The Landmark Trust

WOODSPRING PRIORY, NR. WESTON-SUPER-MARE, SOMERSET

Woodspring Priory, or Worspring as it was known in the Middle Ages, was founded in or around the year 1210. It belonged to the Victorine order of Augustinian Canons, a French foundation of which the Abbey of St Augustine in Bristol was the leading representative in this country.

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 were required to be built in remote places, and for whom manual labour, particularly in agriculture, was a basic requirement. In both of 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 one 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 Becket. He must have 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 was depicted on the priory seal.

Woodspring was not large or wealthy; its buildings were never grand and the community probably had fewer 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 up till the eve of the priory's suppression by Henry VIII in 1536 - an indication perhaps of how little the church suspected that the king would go through with this predatory and immensely destructive policy.

Today, Woodspring is perhaps most remarkable for the way in which it was converted after the Dissolution. No qualms were felt about any need to limit 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, for example, or 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 work was excessive; 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 Priory's great Tithe barn also survives (still in farming use and today owned by the National Trust), as does its magnificent infirmary whose roof is a triumph of the late medieval carpenters' craft.

REPAIR AND RESTORATION OF WOODSPRING PRIORY

In 1969, Woodspring Priory was acquired by the Landmark Trust, a charity which rescues and cares for historic buildings. Its work here has fallen into two phases. The first, completed in 1976, allowed part of the church and the Infirmary to be opened to the public. The second involved the creation of accommodation in the remainder of the church and in the adjoining farmhouse of 1701. This was completed in time for Christmas, 1992. It is now let for holidays to all, for self-catering parties of up to eight people. This generates an income or future maintenance.

Little work had been done at Woodspring since repairs were carried out on the church in 1829, possibly under the supervision of the artist and architect, J.C. Buckler. 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.

It was with these two, therefore, that work began; and so skilfully was the work on the tower carried out, all by one mason and a boy without scaffolding, that it is difficult now to see that they did anything at all. The infirmary required more intrusive methods: the walls were spreading so severely that the roof had to be completely dismantled, and the walls secured by a concrete ring beam before the roof was reassembled by Dawsons of Bristol. Inside the tower, and in part of the north aisle, floors and partitions were removed to restore its original appearance as a church. The south window tracery was renewed.

All around the church and farmhouse a great deal of clutter was removed, leaving the present gardens and orchards free to be enjoyed. At the same time, the cottage to the north of the church, which may be medieval in origin but which had been clumsily modernised, was remodelled more sympathetically, originally to house the curator, Christopher Crook, who lived on the site until his retirement in 2010.

After this initial phase of work, it initially proved impossible to agree what should be done inside the rest of the building. The authorities were keen that the church itself should be completely cleared and restored, and then left as a monument; whereas the Landmark Trust was equally keen that the nave should remain as the extraordinary house it had become. So for a time work ceased, except for the gradual efforts of repair and discovery carried out by the curator.

In 1980 work was able to begin again under Caroe and Partners of Wells, architects experienced in the repair of historic buildings. From 1983, the work was carried out by a small team of craftsmen employed directly by the Landmark Trust, headed by Michael Haycraft. The new phase started with the repair of the farmhouse. The roof was renewed, using second-hand pantiles, the walls repointed, and the oak mullioned windows on the garden front carefully repaired. The oak floor-frame was also repaired. The joists were missing, but could be seen from the pockets in the main beams to have been unusually large. They have been renewed to the original size, cut from green oak and adze dressed on three sides. The great fireplace upstairs was discovered while work was going on, and has been skilfully pieced together.

While this work was still in progress, consent was at last obtained to include the rooms in the nave and part of the north aisle in the Landmark. Further repairs to the exterior of the church could therefore be combined with restoration of the rooms inside it, to provide the present sitting room, two bedrooms and a bathroom with a most unusual view.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Woodspring Priory sleeps up to 8 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk