nuns in this order is known to have varied quite a lot and the nuns at Elstow were all from wealthy families and therefore may have worn more colourful habits and more elaborate headwear.

10.45pm Denise picked up the name Sister Evangeline. I have found no record of this name.

10.47 Wendy picking up insults from Edward, an arrogant Lord of the manor type. See my comments above (8.39pm) re Sir Edward Radcliffe.

11.05pm Joan picks up man in dark clothing, with lace collar, a clerk of some kind. It seems probable that the Abbesses' and various subsequent Lords of the Manor's stewards would have had a clerk attending with them on fair days to collect stallage and taxes.

Wendy picked up Presytarian and 1700s. Bedfordshire was an anti-royalist area, Bunyan became a Presbyterian minister and the Bunyan Meeting Congregation which worshipped here during the 19th C were Presbyterians.

11.12pm Colin feels the room was used as a Sunday Sachool at some point. It was, for much of the 19th C

11.15pm Wendy got the name Lucy Bannister. I have found no record of anyone of this name and the wife of the only Edward I have found (see Sir Edward Hillersden, above) was not called Lucy.

11.45pm. The flower found at the foot of the stairs. Colin reported to me via email that the (unedited) video showed no flower on the stairs when the group went upstairs, but it there when the group came down. I am therefore somewhat puzzled as to why these two important clips have been removed from the published version of the video?

I have also now been to Bedford Record office, to see if any of the various other names your group came up with appear on any records to do with Moot Hall, e.g. The Sunday school registers etc. I had no hits at all, I'm sorry to say.

Clive Arnold
Curator, Moot Hall, Elstow Bedford
20th Jul 2010