

## **WARDON ABBEY 1135-1537**

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## Contents

List of abbreviations	ii
Foundation and expansion	1
Land acquisition in the twelfth century	1
1217 Dispute with Falkes de Bréauté	1
1224 Siege of Bedford Castle	2
Development of the abbey precinct	2
1252 Right of free warren	2
1291 <i>Taxatio Ecclesiastica</i>	2
Layout of the monastery	3
Relationship with the parish church of St Leonard, Old Warden	3
1429 Right to wear pontifical <i>insignia</i>	4
The arms of Wardon Abbey	4
The library at Wardon Abbey	4
1535 Valuation and visitation	5
1537 Wardon Abbey surrenders to the Crown	5
Abbots of Wardon	6
Bibliography	7

## Abbreviations

BARS	Bedfordshire Archives
Beds	County of Bedfordshire
<i>BHRS</i>	Bedfordshire Historical Record Society publication
<i>Cal. Chart. R.</i>	<i>Calendar of the Charter Rolls</i>
<i>Cal. Close R.</i>	<i>Calendar of the Close Rolls</i>
<i>Cal. Pat. R.</i>	<i>Calendar of the Patent Rolls</i>
Cambs	County of Cambridgeshire
Herts	County of Hertfordshire
Hunts	Huntingdonshire (Historic county of England)
<i>LP</i>	<i>Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VII</i>
Northants	County of Northamptonshire
N. Yorks	County of North Yorkshire
TNA	The National Archives
<i>VCH Beds</i>	<i>Victoria County History: A History of the County of Bedford</i>
<i>VE</i>	<i>Valor Ecclesiasticus, temp. Henry VIII</i>

## WARDON ABBEY 1135-1537

### Foundation and expansion

Lord of the manor, Walter Espec, founded Wardon Abbey during the reign of Henry I, and early in 1136 King Stephen issued a confirmation charter at York.<sup>1</sup> The monastery, known as St Mary de Sartis,<sup>2</sup> was populated by Abbot Simon and monks from the Cistercian abbey of Rievaulx (N. Yorks). Wardon flourished, and in 1147 monks were despatched to populate the newly-founded Sawtry Abbey (Hunts), followed by Sibton Abbey (Suffolk) in 1150. Wardon's third daughter house, Tilty Abbey (Essex), was established in 1153.<sup>3</sup>

### Land acquisition in the twelfth century

The monastery acquired extensive landholdings thanks to generous benefactors and various business transactions. A charter issued by Henry II in 1160/61 lists the resources held by the monks of Wardon including most of the benefactors' names, location, asset type, and (occasionally) size. Spread across four counties, the total exceeded 1,1914 (notional) acres and included the 'great garden of Wardon' (at least 273 acres) with a large, spring fed fishpond which served as the abbey's reservoir or header tank. The monks also owned part of the adjoining Norman park, land in the parishes of Southill, Chicksands and Flitwick, granges (monastic farms) at Renhold and Millbrook (Beds), Midloe Grange with Ravensho Wood (Hunts), granges at Odsey and Burden (Cambs), land in Bradfield (Herts), and woodland at Ravenesholte (Cambs).<sup>4</sup>

On 11 November 1198 Richard I issued a charter confirming that the monks held the site on which the abbey was situated, lands in Southill, Stanford and Chicksands, the Bedfordshire granges of Rowney, Park, Limbersey, Renhold, Putnoe with land in Milton [Ernest], and Millbrook with land in Priestley; land in Dunton was managed from Odsey Grange (Cambs). Further afield were the granges of West Wardon (Northants), Livermere (Suffolk), Burden with land in Linton (Cambs), Bradfield with Fildene Wood (Herts), and Midloe Grange (Hunts). Beside Midloe Grange lay Ravensho, 100 [notional] acres of woodland granted by King Stephen, which the monks had cleared for cultivation.<sup>5</sup>

