

Chicksands Priory and the Work of the Friends of the Priory

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SUMMARY

Chicksands Priory represents the only standing remains of the Gilbertine Order of any size, and the Friends of the Priory are attempting to preserve this important building. Their work has led to the discovery of various features previously hidden by later alterations.

HISTORY

The building known as Chicksands Priory stands in the middle of RAF Chicksands, between the A600 road from Bedford to Shefford and the A507 road from Shefford to Ampthill. The Priory was founded in cAD 1150 by Payne de Beauchamp and his wife, the Countess Rohese, for the nuns and canons of the Gilbertine Order.

After the Priory was dissolved in 1538, the property passed into the hands of the Snowe family, and then, a few years later, into the hands of the Osbornes, whose family home it remained until 1936 when it was sold to the Crown.

The Church of St Mary of Chicksands, which existed before 1150, formed the basis of the Priory. According to tradition, the main Priory buildings were in the form of two quadrangles, one built onto the N side of the Church and the other onto the S side (one quadrangle accommodating the nuns and the other the canons, the customary arrangement of Gilbertine double foundations). The N quadrangle, if it did exist, must have disappeared soon after the Dissolution, as did most of the Church a little later. Thus only the S wall of the Church and the S quadrangle remained. To these a new N wing was added before 1730. In 1740 Isaac Ware remodelled most of the first floor and a small area of the ground floor. He was followed in 1813 by James Wyatt, who laid out the Entrance Hall, built the Main Stairway and rebuilt the N Wing as we know it today.

The present building (Fig 1) therefore includes monastic remains (c1150-1500), early Georgian (1740), and Regency (1813), plus some minor alterations and additions from other periods.

OWNERSHIP

The Chicksands base, including the Priory, is owned

by the Ministry of Defence and has been a RAF Station since 1940, although today the RAF is represented by only one officer, the USAF having taken over all operational duties.

THE FRIENDS OF THE PRIORY

The Society known as the Friends of Chicksands Priory was founded in 1974 by the USAF and RAF Commanders of the time with a few other interested individuals, to preserve the Priory and prevent further deterioration of the building. The following year conducted tours were started. Research into the history of the building, the estate and the people connected with them started as a private venture in 1973 and continued as part of the work of the Friends.

Today, this work continues on several fronts: work on the building, opening the Priory for public tours, research into the many aspects of Chicksands, and 'educational' work which includes lectures to interested groups and publication of the results of research.

OBTAINING PERMISSION TO WORK

Although some work on the building was carried out by the Friends before 1980, it was only at about this time that work started in earnest and to a more definite plan. At first such work was simply authorised by the RAF Commander, but as time passed, so the bureaucratic system has become more complicated.

At present, the Friends are licensed by the Ministry of Defence to undertake certain types of work on the building and to take people around it, this license being renewed each year according to strict rules.

In addition to the licence, permission to carry out each item of work has to be obtained from

- (a) the RAF Commander, as landlord for the Ministry of Defence;
- (b) the Property Services Agency, both local and regional, as 'guardian' of all government buildings;
- (c) the Department of the Environment (the Priory is a listed Building);

