

## Abbey Church

Partly rebuilt in 1882, the church retains many of its Norman features. It is unusual in having a separate bell tower, the lower 2/3rds of which were built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with the top section, housing the belfry, added in medieval times. The Bell tower's west wall is marked with a cross, denoting the boundary of the place of sanctuary. The present-day Abbey church is less than half the length it was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. After the dissolution, there were plans for it to become a cathedral. More information about the Abbey and Church can be found in "Elstow Abbey" on sale in Moot Hall's reception area.

## Elstow Place

The ruins of the Abbey's cloister and Hillersden's "Elstow Place" stand just south of the Abbey Church. The once grand porch is thought to have been designed by Inigo Jones. The contours of the meadow in front of the mansion show where a driveway once ran, from the High Street, to that porch.

## Elstow High Street

The most striking feature of Elstow's High Street is its row of 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century timber-framed buildings, which incorporated shops several inns. Further south are several more timber-framed houses, being late 15<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The (now closed) Swan public house stands on the site of an earlier inn, the Black Swan. The Swan is mostly Tudor but the northern wall and chimney stack may have been added later, using stone from the former Abbey buildings.

Beside Church End - the road into the green - stands "Green Corner" - the remaining half of a 13<sup>th</sup> century hall house. This was divided into two dwellings, the northern one housing an inn called "Le Chequer", which was replaced in 1806 by the present red brick building - renamed "Pilgrim House" in 1988. Immediately north of Pilgrim House once stood the cottage in which John Bunyan's grandfather, Thomas, lived with his third wife, Anne Bidkin. This cottage was demolished sometime between 1910 and 1925. The cottage where John Bunyan lived (from 1649 to 1655), was demolished in 1968, after being damaged several times by passing heavy goods vehicles. All Elstow's historic buildings are listed and Moot Hall is a designated ancient Monument. The High Street, School, Green, Abbey, Elstow Place ruins and Moot Hall forming a conservation area.

*For more history and many pictures; [elstow.weebly.com](http://elstow.weebly.com)*

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# Elstow & Moot Hall

## A Brief History

Elstow village is best known as the birthplace of 17<sup>th</sup> century preacher and author John Bunyan but its history stretches back hundreds of years before his birth. The discovery of the base of a carved Saxon Cross and evidence of a burial ground, indicate that there was an early Saxon settlement here.

All the ancient buildings which make up the old village of today were built following the establishment, in 1078, of Elstow Abbey, a Benedictine nunnery. The Abbey existed for 452 years, growing to become the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest and 8<sup>th</sup> richest in Britain. In the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Abbey was granted a charter by Henry I, permitting an annual fair to be held from 2<sup>nd</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> May. These were commercial events, where all sorts of products, livestock, clothes, food etc., were sold. Elstow's fair was large, occupying not just the village green but several adjacent fields. The Abbey raised a quarter of its annual income from the fairs by: charging rents for stalls/ booths; levying tolls for entry and; taxes on sales. They also had their own stalls, from which the nuns could sell produce from the Abbey.

As the Abbey grew, cottages to house tradesmen and other lay workers were built; also several inns to house the many visitors to the Abbey and its fairs. In addition to all their Elstow properties, the Abbey held numerous other buildings and lands across 10 counties. Rents from these properties generated the bulk of the Abbey's substantial annual income.

Perhaps the Abbey's most unusual construction project was the "Green House" - now known as Moot Hall. Designed to serve as a market-house and courtroom, it was built around 1440-1450, possibly by the Abbeys own carpenter, William Arnold.

The ground floor of the Green House was divided into bays, most being used as shops. The upstairs was used for manor and 'pie powder' courts - hearings for disputes arising at the fairs, examining merchant's credentials and testing weights and measures. As 'Lord' of the Manor, the Abbess would have presided over all Court sessions, but may have delegated this duty to her Prioress or steward.