### 1217 Dispute with Falkes de Bréauté

Landholding could prove contentious, and in 1217 the squires of Falkes de Bréauté, sheriff of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, attacked the abbey of Wardon after quarrels over a wood; the record does not say where. They killed one of the monks, wounded others and had about thirty of them 'unceremoniously dragged through the mud' to Bedford Castle. The matter was resolved at a meeting in the abbey's chapter house where de Bréauté apologised, acknowledged the monks' right to the woodland, and did penance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> None of charters issued by Henry I (r. 1100-1 December 1135) are known to have survived, however a reconfirmation charter issued by Henry II (r. 1154-89) verifies that Henry I granted his personal protection to the monks of Wardon; recited in *Cal. Pat. R., Henry VII*, vol. 2, p. 613 (7). Date of the confirmation charter given in accordance with the modern calendar; see 'The Cartulary of the Cistercian abbey of Old Wardon, Bedfordshire: from the manuscript (Latin 223) (transcribed and edited, with introduction, abstracts and appendices in English)', ed. G.H. Fowler, *BHRS*, 13 (1930), 286-87 (344a).

<sup>2</sup> Translated as St Mary of the Assarts, the name is derived from the Old French *essarter*, meaning to clear land of trees and bushes in preparation for arable use.

<sup>3</sup> Foundation dates for all permanent Cistercian abbeys established in Great Britain are listed in G. Coppack, *The White Monks. The Cistercians in Britain 1128-1540* (Tempus, 1998), pp. 137-148.

<sup>4</sup> *Cal. Pat. R., Henry VII, 1485-1509*, vol. 2, pp. 614-17 (9).

<sup>5</sup> *BHRS*, 13, 289-91 (344e); *BHRS*, 13, 287 (344b).

<sup>6</sup> *The Annals of Dunstable Priory*, trans. D. Preest, ed. H. R. Webster (Boydell Press, 2018), p. 27.

### **1224 Siege of Bedford Castle**

In 1224 the monks sustained significant losses from Putnoe Wood when forces of Henry III commandeered timber in preparation for the siege of Bedford Castle. A writ of liberate was issued to the treasurer and chamberlains of the exchequer ordering payment of twenty marks annually to the abbot of Warden for damages, recompense that was to continue until such time as the king provided the abbot with land to the value of £10 a year; it took more than a century for the matter to be concluded.<sup>7</sup>

### **Development of the abbey precinct**

The perimeter of the monks' land in the parish of [Old] Warden originally extended to about 6½ miles and it is likely that early efforts focussed on establishing physical boundaries to create multiple layers of protection around the church, claustral buildings, supporting infrastructure and farmland. The average Cistercian precinct covered about 25 acres, but with two miles of earthworks encircling an area of 157 acres, the precinct at Warden was probably the largest in Britain.<sup>8</sup> The final sections may have been installed during the abbacy of Adam (c. 1232-1242), under whose leadership new mill buildings were erected near Risinghoe Castle in the parish of Goldington shortly before 1240.<sup>9</sup> Movement around the marshy landscape at Warden proved challenging, and causeways were constructed to facilitate access between key points. The reputation of Warden Abbey for its civil engineering capabilities was borne out in 1245, when Henry III mandated Bernard of Savoy, constable of Windsor Castle, to seek the assistance of a lay brother from the abbey, known to have expertise in making large fishponds (*vivaria*), and whose skills were required in the royal park.<sup>10</sup>

### **1252 Right of free warren**

Granted by the Crown, the legal right of free warren was a valuable privilege which permitted the holder to take rabbits and other small game from a specified area. On 25 April 1252 the abbot of Warden agreed to pay 200 marks (£133 6s 8d) to Henry III for a charter of liberties granting right of free warren in the woods belonging to the Bedfordshire granges of Rowney, Park, Limbersey, Renhold, Putnoe, Milton [Ernest], Millbrook, Meadow [Grange at Dunton], Risinghoe, Meppershall, Caldecote, Holme, and Henlow. The same privilege applied to the granges and woodlands of Odsey, West Warden, Livermere, Bradfield, Burden, and Ravenesholte (Cams).<sup>11</sup>

