

THE SITE AND PRECINCT OF THE LATE WARDON ABBEY FROM 1537 ONWARDS

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Abbreviations

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| BARS | Bedfordshire Archives |
| Beds | County of Bedfordshire |
| <i>BHRS</i> | Bedfordshire Historical Record Society publication |
| Bucks | County of Buckinghamshire |
| <i>Cal. Pat. R.</i> | Calendar of the Patent Rolls |
| Central Beds HER | Central Bedfordshire Historic Environment Record |
| 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 |
| 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> |

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Introduction

Wardon Abbey was suppressed on Tuesday 4 December 1537, when the community surrendered the 'site, soil, circuit and precinct' of the monastery to Dr Richard Layton and Dr William Petre, commissioners of Henry VIII. According to the Deed of Surrender which had been prepared in a standard format, this was done 'with unanimous assent and consent, deliberation, sure knowledge of our own accord, just and reasonable causes especially moving us' and by 'our absolute free will'.¹

Abbot Henry Emery and each of the thirteen monks signed the Deed, agreeing to part with their 'manors, demesnes, messuages, gardens, curtilages, tofts, lands and tenements', mills, meadows, grazing and pasture, woods, 'rents, reversions, and services', as well as commons, courts, views of frankpledge, warrens, vineyards, fisheries, ways, and wastes in the 'County of Bedford and within the Counties of Huntingdon, Cambridge, Northampton, Buckingham, Middlesex and elsewhere within the kingdom of England, Wales and the Marches of the same'. The advowson of the parish church, and the rectory of Wardon with 'pensions, portions, annuities, tithes, offerings, and all and singular the emoluments, profits, possessions, hereditaments and rights belonging' were all relinquished.

From 1537 to 1561 the site of the late abbey and its precinct were held for safekeeping by men with strong local connections. The monastic buildings were demolished in accordance with the lease, and a modest Tudor manor house with various outbuildings erected on the footings of earlier structures. The land passed through many pairs of hands between 1561 and 1786, but constituted a relatively inconsequential part of the landowners' portfolios. There is no evidence to suggest that any of them ever lived at Wardon and trustees were called upon to manage the assets on several occasions. The site and former precinct were purchased in 1786 by brewer and MP Samuel Whitbread, whose descendants now manage the land as part of the Southill Estate.

1537/38 Henry VIII profits from Wardon Abbey

The abbey church, claustral buildings, supporting infrastructure and guest facilities occupied almost 13½ acres of the 157-acre precinct. The balance, roughly 143½ acres, along with approximately 25 acres of demesne² abutting the south-east flank of the precinct boundary, formed the Abbot's Garden Grange, where the religious community had tended vineyards, gardens, orchards and a hop yard, nurtured fish, fowl, and four-legged livestock, and maintained stables, workshops and other outbuildings.³ Arable, pasture, meadow, fishponds and farm buildings were to be found at the neighbouring demesne farm of Park Grange, which covered in excess of 740 acres.

Cattle grazed on both farms while further arrangements were put in place and the land failed to generate any income until after 25 March 1538. The Abbot's Garden was renamed Farm of Demesne Lands and valued for rental purposes in conjunction with the site of the late abbey and its old infrastructure at £13 19s 8d, which included 20s 'for tithes from there yearly'. Annual

¹ Deed of Surrender, TNA, E322/253. Details extracted from a transcription and translation held by Bedfordshire Archives, BARS, CRT100/5.

² **demesne**: 'home farm' retained by the abbot to sustain the community.

