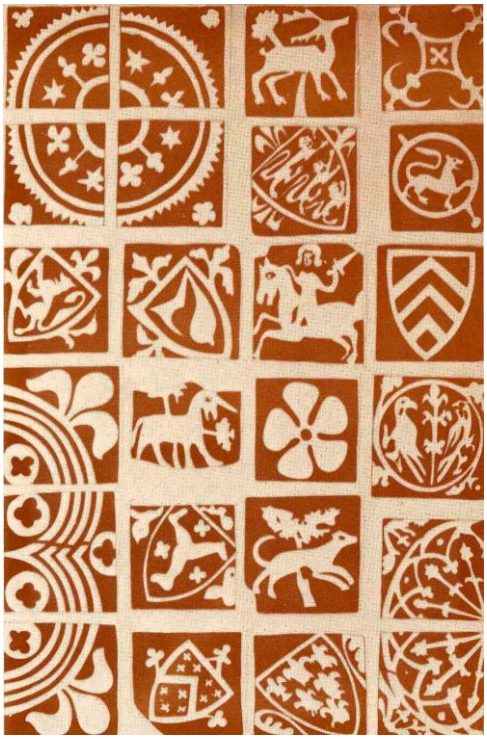
The Landmark Trust

# WOODSPRING PRIORY

## History Album



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with earlier research by Charlotte Haslam.
2004 and re-presented in 2015

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## Basic Details

**Listed:** Priory Church - Grade I. Farmhouse – Grade II*.
Remains of gatehouse and wall – Grade I.
East cloister wall – Grade I.
Remaining west wall of chapter house – Grade I.
Infirmary – Grade I.
Barn – Grade I.

**Built for:** Priory of Augustinian canons.

**Date:** Priory founded c.1210, but largely rebuilt in 15th century.
Monastery dissolved 1536.

**Acquired by the Landmark Trust:** 1969

**From:** The National Trust

**Architects:** 1st phase, 1969-1976 - Burrough and Hannam of Bristol

2nd phase 1980+ –Peter Bird of Caroe and Partners of Wells.

**Contractor:** Mike Haycroft

**Archaeologist:** Jerry Sampson of Caroe & Partners

**Opened as a Landmark:** 1992

**Acknowledgements:** Chris Crook, curator of Woodspring.

## Contents

## Summary

Woodspring Priory, or Worspring as it was known in the Middle Ages, was founded in or around the year 1210, its name most probably derived from the two wells on the site. The Priory modestly housed a community of approximately 10 Augustinian canons throughout its three hundred year life. Religious activities at Woodspring ceased in 1536 when the monastic community was disbanded as part of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries.

The rule followed by the canons of Woodspring was that of St. Augustine, in particular taking as its lead the Abbey of Saint-Victoire in Paris. (For further details regarding this monastic order please see later section "Augustinian Canons and the Victorine Order.") The Augustinians differed from the great Benedictine monastic orders not only in the Rule by which their daily life was governed, but more particularly in that all its members were clerks who had taken Holy Orders, as against the simpler vows of a monk. They were thus able to undertake the duties of parish priest and other work in the community. At the same time they were strongly influenced by the ideals of the Cistercians, whose abbeys had to be built in remote places and for whom manual labour, particularly in agriculture, was a basic requirement. In both these respects the priory at Woodspring was highly suitable - as it still is today, when opportunities for contemplation and the purposeful activity of the farm are happily combined in one place.

The founder of the new priory was a local gentleman named William de Courtenay, who gave to it his manors of Woodspring, Worle and Locking, to provide it with an income. It was not unusual for medieval landowners to do this, but in William's case a major impulse behind so generous an act must have been that of penitence: his grand-father, from whom he had inherited Woodspring, was Reginald Fitz Urse, one of the assassins of St Thomas à Becket. It seems likely that he felt a sense of continuing guilt from which his

family had to be purged. St Thomas was accordingly chosen as a patron saint of the priory and his martyrdom is depicted on its seal.
Woodspring was not large or wealthy; its buildings were never grand and the community probably had less than ten members at any one time. But towards the end of its existence an unknown source of income enabled it to embark on a surprisingly ambitious building programme. To this last great burst of activity in the 15th and early 16th century we owe the church with its fine tower, the infirmary and the great barn and a fragment of the prior's lodging. Work on these was carried on right until the eve of the priory's suppression by Henry VIII in 1536 - an indication of how little anyone really suspected that he would go through with this immensely destructive policy.

Today, Woodspring is especially remarkable for the way in which it was converted after the Dissolution. No qualms were felt about limiting the new work to the more secular of the monastic buildings: the confident new Tudor owners put their house right inside the church itself, drawing back only at occupying the chancel, which they pulled down. Chimneys sprouted through the nave roof and floors were inserted into the north aisle and the crossing beneath the tower. The large windows were prosaically and expertly, blocked and smaller mullioned windows inserted in their place.

The Priory continued life as a farmhouse. From time to time over the following centuries it was smartened up, with a new wing built in place of the prior's lodging in 1701 and the creation of a new parlour on the ground floor of the nave in about 1800; and a garden was formed in the outer court in the mid-19th century, which involved moving the 14th-century gatehouse. But none of this later work was particularly invasive; the original priory was not engulfed by a great mansion and although those buildings which could not be put to a useful farming or household purpose were gradually plundered for building stone, enough remains for us to imagine the whole of it without great difficulty.

The first serious phase of restoration work took place in 1829, possibly under the supervision of the artist and architect, JC Buckler. Fortunately for us, Buckler painted several views of Woodspring during this time and thus we have evidence of the state of the church in the early 19th century. After this date little work was carried out on the site and nearly 150 years later the buildings were once again in decay and repairs were urgently needed. The church tower was being severely damaged by great trunks of ivy and the infirmary was also in danger of collapse. This was the rather saddened site that faced the Landmark Trust when it acquired Woodspring in 1969. Restoration work began straightaway, but was carried out in two main phases, the first being completed in 1976, allowed part of the church and the infirmary to be opened to the pubic. The second phase involved the creation of a Landmark in the remainder of the church and in the adjoining farmhouse of 1701. Initially the Landmark Trust faced some opposition to the restoration of the church, as the authorities were keen that the church should be completely cleared, restored and then left as a monument. Yet one of the wonders of Woodspring is its early conversion into a domestic dwelling and it was therefore appropriate that the Landmark Trust fought to maintain this aspect of Woodspring's history.

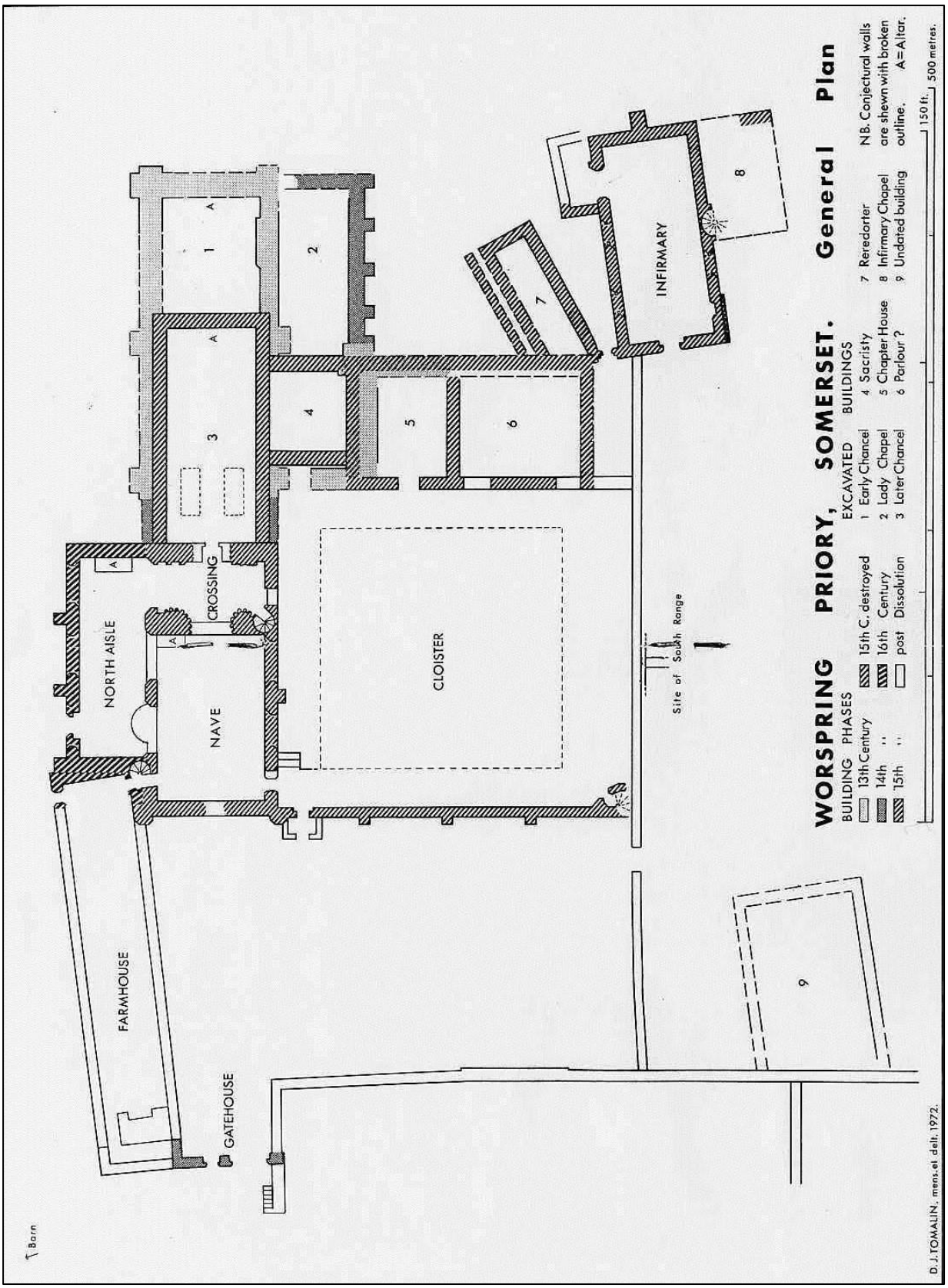



**Figure 1. General plan with building phases**

## A Brief History of Woodspring and a Description of the Buildings

**Religious Beginnings**

The community of canons which formed Woodspring was first established in c.1210, using an existing chapel dedicated to St. Thomas à Becket within the manor of Courtenay. The owner of the manor and founder of the priory, was William de Courtenay, a grandson of Reginald Fitz Urse who was one of the four west country gentleman who committed the sensational murder of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170. When William decided to develop the priory he was helped in his task in 1238 by a considerable endowment of land given by a daughter of Richard Brett, another of Thomas à Becket's murderers. It would therefore appear that penitence was a key motive behind the foundation of the priory and the dedication of its church to England's popular saint.

Woodspring's affluent start was furthered by the gifts of the manors of Worle and Locking, land in Devon, Dorset and Wiltshire. However, despite the support and financial backing from two such notorious families, the priory's wealth did not appear to survive for long. Construction work on the site began very slowly, with rumours of debt circulating in the 1270s and the roofing of the church only beginning in 1291, when King Edward I granted permission to Woodspring's prior to choose 10 oaks from the Forest of Dean, with which to start his roof. [1] Whilst work progressed on the church the canons would have continued to use the old chapel of St. Thomas, possibly living in temporary wooden dormitories on the site. As was the norm with ecclesiastical building, the initial building work focused on the east end of the church, comprising of the chancel and the Lady Chapel. The east end is the most sacred part of a church, housing the altar and the tabernacle with the Holy Communion. To enable religious life to continue it as

[1] *Calendar of Close Rolls*, 1288-96, p.183, cited in *Woodspring Priory* guidebook by DJ Tomalin, 1974.