### **1291 *Taxatio Ecclesiastica***

In 1291 the abbey accrued taxable income of £257 0s 7½d, significantly more than that of Woburn Abbey, which amounted to £164 15s 8¼d.<sup>12</sup> Warden generated revenue by renting out land, mills and woodland rights, selling produce and livestock, and from amercements<sup>13</sup> or other payments received by its Bedfordshire manorial courts at Ravensden, Ampthill, Putnoe, Warden, Caldecote, and Henlow. Having relinquished assets in St Neots,<sup>14</sup> tax was levied on

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<sup>7</sup> *Cal. Pat R., Henry III*, pp. 39, 74; 'Court of Augmentations Accounts for Bedfordshire – I', ed. Y. Nicholls, *BHRS*, 63 (1984), 101-102 (**133**); *Cal. Pat R., Edward III*, vol. 4, p. 520.

<sup>8</sup> C.C. Taylor, [*Warden Abbey*] *Field Survey* (Bedfordshire County Council, 1978) [Unpublished report].

<sup>9</sup> *Matthew Paris's English history, from 1235 to 1273*, trans. J.A. Giles, (London, 1852) vol. 1, p. 434 and vol. 2, p. 32; *Joannis Lelandi antiquarii de rebus britannicis collectanea*, 4 vols., ed. T. Hearne (edition altera, 1770), vol. 1, p. 266; *BHRS*, 13, 184-85 (**240 (1)-(2)**).

<sup>10</sup> *Cal. Close R., Henry III*, vol. 5, p. 293.

<sup>11</sup> Charter dated 25 April 1252 in *Cal. Chart. R., Henry III*, vol. 1, p. 385; reconfirmed by Edward I and recited in *BHRS*, 13, 291-94 (p. 293), (**344f**).

<sup>12</sup> W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. J. Caley, H. Ellis and B. Bandinel, 6 vols. in 8 (London, 1817-49), vol. 5, pp. 369-70 and 478, cited as *Mon.*

<sup>13</sup> **amercement**: financial penalty levied by a court

<sup>14</sup> *BHRS*, 13, 148-49 (**208a**).

town properties in Bedford, Cambridge and London, and on holdings in [King's] Lynn, which had replaced facilities in the port of Norwich between 1286 and 1291.<sup>15</sup>

### **Layout of the monastery**

Constructed in stone during the mid-twelfth century, the abbey church on the north side of the cloister garth boasted an aisled nave 180 feet in length, north and south transepts with side chapels to the east, and a box-like presbytery.<sup>16</sup> The cloister garth and surrounding buildings were set out according to Cistercian norms. Abutting the east side of the complex, the monks' infirmary hall overlooked gardens, vines and fishponds, while a detached ancillary range (bakehouse, brewhouse and kiln house) lay about 50m west of the monastery.<sup>17</sup>

On the back of a thriving wool business, the monks initiated a project in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century to extend and rebuild the east end of the abbey church. The Great Famine (1315-17) brought the venture to a standstill, and by the time that work was completed in the 1330s, the abbey had fallen deeply into debt.<sup>18</sup> Financial tribulations aside, the result appears to have been a spectacular building some 100m in length with an aisled presbytery of seven bays<sup>19</sup> covered by high-quality, glazed floor tiles fired onsite. A number of specially shaped tiles are on permanent display at The Higgins, Bedford, but the whereabouts of several brightly painted and gilded roof bosses unearthed in the mid-nineteenth century are unknown.<sup>20</sup>

### **Relationship with the parish church of St Leonard, Old Warden**

Walter Espec granted the advowson (the right to nominate the parish priest) to the abbey before 1154, but his charter was lost after 1199.<sup>21</sup> While the abbey church was being extended in the first quarter of the fourteenth century the monks also rebuilt the chancel and chancel arch of the parish church, added the south aisle, and installed the highly unusual, twelve-sided font. Masons carved eight corbels to support the new nave roof between 1307 and 1324; St Leonard, Edward II and an abbot survive on the south aisle arcade, while Edward the Confessor, Walter Espec and a foliate head (Green Man) look down from the north wall.