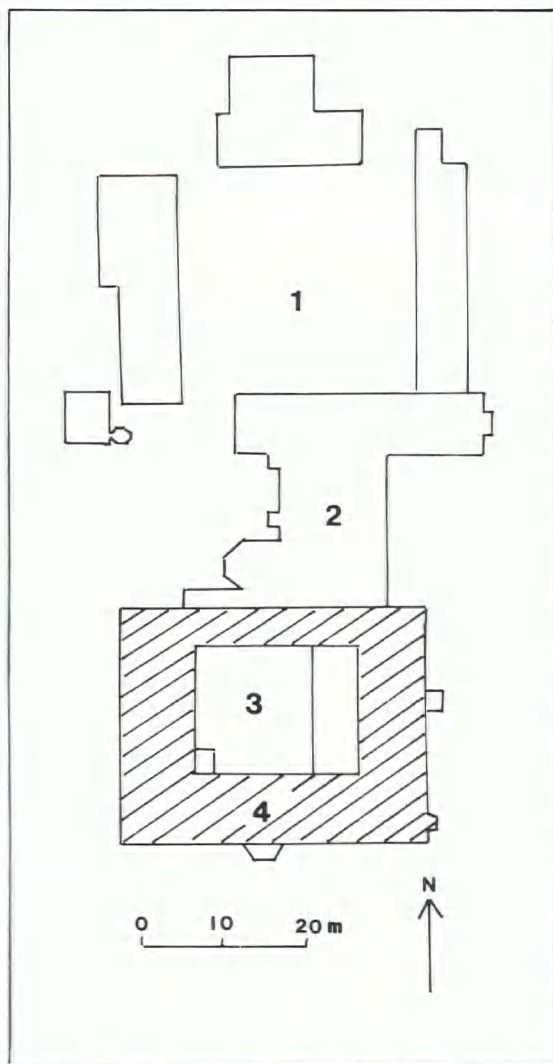


Fig 1 Sketch-plan of the present main buildings (scale approximate) showing:
 1 Stable Yard; 2 North Wing;
 3 Quadrangle; 4 Monastic buildings

(d) English Heritage (the Priory is a scheduled ancient monument).

This means that even relatively simple work will take time to complete.

AIMS OF THE FRIENDS

As the building is unfurnished, the most interesting features of the building are its architecture and the variety of styles found in it, especially as these

reflect changes through the different ages represented at Chicksands. Thus, the Friends have no intention of trying to 'restore' the building to its former condition at any one specific period. Instead, the aim is to present the building in a clean and attractive way to visitors, and to bring out the many points of interest. To carry this out entails preservation work (against damp, dry rot, insects etc), minor repairs, redecoration and cleaning. The Property Services Agency is concerned mainly with wind- and weather-proofing, structural defects and infestations of various types.

WORK TO DATE

Preservation work has included the carrying out of regular inspections and watching of 'danger areas' for signs of deterioration; improving ventilation by re-opening blocked-up fireplaces or removing modern partitions, cleaning gutters and so on. In addition, large quantities of debris have been removed from the tops of ceilings.

Repair work has included such items as the making safe of floor-boards, the filling of many thousands of holes in the plaster of walls and ceilings, and generally making good the results of fifty years of public ownership. Redecoration has been carried out as and when necessary. Since modern decorating materials have been used by the various government departments in charge of the building, over the past two years, the use of these has been continued as being the most practical, especially considering the uses to which the building is put. However, no general stripping of paintwork has been done, in order to preserve the many layers for future analysis, and all materials and colour schemes are approved by the Department of the Environment and English Heritage.

On the ground floor some parts of the walls in the Kitchen and Buildings N of the Church have been stripped of the plaster and cement render to allow the stonework to breathe, and so has improved the drying-out of these areas. Plaster repairs and redecoration have been started in the N Wing ground floor. In addition, some of the floors have been stripped of modern vinyl tiles or lino-paint, also to counteract damp. One wall and several plaster-board partitions have been removed to provide through ventilation.

Much more work has been done on the first floor, where almost all the main rooms have been redecorated over the past few years. One of the more interesting rooms on this floor was badly affected by dry rot and so in 1985 Property Services