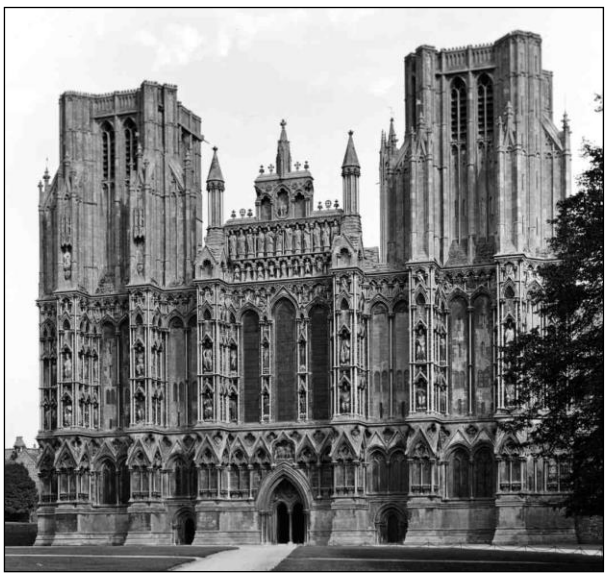
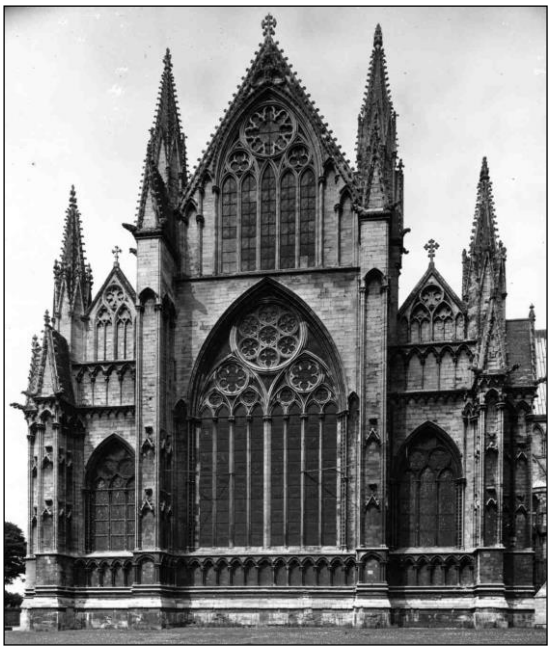


**Fig 2a, Wells Cathedral west front (left) and Fig 2b,nave (c.1175-1239). Examples of the Early English style with its emphasis on the horizontal and the development of the pointed arch and the simple lancet window. (NB. The towers on the west front are later additions of the late 14th and early 15th centuries).**



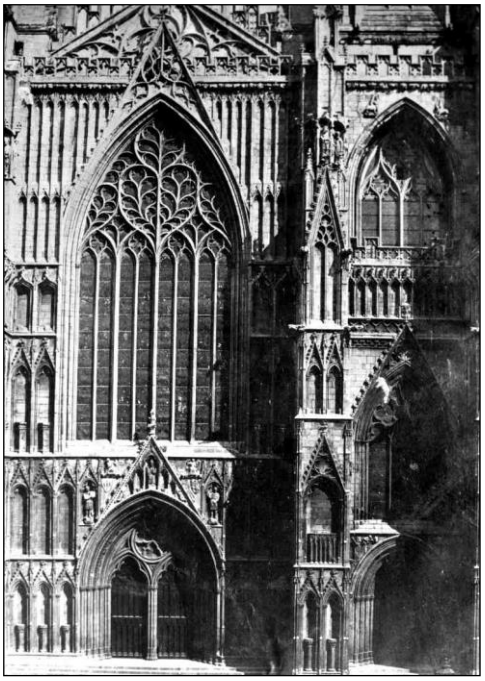


**Fig 2c, East end of Lincoln Cathedral (1256-1280). (above) and Fig 2d, West front of York Minster (c.1290-1338) .Examples of the Decorated style with its rich use of ornament, including flowing tracery and the ogee, a double "S" curve.All photographs on this page reproduced by permission of English Heritage. NMR**

was therefore essential that this part of the church was completed as soon as possible. By 1317 the Lady Chapel and chancel of Woodspring were at last completed. However, the rest of the church was still to be built, resulting in the prior being fined 20 shillings for failing to have the church and its altars consecrated.

The remains of the church that we see today at Woodspring are not that built in the 14th century, but a later construction of the 15th century. This earlier church would have been quite an austere structure, built in the Early English style, the first true Gothic style in England. Early English, which can be broadly characterised as the first architectural style in England to use pointed arches, stone vaults with bosses and simple lancet windows, was first applied in the nearby cathedral of Wells, c.1175-1239. It was a new style developed in England as a conscious move away from the French Gothic. For example, whereas the French placed a great emphasis on the vertical, Early English practised a more horizontal style. By the time that Woodspring finally found the finances to build, Early English was already being surpassed by the new Decorated Style, made popular through its use of the ogee, a double or "S" curve and an incredible use of ornament, particularly naturalistic representations of foliage. Whether Woodspring made a conscious decision to stick with the Early English style, or perhaps a contract and design had already been drawn up which could not be changed, we shall never know. However, it seems likely that finances would have dictated to a large extent what would be built and in this case the more austere Early English would have been much kinder on the Prior's purse than the Decorated style. (For illustrations of the Early English and Decorated styles please see figures 2a-d).

After the church the next building to be completed on the priory site was the gatehouse and a little later the cloister was begun, around which the living quarters of the canons were built. Very little is known about the early 14th century building work, as its few remains lie underneath the existing structures.

Through documentary evidence we do however know that life continued to be hard for the Woodspring canons throughout the remainder of the 14th century. In the latter half of the century there are records of minor gifts to the priory from local benefactors, but nothing of significant value to help with the building work. The generosity of the population may understandably have been impacted by the other major problem which confronted the priory – the "Black Death." In 1348 the first outbreak of bubonic plague was discovered at nearby Weymouth. Woodspring was very quickly affected and within that same year there are records of the priory appointing three vicars in quick succession at Worle and new appointments also had to be made at the neighbouring churches of Locking and Kewstoke. With an average population of just nine or ten canons one can only imagine the devastation that these deaths brought to the priory. The fate of Woodspring reflected that of the rest of the nation, with the national population decreasing by a third and resulting in enormous and long-lasting effects on the country's economy. In 1365 the Dean and Chapter of Wells resigned themselves to writing off the arrears from Worspring, while reasserting at the same time that all further payments would be required in full. [2]

The turn of the 15th century brought better fortune to Woodspring. As life began to return to normal after the blight of the Black Death the priory's prosperity increased and a new phase of building work was embarked upon. Most of what is seen today at Woodspring dates from this time and reflects how architectural fashions had changed once again since the earlier 14th century building work. The country was now embracing a new style known as the Perpendicular and the canons of Woodspring must have been keen to follow suit as the church was completely rebuilt, including even the chancel and Lady Chapel.[3] The

[2] *Calendar of MSS of Dean and Chapter of Wells*, Historical MSS Commission I, (1907), p.268, cited in *Woodspring Priory* guidebook by DJ Tomalin, 1974.

[3] There is some evidence that the east end of the 14th century church was destroyed by fire, but it is not certain whether this happened before of after the decision to rebuild. If the canons were to rebuild their church it is unlikely that they would have left the most sacred part of the church, the east end, in the older more austere style of Early English, whilst modernising the west end with the more elaborate Perpendicular.

Perpendicular style first began to appear in c.1335 and the earliest major example of the style could be found once again not too far from Woodspring, this time in the chancel of Gloucester Cathedral (1337-1357). (For illustrations of the Perpendicular style please see figures 4a-d). The new style was rectilinear, with an almost equal stress on horizontals as on verticals. Within a Perpendicular church one might find large panel windows with flattened four-centred arches, relatively simple tracery and crenellated transoms (the horizontal divisions of a window). Other popular features included the use of blind panelling, i.e. the use of tracery was continued on the stone walls, quatrefoils set in squares and flattened roofs hidden behind decorative or crenellated parapets. Once the new style had been established it continued to dominate English architectural fashions for some 250 years. The style was never adopted on the continent and Perpendicular remained exclusively English. One might argue that this exclusivity explains in part the popularity and longevity of the fashion within England. Another key motif which appeared in the later development of the style was the elaborate fan vault, an example of which can be seen today at Woodspring in the crossing, although this is a Victorian recreation of the original medieval ceiling. The Perpendicular style was adopted almost nationwide, with most parish churches trying to incorporate the new style somewhere within the building. Some of the grandest examples of the time can be found in Suffolk, Norfolk and Somerset, the latter notable for perpendicular towers, as illustrated here at Woodspring. (Please see figures 4c-d for examples of perpendicular towers in Somerset).

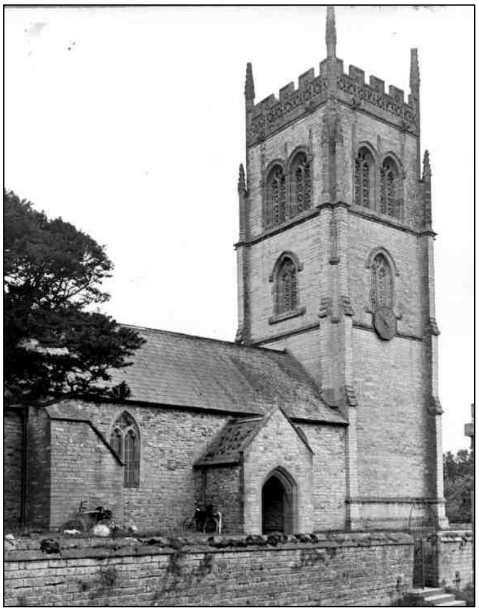
The tower of Woodspring was designed as the central feature of the church, standing 65 feet tall and proudly dominating the local skyline, as it continues to do so today. On the following pages are seen a selection of views from the top of the tower, looking out on to the landscape beyond. The tracery of the windows on the tower, the use of diagonal buttresses and the corner turret to the south west to give access to the interior of the tower, are all typical features

of the Somerset Perpendicular. Although the parapet with quatrefoil panels is a Victorian restoration of 1827 it appears that it remains true to its original design.

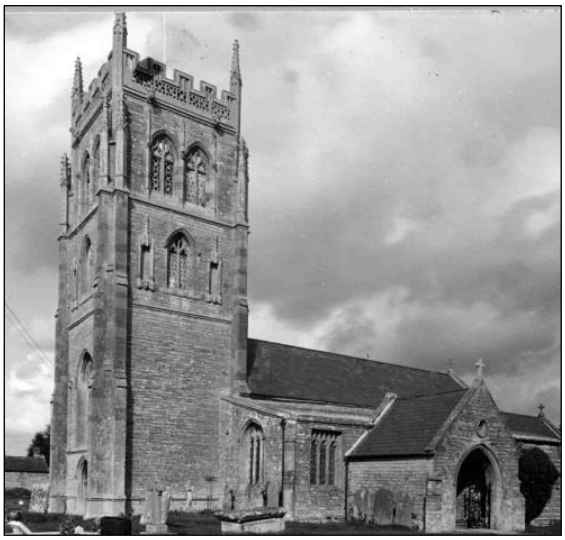
**Fig. 3 East front of the church with tower**

4a

4b



4c



4d

**The Perpendicular**
**Figure 4a – Chancel of Gloucester Cathedral (c.1337-c.1350).**
**Figure 4b – St. James' Church, Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire (mid to late 15th century).**
**Figure 4c – St. Bartholomew's Church, Lyng, Somerset (15th century).**
**Figure 4d – Church of the Holy Cross, Middlezoy, Somerset (late 15th to 16th century).**

**Figure 5a. View from tower looking towards liturgical east.**

**Figure 5b. View from tower looking towards liturgical south west.**

**Figure 5c. View from tower looking towards liturgical south**

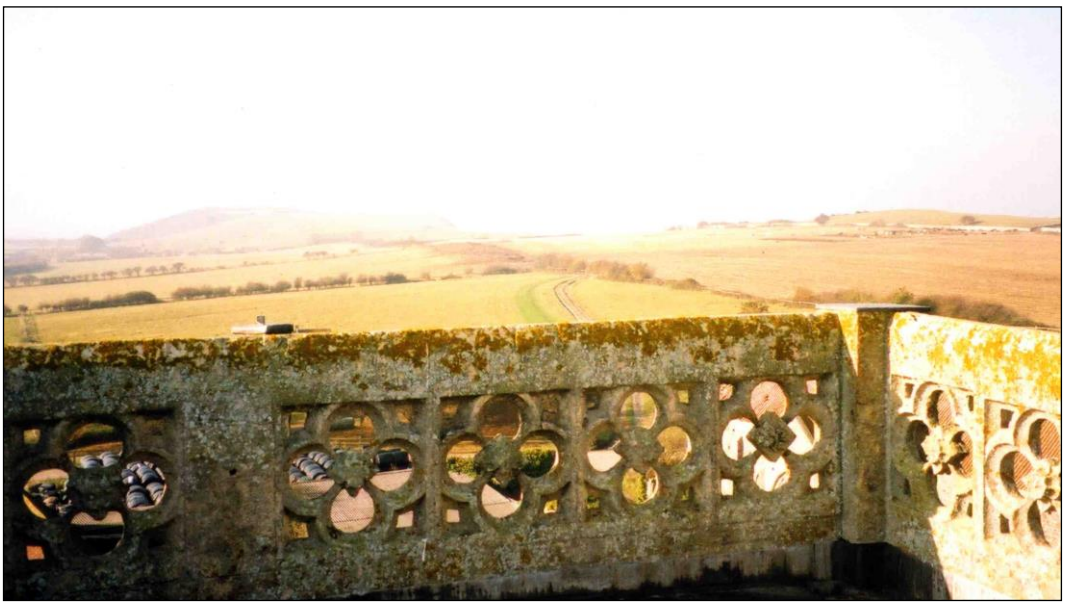


**Figure 5d. View from tower looking towards liturgical west**

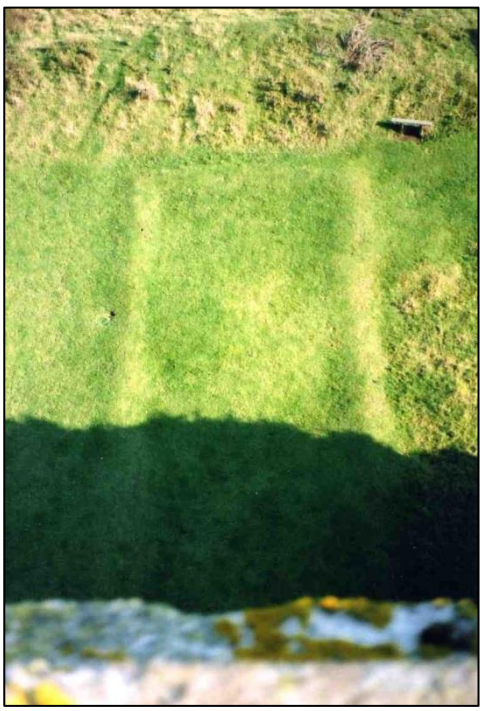
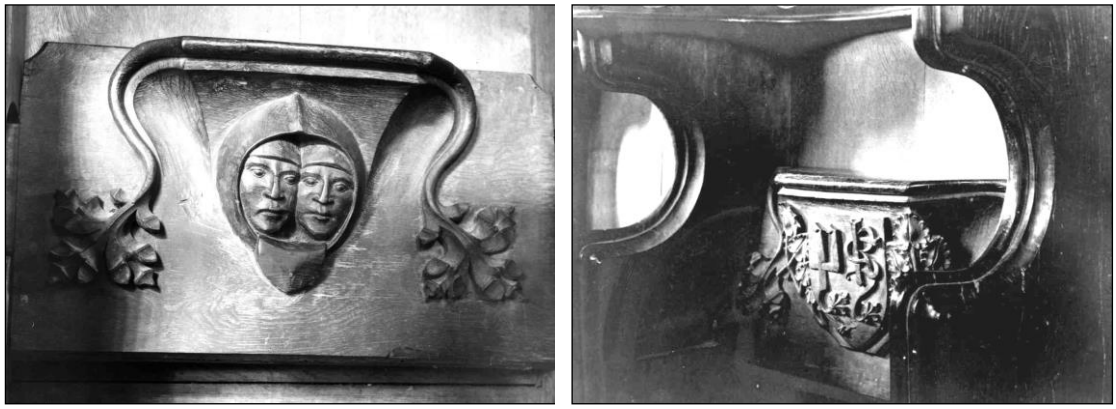