On 12 November 1376 the abbot paid 40 marks [£26 13s 4d] to Edward III for a licence to appropriate the parish church.<sup>22</sup> The strengthening of ties was marked with at least one new bell cast in the foundry of John Rufford at Toddington,<sup>23</sup> and the insertion of one or more windows in the north wall of the nave during 1380/81. Depicting Abbot Walter Clifton praying to St Martha, the easternmost window is the only surviving example of a Cistercian abbot in

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<sup>15</sup> T. Astle, S. Ayscough and J. Caley (eds.), *Taxatio Ecclesiastica Angliae Et Walliae Auctoritate P. Nicholai IV, Circa A.D. 1291* (London, 1802).

<sup>16</sup> MOLA (2017).

<sup>17</sup> The typical Cistercian layout of the claustral buildings and early fourteenth-century extension to the presbytery were confirmed by geophysical survey in 2017. J. Walford, *Archaeological geophysical survey on the site of Warden Abbey, Old Warden, Bedfordshire, March to April 2017* (MOLA Northampton, 2017) [Report], Fig. 4, cited as MOLA (2017).

<sup>18</sup> On 16 April 1338 the monks were granted a 'Pardon, out of compassion for their present depressed estate, to the abbot and convent of Wardon of their contingent of the last three-yearly tenth granted to the king by the clergy of the province of Canterbury'. *Cal. Pat. R., Edward III*, vol. 4, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> MOLA (2017), p. 5 and Fig. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *The Ecclesiastical and Architectural Topography of England, Bedfordshire, Published Under the Sanction of the Central Committee of the Archeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* (Parker, 1848), (footnote to Entry 127).

<sup>21</sup> The charter was produced in the course of a dispute in 1199. *Rotuli Curiae Regis, (1 John)*, ed. F. Palgrave (Record Commission, 1835), 1, 242, 326.

<sup>22</sup> *Cal. Pat. R., Edward III*, vol. 16, p. 379.

<sup>23</sup> P. Albon (2018) [unpublished report prepared for the PCC].

medieval English stained glass.<sup>24</sup> Small fragments of medieval glass also survive *in situ* in the eyelets of the middle window.

### **1429 Right to wear pontifical *insignia***

In 1429 Pope Martin V issued a bull granting Abbot William II of Wardon the right 'to wear the mitre, ring and other pontifical *insignia*, in the monastery, and the priories subject to it, and in the parish and other churches belonging to it, and to give solemn benediction after mass, vespers and matins, provided that no bishop or papal legate be present'.<sup>25</sup> The British Museum houses three exquisite clasps or morsers from Wardon, which it dates to 1426/75. Used to fasten an ecclesiastical cloak, they may have been commissioned to mark the abbot's new privileges, and represent some of the most exciting examples of Cistercian metalwork to have survived anywhere in the world.<sup>26</sup>

### **The arms of Wardon Abbey**

Three golden pears on a blue background, sometimes seen with a crozier, were adopted as the arms of Wardon Abbey during the mid-fifteenth century. It has even been suggested that the monastery was named after the warden (a rock-hard cooking pear) or that the medieval pear was so-called in honour of the abbey, but neither assertion is correct.<sup>27</sup> Local lore also supposed that the arms reflected the pride of the abbey in its horticultural achievements, but the reality is certainly more spiritual. The number three has great significance beginning with the three persons in the Godhead. Blue was traditionally associated with Mary, mother of Jesus, whom the Cistercians held in the highest regard. They believed that at the end of her earthly life, Mary was assumed into Heaven where she was crowned Queen, and gold used to represent her queenship. Pears would have been seen as symbol of the abundance of fruit and life in the Garden of Eden, and Jesus as the fruit of the Virgin's womb.<sup>28</sup>