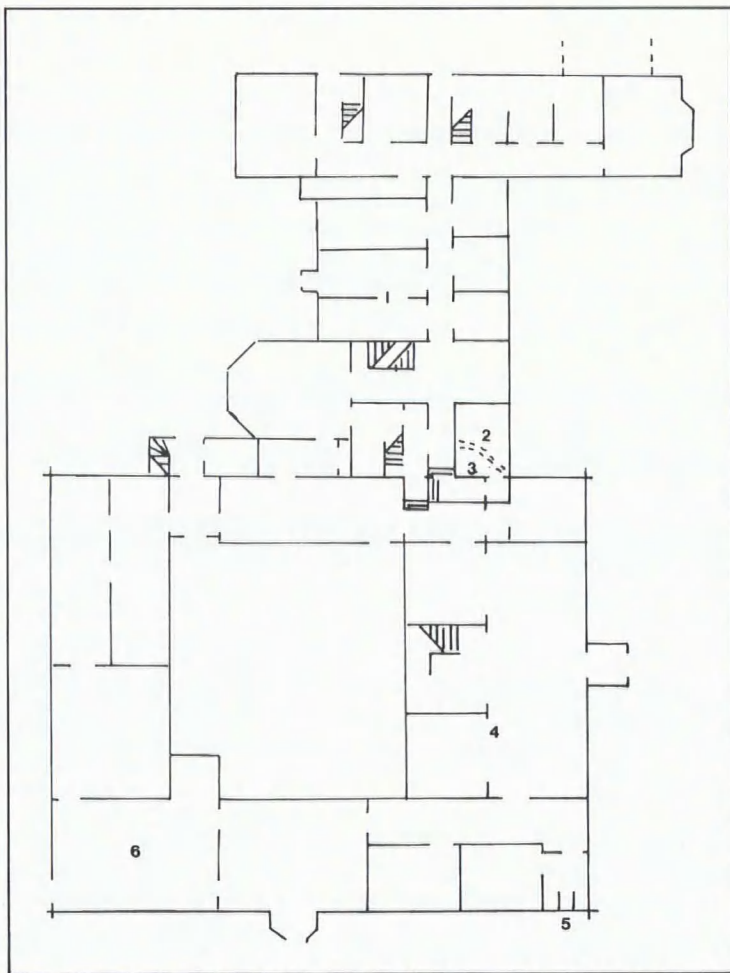


Fig 2 Sketch-plan of the Ground Floor of the house showing: 1 Cistern and remains of old walls under present floor; 2 Conduit; 3 Blocked-up doorway; 4 Remains of older ceiling under floorboards above; 5 Blocked-up window (first left of stairway on Buck print of 1730); 6 Study

