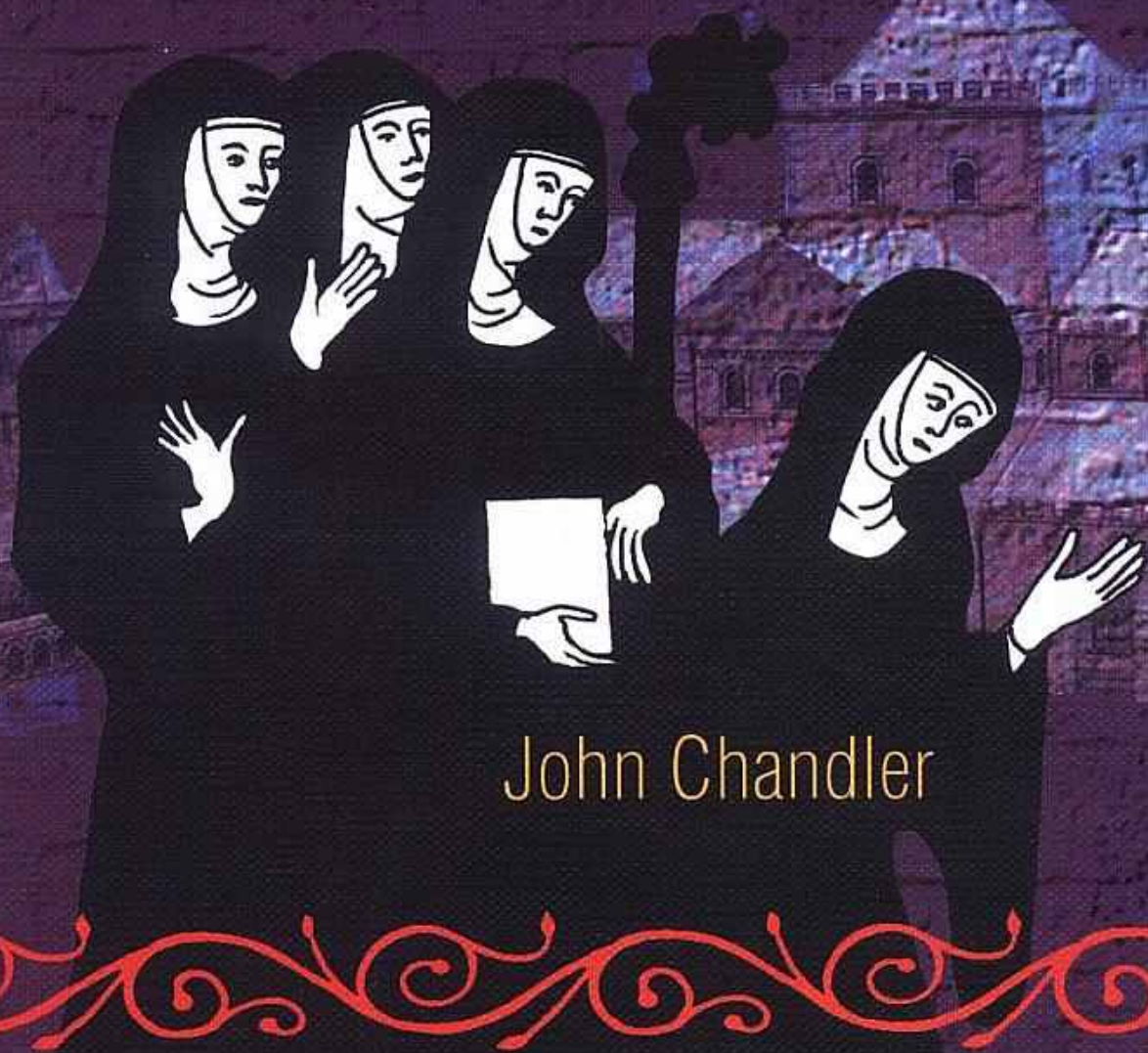




a higher reality

THE HISTORY OF SHAFTESBURY'S ROYAL NUNNERY



The Reality Now: A Guide

Taken from Chapter 10 of *A Higher Reality* by John Chandler

Shaftesbury Abbey Museum & Garden are open throughout the summer months, from April to October, and a guide booklet and audio tour are available to assist visitors in exploring the fragmentary remains of the abbey church and part of the cloister which are open to view within the garden. The pleasures and sensations to be derived on a warm afternoon from strolling in this peaceful enclave are beyond the scope of this history. The purpose of this chapter is more prosaic. It is to complement the experience of visiting the museum and garden by taking a tour around other parts of Shaftesbury, to search for what remains of the world the nuns inhabited, and to see how a dead abbey continues to influence a living town.¹

The tour begins and ends at the entrance gate to the museum and garden in Park Walk. In the following pages directions are given in paragraphs of italic type, and the descriptions in numbered paragraphs of normal type relate to the numbers on the accompanying sketch map. Where appropriate cross-references are made to other chapters in this book.

Stand in Park Walk facing the museum and garden entrance.

1 You are confronted by a long stone wall with, to the right of the entrance, the abbey lodge built in the 1930s (see p. 127) and surmounted by a four-faced finial commemorating the abbey's owner until her death in 1968, Laura Sydenham (p. 128). The abbey garden extends to the right as far as the lodge gate, and to the left as far as the end of the raised elevation of walling. Behind this wall is the modern museum, opened in 1999 (p. 129-130). In the garden, which runs back to the edge of Holy Trinity churchyard (you can see the church tower beyond), are all the features that remain exposed of the abbey church. The ruins comprise principally the footings of the exterior walls, the bases of columns forming the nave arcade and the crossing, the crypt adjoining the north transept, excavated burial vaults and portions of tiled floors. Other structures include a medieval cross from the town, reset on the site of the high altar and, in the chancel, a modern stone altar. There is also a shrine built during the 1930s to house the supposed relics of St Edward (p. 37-39). The church is roughly in line with the wall on to Park Walk, so that its east end lies behind the abbey lodge, and its west end (which has never been excavated) just beyond the end of the higher section of walling away to your left, in the garden of Abbey House.

