Monastic Heritage in Greensand Country

Resource Pack

Greensand Country
Landscape Partnership

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Introduction

Religious houses held sway over much of Greensand Country from the 12th century until the dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s. This resource pack offers an introduction to the abbeys, priories, and monastic cells dotted across the landscape. But where were they? Who founded them? When and why? What did they look like, and how did their fortunes change down the centuries? Discover what happened when Henry VIII challenged their very existence, and explore the traces left behind.

Combining original charters, financial documents and other contemporary records with satellite imagery, aerial photography, mapping and modern archaeological techniques, we begin to unearth the secrets of a world once hidden by the passage of time. Explore further from the comfort of your home or, better still, come and walk in the monks' footsteps.

Religious Houses in Medieval Society

Role of the Church

From the medieval standpoint, there were those who fought, those who prayed, and those who worked the land. Strong religious convictions were the norm and the Church touched every aspect of people's lives. It shaped the calendar, and its rituals marked key events - baptism, confirmation, marriage, the Eucharist, penance, the last rites, and burial.

Route to Heaven

As everyone fully expected an after-life, they hoped to gain salvation through their actions on an earthly level. They believed that after physical death, they had to spend time in Purgatory, where those destined for Heaven underwent purification. They trusted that prayer could shorten their stay in Purgatory and took every possible step to guarantee salvation for themselves and their loved ones.

Power of prayer

The prayers of monks and nuns were considered much more powerful than those of everyone else, so people sought their intercession to help them through Purgatory. The monasteries therefore acted not only as a conduit to higher realms, but also as a sort of spiritual insurance policy. The poor gave what little they could, while wealthier patrons often paid handsomely, founding religious houses and supporting them financially in return for prayers.

Hospitality, charity, and outreach

Religious houses provided for guests from every level of society, often at great expense. The poor were welcomed. Money, food and clothing were distributed and the sick tended. Some provided hospitals or education services, others spread the word of God in the community.

Religious Orders

Alien priory: religious establishment owing obedience to a mother house outside England.

Augustinian: communities of ordained clerics (also known as Austin or Regular Canons) who were entitled to celebrate Mass; adopted the Rule of St Augustine and led a quasi-monastic life.

Benedictine: observed the Rule of St Benedict; also known as 'black monks' from the colour of their habits. Their life was based around prayer and work, their days dictated by regular communal and private prayer, spiritual reading and manual tasks such as cleaning, farming, and manuscript copying.

Cistercian: reformed Benedictines; introduced into England in 1128; also known as the 'white monks'. Daily life for the monks revolved around eight church services, spiritual reading, and manual labour. The lay brothers performed greater amounts of manual work and attended fewer church services. Cistercian monasteries had a standard layout, characterised by simple design, decor and artefacts. Strict dietary rules applied, and statutes influenced everything from books to flock management, and from discipline to clothing.

Fontevraldine: a double order of monks and nuns headed by the abbess of Fontevrault in Anjou.

Gilbertine: originally a community of nuns observing the Cistercian discipline founded *c.* 1131 by Gilbert of Sempringham (Lincolnshire); later reorganized as a double order of nuns and canons living by the Rule of St Augustine.

Hospitallers: military order of knights dedicated to the provision of hospitality to pilgrims, to the care of the sick, and to the protection of the Holy Land; also known as the Knights of the Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem.

Mendicants: derived from the Latin word 'to beg' (*mendicare*), the mendicants were orders who engaged with ordinary people by preaching to them and hearing confession. They included the Franciscans and the Dominicans.

Timeline

1086	Domesday survey
1291	Clerical tax returns filed (by order of Pope Nicholas IV)
1315-17	Great Famine
1337-1453	Hundred Years' War between England and France
1348-49	Great Pestilence (Great Plague or "Black Death")
1379	Clerical poll tax assessed
1535	Valuation of the Church (precursor to the dissolution)
1536-40	Dissolution of the Monasteries

Monastic Heritage in Greensand Country

Seven religious houses were established in Greensand Country during the late medieval period, ranging from a hermitage in the parish of Clophill to the large and powerful Cistercian abbeys of Wardon and Woburn. Information on the community of secular priests at Northill College completes the picture, and likewise details of Grove Priory, which lay just beyond the area now designated as Greensand Country. Economic fortunes waxed and waned. The communities were at the mercy of nature; adverse weather conditions, poor harvests, famine and disease threatened their very survival. Management incompetence and poor business acumen affected profitability.

Most of the land given to the religious houses in the early years was held in demesne, meaning it was farmed in order to sustain the community rather than being rented out for profit. The Cistercians were only allowed to sell surplus produce in order to buy things that they were unable to make or produce for themselves with leasing arrangements banned before 1208.

Reconstruction painting of Wardon Abbey *c.* 1200 © Phil Kenning

Social changes over four centuries saw the population shift from rural to urban centres. Lay brothers gave way to secular workers (tenant labour services, paid employees, and contractors). Mendicant Orders became more popular than the established model of monasticism, support

from benefactors dropped. Only four of the nine religious houses survived into the 16th century.