³ Documented in the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica Angliae Et Walliae Auctoritate P. Nicholai IV, Circa A.D. 1291*, ed. T. Astle, S. Ayscough and J. Caley, (London, 1802), p. 50, the Abbot's Garden Grange is originally thought to have covered in excess of 273 acres, of which 107 acres had already been leased to secular tenants long before the suppression.

rent for Park Grange was set at £27 5s including 60s for 'the tithes yerely as well of the severalls as of the arrable belonging to the said graunge'.⁴

The Crown honoured extant leases for the abbey's other manors and granges, messuages, tenements, tofts, cottages, barns, workshops and outbuildings, mills, shops and inns, arable, pasture, meadows, orchards, warrens, and woodland rights. Basic rents remained unchanged, however cash payments appear to have been imposed in lieu of tithes, leaving no latitude in the event of disease or poor harvests.⁵

Crown acquisitions in Bedfordshire comprised the manor of Wardon (renamed the Lordship of Wardon) and Wardon warren, Rowney grange and Rowney warren, Gastlings, a pasture called Inlonde [Ireland], Fishers grange with Bury Close,⁶ Stanfordsbury manor, Stanford mill, Holme Mills Grange, Holme mills, and Southill manor. To the east and north-east lay Dunton Grange with a parcel of land at Eyeworth, Druell's wood in Northill, and resources in Ickwell, Thorncote, Beeston, Caldecote (including Caldecote mills), Cogswell, Girtford, Sandy, and Tempsford. To the south and south-east were Meppershall Grange, and holdings in Henlow (including a mill) and Clifton. To the west, pasture at Witherswell straddled the Wilshamstead/Eastcotts parish boundary. Grazing was available at Limbersey (Maulden parish) to the south-west, with arable in nearby Clophill. Milton [Ernest] mills, Castle mills in Goldington and Barford mills⁷ were powered by the River [Great] Ouse. Manors were handed over at Putnoe and Ravensden, as were assets in Bedford, Biddenham, Cardington, Goldington, and Renhold.⁸

Beyond the county boundary, the king received Odsey Grange (Cambs), Bradfield Grange and a farm in Hitchin (Herts), Midloe Grange, Mulsoo pasture, and land in Eynesbury (Hunts), strips in the common fields at Ecton (Northants), the manor of West Wardon (Northants), Livermere Grange (Suffolk), messuages in [King's] Lynn (Norfolk), properties in the parish of St John Zakary (City of London),⁹ and rental income from land in Lower Winchendon (Bucks).¹⁰

Redevelopment of the site in the sixteenth century

On 24 January 1539 the Crown issued a 21-year lease for the site of the late abbey and Farm of Demesne Lands to **Sir Francis Bryan**, who had been steward of Woburn Abbey (Beds).¹¹ Sir Francis had sublet the property to former abbey bailiff **Robert Gostwick** before 29 September 1542,¹² and on 16 July 1545 Gostwick and his wife Anne formally acquired the

⁴ 'Court of Augmentations Accounts for Bedfordshire – I', ed. Y. Nicholls, *BHRS*, 63 (1984), 148-50 (197-199).

⁵ Figures in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (1535) have been compared with the accounts for FY 1537/38. See W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. J. Caley, H. Ellis and B. Bandinel, 6 vols. in 8 (London, 1817-49), vol. 5, pp. 369-70, cited as *Mon.*, and *BHRS*, 63, 78-109 (104-149).

⁶ Rather than a consolidated monastic grange whose produce fed the religious community, Fishers grange probably comprised strips of land in the common fields. It appears to have been renamed 'Graces grounde' farm in 1537/38 and likely to be the forerunner of Gracious Farm in Southill. Bury Close may have been known later as Southill warren.

⁷ The Cistercian abbeys of Wardon and Pipewell (Northants) shared income from the mills at [Great] Barford. *BHRS*, 63, 185 (427). Pipewell Abbey was suppressed in November 1538.

⁸ *BHRS*, 63, 78-104 (104-137), 105-106 (139-140), 109 (149).

⁹ *BHRS*, 63, 104-105 (138), 106-109 (141-148).

¹⁰ Wardon Abbey held land in Lower Winchendon near Long Crendon (Bucks), which was leased to the Augustinian abbey of Notley. *VE*, vol. 4, pp. 232-34 (p. 234). Notley Abbey was suppressed in December 1538.

¹¹ The Cistercian abbey of Woburn was suppressed in June 1538.