**Figure 6. Foundation marks of former east end, as seen from the tower.**

Looking at the east face of Woodspring's tower today one can still see the outline of the roof gable for the former east end of the 15th century church. Unfortunately this part of the church was destroyed when the priory was converted into domestic dwellings (please see later section "A secular life"). However its outline is still visible on the ground when viewed from above.

Further evidence of the former chancel can be seen just beneath the apex of the gable. Here lies a rectangular opening which is now blocked up. The high location of this opening, in what would have been the loft above the choir, suggests that it led to a ringing chamber in the tower. The ringing of bells played an important role in the life of the priory, calling the canons to church for every mass or service. The canons could therefore have entered the ringing chamber either through a stairway in the choir, or through the extant octagonal stair turret on the south west corner of the tower which in turn could be entered through a doorway in the crossing.

The crossing of the 15th century church would have been quite a grand affair, with a richly decorated stone screen dividing it from the choir. A few remains of this screen, or pulpitum, are still visible, most noticeably a crocketed pinnacle carved on the south pier. Further evidence of the rich decoration in the east end was found during an excavation in the early 20th century. It was then that several coloured encaustic floor tiles were discovered in the north aisle of the church, although with their heraldic coats and animals it is likely that these tiles originated in the east end, (for illustration please see title page). It was common practice in the middle ages for priors to incorporate their coats of arms within the church, whether within the stonework, or on floor tiles, such as these at Woodspring. Another opportunity for decoration within the east end would have been the choir stalls. We are fortunate in that five of Woodspring's oak choir stalls survive today in the nearby parish church of Worle. These wooden structures are decorated with carved canopies and under the seats, the traditional sculpted misericords. A misericord is a bracket on the underside of a hinged choir stall which, when the stall was raised, served as a support during long services. Its discrete location lent itself to humorous carvings and one can often find here comical representations of biblical stories, or even caricatures of local clergy.



**Figures 7a & 7b. Misericords from Woodspring, now in Worle church. Note the one on the right with the embossed letters "RS" which were the initials of Richard Spryne, Prior of Woodspring and Vicar of Worle, 1499-1516. Reproduced by permission of English Heritage. NMR**

Other than during important feast days when the liturgy required a grand procession, the canons would have come to take their seats here in the choir by entering through a doorway in the south wall of the crossing. The recess for this doorway may still be noted in the wall and the old doorstep may be seen beneath a modern grill set in the floor. This doorway afforded the canons the quickest and easiest access to the choir from the living quarters of the cloister. It also gave them the opportunity to enter the church without being disturbed by any lay visitors who happened to be in the nave. Another option for entering the church was a doorway in the west end of the nave, which gave access from the west walkway of the cloister. This doorway has been altered over the centuries, although a doorway may still be found here, hidden behind a curtain in what is now the sitting room.

The last part of the 15th century church to be built would have been the west end and once again the scars of the building's past are visible on the exterior of the building. The outline of a very large west window is quite clearly visible, as are three niches either side and above of the window. There is unfortunately no record which gives details about the contents of the niches although the outlines of two figures are still quite apparent in those either side of the window. Both figures appear to be wearing bishops' mitres and thus it is quite reasonable to suggest that one is a representation of the church's patron saint, St. Thomas à Becket and the other is possibly Roger Tormenton, the last prior of Woodspring.

The sad reduced state in which we see these sculptures today is due of course in part to the ravages of time and weather, but it is also likely that the figures were decapitated during the Reformation. Another loss from the west front was the quatrefoil parapet which adorned the top of the façade, running along the gable. This decorative feature most probably followed the design of the blind tracery on the two octagonal corner turrets which flank the façade. The west front would therefore have been quite an impressive sight to behold in the 15th century, with its corner towers, large west window, sculptures and entrance doorway in the

centre, the outline of which can still just be discerned around the replacement window that exists there today.

**Fig. 8 West front of the church**

Other building work of this active phase in the priory's history included the new barn and the infirmary. The infirmary, or Prior's Hall as it has sometimes been known incorrectly, is a particularly impressive structure with an arch-braced collar beam roof. The building was used as a hospital and place of rest for the canons. It was here that they could find a break from the strict priory life and diet, for example in the priory itself they were only permitted to eat white meat and fish, but here in the infirmary they were granted red meat to aid their healing and recuperation. [4]

[4] The large size of the infirmary is slightly surprising given that the priory only housed on average ten canons, however, its scale may perhaps have been justified by it providing refuge and care for other monks in the vicinity or even visiting lay pilgrims who became infirm during pilgrimage.

The infirmary also had its own small chapel for the infirm canons to use. Although nothing remains of this structure we know that it sat to the south of the infirmary as the remnants of a spiral staircase which would have led to the chapel can be seen on the exterior of the south wall.

**Figure 9. Interior of Infirmary, after the 1987 restoration of the roof.**

Continuing a tour of Woodspring outside the main church you discover two wells, located to the north side of the farmhouse. These wells, which were revealed during excavations in 1991, contain 15 stone steps leading down to the well head, enabling the canons to gain access to the water level when it had sunk through either use or drought. These two wells are now redundant but they are significant in that it was probably these sources of fresh water which gave the priory its name “Worspryng” or later “Woodspring.”

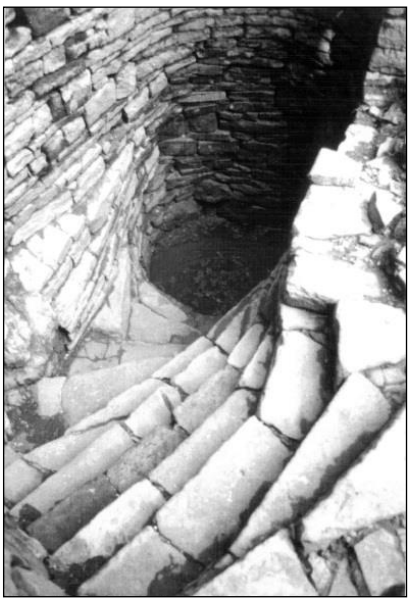


**Figure 10. The well discovered in the cottage garden.**

The final chapter in the priory’s ecclesiastical building program was the addition of the north aisle, built onto the church in the early 16th century. During the 1991 excavations a substantial amount of stone dust and debris was found just to the north of the aisle, suggesting that it was here that the masons’ yard lay for this last campaign of work. The 3 bay aisle was probably built with the intention of serving as a chapel, a quiet area set aside for private devotion and separated from the nave by screens. The base of a large altar can still be seen at the east end of the aisle, which now forms part of Woodspring’s museum. The loss of the 14th century Lady Chapel may have prompted the canons to erect this structure, or possibly it was intended to house the Becket reliquary and thus

serve as a private area for praying to the priory's patron saint. It would also have allowed monastic

life to continue in the rest of the church without being hindered by lay pilgrims visiting Woodspring to see the reliquary. (For further details regarding the Becket reliquary at Woodspring please see the "Thomas à Becket" section). If this was indeed to have been the function of the aisle one would expect this area to have been quite ornate, to honour St. Thomas. This notion is supported by the evidence that the aisle was originally fan vaulted, a few scant traces of which remain. To have a side chapel or aisle dedicated to holding a sacred reliquary was quite a common occurrence in parish churches of the time, for example the churches of Barnburgh and Conisbrough in South Yorkshire and Ropsley in Lincolnshire.

Work on the north aisle had not quite finished when the life of the entire priory was put under threat by the Reformation. In 1534, as the climax to Henry VIII's long dispute with the papacy, the Acknowledgement of the King's Supremacy was drawn up and England officially broke away from Rome and the Catholic Church. Woodspring's prior at the time, Roger Tormenton, could not accept his King as the head of the Church and thus, as a wise man with foresight, he began to sell the priory lands, dispersing of the proceeds of the sales as he went along. On the 27th September 1536 the priory was suppressed and the canons' community disbanded. The King may have succeeded in dissolving the country's monastic institutions, but at Woodspring he was denied the financial benefits he gained from so many other priories and abbeys across England.

**A secular life: Woodspring after the Dissolution**

The secular life of Woodspring brought a string of owners to the site, the first being Edward Fetyplace of Donnington in Berkshire. Fetyplace acquired the lease of the priory and adjoining meadows in 1536, immediately after the suppression of the priory. [5] He held the lease for 21 years and during that time it appears that he pulled down the chancel of the church and blocked the east archway of the crossing, destroying the ecclesiastical integrity of the site. In 1557, when the lease ended, the property reverted to Sir John St. Loe, an influential member of Henry VIII's court. [6]

However, just nine years later the St. Loe family sold the priory to William Carr, a M.P. and merchant from Bristol. It was around this period that the church was fully converted to a house, completing the work begun by Edward Fetyplace. The most obvious aberration was and arguably still is today, the appearance of chimney stacks breaking through the roof of the former nave (the current roof is a later replacement after a fire in 1876). All across the country priories and monasteries were following a similar fate as wealthy families took over the sites and converted them to country houses. Other Augustinian examples include Halberton Priory in Devon, St. Ostyth's Priory in Essex, Felley Priory in Nottinghamshire and notably Mottisfont Abbey in Hampshire. Landmark's own Warden Abbey (Cistercian) and Wilmington Priory (Benedictine) shared a similar fate. However, very few appear to have retained so clearly the structure of the church as here at Woodspring. Most domestic conversions were centred around the prior's or abbot's lodging, or other domestic quarters around the cloister. Woodspring is therefore quite remarkable in its preservation of the church tower and overall general form.

[5] *Letter and Papers, Henry VII*, XIII, part I, p. 578, as cited in *Woodspring Priory* guidebook by DJ Tomalin, 1974.
[6] *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, XIII, part I p.484, as cited in *Woodspring Priory* guidebook by DJ Tomalin, 1974.

By the time of William Carr's ownership the chancel of Woodspring had been completely destroyed, perhaps the owners having felt that it was too sacred a space to reside in domestically. Domestic quarters were however built around the crossing, with the east archway already being blocked up. A floor was inserted into the area, as were windows and a latrine, the remains of which can still be seen today.

**Figure 11. Upper part of east wall in crossing. Note the remains of the latrine on the left.**

A floor was also inserted into the north aisle and the area divided up into a number of different rooms. One of these chambers remains today in the upper part of the west bay and from here one can look down into the remainder of the north aisle which now houses the museum of Woodspring. For an overview of the different room divisions at Woodspring and how they relate to the former church please see the plans overleaf.

In 1605 Woodspring passed by marriage to William Younge of Ogbourne St. George, in Wiltshire.[7] The former church was now functioning fully as a family home and it appears that many of the claustral buildings had been demolished by this time, possibly to be recycled for building materials within the new house. At the end of the 17th century Woodspring was inherited by the Pigott family, in whose hands the site remained for the next two hundred years. One of the first acts that they most likely carried out was the construction of a farmhouse alongside the former church, incorporating parts of what had been the Prior's lodgings, (but now containing the kitchen, bathrooms and two bedrooms of the Landmark property).

[7] J. Collinson, *History of Somerset*, (1791, p. 595, as cited in *Woodspring Priory* guidebook by DJ Tomalin, 1974.

