

Notes on the History of Warwick Priory

(Now the site of Warwickshire County Record Office)



THE PRIORY IN 1829

For nearly 900 years a succession of buildings has stood on the low sandstone hill to the north of Warwick, a site now occupied by the County Record Office. The Priory of Saint Sepulchre was founded here by Henry de Newburgh, the first Earl of Warwick, at some date between 1114 and 1119. It belonged to the order of the Canons of the Holy Sepulchre, who had the special duty of caring for pilgrims to the Holy Land; these canons were distinguished by a double red cross on the breast of their habit. After the fall of Jerusalem in 1188 the house became indistinguishable from an ordinary Augustinian priory. There were eight canons besides the prior in 1339. The house was surrendered to the crown in 1536 by the then prior, Robert Radford, and three canons: Radford was given a pension of £5 per year.

In 1546 the Priory was granted to Thomas Hawkins (alias Fisher), a servant of John Dudley. Dudley was the father-in-law of Lady Jane Grey and was created Earl of Warwick in 1547. Fisher pulled down the old buildings and on the site built a mansion, finished in about 1566, which, according to Dugdale, he called "Hawkyns Nest".

After Fisher's son had wasted his inheritance it was sold by him to John Puckering in 1581. Puckering was a lawyer, who became the Speaker of the House of Commons, and was made Keeper of the Great Seal in 1592 and knighted. The house was remodelled, probably by Sir John or his widow between 1581 and 1611, and the west front made uniform, with the row of six great ogee headed gables rising above the parapet, familiar from photographs.

The estate was later acquired by Henry Wise, the royal gardener, who retired here in 1727 and landscaped the grounds. His son added a huge square wing facing the terrace in about 1745. The now very large mansion passed through various hands and restorations until it was bought by A.W. Weddell (later U.S. ambassador to Spain) at a demolition sale in 1925. Amid local and national controversy the

stones were numbered, packed up and shipped 3,000 miles to Richmond, Virginia, U.S.A.

As well as stone from the old house the Weddells also enthusiastically tracked down and purchased some of the Priory's staircases, window glass, panelling, lead pipes and rain water heads which had been dispersed at the sale. The carved stones and other ornamental work were carefully protected by being packed in boxes with sand and the ashlar went as ballast freight, all in all several thousand tons of materials. The Tudor-style building lovingly erected by the Weddells and known as "Virginia House" was not a faithful reconstruction of the Priory, although it retained its essential features. It still stands and is now a museum maintained by the Virginia Historical Society.

The Priory estate was acquired by Warwickshire County Council in 1940, but plans for its development had to be postponed because of the war. In 1953 Priory Park (which had been sold to Warwick Borough Council in 1951) was opened to the public and in 1972 excavations in advance of building the new County Record Office revealed that the 12th century religious house had been built over three earlier limekilns. Traces of the monastery included burials, presumably under the floor of the church, and the outline of a small room with the base of a central column, which can still be seen. Most of the foundations were, however, obliterated by the cellars of the Tudor mansion and its later additions.

The new Record Office was opened in 1973; it was built by Messrs. Crosbee and Atkins at a cost of £111,000. Accommodation for documents was provided by two air-conditioned strongrooms of massive brick and stone construction, with pre-cast concrete floors to support the mobile racking, containing some two and a half miles of shelving. The adjacent Priory Bungalow and Priory House are a surviving portion of the 16th and 17th century mansion.

In November 2002 the County Record Office was awarded £1.3 million by the Heritage Lottery Fund to refurbish the existing building. This, together with a sum of over £0.5 million provided by the County Council, has enabled the public service and staff areas of the office to be extended and enhanced, an additional two strongrooms to be built to accommodate the deposit of records for at least another twenty years, and the Priory Bungalow to be converted into a conservation suite with an accompanying photographic studio. In addition the Friends of Warwickshire County Record Office provided £3,000 to furnish and equip the Readers' Tea Room. The construction company TRY, a Leicester based firm, was awarded the contract to do the work. They commenced work in the early spring of 2002, and the office reopened to the public on 29 April 2003.

Warwickshire County Record Office
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