¹² *LP*, vol. 14 pt. 1, p. 608 (32b); *Ancient Deeds, Series B for the year 22 April 1538-21 April 1539*, TNA, E 326/11772; *LP*, vol. 20 pt. 2, p. 680 (101); 'Court of Augmentations Accounts for Bedfordshire – II', ed. Y. Nicholls, *BHRS*, 64 (1985), 150-51 (430).

tenancy for a term of 41 years.¹³ The lease demanded that the abbey buildings be dismantled and the stone taken offsite,¹⁴ so although Gostwick recycled small quantities in new stables, barns and dovecotes, most was repurposed elsewhere. At a sitting of the Privy Council on 10 June 1552, members agreed that a letter should be sent to the Chancellor of the Augmentations, requesting him to grant 400 cartloads of the stone¹⁵ from Wardon (probably building blocks and rubble) to Oliver St. John esquire for rebuilding a gaol in Bedford. This was almost certainly the county gaol on the north side of Silver Street at the junction with the High Street, where writer John Bunyan would be incarcerated from 1660 until 1672.¹⁶



Figure 1 Manor house on the site of Wardon Abbey (1730).

Robert Gostwick, his three children, and Alice his second wife had moved into a modest Tudor manor house on the site of the monks' infirmary cloister by 1558.¹⁷ The brick building incorporated various architectural features fashionable at the time (prominent chimneys, canted bay window, full height porch, and stair turret), but although the structure was clearly imposing, an engraving made by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck in 1730 (Figure 1) exaggerates the grandeur of the north-south wing in the foreground. In reality the east-west wing was longer, but had been truncated for artistic reasons in favour of two small (non-existent) outbuildings, anomalies identified by use of an estate map (1750) and geophysical survey

¹³ H.P.R. Finberg, 'The Gostwicks of Willington, Bedfordshire', *BHRS*, 36 (1956), 85; *LP*, vol. 20 pt. 1, p. 680 (1336, no. 101).

¹⁴ *LP*, vol. 14 pt. 1, p. 608 (32b); *Ancient Deeds, Series B for the year 22 April 1538-21 April 1539*, TNA, E 326/11772; *LP*, vol. 20 pt. 2, p. 680 (101); *BHRS*, 64, 150-51 (430).

¹⁵ If one cart-load weighed about 19½ hundredweight (nearly 1,000 kg), the total hauled around 5 or 6 miles would have been 7,800 hundredweight (400,000 kg). See 'Glossary of Ancient Weights and Measures'. Hemyock Castle, <https://www.hemyockcastle.uk/measure.html#other>.

¹⁶ *Acts of the Privy Council of England, 1552-1554* (London, 1892), vol. 4, p. 71 requests that he '... shall have of his Majesties gyft iiiij^c loodes of stone owt of the late Monasterie of Warden, towards the building of Bedforde Gaole'. The gaol was on a site thought to have originally come into use in about 1165 and last remnants were finally demolished in 1911.

¹⁷ *BHRS*, 36, 85; *LP*, vol. 20 pt. 1, p. 680 (1336, no. 101); recited in *Cal. Pat. R., Elizabeth I*, vol. 4, p. 343 (2046); F.A. Blaydes (ed.), 'Gostwicke Wills', *Bedfordshire Notes and Queries*, vol. 2, pt. 18 (June 1888), 182-191 (pp. 187-88).

(2017).¹⁸ Nevertheless, other than the loss of a dovecote, the splendid view over the former monastic precinct from the main wing remains little changed (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Looking east, view from the manor house over the former monastic precinct.

