

# The Landmark Trust

## WARDEN ABBEY

Warden Abbey was founded in 1135 as a daughter house to the slightly older Cistercian abbey of Rievaulx in Yorkshire, whose founder, Walter Espec, also gave the land for this new community. The Cistercians were great sheep farmers, turning marginal or rough grazing land to productive use. This seems to have been true of Warden, which was also called St Mary de Sartis, meaning 'of the cleared land'. The first abbot was Simon, formerly novice master at Rievaulx and famous for his piety and learning.

With this auspicious start, Warden flourished and grew wealthy. Fine buildings followed and by 1300 the monastery was already extensive. It was to continue growing, because around 1320 work started on an abbey church of cathedral-like proportions. Much of the money to pay for this came in the form of alms, gifts from those who visited the church - the medieval equivalent of the modern fabric appeal. The magnificent mosaic tile pavement with which the church was embellished was discovered in 1961, and has since been taken to Bedford Museum. Another, similar, pavement, which is thought to have decorated the Abbot's Lodging, was found in 1974 just north of the present Warden Abbey.

Little is known of the abbey during the four centuries of its existence, but such information as exists points to it being highly respected for its spiritual life and religious discipline. The most famous, or infamous, incident took place in 1217, when, after a dispute over property, Fawkes de Breaute, the overmighty Sheriff of Bedfordshire, killed one of the monks, wounded others and had thirty of them dragged 'through the mud' to his castle at Bedford. Although he later did full penance in the chapter house at Warden, it must have been some time before harmony was re-established in the abbey.

Warden was widely known for more peaceful activities, too, since it was here that the Warden pear was cultivated. A small pear used for cooking, it gave rise to the Warden pie, which crops up here and there in Elizabethan and Stuart literature, most notably in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. Hot Warden Pies were still sold in Bedford in the nineteenth century. So proud was the abbey of this horticultural achievement that they put it on the reverse side of their seal, which displays three pears surrounding a crozier.

In 1537, in the reign of Henry VIII, the abbey was dissolved and its estates, valued at £389 16s 6l/2d, distributed to new owners. The site of the abbey itself went to Robert Gostwick, whose family were large landowners in the county. He set about demolishing the buildings, and selling the materials: 400 cart loads of stone were taken to Bedford to build the new gaol. This was in 1552 and shortly afterwards a red brick mansion was built just east of the site, possibly incorporating some late additions to the Abbot's Lodging. A view of this house was engraved by S. and N. Buck in 1730, at which time the owner was a 'Rev. Mr. Paris'. Later in the century the property was bought by Samuel Whitbread, of Southill Park, to whose family it still belongs, although it has been held on lease since 1974 by the Landmark Trust.

In about 1790, the main part of the Tudor house was pulled down, leaving only a short wing which ran back from its north-west corner. This wing is the building known today as Warden Abbey, which is therefore all that is left to us here, above ground, of both monastery and house. With its red brick walls, ornate chimney, and tall mullioned windows, it is recognisably Tudor, but the story is more complicated than first appears. The north-west corner is in fact the stone buttress of a vanished medieval building to the north. Inside, in the main ground floor room, is an arch through which you could once pass into a room beyond; this was later blocked and then turned into a fireplace. The whole of this surviving fragment could even be earlier than the Gostwick house, built by one of the last abbots, perhaps, who might have used the fine room on the first floor as a sunny, south-facing parlour.

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## THE REPAIR OF WARDEN ABBEY

When the Landmark Trust took on Warden Abbey in 1974, the building had been derelict for many years. As long ago as 1912, in the *Victoria County History*, it was described as being 'very ruinous' and used only as a pigeon house. In the 1950s, the roof was damaged by a fire, and although repairs were carried out in the 1960s, where the corner of the garderobe tower next to the stair turret had collapsed, a full restoration was still urgently needed.

This the Landmark Trust offered to carry out, in return for a lease of the building. Once repaired, the building would be let for holidays, which would bring in an income to maintain it. Since each party of visitors would only be here for a short time, there was no need for a garden, and nor was it essential to bring a car right to the door. The position of the building in the middle of an actively-farmed field was therefore no impediment.

The restoration was carried out under the supervision of the architect John Phillips, from London. The builders were Bernard Ward, of Bedford. Work started in 1974, and the building was finally furnished and ready for visitors in 1976. A minor alteration to the stair turret was made in 1979, to extend the stairs to the attic, which to begin with was only reached by ladder.

The first task in 1974 was to repair the roof. The west gable had to be taken down and rebuilt, and eight new rafters fitted. The old tiles were then put back, with second hand ones to make up for those that were missing. The stair turret was given a new conical top, based on that in the Buck engraving. A hidden dormer was made behind the tall chimney at the same time, to give it extra support. The west chimney was made taller, to encourage it to draw.

Some sections of the parapet had to be taken down and rebuilt, with new coping stones laid on top. In the walls themselves, one or two corner stones, or quoins, had to be renewed, and several bricks had to be cut out and replaced. Only the east wall was in reasonably sound condition, since this was only built when the Tudor range beyond it was demolished in about 1790.

Most of the windows had been blocked, and these were now opened up again, and the mullions repaired. Only the later window in the east wall of the first floor room was left blocked, to recreate the original arrangement of that room. New windows were made to light the present bathroom and the loo above it. All the windows were then reglazed by Denis King of Norwich.

In the north wall of the building, next to the stair tower, was a blocked doorway. Since visitors would approach from this direction, it seemed sensible to open this up, and make a hall at the foot of the stairs. The more elaborate southern doorway opened into a small room which, since it was next to the main living room, seemed the best place for the kitchen. Upstairs, the large first floor room had long been divided into two rather small bedrooms. Since this had originally been just one room, and a very fine one, the partitions were taken down to allow it to be enjoyed as one room again.

The ceilings were repaired on both floors, particularly where the ends of beams had rotted, and the moulded wallplate or cornice had disappeared. New oak floors were laid on the upper floors, with tiles on the ground floor. The walls were replastered where the old plaster was missing or decayed, and then limewashed in the traditional way. Around the building, the ground level had risen considerably. The work of lowering it, and digging trenches to bring water and electricity into the building, was carried out by archaeologists from Bedfordshire County Council, with exciting results. Some of the finds can be seen in Bedford Museum.

In 2007 and 2009, Landmark completed the restoration of two more buildings in Old Warden, Keeper's Cottage and Queen Anne's Summerhouse, which both stand on the Shuttleworth Estate.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Warden Abbey sleeps up to 5 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*