Religious houses were taxed not on their profits, but on gross income less certain allowable expenses (eg pensions, obligatory payments to the diocese, and tithes). Expenditure would have included labourers hired in for the harvest; purchase of metal items such as locks, keys, and knives; additional foodstuffs; materials for building repairs and maintenance; and wax for attaching seals. In the absence of account books, it is impossible to assess the impact, however latterly, they struggled to make ends meet; in 1492 rain was coming into the abbey church at Wardon and the claustral buildings were mostly in ruins.

Monastic Sites

The medieval religious houses were scattered throughout Greensand Country. Access to the sites is subject to the following limitations:

1. Grove Priory (earthworks can be seen from the footpath beside the River Ouzel)
2. Woburn Abbey (Abbey closed until 2025 but deer park footpaths open)
3. Ruxox Chapel (site can be seen from nearby footpath and bridleway)
4. Millbrook (church open to the public)
5. Beaulieu (Beadlow) Priory and hermitage of St Mary the Virgin (site can be seen from nearby footpath and bridleway)
6. Chicksands Priory (by pre-arranged tour only)
7. Wardon Abbey (no public access to the site; events and volunteering opportunities at Warden Abbey Vineyard)
8. Northill College (church open to the public)

Wardon Abbey

Cistercian

Grid reference: TL 1206 4385


Reconstruction painting of Wardon Abbey *c.* 1370 © Peter Dunn

Wardon Abbey was founded in 1135 by lord of the manor, Walter Espec. Known as St Mary de Sartis, the monastery was populated by Abbot Simon and 12 monks from the mother house of Rievaulx in Yorkshire.

Self-sufficiency was vital, and the 273-acre Abbot's Garden Grange filled a shallow valley on the Greensand Ridge. Here the community tended vineyards, gardens and orchards, hay meadows, pasture, and fishponds. There were grain mills, dovecotes and beehives, agricultural buildings and workshops. Woods, arable land and rabbit warrens lay nearby. By *c.* 1200 an estimated 135 monks were supported by over 330 lay brothers who managed assets scattered across some eight counties and six urban centres. The abbey was running a thriving wool business by the 1270s, and in 1291 taxable income of £257 0s 7½d was generated from land/other assets, manor courts, and the offspring of the abbey's livestock.

A project to extend the east end of the abbey church began *c.* 1300, resulting in a spectacular building some 100m in length with an aisled presbytery (chancel) covered by high-quality, glazed floor tiles fired onsite. The monks also largely rebuilt and extended the parish church, however building costs and taxation, famine and plague saw the abbey fall deeply into debt; recovery was slow.

By 1379 the community had been reduced to an abbot, 24 monks, five lay brothers, and a novice. In 1535 the taxable value of Wardon Abbey was £389 16s 6¼d, and it survived until 4 December 1537 when the abbot and 13 monks 'voluntarily' surrendered to representatives of Henry VIII. The buildings were flattened. A modest Tudor manor house constructed on the site of the infirmary cloister was occupied by 1558, but apart from one fragment, this had been demolished before brewer and MP Samuel Whitbread purchased the site in 1786. The working farmland remains in Whitbread family hands as part of the Southill Estate;


Remaining fragment of Tudor house (June 2015)
© M. Roberts

access is not permitted and there are no public rights of way. The Tudor building was restored by the Landmark Trust and opened as a holiday let in 1976. Replanted by Lady Whitbread in 1986, five acres of former monastic vineyard have been run as a community project by Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity since 2010.

Did you know? *Wardon* comes from the Old English *weard-dún* meaning 'beacon-hill' or 'watch-hill'.

Woburn Abbey

Cistercian

Grid reference: SP 9646 3255

Woburn Abbey was founded in 1145 by lord of the manor, Hugh de Bolebec, and populated by monks from Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire. In 1202 monks were despatched from Woburn to set up a new monastery at Medmenham (Buckinghamshire). Faced with financial woes, Abbot Richard was dismissed from Woburn in 1234 and replaced by Roger, a monk from Fountains. Monks and lay brothers were sent to other monasteries throughout England until the debt problem was resolved.

In 1245 Henry III gave permission for the monks of Woburn to hold a weekly market (Friday) and an annual fair (September) at the chapel of Old Woburn. In 1291 the abbey declared income of £164 15s 8¼d from rents etc, but religious houses were taxed relentlessly. In 1380 Richard II extorted horses from both Woburn and Wardon to carry the chancery rolls. The same happened in 1388 with emphasis on a strong horse 'not bought'. Insistence on a beast from the abbey's own stock suggests that poor quality animals had previously been bought in rather than the monks parting with one of their better animals (never to be seen again).

By 1379 the monastery housed the abbot and 17 monks. It had a good reputation and the Order repeatedly called upon the abbots to solve problems and maintain discipline at other Cistercian houses during the 15th century.


Woburn Abbey © GCLP

In 1533 the abbots of Woburn and St Mary Graces were appointed to oversee the nunneries of Cook Hill (Worcestershire), Tarrant (Dorset) and Marham (Norfolk). Abbot Augustine London of Wardon retired to Woburn early in 1535.