After the 1539 Dissolution Act, Elstow's green and Abbey were leased to Edmund Harvey, whose daughter, Isabel, subsequently married Sir Humphrey Radcliffe. In 1553, Edward VI granted him all the former Abbey's Elstow estates and its manorial rights. Sir Humphrey died 13 years later and, in 1616, his son Edward sold the Elstow manor estate to Sir Thomas Hillersden. The Hillersdens incorporated the former Abbey's cloister into a grand manor house, named "Elstow Place" Fairs continued to be held throughout this period and the Green House continued to be used for Manor Court hearings. Thomas Bonyon (John Bunyan's Grandfather) was a member of the "homage" (the Court's presiding jury) when his wife was fined 1 penny for 'breaking the assize of ale'. She also appears in subsequent court records, for committing further offences involving the sale of ale or bread.

In 1773, their finances dwindling, the Hillersdens let the Green House, fair rights and equipment to Thomas Coleman. In the 1790s, they moved into Elstow Lodge, leaving "Elstow Place" to fall into ruins and, over the next few years, sold all their Elstow properties to Samuel Whitbread. The 1800 Enclosure Act allotted Elstow Green to Whitbread, who subsequently purchased other properties in the village. (The numbers on some houses in Elstow are old Whitbread Estate, not street, numbers.)

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Whitbread leased the Green House to Elstow's Bunyan Meeting Congregation. It was used by them both for worship and as a Sunday School. It was also used as a National and a night school. In 1910, the Bunyan congregation moved to a newly-built chapel in Elstow's High Street.

In Rev'd Dr John Brown's 19<sup>th</sup> century biography of John Bunyan, he referred to the Green House as being 'what we may call Moot Hall'. This is the earliest recorded use of this name, but it is appropriate - 'Moot' being the medieval word for "meeting".

Fairs continued to be held on Elstow green but sales of cattle ceased in 1900, when a purpose-built cattle market was opened in Bedford. Only a small pleasure fair continued, but that too ceased during the Second World War. The stump of the original Market Cross - which denoted Elstow Abbey's Fairs as having Royal Charter status - still stands, some 50 yards west of Moot Hall.

In 1950, Major Simon Whitbread gave Moot Hall and Elstow green to Bedfordshire County Council, which restored the building as their main contribution to the Festival of Britain, opening it in 1951 as a museum of 17<sup>th</sup> century life and dedicated to the life and works of John Bunyan.

### **Construction of Moot Hall**

When first constructed, the timber frame would have been in-filled with wattle and daub, rather than brick. The original building had only four bays on the ground floor, the western-most two bays each contained two small shops. Each had a separate door with a broad window, with a four-centred arch above. These 'windows' may have been wooden panels (rather than leaded glass) which could be let down and used as serving counters.

Most of the main timbers between the shops remain and slots in the ceiling and floor timbers show where the remaining uprights stood. The timbers have numerous nail-holes in them, from the original wattle and daub partitions.

The fourth bay contained a separate room, with an east-west ladder stairway to the upper storey, which consisted of one large hall.

Sometime after the building's construction, and presumably before the abolition of the nunnery, a fifth bay was added to the eastern end, including a large chimney breast. This contains fireplaces on both stories, suggesting that it was designed as accommodation for important visitors to the monastery. Probably at the same time; the window in western wall was moved to a higher position; a cellar was excavated under the fourth bay; a south-north staircase erected; an Elizabethan doorway (now removed) inserted into the north wall where the eastern-most shop stood and; all of the external wattle and daub in-fill was replaced with bricks.

During the County Council's renovations, the original mediaeval form of both floors was restored and the window in the western wall moved back down to its original position, but the external walls' brick in-fill was retained. The Mediaeval roof was also left largely intact, with new rafters being laid over the inals.

Similar late-mediaeval market houses, with shops below and a long chamber above, are rare. Two others survive in Buckinghamshire; one at Long Crendon and West Wycombe and a similar, but later, example in Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, However, Moot Hall is the only known example of market house to have been built for an Abbey, with a guest-house attached.