An inventory taken after Robert Gostwick's death recorded goods valued in total at £12 6s 4d.¹⁹ The nether hall was comfortably furnished with tables, seating including an armchair and two small turned chairs, calf-skin cushions, storage cupboards, and hangings, while the great hall contained a bedstead and tester, a great chest and a wood panelled oak chest, a table in the window, an old chest, an old table, two benches, two trestle tables, and a *Daronix* carpet.²⁰ Gostwick's private chamber, adorned with red and yellow hangings, held a bedstead, a tester of red and yellow, a bedside rug or mat, two truckle beds, a chest, and a press for storing clothes. 'In the madens' chamber' were a bedstead and tester, and two chests, one of which had a rounded lid that allowed the rain to run off whenever it was being transported. The horse keeper had a chamber with bedstead and tester, a bedside rug or mat, and two chests. In the nether green chamber, decorated with old hangings, was another bedstead and tester, a truckle bed with bedside rug or mat, a chest, and a table. The over green chamber was similarly furnished, but without hangings. The buttery provided storage for beer and bread, while the kitchen was meanelly equipped with the bare necessities for cooking.

Landholders from the sixteenth century onwards

Robert Gostwick died in 1561. William his elder son was a minor and Robert left instructions for Warden Abbey to be sublet as advantageously as possible until his heir came of age.²¹ At some point the lease reverted to the Crown and on 16 June 1569 'the house and site of the Monastery of Warden', Park Grange and other specified lands were granted to **Arthur Grey**,

¹⁸ J. Walford, *Archaeological geophysical survey on the site of Warden Abbey, Old Warden, Bedfordshire, March to April 2017* (MOLA Northampton, 2017) [Report]; BARS, Z1125/1.

¹⁹ C.E. Freeman, 'Elizabethan Inventories', *BHRS*, 32 (1952), 92-102 (p. 102).

²⁰ In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Arras in the Hauts-de-France region of northern France, was a thriving textile town. According to the OED, an *arras* referred to a wall hanging made of a rich tapestry fabric, typically used to conceal an alcove.

²¹ 'Gostwicke Wills', pp. 187-88; *BHRS*, 36, 85-86.

14th Baron Grey of Wilton (1536-1593), for 31 years.²² William Gostwick spent the end of his life in a London prison (probably incarcerated for clinging to the Catholic faith), where he died unmarried and childless in 1574.²³

Sir Charles Morison of Cassiobury (Herts) acquired the lease in 1587/88, and when he died in 1599, his estate passed to Charles, his 12-year-old son.²⁴ In March 1600 Elizabeth I granted the house and site of the late monastery of Warden to John Eldred and William Whitmore of London²⁵ who probably acted as the child's trustees. In November 1627 **Sir Charles Morison junior** placed the house, the site of the late abbey, and associated lands into the hands of trustees who were charged with looking after his interests during his lifetime, and thereafter for the lifetimes of his wife, their 16-year old daughter Elizabeth, and her heirs.²⁶ Elizabeth married **Arthur Capel** who, as a staunch supporter of Charles I, was beheaded on 8 March 1649. **Lady Elizabeth Capel, dowager** soon recovered Warden Abbey and died in January 1661, leaving the estate to **Arthur Capel**, her eldest son who became earl of Essex under Charles II.²⁷

Sir Ralph Bovey acquired the site piecemeal. Articles of agreement had already been drawn up on 14 February 1648 between Thomas Cary and Ralfe Bovey of Gray's Inn, clearly indicating the latter's intention to acquire the lease of 'Warden Abbey & Grange' for £3,650; the annual value was given as £635.²⁸ In July 1662 Sir Ralph paid £400 to Arthur, earl of Essex, for the assignment of the lease on Park Grange with some smaller parcels in the vicinity of the late abbey, and on consolidating his purchases in 1667, largely reconstituted the monastic demesne farms.²⁹

On his death in 1679 Sir Ralph bequeathed the site and lands to **Charles Bovey**, his illegitimate son by Mrs Elizabeth Symonds. When Charles died in 1713, everything passed to his only surviving son, 5-year-old **Charles Bovey junior** for whom the estate was to be held in trust until his majority. Sadly he died under age on 29 November 1728 and in the absence of an heir, left his personal estate to his sisters.³⁰ A pretentious man and lawyer by profession, Sir Ralph had used his will to ensure that the family name would continue through the male bloodline, so on the death of Charles junior, the estates passed to Sir Ralph's great-nephew, the **Reverend Thomas Davies** [Davis] (1668-1733), who was obliged to adopt the name of Bovey.