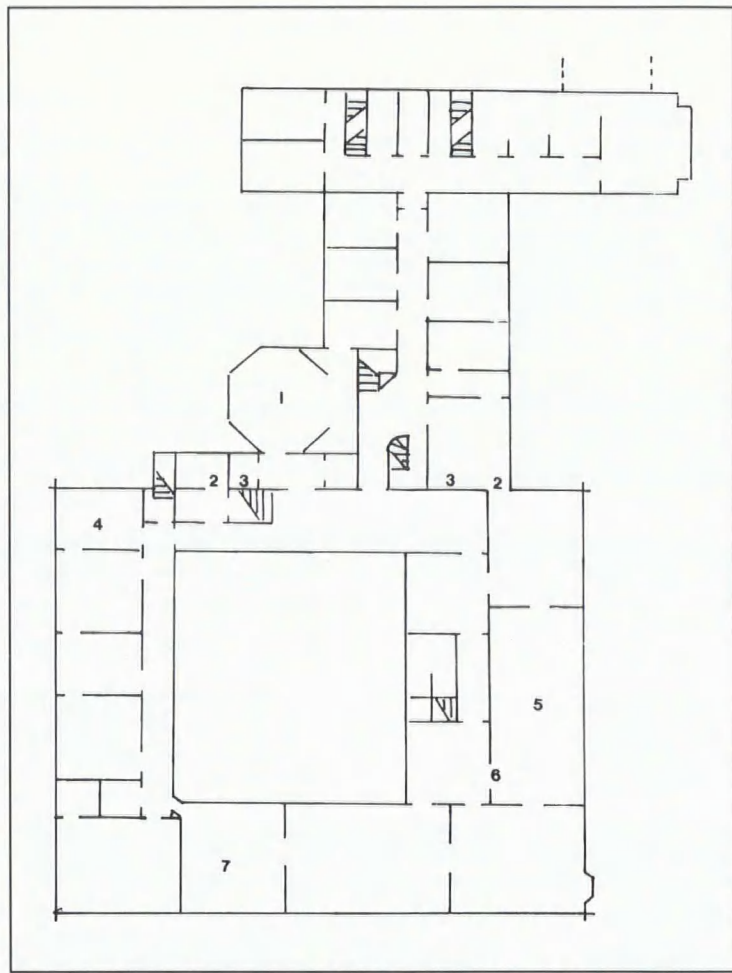
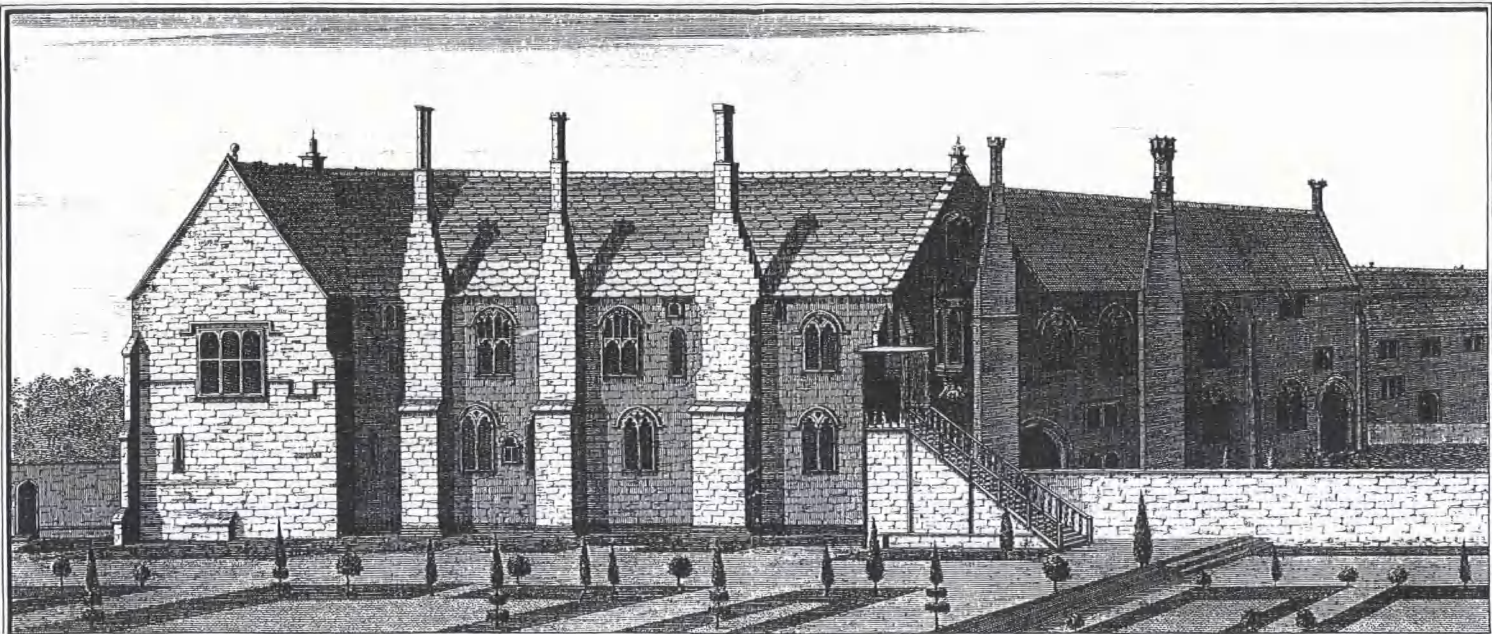


Fig 3 Sketch-plan of first floor of the house showing: 1 King James's Room; 2 Remains of older doorways; 3 Remains of older windows; 4 Remains of the monastic building found when floorboards were removed; 5 Library; 6 Remains of older ceiling under present floor (see Fig 2:4); 7 Chinese Room

THE SOUTH-EAST VIEW OF CHICKSAND-PRIORY, IN THE COUNTY OF BEDFORD.