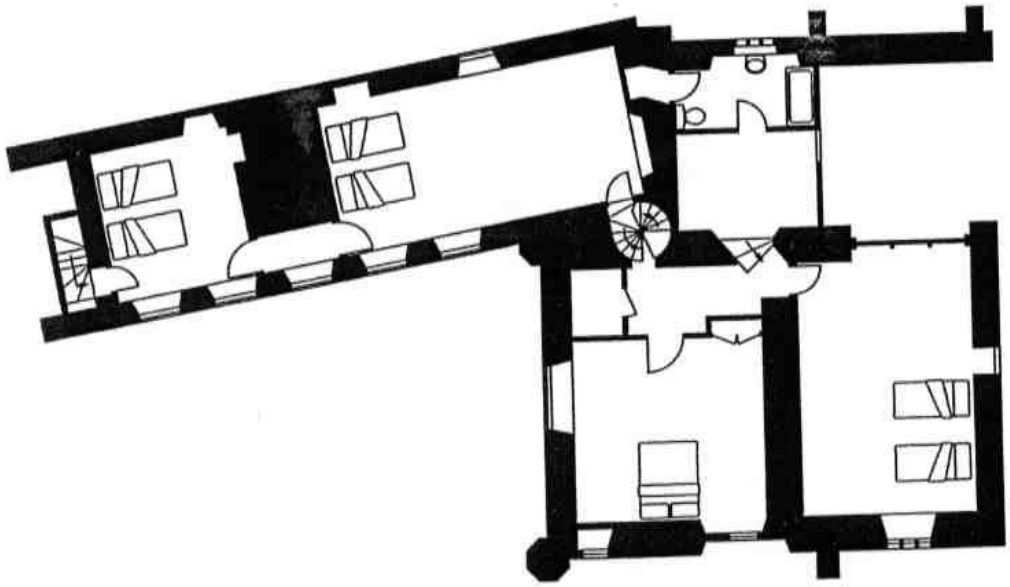


**Figure 12. 1st floor plan with current Landmark Trust room arrangements.**

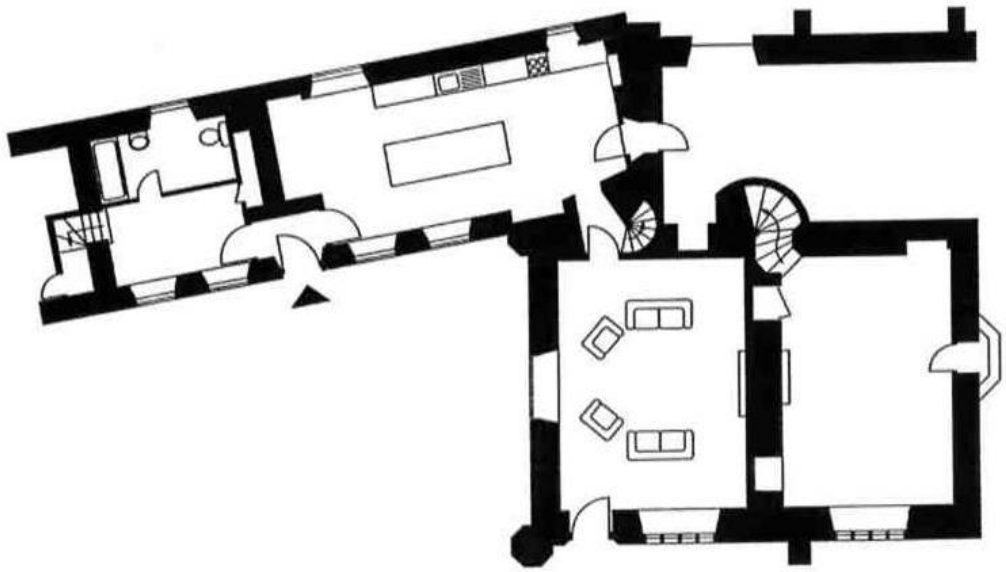


**Figure 13. Ground floor plan with current Landmark Trust room arrangements.**

The date stone on the house reads 1701 (located above the entrance door), although little is known about the subsequent owners of Woodspring other than they were of the Pigott family. The next date for which we have specific evidence is 1823, the year that Ann Pigott inherited Woodspring from her uncle Wedham Pigott. Ann was married to John Smyth, the illegitimate son of Sir Hugh Smyth, but due to a stipulation in her uncle's will she and her husband assumed the barrelled name of Smyth-Pigott. Under John Smyth-Pigott (1792-1853) Woodspring enjoyed a period of renewed prosperity. Smyth-Pigott was a cultured man, known for his generosity and interest in archaeology. Between 1825 and 1829 he employed the topographical artist and architect John Buckler both to paint and restore the site. The church tower in particular received much attention and the fan vault was lovingly restored to its former glory. (Please see the DJ Tomalin's guidebook for a reproduction of Buckler's watercolour of Woodspring in 1829).

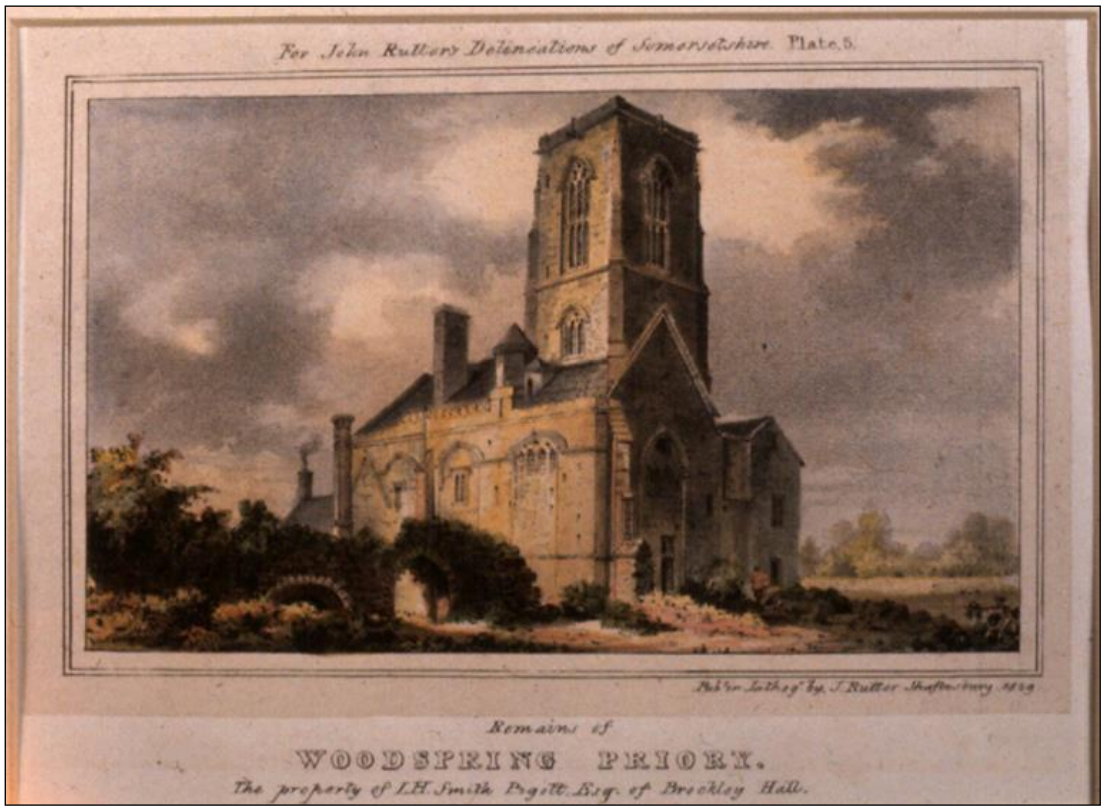



**Figure 14. John Rutter's view of the priory from the south east in 1828, published in *Delineations of Somersetshire,* 1829.**

**Fig. 15 Mrs Buskin & Phyllis Anne, *c.* late 1870s.**

**Fig. 16 The Local Volunteer Reserve at Middle Hope, *c.* 1879-80.**

During this time Woodspring became a haven for learned men looking for peace and tranquillity, but also for a place for study, including geological investigation and spiritual reflection. The clergyman and influential poet Reverend William Lisle Bowles (1762-1850) found inspiration here and in his most famous poem "Banwell Hill," published 1829, there is a tribute to Woodspring (for quote from poem please see section on Thomas à Becket). Other figures who visited Woodspring around this period include George Cumberland (1754-1848), an artist of the Bristol school and amateur geologist, the antiquary Reverend John Skinner (1772-1839) and George Bennett (1771-1834), a solicitor and local antiquarian correspondent for *The Gentleman's Magazine.*

During the latter half of the 19th century the Smyth-Pigotts began to let the priory and the surrounding lands. One of their tenants was the Buskin family, who farmed and lived at Woodspring in the 1870s. John and Anne Buskin were strong supporters of the Methodist church, running the Sunday School at Huntspill and then Burnham-on-Sea. In testimony to their devotion to Christian values they took into their care their niece Phyllis Anne (1867-1930), after her mother died from consumption. Phyllis Anne was brought up at Woodspring until the time of her own marriage and thanks to her grandson, Mr R.C. Thomas, we are fortunate to have a photograph of the family during this time, taken in a photographic studio in nearby Burnham-on-Sea (Figure 16). Unfortunately we do not have an exact date for the photograph, however the costume of young Phyllis is reminiscent of that of Lewis Carroll's Alice in *Alice through the Looking Glass*, as illustrated by John Tenniel in 1871, suggesting that the photograph was taken not long after this date.

Further fortuitous photographic evidence arrived at the Landmark Trust courtesy of Chris Crook, then curator of Woodspring. In 1998 Chris came across a photograph of the local Volunteer Reserve on Summer Camp at nearby Middle Hope. The photograph dates from c.1879-1880 and is a wonderful memento of some of the colourful characters who have spent time at Woodspring There is a

record of one private having suffered a mortal injury from his own bayonet at around this time and the poor soul could well be in this picture!

Subsequent tenants of Woodspring after the Buskin family are revealed by looking in *Kelly's Directory of the County of Somerset*. The 1894 edition lists a William Phippen as the farmer of the site, then in 1906 we learn that John Garrett was a private resident of Woodspring, continuing to live there until at least 1910, when he is again listed in the *Kelly's Directory*, this time alongside "Garrett Jn.," presumably his son and a Mr Austin, who are cited as being the farmers of Woodspring.

During this period the lands of Woodspring adopted another role in addition to farming, that of golf course! In 1895 James Greig-Smith, a surgeon from Bristol, founded an exclusive golf club at Woodspring. As a renowned abdominal surgeon working in the city he sought relaxation in golf and at Woodspring he could combine his love for the sport with his passion for the charming scenery of Woodspring. Much of the land was therefore cultivated for use as a golfing green and parts of the priory itself were also used by the club. In particular a room in what was the east end of the nave of the church (not part of the Landmark), was redecorated for the use of club meetings and dinners. Woodspring golf club was a private society, with strict rules allowing only eight members, hence the name by which Greig-Smith fondly referred to it, "the Octave." Grieg-Smith unfortunately suffered an early death in 1898, leaving the group greatly saddened. The club nevertheless continued for a further ten years or so, although by c.1910 golf was no longer played at Woodspring.

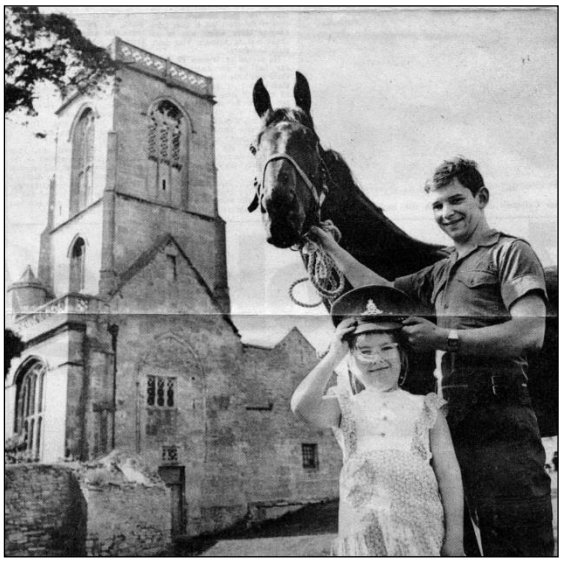
In 1918 the fate of Woodspring changed direction again as it finally left the hands of the Smyth-Pigott family after a happy friendship of over a century and was sold to Major Vernon Tickell Hill. Under Major Hill a considerable amount of excavation was carried out at Woodspring, during which a large number of medieval glazed and coloured encaustic tiles were found in the north aisle of the

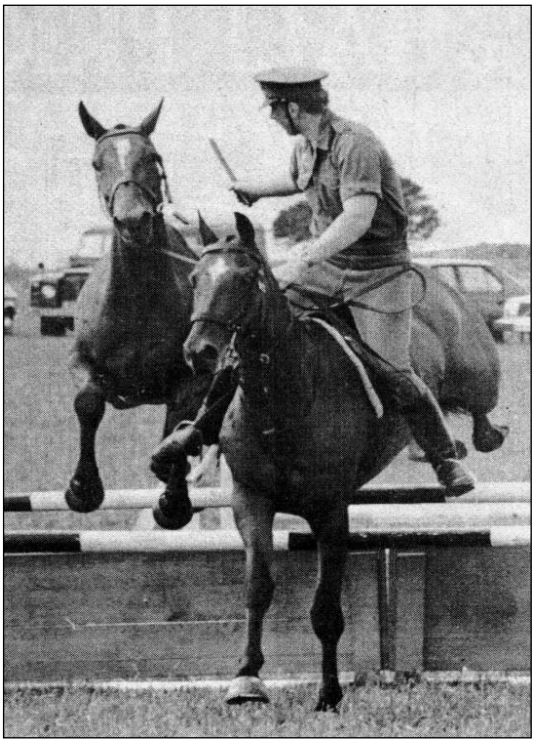
church, as discussed above. The heraldic, ecclesiastical and geometric designs of these tiles may be seen today reflected in the priory's current curtains as they were used as inspiration for the fabric's motifs. Also during Major Hill's time at Woodspring, it was proposed that the former church be converted into a hotel and that it be adjoined by a new "bungalow town."[8] Fortunately these plans were never realised and by 1939 Woodspring had changed hands again and was owned by Richard Frank Burrough.