In 1535 the taxable value of Woburn Abbey was £391 18s 2d. Deeply opposed to the Reformation, the elderly abbot, Robert Hobbes, observed 'surely brethren, there will come over us a good man that will re-edify those monasteries that are now suppressed.' The abbey surrendered to the Crown on 8 May 1538. For his active resistance, Hobbes was tried for treason on 14 June 1538 along with the sub-prior, Ralph Barnes *alias* Woburn, and a sexton called Laurence Blunham who had boasted that he had never taken the oath acknowledging Henry VIII as head of the Church in England and never would. All were convicted and executed. Of the other monks documented at Woburn in 1538, fifteen received papal dispensation to become a secular priest.

Sir Francis Bryan, formerly the abbot's steward, lived at Woburn for a time from 1539, and on 9 July 1544 Henry VIII leased the site and lands of the late monastery to him for 21 years at £49 10s per annum. Granted to Lord Russell by Edward VI on 16 July 1547, they remain in family hands. The site is occupied by a 17th and 18th-century house and there are no visible remains of the abbey, although it is thought that the quadrangle of the house perpetuates the location of the church and cloister ranges.

Did you know? Woburn is a compound of the Old English words *woh* meaning 'crooked' and *burna*, a stream, brook, or river.

Chicksands Priory

Gilbertine

Grid reference: TL 1215 3930

Chicksands Priory was founded *c.* 1150 by Rohese, countess of Essex, and her second husband Payn de Beauchamp, baron of Bedford. Two cloisters ensured strict segregation of nuns and canons, and a high wall divided the church so that the women could hear, but not see, the men at prayer. Visiting relatives were viewed through a slit the length of a finger and width of a thumb. Faced with Henry II's wrath in 1164, archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, is said to have sought refuge at the priory before escaping to France.

Chicksands Priory, south front (March 2009) © UK City Images

Bad harvests hit in the mid-13th century, and in 1257 fifty of the nuns and 10 lay brothers were sent to other Gilbertine houses. Taxable income of £124 15s 5¾d from rents etc was declared in 1291. In the early 14th century the priory fell deeply into debt and assets sold to satisfy its creditors. By 1347 the religious were so poor that they were unable to give alms or carry out any of their ordinary works of charity. In its early 13th-century heyday, Chicksands had housed 55 canons and 120 nuns plus lay brothers and sisters, but in 1379 only six canons, 30 sisters, and one lay brother remained.

In 1535 the taxable value of Chicksands Priory was £212 3s 5d, and accounts show that when it was dissolved on 22 October 1538, the community of eight canons and 18 nuns had held 37 properties in Greensand Country, including 21 farms, a watermill and a rabbit warren.

Chicksands was granted to a series of leaseholders before being acquired by the Osborn family in 1553. By 1599 only the southern cloister and the quadrangle had survived the demolition process. The family sold the Chicksands Estate to the Commissioners of Crown Land in 1936, since when it has been used by the RAF, the United States Air Force, and the Ministry of Defence.


Chicksands Priory, east front (March 2009) © UK City Images

Did you know? In 2001 the *Time Team* failed to find the canons' cloister, but unexpectedly discovered some splendid foundations east of the priory. They also exhumed a female member of the Gilbertine community whose remains were reinterred in the monastic burial ground in 2006.

Millbrook

Benedictine


Millbrook Parish Church (D.Bowles) © GCLP

The monastic cell at Millbrook was probably founded in the late 11th century by tenant-in-chief Nigel d'Aubigny [d'Albini] of Cainhoe. Nigel died *c.* 1100 and the cell was granted to the Benedictine abbey of St Albans while his brother Richard was abbot there (1097-1119). Despite the lack of visible evidence, the cell seems to have been near the present-day parish church. The community closed between 1140 and 1146 when the monks relocated to a hermitage set up near Cainhoe Castle by Nigel's eldest son, Henry.

Did you know? For the purposes of the Domesday survey (1086), woodland was generally measured by the number of pigs it could support. Nigel d'Aubigny had enough for 100 pigs at Millbrook, so based on 1.5 acres per pig, this suggests he paid tax on 150 acres of woodland in the parish. Woodland was a vital resource, not just for timber, but also for grazing and hunting.

Hermitage of St Mary the Virgin ('heremitagium de Modri')

Grid reference: TL 1061 3850

Henry d'Aubigny founded a hermitage ¾ mile north-east of his castle at Cainhoe (parish of Clophill) *c.* 1100, probably following the death of his father, Nigel. He granted assarts (land cleared ready for cultivation) and woodland for its upkeep, and the little place of refuge was occupied by Ralf the Hermit, who built a church there. Cecily, Henry's wife, and their son Robert granted additional woodland when the church was dedicated to St Mary (date unknown). The hermitage functioned as a private place of worship until the early 1140s when, with Cecily's permission, Robert gave it to the abbey of St Albans.

Did you know? The hermitage *de Modri* (*de Moddry*) got its name from the Old English *mōdor*, *mōdur* or the Middle English *mǭder* meaning 'mother'. Here the word is applied in its special context referencing the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus.

Beaulieu Priory

Benedictine

Grid reference: TL 1061 3850

Robert d'Aubigny gave the hermitage of St Mary the Virgin and various other assets to Geoffrey, abbot of St Albans, between 1140 and 1146. The gift was intended for the salvation of the souls of Robert, his father and mother, and their forebears. The abbey turned the hermitage into a small priory called Bello Loco (Beaulieu) meaning 'beautiful place', and having transferred over the monks from Millbrook (5¾ miles away), the Millbrook cell was closed.