The earliest known surviving example of the arms is found on one of the three morsers mentioned above<sup>29</sup> and another, from about the same period, can be seen on a roof boss at the west end of the north aisle in Amptill parish church. The logo is incorporated into the seal of Abbot Augustine London, which remains attached to a lease of 1500 concerning land in Haynes, Houghton [Conquest] and Maulden - wool from the abbot's sleeve is embedded in the wax.<sup>30</sup> The counterseal appended to the Deed of Surrender (1537) bears the arms in the form of a shield containing a demi-crozier with ram's horn design handle between three pears and the legend: SPES MEA IN DEO EST (My hope is in God) - a thumb-print in the wax probably belongs to Henry Emery, the last abbot.<sup>31</sup>

### **The library at Wardon Abbey**

Abbot John Bright pawned 'twelve large volumes, including St Augustine's *City of God* and other authoritative texts on the old and new testaments in 1491/92,<sup>32</sup> but otherwise little is known about the monks' library. Nevertheless, having survived the dissolution in excellent

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<sup>24</sup> R. Marks, 'Cistercian Window Glass in England and Wales', in *Cistercian Art and Architecture in the British Isles*, ed. C. Norton and D. Park (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 211-27 (pp. 225-27).

<sup>25</sup> 'Lateran Regesta 292: 1428-1430', in *Calendar of Papal Registers Relating To Great Britain and Ireland: Volume 8, 1427-1447*, ed. J.A. Twemlow (London, 1909), pp. 137-146. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-papal-registers/brit-ie/vol8/pp137-146> [accessed 14 October 2022].

<sup>26</sup> British Museum numbers 1853,0607.1, 1853,0607.2, and 1853,0607.3; J. Geddes, 'Cistercian Metalwork in England', in *Cistercian Art and Architecture in the British Isles*, ed. C. Norton and D. Park (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 256-65 (pp. 261-62).

<sup>27</sup> Occurring in Domesday, the name *Wardon* is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *weard-dún* meaning beacon-hill.

<sup>28</sup> M. Roberts, *The Original Warden Pear* (Eventispress, 2017), pp. 13-14.

<sup>29</sup> British Museum No. 1853,0607.1.

<sup>30</sup> BARS, RO5/208.

<sup>31</sup> TNA, E322/253.

<sup>32</sup> D.H. Williams, *The Tudor Cistercians* (Gracewing, 2014), p. 79, cited as *Tudor Cist.*

condition, a large collection of manuscripts (all dating from the twelfth/early thirteenth century) is preserved by Trinity College, Cambridge in fourteen bound volumes. These are freely available online through the Wren Digital Library. Seven titles are preserved in one (re-bound) volume (MS 71) at Sydney Sussex College, Cambridge and three kept together in their original binding (MS 316/712) at Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge. A further two volumes are held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (MS Bodl. 139 and MS Laud misc. 447).<sup>33</sup>

### **1535 Valuation and visitation**

When Henry VIII ordered a valuation of the Church's estate in 1535, the gross income of Wardon Abbey amounted to £442 11s 11d. After deduction of allowable expenses, a net (taxable) total of £389 16s 6¼d was recorded in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*. This was comparable to Woburn Abbey, which was worth £430 13s 11½d gross (£391 18s 2d net).<sup>34</sup>

Determined to ensure full implementation of the 1534 Act of Supremacy, the king appointed Cromwell as his vicar-general, granting him special authority to visit the religious houses and issue a series of twenty-five royal injunctions designed to make them toe the party line. Dr Thomas Legh and his assistant, John ap Rice, visited Wardon Abbey on 16 October 1535.<sup>35</sup> Shortly afterwards, Abbot Henry Emery made fruitless attempts to resign his post, complaining bitterly about the monks' appalling behaviour. Examples include John Carrington, thought to be the sub-prior, supposedly caught in the vineyard hedge with a prostitute, and five other monks branded nothing more than 'common dronkerdes'.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the veracity of his claims remains highly dubious, but if true, raises serious questions over the abbot's competence and motives. Speculation aside, given the religious strength in depth of the community, his allegations point more towards political machinations than a true reflection of the contemporary situation at Wardon.