Woodspring remained in private hands until 1968 when the estate was purchased by the National Trust. It was acquired by the Trust under its Enterprise Neptune scheme, a project designed to preserve Britain's coastline and thus Woodspring was of particular concern encompassing a valuable part of Avon's shoreline from Sand Point to St. Thomas' Head. Just one year later, after conservation work had been carried out on the land, the priory was taken over by the Landmark Trust and the focus of care was shifted to the former monastic buildings.

One of the first groups to occupy Woodspring Priory after the Landmark Trust took on the site was remarkably the Right Section of the King's Troop, Royal Horse Artillery! 56 officers and other ranks, along with 35 of their horses, came to Woodspring for a nine day stay in August 1980.

[8] *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 09 April 1927, as cited in *Woodspring Priory* guidebook by DJ Tomalin, 1974.





**Figures 17a & 17b. Photographs taken from *Weston Mercury*, Friday August 15, 1980.**

The visit came about because the commanding officer of the troop, which is based in St. John's Wood Barracks, London, wanted to give his men and horses a holiday away from the city and to experience the country and its fresh air. He contacted the Landmark Trust for advice on possible sites and they suggested Woodspring, a property under restoration but with multiple buildings suitable for the artillery's use. The men of the unit occupied the farmhouse and tents and caravans they had erected on site, whilst some of the horses took up proud residence in the infirmary, which served perfectly as a stable block. At the request of the West Woodspring Rotarians, the troop put on an open day during their stay, offering the locals a rare opportunity to see the city-based soldiers and their magnificent horses. The event showcased the men's equestrian skills, with displays of pairs jumping, mounted wrestling and even a mounted tug of war. The event was a great success, attracting over five hundred visitors and raising a considerable sum for the West Woodspring Rotary charity fund - a happy and unusual start to Woodspring's new life as a Landmark property.

**Figures 18-29. A selection of old photographs of Woodspring (c.1890-c.1950) may be seen on the following pages.**

**Figure 18. View of church tower with infirmary in foreground.**

**Figure 19. A lean to against the north elevation of the 1701 farmhouse.**

**Figure 20. The south elevation.**
**Figures 18-20. All views of c.1890.**

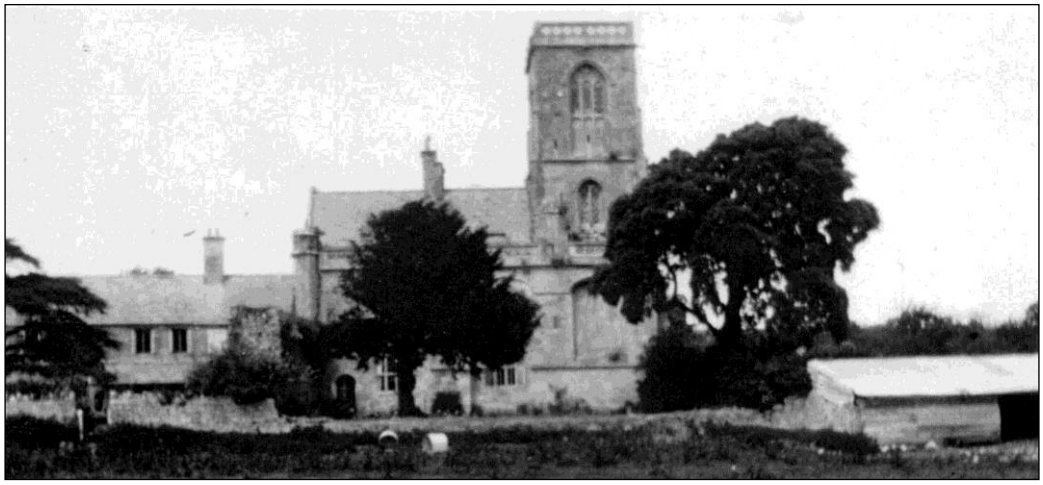


**Figure 21. View of south front of the former church and farmhouse in ?c.1890.**

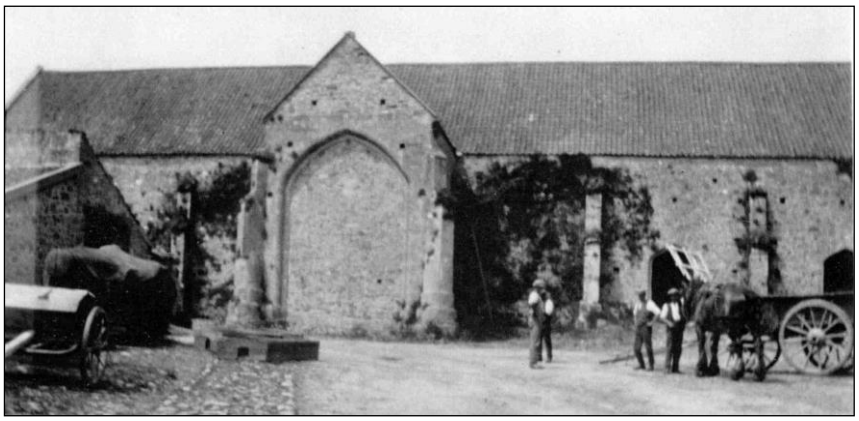
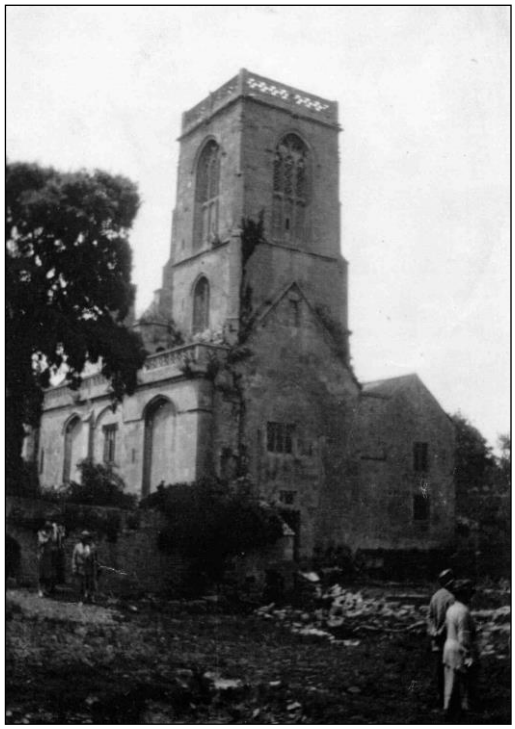
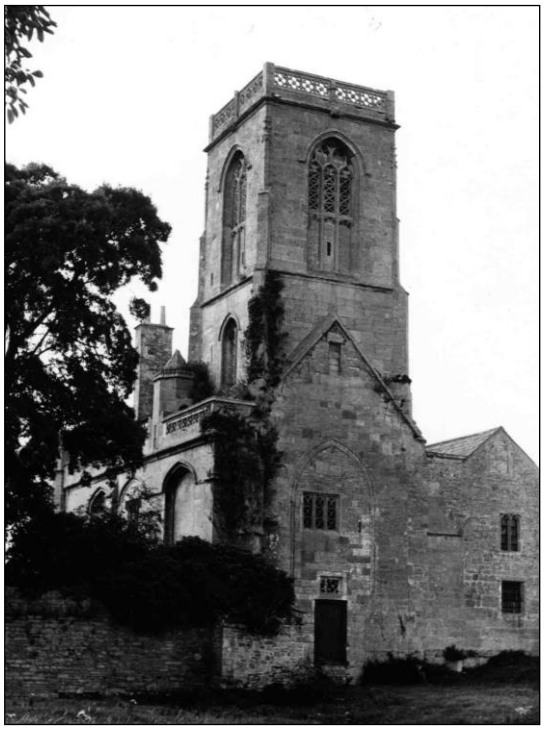


**Figure 22. The old barn in c.1900.**

**Figure 23. View of farmhouse and church in c.1910.**





**Figures 24 & 25 illustrate almost the same view of the east end in the 1920s, (figure 24 on the left) and in 1942 (figure 25 on the right).**
**Reproduced by permission of English Heritage. NMR**

**Figure 26. 1930s view of the farmhouse with its 19th century verandah still apparent.**

**Figure 27**

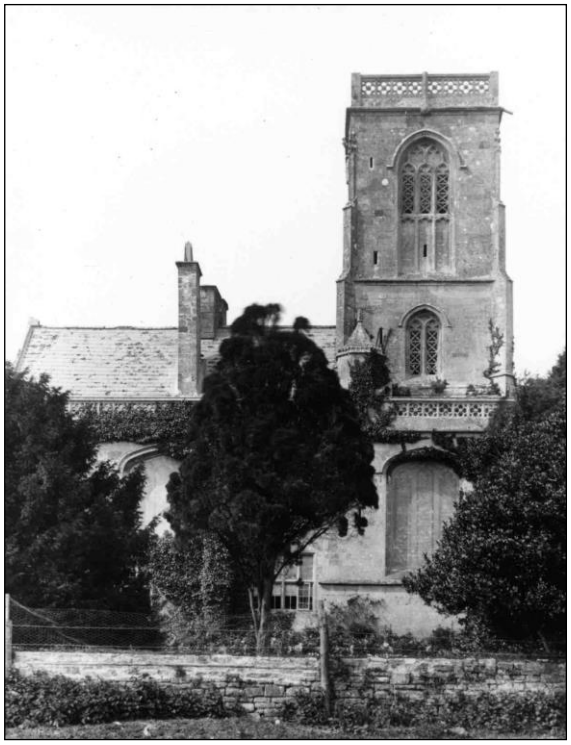
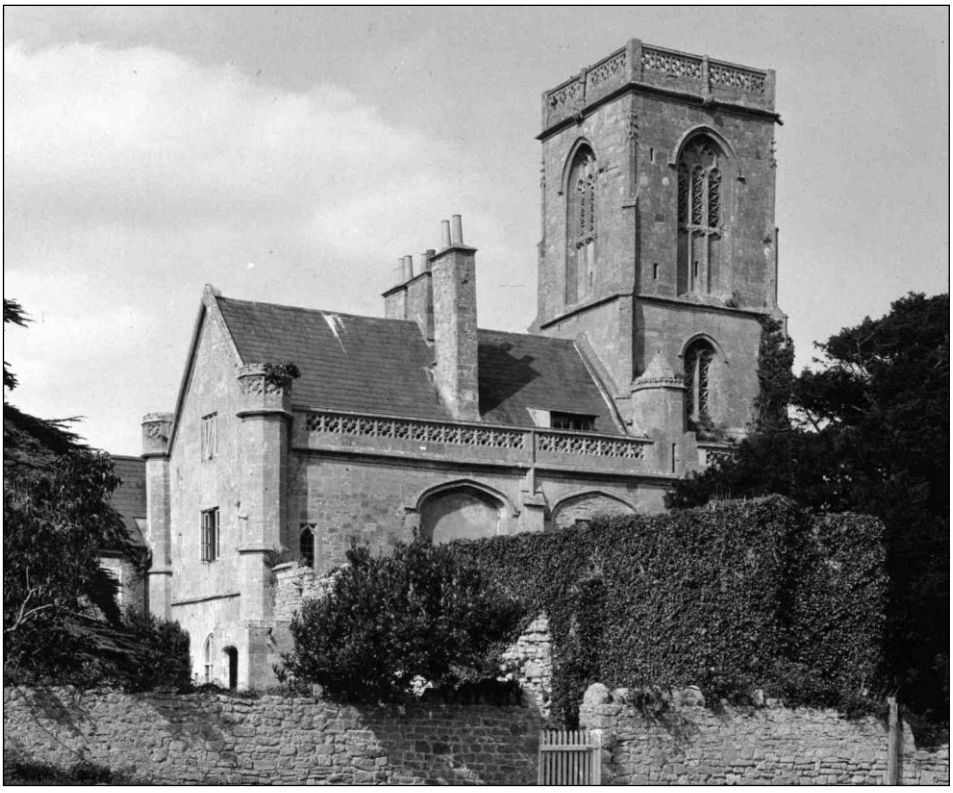


**Figure 28**



**Figures 28-29. Various views of the south front of the church in the 1930s (fig. 27), 1942 (fig. 29) and in the 1950s (fig. 28).**
**All images on this page reproduced by permission of English Heritage. NMR**

## The Restoration of Woodspring

The first phase of restoration at Woodspring took place as early as 1825. The contemporary owner, John Smyth-Pigott instructed the topographical artist and architect John Buckler to carry out a survey and restoration programme at the former monastic site. Buckler was a noted Gothic revivalist, favouring the medieval style and thus must have been extremely happy to have been commissioned for such a project. Although an architect by training Buckler was better known for his paintings and drawings than his architectural work, however in any discussion of the restoration of Woodspring tribute should be paid to both Buckler and Smyth-Pigott for their pivotal role, in particular for the rebuilding of the church tower vault.