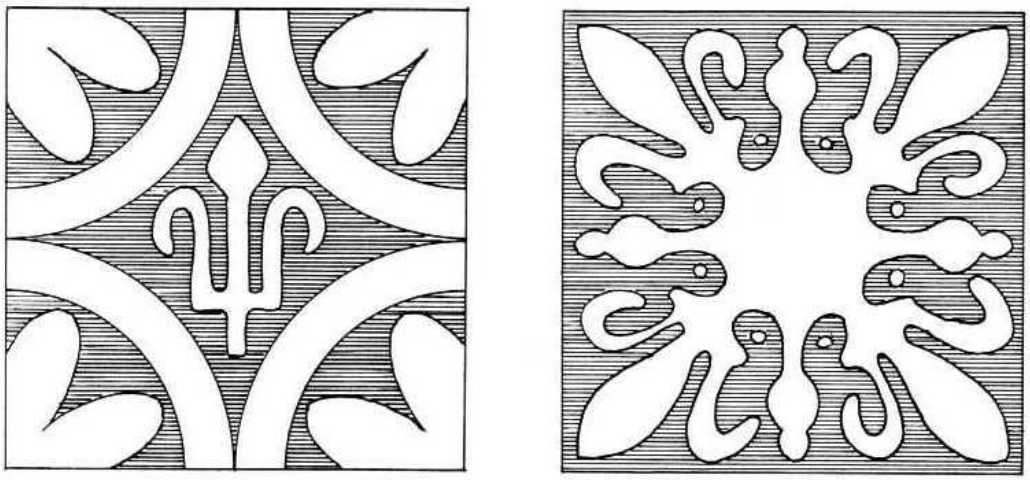
Resources for no more than four or five monks included a mill, arable, and meadow; the church of Millbrook; continued right of pannage (grazing) for monks' pigs in Millbrook; lands in Steppingley; the churches of Ampthill and Clophill; grazing for 40 pigs in the woods at Clophill, and rights in the common pasture. In return, a service was to be held in the 'chapel of Cainhoe' three times a week.

Heads of religious houses worked closely together, and in both 1222 and 1223, the abbot of Wardon and the prior of Bello Loco jointly adjudicated on debts owed by secular tenants to Dunstable Priory. The priory of Bello Loco remained impoverished, declaring income of just £26 7s 10d from rents etc in 1291. By 1379 the religious community consisted of a prior, a monk and one other individual.

The complex probably contained little more than a chapel, a hall, parlour with an upper chamber, a kitchen, stable, barn, and nearby mill. After fire damage in 1394, Margaret, Countess of Norfolk gave money for repairs, but everything was dilapidated by the early 15th century. The house could barely support two monks and its patron, Lord de Grey of Ruthin (descendant of the founder), handed over his rights to the abbot of St Albans and the prior of Beaulieu in 1428. The monks departed, leaving one chaplain behind to fulfil the

conditions of the priory's foundation.

When the abbey of St Albans was dissolved on 5 December 1539, the 'manor of Bello Loco' was valued at £9 13s 4d. A lease issued in 1538 had required the lessee to keep 'the leaded chapel' in repair, and it remained standing until the 17th century. Considerable amounts of medieval roof tiles and mortar were unearthed by ploughing in the 1960s, and archaeological excavations have revealed stained glass fragments and decorative floor tiles.



Decorated floor tiles from Beaulieu Priory © Ampthill and District Archaeological and Local History Society

Did you know? Making a grant to a religious house was a very formal occasion. When Robert d'Aubigny gave the hermitage to the abbey of St Albans, he confirmed his gift in the chapter house before placing the charter on the high altar in the abbey church. In the presence of Abbot Geoffrey and the monks, the document was witnessed by nine individuals from Robert's side, and by at least four representatives of St Albans.

Ruxox Chapel

Augustinian

Grid reference: TL 0478 3599

Philip de Saundreville founded the chapel between 1148 and 1154. It was dedicated to St Nicholas and given to the canons of Dunstable Priory *c.* 1170. The founder's heirs paid for its upkeep "so that in that place the divine office may be celebrated and religion preserved continually by honest men of Dunstable". In the early 13th century three of the founder's great-grandsons retired to Ruxox in the hope of earning salvation.


Ruxox Moat (D.Bowles) © GCLP

Ruxox had its own prior, and arrangements formalized in 1205 included a budget for his sacristan and a sum for the almoner to distribute among the poor. A curate was provided for Flitwick parish church in the 13th century. Business transactions between Wardon Abbey and Dunstable Priory were carried out at Ruxox from 1207 onwards. Construction of a 'new house at Ruxox, consisting of a solar and a cellar, a kitchen, a room in the middle for bread and beer' began in 1248. A dairy was built in 1249 and a big barn in 1257. Ruxox was largely self-sufficient, but a meagre harvest in 1255 saw a shortfall of corn. The chapel was rented to secular tenants after the turn of the 14th century, and in 1537 the prior leased the site to Robert Hewet in return for a roll of bread on the feast of St Nicholas.