THIS Priory was founded in the Reign of R. H. I. by Rose, Wife of Paganus de Beauchamp Baron of Bedford: for Nuns of the Order of S. Gilbert of Sempringham: & dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. This Paganus & his Wife gave divers Lands & Privileges to this House, which were confirm'd by R. E. II. who in the 10th Year of his Reign granted Licence to John Blundel to settle y^e Manor of Chicksand wth all it's Appurtenances on this Convent. ————— The present Owner is S^r. Danvers Osburn Bar.^t

J. & W. Buck Delin. et Sculp. 1730.

123 Fig 4 Chicksands Priory viewed from the South-East: engraving by the Buck brothers, 1730

Agency contractors removed a modern partition and the affected floor-boards, revealing a number of unusual features. The Friends are at present building a walk-way through this room so that visitors can more easily see these features. Also on the first floor, work is in progress to re-open a doorway in order to restore Isaac Ware's original route through the reception rooms. Other work is in hand in the rooms along the N Wing Corridor. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to undertake work in the 'King James Room', which is potentially one of the finest parts of the house.

Work has also taken place in the S Attics, although here some panelling is in need of replacing and some painting is to be completed. Often there are difficulties in completing work in one area before moving on to another job, which can make the task both frustrating and rewarding. A typical instance would be the decorating of one of the landing bays, where a succession of repairs and workmen, followed by the installation of new fire alarm system and lighting, and the aftermath of social functions, have resulted in the decoration of the bay still awaiting completion after six years.

DISCOVERIES

It was inevitable that work on a building of this antiquity should produce some discoveries. Most of the finds in recent years came to light when the Property Services Agency contractors were involved in major repairs which entailed the removal of floor-boards and of plaster from walls in a number of areas.

In the N Wing, the E half of the floor is of concrete, but the W half is of wood and under this latter section the discovery has been made of what appears to be a rain-water cistern (at present full of rubble) and remains of older walls (Fig 2.1). The precise date of these is as yet unresolved, but both the cistern and the walls appear to date from before 1813 and are most likely to have formed part of the

building shown in the Bucks' engraving of 1730 (Fig 4). The walls are orientated along the lines of the present buildings for the work of 1813. This area is in need of clearance so that the features can be measured, photographed, planned and properly recorded.

On the ground floor, the following features have been brought to light: part of a window shown on the print of 1730 (Fig 2.5 and Fig 4); a conduit just below floor level (perhaps once used for rainwater), and remains of an earlier ceiling in the former E Cloister (Fig 2.2 and 2.4). This early ceiling must pre-date 1812 since a Fisher print of that date shows a vaulted ceiling which obviously had replaced the earlier one with moulded wall-boards. It is possible that the conduit led to a cistern which would have been destroyed when the cellar was extended. The construction of the vaulting in the Study has also been elucidated. It is now clear that the vaulting in the Study is of two different periods: the western two-thirds (originally part of the W range) dates from the monastic period, whereas the eastern third dates from Ware's alterations of 1740, when the monastic staircase was removed.

Repair work on the first floor yielded Chinese wallpaper from behind the architrave of one door, a number of early windows and doorways which had been covered by plaster, several moulded timbers of monastic age re-used as floor joists, an old monastic passage floor below the level of the modern floor, and the remains of earlier ceilings over the Library and King James Room (Fig 3).

Most of these finds will not be covered up again, but will be left open so that they can be viewed by visitors.

No doubt further evidence of the building's past history and use will be uncovered as work progresses, but how quickly this can be carried out depends on the availability of volunteer labour and the willingness of visitors to donate towards the cost; the Friends receive no grants of any sort.