### **1537 Wardon Abbey surrenders to the Crown**

Having been deposed by his monks in summer 1537, Abbot Henry returned to post thanks, apparently, to intervention by the duke of Norfolk. However, the fate of the abbey was sealed and the community was suppressed on 4 December 1537. The abbot and thirteen remaining monks signed the Deed of Surrender in front of royal commissioners Dr Richard Layton and Dr William Petre, declaring unanimously and of their 'absolute free will' that they had given and granted the whole monastery and estates to the king.<sup>37</sup>

In common with the Bedfordshire priors of Newnham and Dunstable, Abbot Henry Emery seems to have been awarded an annual pension of £60,<sup>38</sup> and while the abbess of Elstow fared remarkably well with £50, the prioress of Harrold received a miserable £7.<sup>39</sup> Having failed to accede to the king's demands, Abbot Robert Hobbes of Woburn was hung on 14 June 1538.<sup>40</sup> On 1 March 1538 the Court of Augmentations confirmed that pensions ranging from £6 13s 4d to £5 6s 8d annually had been granted to twelve of Wardon's former monks.<sup>41</sup> Only William Peck (probably the old prior) was missing from the list and may have died soon after the abbey closed. For details on subsequent events, see [THE SITE AND PRECINCT OF THE LATE WARDON ABBEY FROM 1537 ONWARDS](#).

<sup>33</sup> For further details, see D.N. Bell, *An Index of Authors and Works in Cistercian Libraries in Great Britain* (Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, 1992), p. 257 and N.R. Ker (ed.), *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain. A List of Surviving Books* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London, 1964), pp. 193-94.

<sup>34</sup> *Mon.*, pp. 373 and 478.

<sup>35</sup> *LP*, vol. 9, August-December 1535, p. 210.

<sup>36</sup> *LP*, vol. 9, August-December 1535, pp. 397-98.

<sup>37</sup> Deed of Surrender, TNA, E322/253.

<sup>38</sup> R.C. Marks, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries in Bedfordshire (An Introductory Survey)* (1968), p. 21 and Note 111 [paper prepared for a seminar held at King's College, London University].

<sup>39</sup> *LP*, vol. 15, p. 549 (170b), p. 553 (350b), and p. 547 (80); *LP*, vol. 13, pt. 1, p. 577 (54b).

<sup>40</sup> *Tudor Cist*, p. 472.

<sup>41</sup> *LP*, vol. 13 pt. 1, p. 583 (11-13).



## Abbots of Wardon

We usually only know when the name of an abbot 'occurs' in a document. It is rare to find the exact dates of his tenure.

- Simon 1135, occurs c. 1160/70
- Hugh ? – c. 1186
- Pagan c. 1186-c. 1198
- Warin I c. 1198-c. 1200
- Roger I Occurs 1200
- Warin II c. 1200, occurs 1205
- Laurence I Occurs 1208, 1209/10
- Henry I After 1209/10-1215
- Roger II 1215-1224
- William I 1224-c. 1233
- Adam Occurs 1234-1242
- Geoffrey 1242-c. 1258
- Alexander Reynes Occurs 1259, 1271
- Elias Occurs 1272, 1276
- John de Dallinger c. 1278, occurs 1290
- Laurence II Occurs 1302, died 1304
- Ralf de Harrold 1304-1313
- Geoffrey de Stanford 1313-c. 1317
- Thomas c. 1317, occurs 1320
- Robert of Odell c. 1320, occurs 1324
- William de Helmsley Occurs 1330, 1346
- ?William III After 1356, occurs 1365
- Walter Clifton Occurs 1377, 1379
- John I Occurs 1397, 1399
- William IV Occurs 1404
- John II Occurs 1415
- William V Occurs 1428, 1431
- John Alcumbury Occurs 1437
- John Fraunceys 1441, occurs 1472
- William Huby ?-1479
- *Not known* 1479-91
- John Bright 1491, occurs 1492
- Augustine London By 1500, retired 1535
- Henry Emery 1535, deposed July 1537
- Thomas London July/August 1537
- Henry Emery Reinstated August 1537, surrendered 4 December 1537

For more information, see [THE ABBOTS OF WARDON, ST MARY DE SARTIS 1135-1537.](#)

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