Dunstable Priory closed on 31 December 1539, and later accounts show John Lyon paying £6 7s 6d yearly for a dwelling and land at Ruxox (10 acres) plus 45 acres containing pasture, moor, and meadows.


Ruxox Moat (D.Bowles) © GCLP

The assets were sold by Sir Thomas Strading to Nicholas West in 1558, and acquired by the Duke of Bedford in 1738. Sandstone foundations, red roof tiles and carved limestone doorframes and window surrounds have been found, while the remains of a dry, D-shaped moat measuring 10-15m wide and up to 3m deep can be seen from the footpath beside Ruxox Farm.

Did you know? The abbot of Woburn received 27s 6¾d cash plus '1 pair of gloves & 1 rose' yearly from tenants in Milton Bryan. Wardon Abbey accepted 10d cash and a single rose for a dwelling and an acre of garden in the Broom area, while a tenant in Stanford supplied a pair of gilt spurs worth 51s 8d.

Northill College and St Anne's Chantry

Collegiate church

Grid reference: TL 1490 4655

Northill College was founded in 1406 for the souls of Sir John Trailly (died 1400) and his son Reginald (died unmarried and childless in 1401 aged 23 years). It was one of 35 English collegiate churches founded in the 14th and 15th centuries, 15 of which took over a parish church and its income (from tenants, tithes, offerings, and courts) to become self-supporting. Approval for the foundation was granted by Henry IV, but the process took so long that two popes were involved.

The college was headed by a resident master who received food and drink for himself and one servant, sufficient fodder for two horses, and a stipend (£7 6s 8d was payable in 1526). Each of the four canons (classified as 'fellows' or 'chaplains') was given board and lodging, and a stipend of £6 in return for maintaining prayers and saying Masses for the repose of the founders' family. The statutes also allowed for 2 choristers who would be provided with food, drink, clothing and education.

Parishioners and chaplains alike worshipped in the parish church on the west side of the lane. Opposite lay the college precinct of about 5¼ acres [TL 1503 4650] containing living accommodation for the master and fellows, a malthouse, kiln house, 2 stables, a hay house, 3 barns, 5 chambers for storing grain, and a granary for malt. There was a kitchen, a brewery and a bakehouse, a small building for geese, chickens and other fowls, and in the outer yard an old barn. A one-acre orchard contained a dovecote, 3 ponds and a small well. Also within the precinct was a horse-mill and mill house, both let to a secular tenant.


St Mary the Virgin, Northill (July 2016) © M. Roberts

In accordance with the will of William Fitz, St Anne's Chantry was established above the church porch in 1494. A chaplain was to celebrate divine services there and to pray for the souls of William, his grandfather (William Risley), and the souls of the founder's family and friends. The chantry was endowed with 'All those lands, tenements, meadows, grasslands and pastures, woods, and rents and services in the towns and fields of Beeston, Thorncote, and Hatch called Juells', but no manse, goods or chattels.

In 1535 the college and chantry received taxable income of £61 5s 8½d and £4 14s 2d respectively. The college was dissolved in accordance with the Abolition of Chantries Act signed by Edward VI in 1547. Its assets were confiscated by the Crown and the church returned to ordinary parochial status. St Anne's Chantry served as a schoolroom until 1850, and has been used in recent years as a museum for the church and parish.

Did you know? Historically, the owner of the common land was normally the lord of the manor, and those entitled to exercise certain rights there were called commoners. To prevent over-grazing, certain restrictions were put in place, and at Northill the college was limited year round to 300 sheep, 6 cows and a bull ('horned animals'), 4 carthorses, and 30 pigs.

Grove Priory

Alien priory

Grid reference: SP 923 226

In 1164 Henry II gave the manor of Leighton to the nuns of Fontevrault. They established a monastic cell (men only) called Grove Priory just south of the town, with a chapel dedicated to St John [the Evangelist]. The cell survived for roughly 140 years, and its priors represented Fontevrault's interests throughout England. Monarchs may even have stayed at the priory during the five documented royal visits to Leighton between 1264 and 1290. In 1291 the abbess had taxable income of £36 0s 3½d (mainly from the manor of 'Leyttone'), while the prior 'de Grave' declared £9 11s 10d from Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

Early in the 14th century the manor was confiscated by Edward I and put into the hands of his daughter, Mary of Woodstock. Mary, a nun at Amesbury Priory (the main religious house in England owned by Fontevrault after 1275) was Lady of the Manor of Leighton alias Grovebury until her death in 1332. About 1318 her bailiff recorded a dovecote, two new farm buildings, a cow house and a stable ("hakhous") of wattle, daub and thatch, with a stable, dairy, and grain barn, as well as 2 watermills and a windmill.

The manor was often taken into Crown ownership during the Hundred Years' War. Handed back to Fontevrault in brief times of peace, the king demanded a payment from any tenant entering into a new rental agreement with the abbess. In 1364 the lease required two chaplains to celebrate divine service there daily for Edward III and Queen Philippa. The same stipulation was made in 1373, and the chaplains serving the lord of Grovebyry in 1379 named as John and Nicholas.