Further restoration work was carried out under the Smyth-Pigott family when in August 1876 a fire broke out at the priory, destroying the original nave roof. It would appear that the fire was quite severe and Woodspring was lucky to escape further devastation, as attested to by a letter from the trustees of the Pigott estate to the local fire brigade, thanking and praising them for their "prompt and gallant" service.

By the time the Landmark Trust took over the priory in 1969 the former monastic buildings had once again fallen into a sad and dangerous state. The church tower was under particular threat. The following account of the restoration is largely drawn from two articles by the curator of Woodspring, Chris Cook, entitled "The Repair and Restoration of Woodspring Priory" and "Woodspring Priory, Repair Retrospective."

The initial works involved the painstaking repair of the priory tower. A huge trunk of ivy embedded in the south-east buttress was in danger of causing its collapse. The lead roof, which had been replaced between 1825 and 1829, had a rotten timber subframe and the stone parapet was unattached and held up with

wire and baler twine: it was interesting to watch this swaying in squally weather. In addition the lead gullies north and south of the tower were leaking into the buildings, the whole building needed repointing and re-roofing and the fan vault in the crossing under the tower had about 6 tons of bird guano pressing down on its thin stone shell.

The tower was re-pointed from fixed ladders over a period of eighteen months by a single craftsman and his boy. A new wooden platform replaced the rotten tower roof and the lead cover was recast. All the stone parapets were reset and pinned and the sub-structure of the gullies replaced and re-leaded. The removal of the over-burden on the fan vault presented a serious access problem which was solved by the removal of a stone louvre from a tower window and the guano was then passed through in plastic bags, the operation taking about a week. The nave and north aisle roofs were renewed, using salvaged slates as far as possible.

Having made the exterior of the priory safe for people to visit, it was then time to rationalise the crossing and north aisle so that visitors could enter the building in safety and at the same time be made aware that they were in a former church.

The main crossing arches, south window and north aisle arch had all been blocked as part of the conversion of the church to a dwelling. Within the north aisle a floor had been inserted to create an upper storey of bedrooms. This floor was removed in the first two bays of the aisle arcade. The east bedroom was reputedly haunted by a “chain-clanking monk”: if he did not before, he must now hover. Once the arches and south window had been unblocked, the tracery in the window was completely restored with the aid of a generous grant from the Historic Buildings Council. This greatly improved the natural light within the building and on sunny days shows the fan vault to great effect. The floor in the newly created open space was lowered to reveal the bases of the monumental

tower piers and was reconstructed with flagstones salvaged from the farmhouse range. A small museum was made in the north aisle to interpret the site for visitors in a modest way.

The next phase of the restoration was to stabilise the infirmary, by now on the verge of collapse. The east wall had been destroyed to allow tractor access and the fine arch-braced collar beam roof was being re-cycled by fungus, woodworm, death watch beetle, rats and the weather. The wall was rebuilt using salvaged stone from the unblocked crossing arches in the priory. This new wall is nearly 3 feet thick, 25 feet high and took 22 days to build from base to gable apex. The tiled roof was removed, leaving the skeleton beneath exposed to the elements. Heavy rainstorms washed down the medieval timbers over several weeks, with beneficial effect.

Meanwhile a reinforced concrete ring beam was made around the top of the building to arrest the outward spread of the walls at eaves level. The timber roof was treated for all its ailments. Missing wind-braces and purlins were remade and fixed in position. Once this important building was repaired, restored and consolidated, it was decided that it should become a hotel for sheep, with public access.

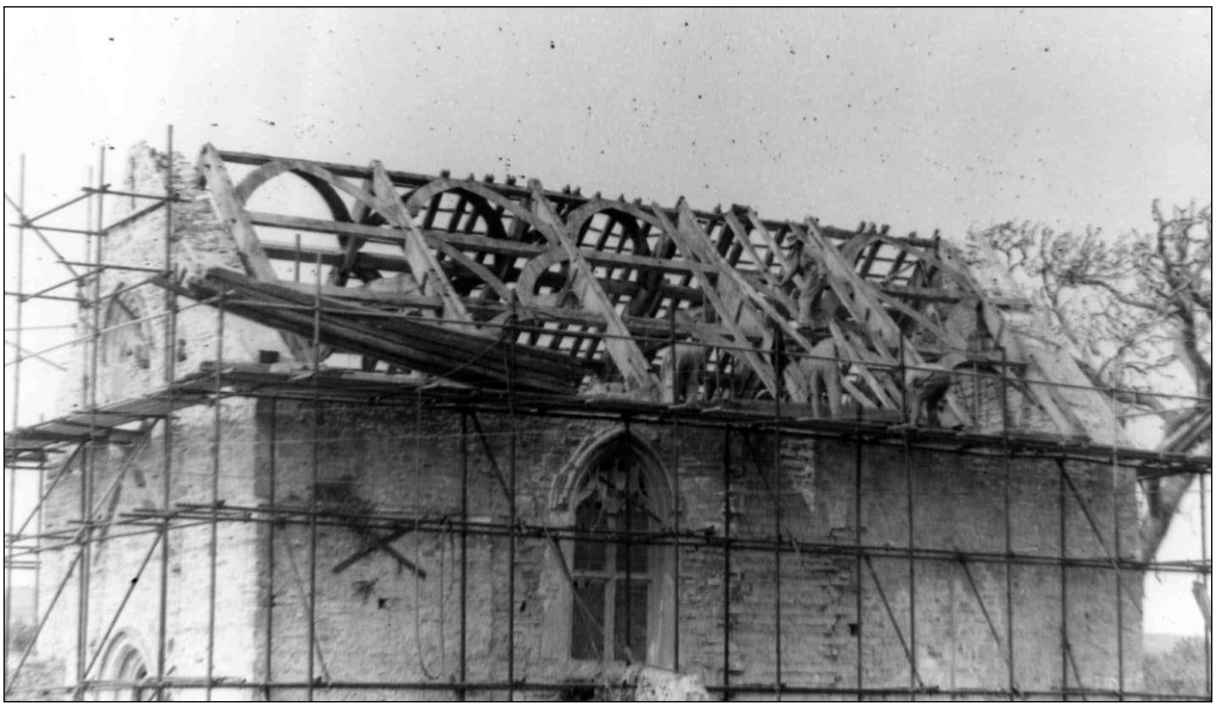
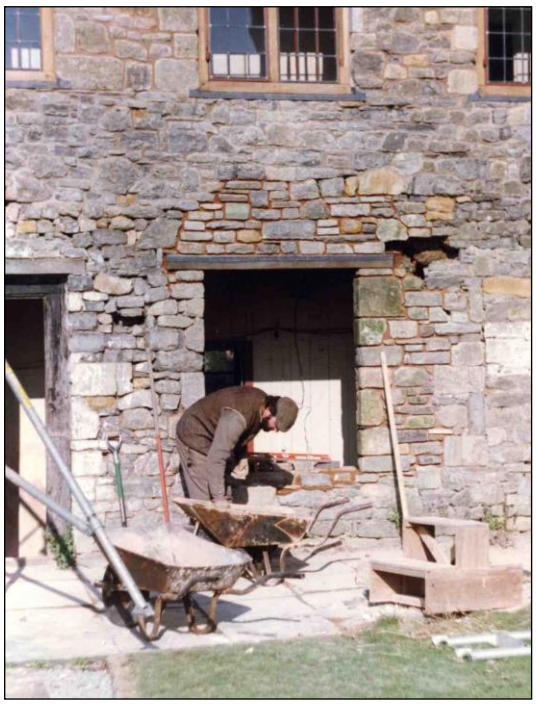


**Figure 30. Restoration work on the infirmary roof, presumably in the late 19th century.**


**Figure 31. Further repair was required to the infirmary roof in September 1990.**

These repairs lasted until 1976. There then followed a four-year hiatus when many improvements were made to the Priory's surroundings but none to the Priory itself. However, work on the buildings was resumed in 1980, (for the layout of the rooms restored by the Landmark Trust please see figures 14 and 15). The roof of the 18th century farmhouse was leaking badly and it was decided to renew the roof covering with salvaged pantiles. The roof was double-felted and the copings reset. During this operation it was discovered that the roof had been raised by about 18 inches in the mid 19th century. The earlier roof had been covered in gauged pennant stone tiles fixed with oak pegs. The stone tiles had been re-used to raise the wall plate of the building to its present level. Other activities carried out during this phase of the restoration included the fine stone chimneys being pointed and rebuilt and the oak lintels of the 18th century windows replaced where necessary: several were found to be reused moulded medieval timbers. All the gutters and downpipes were also renewed in cast iron.

In 1983 it was decided to reinstate the early 18th century window plan of the farmhouse, removing in the process the 19th century verandah, as visible in figure 30. Several window openings had been blocked or altered over the centuries. New oak frames were made for the new openings and careful repair was undertaken of all surviving oak frames. This involved some extremely complicated scarfing joints to maximise the strength of the repair and also to save as much original material as possible. After the south front of the building had been repointed, the newly repaired windows were reglazed with leaded lights. Thus this prospect of the farmhouse emerged with a simple, dignified symmetry not witnessed for two and a half centuries.



**Figures 32 & 33. Farmhouse windows and door being replaced.**

Inside the farmhouse, an early 16th century fireplace in the west wall of the first floor room, (formerly part of the prior's lodging, now the main bedroom) was reconstructed using original fragments. We know that this fireplace was still in situ in 1885 as it was drawn by RW Paul, the Bristol architect who was completing an excavation at Woodspring at that time. At some point after this date the fireplace must have been smashed and broken up as two large parts of the mantle were discovered in the east end of the church, being reused as steps. The central portion of the stone lintel was moved and recycled even further afield as it was recovered from a rockery in Winscombe!

34

35

36

**Figure 34. Reconstructed fireplace in first floor bedroom.**

**Figure 35 & 36. First floor bedroom during restoration.**

The main first floor beams were taken down for repair and woodworm treatment. When they were reinserted, it was noticed that the joist pockets were unusually large, so a decision was made to renew to this original size. A large quantity of green oak was bought in, cut to size and adze-dressed on three sides and so a splendid new oak floor was made.

**Figure 37. Repair of a ceiling beam.**

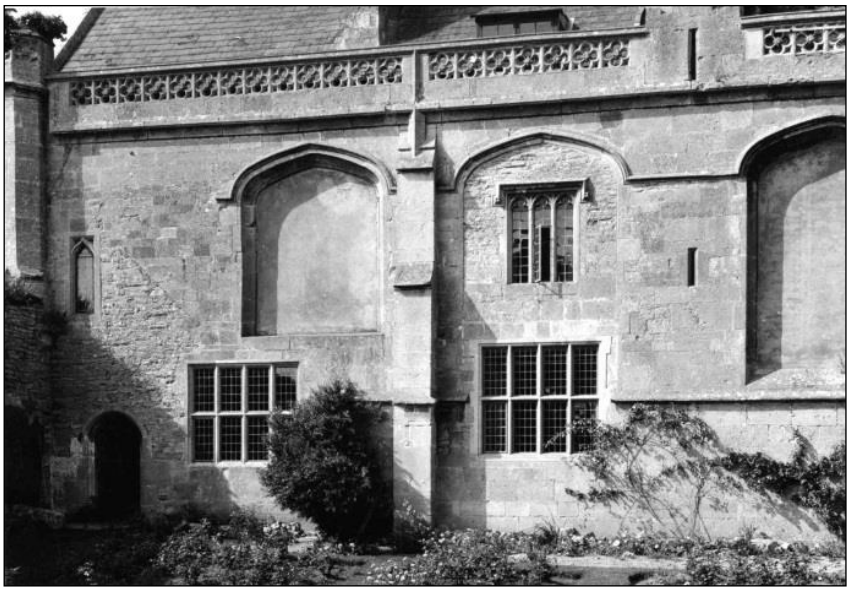


**Figure 38. South elevation in 1942**

**Figure 40. Scaffolding erected around the exterior of the window, (south elevation)**

**Figure 39. Restoration work being carried out on the window of the first floor bedroom in the west end of the former nave, (south elevation of church**

Restoration work on the second bedroom, (located on the first floor in the former west end of the nave), produced a conundrum for Landmark. This room contains a large window in the south wall which had been completely blocked up prior to Landmark taking on the site. However, the render on the blocking stones had been rather interestingly painted at some point to imitate tracery. A decision had to be made whether to re-open and restore the window, resulting in a loss of the rendering and the creation of a rather large window open to the floor of a now private bedroom, (please see figure 38). A compromise was achieved by installing shutters at the bottom half of the window, offering privacy for those who chose it, whilst also allowing the whole window to be revealed.

Work at Woodspring since 1983 was initially carried out by Landmark's then direct works team under the leadership of Michael Haycroft, who had previously worked on Lundy Island and at Stogursey Castle.