²² *Cal. Pat. R., Elizabeth I*, vol. 4, p. 343 [entry 2046].

²³ *BHRS*, 36, 86-87; 'Will of William Gostwick, Gentleman of Ware, Hertfordshire, PROB 11/56/401'. *TNA*, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/D960799>.

²⁴ *VCH Beds*, vol. 3, p. 253; 'MORISON, Charles (1549-99), of Cassiobury, Herts.' and 'MORRISON (MORYSON), Sir Charles, 1st Bt. (1587-1628), of Cassiobury, Watford, Herts. and Whitefriars, London'. *The History of Parliament*, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/>.

²⁵ *BARS*, W2296.

²⁶ 'House of Commons Journal Volume 6: 7 May 1649', in *Journal of the House of Commons: Volume 6, 1648-1651* (London, 1802), pp. 203-204. British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/commons-jrnl/vol6/pp202-204> [accessed 17 April 2022].

²⁷ O. Airy, 'Capel, Arthur (1631-1683)'. *Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900* (28 December 2021), https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography,_1885-1900; Sir Peter Lely, 'Arthur Capel, 1st Earl of Essex; Elizabeth, Countess of Essex'. *National Portrait Gallery*, <https://www.npg.org.uk/>.

²⁸ *BARS*, W2306.

²⁹ *BARS*, W2319.

³⁰ 'Charles Bovey in 1708'. *Cambridgeshire Baptisms; The Historical Register Containing an Impartial Relation of all Transactions Foreign and Domestick with a Chronological Diary, Volume 13 for the Year 1728* (London), p. 60; 'Charles Esq Bovey in 1728'. *Cambridgeshire Burials, Longstowe*, <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>.

When the Reverend Davis Bovey died in 1733, his extensive landholdings in several counties passed to his 15-month old daughter, **Katherine Davies Bovey**.³¹ On reaching her majority in 1750, an estate map of her assets in Old Warden was drawn up in preparation for a hasty marriage to retired army officer **Thomas Alston of Odell**.³² Thomas appears to have suffered from post-traumatic stress which might be attributed to his combat experience on the continent, and the couple parted within two years due to his heavy drinking. Thomas Alston retained the site at Warden Abbey until he died in 1774, at which point his widow Dame Katherine Alston recovered her inheritance.³³ On her death in 1778, the site of the abbey and former demesne lands passed to her elder son, 17-year old **John Wasse**, the illegitimate offspring from her long-standing relationship with John Wasse senior, said by one source to have been a horse-dealer.³⁴

There is no indication as to the condition of Robert Gostwick's old house by the late 1770s. Whether maintenance was proving unaffordable, or John Wasse junior simply engaged in asset stripping to service his debts is a moot point. John came of age in 1781 and suffice to say, the greater part of the manor house was probably demolished after the entailed lands legally came into his hands in June 1782.³⁵ A conveyance in trust (lease and release) was agreed on 28 July 1785 between 'John Wasse junior of Stowe alias Long Stowe Hall, Cambridgeshire, esquire' and 'James Graham of Lincoln's Inn, gentleman, Charles Arnold of the Six Clerks Office, Chancery Lane, and James Atkins of St Ives, gentleman' for the sale of 'a messuage in Warden Street, Old Warden, known by the name of the Abbey, and closes adjoining, in the occupation of Samuel Sutton', together with all of the messuages held by Wasse in the former Farm of Demesne Lands and Park Grange.³⁶ In July 1786 brewer and MP **Samuel Whitbread** (1720-1796) paid £19,600 to complete the purchase of the site of the abbey and its demesne land, Old Warden Church, Sweetbrier Farm, and Park Farm.³⁷

