



Elstow and The Moot Hall. A Brief History

Elstow village is best known as the birthplace of the 17th century preacher and author John Bunyan. But Elstow's history stretches back many hundreds of years before Bunyan's birth. Evidence of a burial ground and the discovery of the base of a carved Saxon Cross show that there was an early Saxon settlement here. But all the 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 in Britain. By the 16th century, there were plans for it to become a cathedral - the present-day Abbey church, whilst still impressive, is less than half the length it was in the 14th century.

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 of the 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 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. Many of these properties were owned by, and probably built on the instruction of, the Abbess. The Abbey owned numerous other properties in Bedfordshire, as well as in 10 other counties and the rental from these formed a substantial part of the Abbey's annual income.

Perhaps the Abbey's most unusual building project was The Green House (The Moot Hall's former name). This was designed to be a market-house and built in the late 15th century, possibly by the Abbey's carpenter, William Arnold. Construction of such a substantial building demonstrates scale of the fairs and their importance to the Abbey.

The ground floor of this building was divided into bays, used as shop booths and for storing stalls and other equipment for the fairs. 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. Elstow's Manor Court sessions were also held in this upstairs room.

In 1554, Thomas Bonyon (John Bunyan's great, great Grandfather) was a member of the "homage" (presiding jury) when his wife was fined 1 penny for 'breaking the assize of ale'. She also appears on nearly all of this court's subsequent records for committing further offences involving the sale of ale or bread!

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 V 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 still being used for its original purposes.

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 left to fall into ruin. The 1800 Enclosure Act allotted Elstow Green to Samuel Whitbread, who subsequently purchased other houses in the village. (The numbers that still appear on some houses in Elstow 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's upper room also became home to Elstow's Congregation of the Bunyan Meeting. It was probably then that it came to be known as "Moot Hall" ('Moot' being the old word for "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.

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 Moot Hall.

In 1951, 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, particularly the life and works of John Bunyan.

Construction of Moot Hall

When first constructed, the timber frame would have been 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. Parts of the partitions between these 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 room. The external door to the fourth bay was probably at the southern end of the east wall. That original external wall, including its wattle and daub, still survives, now forming the partition between the building's fourth and fifth bays.

About 100 years after the original construction, a fifth bay was added to the east end, with a large chimney breast. This contains fireplaces on both storeys, suggesting this new bay was designed as an hospitium, 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 made 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 whole external frame was brick-nogged.

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 brick-nogging was retained. The Mediaeval roof was also left largely intact, by laying new rafters over the originals.

Similar late-mediaeval market houses, with shops below and a long chamber above, are rare. Two other examples survive in Buckinghamshire - at Long Crendon and West Wycombe. A similar, but later, example is also to be found in Bedfordshire - in Leighton Buzzard.

Abbey Church

Partly rebuilt in 1882, the church retains many of its Norman features. It is unusual in having a completely separate bell tower, built in the 13th century and marked with a cross, denoting the boundary of a place of sanctuary. More information about the Abbey and Church are available in Moot Hall and there is an exhibition in the church itself.

Elstow Place

The ruins of Hillersden's mansion lie to the south of the Abbey Church. The contours of the meadow in front of these ruins clearly show where its driveway once ran down to the High Street.

Elstow High Street

The most striking feature of Elstow's High Street is the early 14th / late-13th century timber-framed building, which once included a shop and a coaching inn. South of this are several more timbered houses, of somewhat later dates, the most southerly being late 15th or early 16th century. The Swan public house is Tudor but stands on the site of a much earlier inn.

Beside the road into the green stands "Green Corner" - the remaining half of a 13th century hall house, possibly once an inn called The Chequers. At some point, this was divided into two dwellings, the northern one taking the name "le Chequer". Le Chequer was replaced in 1806 by the present red brick building which was renamed "Pilgrim House" in 1988. Immediately to the north of Pilgrim House, is its short drive, and here 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.