**On the following pages are a series of photographs illustrating the various craftsmen who gave their time and expertise to the restoration of Woodspring.**

**Figure 41. Mike Haycraft of Landmark's direct labour team with John Brown, who joined Landmark from Ford's during the Woodspring project and has been with us ever since.**

**Figure 42. Planing a new floor board.**

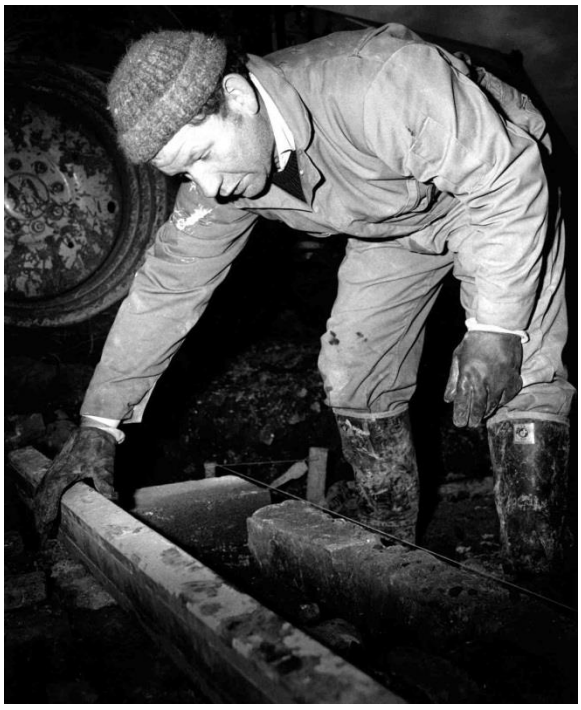


**Figure 43. Dave Cole of Ford's.**

**Figure 44.**

**Figure 45. Lime for use at Woodspring was slaked at nearby Gurney Manor, another Landmark on-site at the same time and which acted as a slaking centre for several projects. Today, Alan White (top) and Dave Chubb would certainly be wearing more protective gear for slaking!**

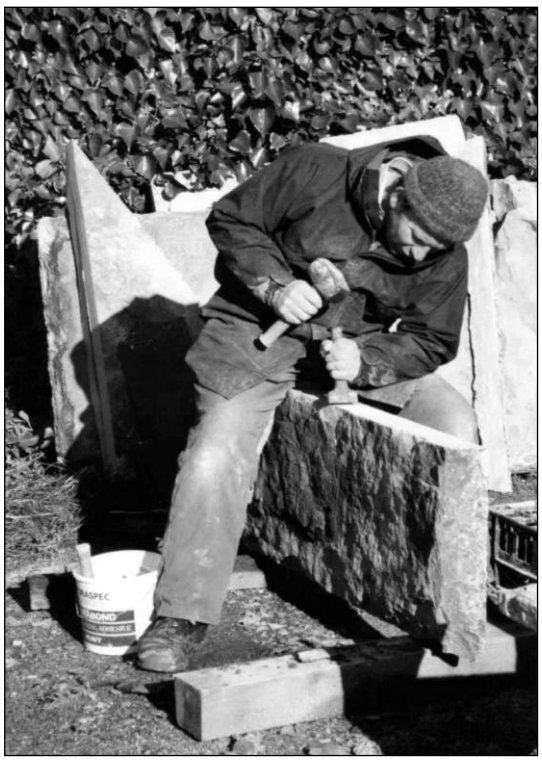


**Figure 46: Trimming a flagstone**

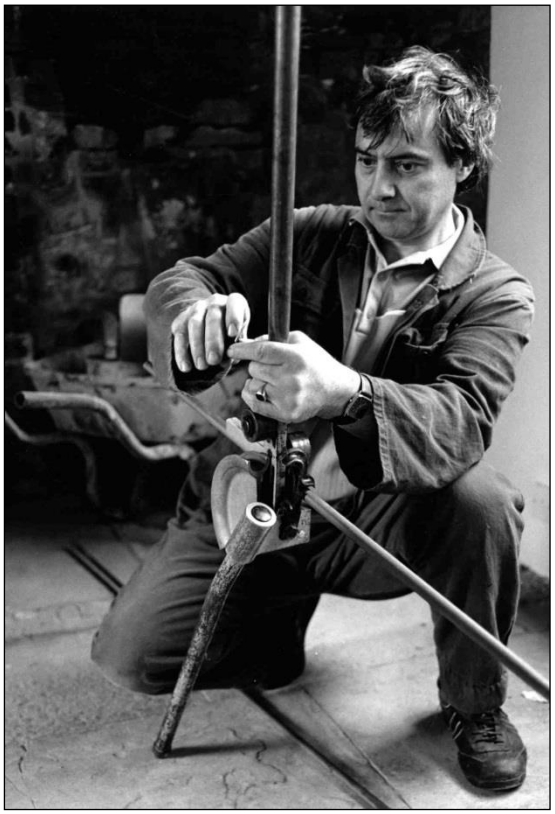


**Figure 47. Modern plumbing.**

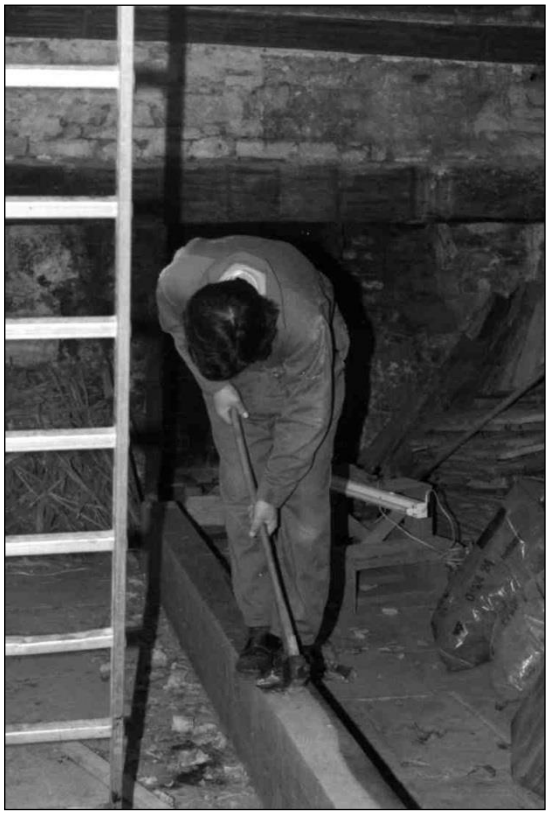


**Figure 46. Mike Haycraft using an adze, a tool in use since the Middle Ages.**

**Figure 49. John Brown putting in place a new skylight above the spiral staircase between the north aisle and the nave of the church.**

**Figure 51. Bernard Cole, brother of David**

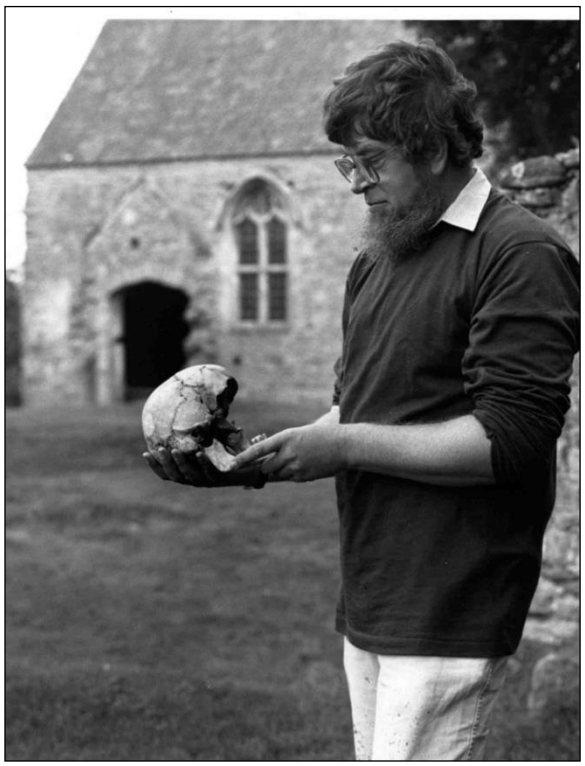


Figure 52. Chris Crook with a skull found near the infirmary. At time of writing (2005), Chris was still Curator of Woodspring 36 years after Landmark first came to the site. He retired in 2010.

**Figure 53. A well earned rest!**

Landmark and the Culture Recovery Fund 2020-21


**Landmarks that benefitted from the Cultural Recovery Fund 2020-21**

2020-21 was the year when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the UK, and for nine months out of twelve, Landmark had to close all its buildings, with a resulting cessation of the holiday income that funds our buildings' maintenance. Vital projects across Britain were put on hold because of the pandemic, because of uncertainty about when contracts could be agreed or when specialist builders and craftspeople would be allowed to work onsite again. The closure of Landmarks for holiday bookings from March to October 2020 and again from December to April 2021 was a devastating blow to our finances and directly impacted Landmark's maintenance budget.

However, in autumn 2020 we were delighted to receive a grant of £1.2million from the government's Culture Recovery Fund, allowing us to reignite our planned maintenance programme and ensure that none of our buildings fell into disrepair.

Under the auspices of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the Culture Recovery Fund was designed to secure the future of Britain's museums, galleries, theatres, independent cinemas, heritage sites and music venues with emergency grants and loans. One strand of the Fund was the Heritage Stimulus Fund administered by Historic England, which included the Major Works Programme, source of the grant to Landmark. This transformative grant allowed a group of 15 critical maintenance projects at 17 Landmarks across England to go ahead.

The projects directly provided employment and training for more than 130 craftspeople, including many multi-generation family-run businesses local to our buildings. Masons, carpenters, architects, engineers and many more skilled specialists were involved across these sites, fuelling the recovery of the heritage sector and contributing to local economies on a national scale. Several sites hosted students and apprentices, providing vital opportunities at a time of great uncertainty.

At Woodspring, it is often hard to schedule works to the many ancillary walls and structures that contribute to the site's historical importance as a medieval site and Scheduled Ancient Monument. Thanks to the CRF, in 2020 we commissioned Devon-based Orchard Stonemasons to rebuild stretches of deteriorating cloister and boundary walls, with new coursing carefully matched to the existing. A fragment a medieval chimneypiece, perhaps from the prior's lodging, was found among the stones used in one stretch of wall, and has been built back in among the rest.

Areas of the tower's balustrade were repointed, with bronze cramps reinstated where necessary into the stone coping that ensures the tower remains weatherproof.

Throughout the works, Landmark's surveyor for Wales and West Midlands, Richard Burton, worked closely with local archaeologist Vince Russett, who has a longstanding relationship with the site.

**Rebuilding the walls at Woodspring in 2020.**

## Who was Thomas à Becket?

The dedication of Woodspring to Thomas à Becket and the story of the founder's historical association to the saint has been discussed above, but just who was Thomas à Becket and how did this former Archbishop of Canterbury become one of the nation's most popular saints?

Thomas was born in London of a Norman family in 1118. He was a personable and highly intelligent man, educated in Paris, Bologna and Auxerre. In 1141 Thomas entered the household of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury and it was on Theobald's instruction that Thomas went to Italy and France to study canon law. Upon Thomas' return to England he became greatly favoured by Theobald, who ordained him a deacon and made him archdeacon of Canterbury in 1154. It was also in 1154 that King Stephen died and was succeeded by the new young king, Henry II. Henry inherited from Stephen a land of disorder and injustice following years of civil war. Henry was determined to resolve the country's problems, which included great friction between the Church and State and to bring back order to England. Archbishop Theobald therefore proposed to the King that he appoint the wise and learned Thomas as Chancellor. Henry agreed and a strong friendship grew between the two young men. Both were keen horsemen who enjoyed hunting, grand feasts and both had a taste for splendour. Thomas became very rich, living a life of considerable grandeur. For example, when he was sent to France to negotiate a royal marriage Thomas is recorded as having taken a personal retinue of some 200 men! The friendship thus proved beneficial to both men and in Henry's efforts to regain order in England and more control for the King, he moved to increase the crown's control over clergy and in this he was aided on a number of occasions by his chancellor. Further evidence of the bond between the two young men was that in 1159, when Henry was fighting in France, Thomas accompanied the king and even joined in the fighting. It was only in 1161, when Archbishop Theobald died, that the friendship was put fully to the test.

At the death of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the leader of the Church in England, Henry saw a great opportunity for him to not only promote his friend Thomas, but also thereby to place a strong ally in the Church who would help him to gain the control he so desired. Thomas was instantly nervous of the position and expressed his fears to the king, warning him that their friendship could be destroyed.

> "For several things you do in prejudice of the rights of the Church make me fear you would require of me what I could not agree to; and envious persons would not fail to make this the occasion of endless strife between us." [9]

Thomas continued to refuse the position until, after some persuasion by the King, Cardinal Henry of Pisa, legate from the Holy See, overruled Thomas. Up until now Thomas had only been a deacon, (the rank of a layman working within the church but not ordained) and so the day before his coronation as Archbishop in 1162, he was ordained a priest.