Survival and protection

Dilapidated outbuildings, including a sixteenth-century stable and dovecote, were demolished after 1790,³⁸ but high-quality Tudor barns and several walls with diaper patterns have stood the test of time. Manor Farm was probably constructed on the site of the monks' guesthouse soon after Samuel Whitbread purchased the land, and the 1794 enclosure map illustrates the footprint of a farmhouse at 'The Abbey' (now Abbey Farm) on the site of the nave where lay brothers and guests once worshipped in the abbey church.³⁹ The surviving fragment of the Tudor manor house was granted Grade 1 listed building status on 16 January 1952,⁴⁰ and the

³¹ F.A. Blaydes (ed.), *Genealogia Bedfordiensis* (London, 1890), p. 113. The date of Katherine's baptism is given in 'Sale of Stowe Hall 1795 (Property of Lady Alston deceased)'. *Cambridge Community Archive Network*, <https://longstowe.ccan.co.uk/>.

³² BARS, W2320; BARS, Z1125/1.

³³ 'Thomas Alston'. *Military, armed forces & conflict*, <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>; 'History of the Foot Guards. Wars of the 1700s'. *The Guards Museum*, <https://theguardsmuseum.com/>; 'ALSTON, Thomas (?1724-74), of Odell, Beds'. *The History of Parliament*, Ref Volumes: 1754-1790, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/>.

³⁴ 'Catherine Davies Alston in 1778', NBI; Will of Dame Catherine Davies Alston; G.E. Cokayne (ed.), *Complete Baronetage*, 6 vols. (Exeter, 1902), vol. 2 (1626-1649), pp. 182-83 (VII).

³⁵ The relatively recent demolition was documented on 28 August 1790 by diarist John Byng. J. Byng, *Torrington Diaries: A Selection from the Tours of the Hon. John Byng (later Fifth Viscount Torrington) Between the Years 1781 and 1794* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1954), p. 299.

³⁶ Conveyance in trust to sell (lease & release), BARS, W2346-W2347.

³⁷ BARS, W2350-W2351. As a guide, £19,600 in 1786 equated to spending power of over £1.5m in 2017. See 'Currency converter: 1270-2017'. *TNA*, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/#>.

³⁸ BARS, Z50/129/53 'Remains of buildings'; *Torrington Diaries*, p. 299; Photographs from volume "Anecdotes of Warden Monastery" Stone building "now a pigeon house" (p.20c) [slide 9069-70], BARS, Z50/129/52.

³⁹ Old Warden Enclosure Map (1794), Central Beds HER, CRO W2/6/1-2.

⁴⁰ 'Warden Abbey'. *Historic England*, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1222165>.

mid-sixteenth-century barns listed on 16 March 1972.⁴¹ In 1974 the Landmark Trust offered to carry out the work on the remaining section of the manor house in return for a lease from the Southill Estate. Restoration was completed in 1976 when the building opened as a holiday let to generate an income for its upkeep.

The monastic landscape is scheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979, and the protected area was extended on 2 September 1983 to include the entire abbey precinct (with the exception of the route of the old railway and the area of two houses and their gardens).⁴² The land is still farmed by descendants of Samuel Whitbread as part of the Southill Estate; there is no public right of access.

Lady Whitbread replanted part of the monks' former vineyard in 1986, and it is now run as a community project by Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity. The work of the volunteers was recognised by The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) in 2016, with the award of a top CPRE Mark in the Sustainable Enterprise category of its Living Countryside Awards. This recognises people, businesses or groups that are not only fulfilling their own goals, but doing so in a way that benefits both the environment and community, a fitting testament to its monastic heritage.

⁴¹ 'Barns at Warden Abbey Farm', *Historic England*, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1274805>.

⁴² Heritage Gateway, 'The Historic Environment for Bedfordshire', <9> **English Heritage**, *Field Monument Warden's Scheduled Ancient Monuments Record Form, Site 33747; No. 38* (Unpublished document). SBD11859, https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=MBD460&resourceID=1014.

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