Earthworks at Grove Priory (August 2023) © M. Roberts

In 1411 Henry IV authorized John Worship to travel to Fontevrault with a view to buying the manor. Sir John Phelip was similarly authorised in 1413, but in May 1414, parliament ordained that 'in case of peace with France all possessions of alien priories in England shall remain in the king's hands'. By then Sir John Phelip held the manor in return for a rose rendered to the king at Midsummer. Later tenants included Eton College, the countess of Suffolk, and the Dean and Canons of Windsor (*c.* 1480/81). The site was abandoned in the late 16th century when a new farm (Grovebury) was built south of the boundary stream. This was demolished in the 20th century and the late priory's land to the north-east quarried for sand.

Did you know? Medieval scribes wrote down the names of people and places phonetically. Spellings varied and place names evolved, so the Priory of De la Grave (de Grave, Gravebery, or Grovebyry) was sometimes called the Priory of Leighton-Busart (or should that be Leyttone, Leghton, Lecton, or Leighton-Busard?)

Business relationships between religious houses

Two religious houses rented assets from the abbot of Wardon. Of these, the Master of Northill College leased lands in Northill (1s 5d) and Ickwell (8d), together with Druell's Wood (now part of College Wood) in Northill (10s). The abbess of Elstow paid the abbot 2s 6d annually for land in Clophill.

Druell's Wood [TL 1428 4706] rented to Northill College by the abbot of Wardon (July 2016) © M. Roberts

Other religious houses holding land in Greensand Country

Religious houses from within and beyond Bedfordshire had connections with Greensand Country. The Cistercian **Stratford Langthorne Abbey** (Essex) held the manor of Everton Mosbury during the late 13th and early 14th century. **Sawtry Abbey** (Huntingdonshire), the eldest daughter house of Wardon, surrendered to the Crown in 1536, and accounts for the year ending 29 September 1537 show tenants in Everton paying rents amounting to 15s. Closed in March 1539, the **Monastery of the Minoresses without Aldgate** (a house of Franciscan nuns in London) had the most valuable assets, namely the rectory and lordship of Potton worth £16 6s 8d. The Benedictines of **St Neots Priory** (Huntingdonshire) also surrendered in 1539, and accounts for 1541 included rents from Everton (£2 11s 3½d), Beeston (2s 6d), and Thorncote (6s 8d). The Benedictine **Thorney Abbey** (Cambridgeshire) capitulated on 1 December 1539, and the 1542 accounts included the manor of Husborne Crawley worth 27s 3d. The last abbot of **St Albans** (Hertfordshire), John Whethamsted [*sic*], acquired various assets from the late abbey, including the manor of Bello Loco, lands in Haynes (formerly leased by St Albans Abbey to the prior of Chicksands), and the Chapel of St Machutus in Haynes. By September 1542 the tenant of the chapel, Lord Braye, was in arrears by 100s.

Dissolved in 1536, the Augustinian **Caldwell Priory** in Bedford had owned a farm in Potton (40s), land in Eversholt (3s), land in Segenhoe with Ridgmont (8s 10d), and seven parcels of land in Flitwick totalling 2s. The Augustinian nuns of **Harrold Priory** also surrendered in 1536, when their assets included rents of 23s 4d derived from Cainhoe in the parish of Clophill.


Maulden Wood (April 2023) © M. Roberts

Elstow Abbey, a house of Benedictine nuns, was suppressed on 15 August 1539. The ministers' accounts for 1542 show that the abbey's assets in Maulden totalled £13 7s 10d. Urgent repairs to the fence around the 'royal wood' had been called for after the abbey closed, with 165 stakes made at a cost of 13s 9d. **Dunstable Priory** had held not only Ruxox, but also the rectories of Husborne Crawley (£22 2s 6d), Flitwick (£11), and Segenhoe (£12). When a list of the resources belonging to the 'Lordship or late **Preceptory of Melchbourne**' (a monastery of the Knights Hospitallers in Bedfordshire) was compiled in 1540, it included the manor of Ickwell worth £7 13s 4d. The Augustinian **Newnham Priory** was finally closed down on 2 January 1541, when its possessions included '2s for farm of 1 gard[en]' in Chicksands.

Dissolution of the Monasteries

Henry VIII breaks with Rome

Queen Katherine of Aragon stayed at Ampthill Castle between 1531 and 1533 while her divorce from King Henry VIII was under discussion at Dunstable Priory. The 1534 Act of Succession made Queen Anne Boleyn's children the king's lawful heirs, and by the Act of Supremacy Henry VIII became head of the Church in England. It was treason to oppose either, as the abbot of Woburn later found to his cost. 1534 also saw provision made for the Crown to receive one-tenth of the net yearly income from all ecclesiastical bodies, and Church property was valued in spring 1535. When the quality of religious observance in monastic institutions was surveyed later that year, reports of misconduct abounded, yet these were often unsubstantiated, exaggerated, or even fabricated.

Religious houses (except chantries) with annual net income of under £200 were forced to shut from spring 1536 onwards, but none of those surviving in Greensand Country fell into this category. Pressure was brought to bear on the remainder from autumn 1537, Wardon Abbey being one of the first to succumb. In total around 800 houses were closed and 200 religious members executed between 1536 and 1540. Read on to find out more about the process and what happened afterwards.

Formal handover

Each member of the religious community signed the deed of surrender in front of the king's commissioners. After the monastery's seals had been used for one last time, the matrices were destroyed to prevent further business from being done.