From then on there was a noticeable change in Thomas. He gave up much of his luxurious lifestyle, took to wearing a simple black cassock and resigned his position as Chancellor. It was not long before relations between the new Archbishop and the King became strained. Henry continued to try to increase the State's control over the Church and Thomas found himself having to refuse his king and friend. After a series of conflicts, in particular regarding whether criminal clergy should be tried in a civil or ecclesiastical court, Henry summoned all bishops to the royal hunting lodge of Clarendon, near Salisbury, to draw up a series of laws, which became know as the Constitutions of Clarendon. Thomas was initially reluctant to accept the rulings, but after being placed under some pressure by his fellow bishops, he finally agreed.

When he later looked in more detail at the constitutions, in particular Henry's demands for observing royal customs, Thomas came to regret bitterly his

[9] Cited in *One Hundred Saints*, A. Bulfinch pressbook, (1993) p. 185, drawn from Rev. Alban Butler's *The Lives of the Saints*, 1756.

submission to the King and made this regret known. The rift between Thomas and Henry escalated to the point where the King decided to try to force Thomas to resign his archbishopric. Henry summoned a council in Northampton requesting Thomas to render his accounts for Canterbury or face judgement, prompting Thomas to flee and set sail to France. The archbishop then spent the next six years in voluntary exile, until his return to England in 1170. Whilst on the continent Thomas, along with representatives of Henry, put their case before the pope. Upon learning about some of the Constitutions of Clarendon and how Thomas had been treated by the King, including the confiscation of the goods of all of Thomas's friends, relations and domestics, the Pope came to decide in Thomas' favour and the King was excommunicated in 1166. It was only when Henry made a political blunder upsetting the pope and more importantly, the King of France, that he found himself forced to bow down and make amends with his archbishop. The King's fateful mistake was that in his hurry to crown his young son Henry, he went against the tradition that the Archbishop of Canterbury crowns all monarchs and had the Archbishop of York crown his son. He thereby upset not only the Church, but also the King of France since the ceremony was also performed without young Henry's wife, Margaret Capet and daughter of the King of France, being present.

In a move to prevent the pope prohibiting Henry's French provinces, the King initiated a reconciliation with Thomas, although significantly he never engaged in the traditional symbolic exchange of the Kiss of Peace. Thomas returned to Canterbury on 1 December 1170, receiving a great welcome from both the monks and the people of the city, but this peace was to be short-lived. It is not certain exactly how the peace in Canterbury was interrupted. Some historians report the meeting of Thomas and the King's young son as the impetus for Henry to speak out once more against the archbishop. Others cite the letters Thomas had sent from the continent excommunicating the three bishops who had previously travelled to France to appeal to the pope on King Henry's behalf, which included Thomas's rival, Roger, archbishop of York. Reputedly these three

clergymen complained to the King that there would be no peace in the realm whilst Becket lived, to which Henry is believed to have cried out in a fit of rage "will noone rid me of this turbulent priest?" These words were overhead by four knights, Reginald Fitz Urse, (grandfather of the founder of Woodspring), William de Tracy, Hugh de Morville and Richard le Breton, (or Brett) and convinced them that they would win the favour of the King if they carried out this wish. On the 29 December 1170 Thomas was confronted by these four men within Canterbury Cathedral itself and was famously murdered in front of the altar.

**Figure 54. Illustration from "The Huth Psalter" manuscript, 1170-1285. ©The British Library**

Accounts of the murder came from numerous witnesses, including Thomas's companion Edward Grimm, who is depicted in the above manuscript illustration standing behind Thomas and bearing a cross as though to ward off the attackers. The outrage and scandal that a man of the cloth could be murdered within his own cathedral and at the foot of the altar no less, spread across all of Europe. Part of this anger was aimed at the King and in an effort to appease his people and arguably out of personal guilt, Henry promised full penance, repealed the Constitutions of Clarendon and agreed to go on a pilgrimage. In a letter of 1171 to Pope Alexander III, Henry wrote

> "……..they fell upon him and killed him (I say it with sorrow). I fear the anger I had recently shown against him may have been the cause of this

> misdeed. I call God to witness that I am extremely disturbed, but more with anxiety about my reputation than qualms of conscience." [10]

A year later, in May 1172, Henry was pardoned for his part in the murder and in February 1173 Thomas was canonized. An ornate shrine was erected in Canterbury Cathedral to hold Thomas's body and it soon became a major Christian pilgrimage site, at which numerous miracles occurred. The cult of St. Thomas à Becket continued until the 16th century, but in 1538, just two years after the closure of Woodspring, one of the many foundations dedicated to St. Thomas à Becket, the shrine of St. Thomas was destroyed, along with numerous other monuments as part of Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries.

St. Thomas à Becket was venerated at Woodspring, not only by the dedication of the priory, but also through the Priory's possession of a sacred reliquary of the saint, a cup of his blood. In 1849 during repairs to the north wall of the nearby parish church of Kewstoke a reliquary was found hidden in the wall which consisted of a stone container and wooden cup holding a dried residue of blood.

[10] Cited *in The Hutchinson Illustrated Encyclopaedia of British History*, (1998), p.166.

**Figure 55. Reliquary cup. Somerset County Museum, TTNCM A.3256**
**© Somerset County Museum.**

Contemporary accounts of the murder say that wooden cups were used to scoop up the archbishop's blood after the murder. These cups were reputedly hung around Becket's shrine in Canterbury Cathedral and played an important role in the stories of miracles taking place around the shrine. The cup found at Kewstoke fits such a description and although it is now impossible to complete any scientific tests on the dried residue to confirm that it is indeed the blood of England's popular saint, other evidence points to it being an authentic relic. The seal of Woodspring Priory alludes to the reliquary as it includes an illustration of a cup alongside a representation of Becket.

**Figure 56. The seal of Woodspring Priory.**

The container itself is fronted by a carved figure resembling a bishop seated in an arched niche with shafts of early English character, the gothic style which is contemporary with the time of the dedication of Woodspring. Upon the discovery of the reliquary it was submitted to the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland and they concluded that it "probably contained the most valued relic possessed by the Priory……the blood of their murdered patron, St. Thomas of Canterbury."[11] The Institute also came to the conclusion

[11] Rev. F. Warre quoted in the *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society*, volume II, 1852, part I, pp.17-19.

that the relic had probably been moved by the canons in the early 16th century to their nearby parish church of Kewstoke. Shrines and reliquaries were despised objects at the time of the Reformation, representing the opulence and decadence of the Catholic church. The canons of Woodspring may well therefore have removed and hidden their sacred object, in an effort to safe-guard it from the threat of desecration from the King and his soldiers.

It seems fitting to end this section on the tumultuous life of Thomas à Becket and his association with Woodspring with a quotation from the 19th century poem by Rev. Lisle–Bowles. The poem not only captures the atmosphere of Woodspring but also summarises beautifully the story of the priory's remorseful origins:

> "…….But mark that hill-
> Where Kewstoke seems to creep into the sea,
> Thy abbey, Woodspring, rose. Wild is the spot;
> And there three mailed murderers retired,
> To the last point of land. There they retired,
> And there they knelt upon the ground and cried,
> Bury us 'mid the waves, where none may know
> The whispered secret of a deed of blood!
> No stone is o'er those graves: - the sullen tide,
> As it flows by and sounds along the shore,
> Seems moaningly to say, Pray for our souls!"[12]

[12] "Banwell Hill" by Rev. William Lisle Bowles, 1829.

## Augustinian Canons & the Victorine Order.

The canons of Woodspring followed the Augustine Rule, but just how did this differ from the other monastic orders of the day? St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), author of the *City of God*, was a fervent admirer of St. Anthony and the desert hermits, but as Bishop of Hippo in Algeria, he himself never became a practising monk.

His legacy exists rather in a letter he wrote giving advice and suggesting regulations for a new religious house for women in 5th century North Africa. The document itself was rather brief and as the Augustinian canons formed their communities they had to look to the older Benedictine Rule to fill the gaps in St. Augustine's teachings. Along with a number of other papal reforms, the order was reformed by Pope Gregory VII in 1059, thereby officially establishing the Order of Regular Canons following the Augustinian Rule, allowing groups of priests who wanted to live in monastic communities to follow this rule.

The first English house which submitted to the Augustinian rule was probably St. Botolph's Priory, in Colchester, founded in 1103. The canons of St. Augustine came to be known in England as the Austin Canons, or the Black canons, referring to the black habits, leather belts and cloaks they wore. Foundations for Black canons grew throughout the early 12th century, particularly in the reign of Henry I (1100-1135), who, with his wife Queen Matilda, helped to establish and support major centres at Cirencester, Carlisle and Aldgate in London. Woodspring was therefore a relatively late Augustinian Priory, although the monastic community itself had existed previously at Dodelyng or Dodlinch, a Somerset house associated with Bristol which was moved to Woodspring in 1210.

The Black canons proved quite popular in England, with the number of Augustinian houses growing to 218 at its peak and at the time of the Dissolution

170 still remained. Perhaps the main reason for this popularity was the fact that, unlike the Benedictine monks, the Augustinian canons were allowed to undertake pastoral work, including working in hospitals, schools and parish churches, as was the case at Woodspring. Monks, as distinct from regular canons who were ordained priests, took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and spent most of their time in private prayer and worship. For the life of a canon, in particular an Augustinian canon, the emphasis was more on the active, rather than the contemplative. St. Augustine, although himself quite an introverted man, promoted the vision of a holy life spent both within the spiritual centre of the priory with one's fellow canons, but also going out into the world and undertaking physical work. Following on from the teachings of St. Anthony, St. Augustine believed that work was of the utmost importance to humanity and as such was a divine gift. He therefore argued that manual labour was an essential part of holy life. The core vocation of the Augustinian canons remained the same as that of its counterparts, to instruct, inspire and lead other Christians by example, but the manner in which they chose to practice this was different from the other monastic orders such as the Cistercians and Carthusians. Theirs was a freer life, with less time spent on the daily Office, or services and less restrictions on food, drink and conversation, leaving them more time to tend to their work within the local diocese.

Although the number of Augustinian priories in England grew, their wealth unfortunately did not follow suit. Despite the generous benefaction of Henry I and Matilda and the subsequent relatively affluent start to the order, only thirteen of their some two hundred houses ever held the rank of abbey. Most of the priories were of modest size, with only enough room and resources to house between five and ten canons. Woodspring was therefore quite typical of Augustinian priories in England in its size, although in its choice of mother house it was slightly more unusual.

Like all religions which encompass many denominations, even a monastic order has its own individual branches and loyalties and the Augustinian order was no exception. Woodspring belonged to the Victorine order of Augustinian Canons, a French foundation of which the nearby Abbey of St Augustine in Bristol was the leading representative in this country. The order was founded by the French King Louis VI in 1129 and its mother house was the Abbey of Saint-Victoire in Paris, which was well known for its theological teaching and philosophy. The Victorine order became widely established in France, but was poorly represented in England. Woodspring became one of just six permanent communities scattered around the river Severn, the others being Bristol and Wigmore, (the chief abbeys), Keynsham, Wormsley and Stavordale. The first Victorine house in England was at Wigmore in Herefordshire. It was established after an Englishman, on his way back from pilgrimage to Santiago Compostela in Spain, visited Saint-Victoire in Paris and was so impressed by their teaching that he brought back with him three of the French canons. The allegiance of Woodspring to the Victorine order does not appear to have made it stand out in anyway from other Augustinian priories. The influence of the French mother house may have placed a greater emphasis on the teachings within the priory, but for our purposes it simply serves to illustrate the complexities of the monastic orders.

## Appendix

**Woodspring Priory**
**(The Last Christmas, 1535)**
**By J. Meade Falkner (1858 - 1932)**

Butter and honey shall he eat,
His lips may taste no common food,
But this shall be his daily meat –
To know the evil and choose the good.

The beech-logs on the Frater hearth
Crackle to hear the Choir go by:
Our brothers in the Centry Garth
Lie with their faces to the sky.

The snow has powdered their burial sod,
Our Lady leaves us still to sing
"The heavens declare the glory of God"
And Blessed Christ's Incarnating.

O Blessed Christ, bring this to pass,
That we who live again to hear
The Abbot sing the cock-crow Mass
May walk with Thee another year.

The night-air through the Cloister-walk
Comes frostier from the frozen clod,
And still the silent company talk,
The heavens declare the glory of God.

To-night the dead and living meet,
The creature cries from field and wood:
Butter and honey shall he eat,
Shall know the evil and choose the good.

## List of Illustrations

17a & 17b. The King's Troop, Royal Horse Artillery at Woodspring, *Weston Mercury*, Friday August 15, 1980.

18 – 21. Old photographs of Woodspring c.1890.

22. The old barn in c.1890.

23. View of farmhouse and church in c.1910.

24 & 25. Views of the east end in the 1920s and 1942 respectively.

26. View of the farmhouse in the 1930s.

27 -29. Views of the east end in the 1930s, 1950s and 1942 respectively.

30. Restoration work on the infirmary roof, presumably in the late 19th century.

31. Further repair work on the infirmary roof in September 1990.

32 & 33. Farmhouse windows and door being replaced.

34 - 36. Restoration work in the first floor main bedroom, including the medieval fireplace.

37. Repair of a ceiling beam.

38. South elevation in 1942.

39 & 40. Restoration work being carried out on the window of the first floor main bedroom.

41 - 53. Various photographs taken during restoration work.

54. Illustration from "The Huth Psalter" manuscript, 1170-1285.

55. Reliquary cup. Somerset County Museum, TTNCM A.3256.

56. The seal of Woodspring.

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