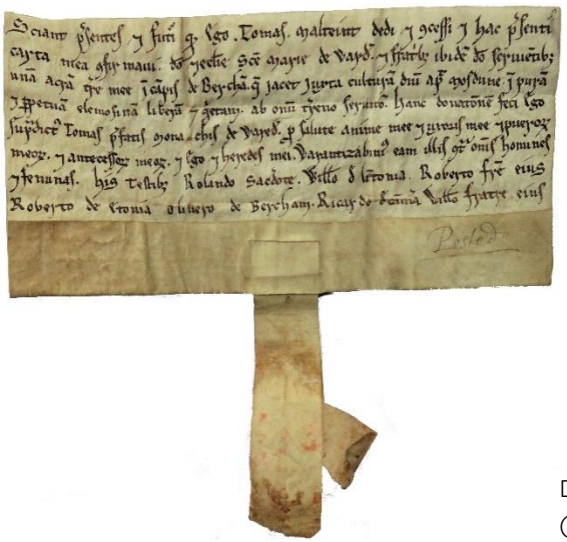
Collecting the spoils

The quantity of lead was assessed, bells counted, an inventory of other assets prepared, and the estimated value of everything from chalices to dung carts noted. The best plate and jewels, altar cloths and vestments were packed up to be sent to the king's jewel house, and valuable books seized for the royal library. Yet, just occasionally, precious items remained hidden...

Asset stripping

Medieval sheep may have been similar to the Lincoln Longwools © M. Roberts

Lead was torn from the roofs of the church and chapter house, gutters and drainpipes pulled down, and windows smashed to reach the lead fixings. Once the church had been desecrated, demolition could wait. Church bells were broken with sledge-hammers, packed into barrels with small metal fixings (eg locks and keys) and sold to local scrap merchants. Furniture and domestic items were collected and sold by public auction or private tender, together with the window frames, shutters, and doors. Remaining books were normally collected by the gentry or antiquarians, destroyed, or recycled as book covers. Any livestock on the home farms was sold or included in leasing arrangements.



Financial reckoning

Records were collated, including transcripts of leases, original deeds, cartularies, court rolls, rental agreements, and any other legal documents. Arrears of wage and running costs incurred after the closure were calculated, rental income and tithes itemised, and the home farm(s) valued in preparation for leasing. Proceeds from manor courts, fairs and markets reverted to the Crown.

Donor's copy of a charter granting an acre in Barham Field (Cambridgeshire) to Wardon Abbey *c.* 1210 © M. Roberts

What happened after the Dissolution?

Monks, canons, and nuns

Those who failed to comply with Henry VIII's demands were executed. The rest left to lodge with family or friends. Taxable pensions were granted (male heads of houses fared best), but late payment often led to hardship. Some supplemented their pension by becoming a chantry chaplain, parish curate or priest. Many, but not all, former monks and nuns remained unmarried.

Lay servants and officials

Arrears of wages were paid until the date of surrender and pensions awarded to former monastic officials. Rent-free housing was provided locally for some elderly servants, but most former employees left to seek other paid work and their old dwellings fell into disrepair.

Local community

Suppliers and contractors sought new business elsewhere. Hospitality was denied to travellers, and the poor lost access to essential food and clothing without a monastic safety net. Where the monastery had provided for the spiritual welfare of the parish, the Crown appointed a minister to the local church.

Parish Church of St Leonard formerly owned by Wardon Abbey (April 2023) © M. Roberts

Sites and buildings

Assets and remaining livestock were handed to local gentry for safekeeping. Grave robbing was not unheard of. Sites tended to be 'sold (or let) as seen' and the buyer (or new leaseholder) made responsible for the remaining demolition work. Materials were reused (stone from Wardon Abbey was sent to Bedford for building a new gaol).

Land and property

Most former monastic lands and other assets (eg rectories, mills, and rabbit warrens) were already leased to secular tenants. Little changed; rents were paid to the Crown instead of the religious house, and tithes commuted to cash. On the whole, the dissolution of the three monasteries situated in Greensand Country and the suppression of several other religious houses which had also held land in the area, may have had less of an impact than might be supposed. Continuity prevailed, and the more valuable landholdings often remained in the same hands for many years; Edward Peke, for example, held Warden Warren from 1526 until 1563. Assets were commonly handed down through the generations, with the rectory of Wardon held in the Barnardiston family from 1521 until 1562, after which the Marbury family kept it for a further 55 years or more. Evidence of the lower echelons of society is harder to trace, but some family names are repeated in manorial documents for hundreds of years after the dissolution.

The 21st-century landscape

Infrastructure

Since the political, religious, and socio-economic shifts of the 16th-century, towns and villages have expanded to accommodate a growing population. Highways cut through and crisscross the Greensand Ridge; worth noting is the curious bend in the A507 between Clophill (A6 roundabout) and Chicksands, which was engineered to avoid the site of Cainhoe Castle to the north. Many modern roads replaced ancient thoroughfares, but some of the old routes survive as green lanes, walking trails or hedge lines.

Railway tunnel beneath the monastic Park Grange, Old Warden (September 2015) © M. Roberts

Tunnels and cuttings allowed railways to take the straightest path from north to south, but the 19th-century Bedford to Hitchin line (now disused), just 182 metres from the site of the abbey church at Old Warden, caused irreversible damage and loss of archaeological evidence. The Grand Union Canal was never constructed as an entity, but is the result of amalgamations of several independent waterways between 1894 and 1929. Linking London with the Midlands, the canal passes close to the western boundary of Greensand Country and less than 200m from the site of Grove Priory.

Natural Resources

Spring water harnessed for ornamental ponds and fisheries soon readopts its natural course. The rivers Ouzel, Flit, and Ivel, along with their tributary streams, continue to take the path of least resistance, but despite the disappearance of medieval mills, parts of the old timber frame structure have been absorbed into the current building at Flitwick mill, property of Dunstable Priory from 1150.

Evidence of monastic fishponds is limited, however the spring-fed reservoir belonging to Wardon Abbey never dries out. Placenames perpetuate the (possible) location of old rabbit warrens. Pockets of ancient woodland survive, and while most of the identifiable monastic holdings have been replanted, ancient ditches that once served as boundary markers hide between the trees.

The monastic sites and land

Farming continues where religious houses once graced Old Warden, Clophill, and Ruxox. The brown ironstone parish churches at Millbrook and Northill stand firm. In contrast, the churches and claustral buildings have been replaced by secular residences surrounded by landscaped parks and gardens at Woburn and Chicksands, while most of the lands belonging to Grove Priory were lost to industrial use in the 20th century.

But step onto the Greensand Ridge Walk anywhere in the parish of Old Warden to find yourself on former monastic farmland. Follow the John Bunyan Trail from Bedford via Haynes to Chicksands, pick up a footpath from Greenfield or Flitton to Ruxox Farm, or wander through Maulden Wood. Take a path from Husborne Crawley past Birchmore

Farm to Woburn before enjoying the deer park, and spare a thought for the religious communities who were custodians of the land nearly 900 years ago.

Wardon Abbey's Wytherswell pasture near Haynes [TL 0942 4310] (September 2017) © M. Roberts

Selected Primary Sources

'Clerical Poll Taxes of the Diocese of Lincoln 1377-1381', ed. A.K. McHardy, *Lincoln Record Society,* 81 (1992)

'Court of Augmentations Accounts for Bedfordshire – I', ed. Y. Nicholls, *BHRS,* 63 (1984)

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Valor ecclesiasticus temp. Henr. VIII: autoritate regia institutus, 6 vols, ed. J. Caley, (London, 1821)

For full details of Bedfordshire Historical Record Society (*BHRS*) publications, see https://www.bedfordshirehrs.org.uk/

Discover More

Explore from home...

Historic England Listed Places, https://historicengland.org.uk/

Historic England Aerial Photo Explorer, https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/

Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photography, https://www.cambridgeairphotos.com/

Light Detection and Ranging, https://www.lidarfinder.com/

National Library of Scotland (Ordnance Survey maps), https://maps.nls.uk/os/

Bedfordshire Archives, https://bedsarchives.bedford.gov.uk/CommunityHistories/Community-Histories.aspx

Heritage Gateway, https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/

British Museum (Warden Abbey plaques), https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1853-0607-1

Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge (Warden Abbey manuscripts), https://trinitycollegelibrarycambridge.wordpress.com/2018/03/

For reports on Beaulieu Priory and on Ruxox, see https://adalhs.mooncarrot.org.uk/reports.php

Dissolution of the monasteries, https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/dissolution/

Visit and Stay...

Warden Abbey Vineyard (pre-booked tours and events; annual open day), https://wardenvineyard.org.uk/

The Parish Church of St Leonard, Old Warden, https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1274774

St Andrew's Church, Ampthill (15th-century roof boss showing the arms of Wardon Abbey at the west end of the north aisle), https://www.standrewsampthill.org/

Woburn Village, https://www.woburnvillage.co.uk/

Woburn Abbey [house reopens spring 2025], https://www.woburnabbey.co.uk/

Chicksands Priory (pre-booked tours only), https://www.chicksandspriory.co.uk/

Medieval Dunstable, http://medievaldunstable.org.uk/monastic.html

The Higgins Art Gallery and Museum, Bedford (closed Mondays), https://www.thehigginsbedford.org.uk/Home.aspx

Stay in the Tudor building on the site of Warden Abbey (book via the Landmark Trust), https://www.landmarktrust.org.uk/about-us/

Get Involved...

Volunteer at Warden Abbey Vineyard, https://wardenvineyard.org.uk/get-involved/volunteering/

Further reading...

Aston, M., *Monasteries in the Landscape* (Amberley, 1993)

Baker, E., *La Grava: The Archaeology and History of a Royal Manor and Alien Priory of Fontevrault* (Council for British Archaeology, 2013)

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Wardon Abbey *c.* 1370 © Peter Dunn.

Wardon Abbey, a view from the vineyard at harvest time *c.* 1200 © Phil Kenning.

Thanks to Jan Campbell for the photographs of Chicksands Priory, © UK City Images and to Kevan Fadden of the Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society for permission to reproduce the image of decorated floor tiles from Beaulieu Priory.

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Daniel Bowles
Partnership Coordinator, The Greensand Trust
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