Park Walk was laid out as a fashionable promenade in the eighteenth century, and the wall cuts right across the abbey precinct (p. 117). The cloister lay to the south of the church, adjoining its nave, and extended across what has become Park Walk, in the area to the left of where you are standing. Part of its footings remain in the garden beyond the wall. The cloister was probably a square of 33 yards (about 30 metres), with buildings ranged along its sides. The abbey refectory and kitchen occupied the south range, with their backs close up to the edge of the promontory. They have not been excavated (pp. 53-4).

Turn around and walk through the gate to the edge of the promontory, where there are two seats and the golden jubilee sundial.

2 This stunning view across Blackmore Vale to the distant chalk hills beyond Blandford and Sturminster Newton includes several medieval estates which belonged to Shaftesbury Abbey. Melbury Beacon, the prominent hill to the left of the prospect, forms part of an escarpment running south, beneath which sits a string of the abbey's villages – Melbury Abbas, Fontmell Magna, Compton Abbas and Iwerne Minster. Other possessions lay in the

valley floor further to the right of the view (see map p. 20). Dropping sharply away beneath you is the abbey's park, which is confined by the medieval line of St James's Street, the suburb of houses at its foot. This culminates in St James's church, away to your right. Beyond this suburb lay the abbey's fishponds, and to the left, out of sight, runs the massive wall which forms one side of Gold Hill. When excavations took place on the site of the abbey church during the period 1902-4 much of the spoil was tipped over the precipice here (p. 124).

Return to Park Walk, turn left and follow the wall away from the town as far as the war memorial in the form of a Celtic cross.

3 All this area lay within the abbey precinct. It probably accommodated the abbess's lodging and perhaps the infirmary (pp. 53-54). Behind the wall to your right is Abbey House, which was built in the seventeenth century but includes much stonework from the medieval abbey (p. 117). The war memorial cross stands opposite one end of Abbey Walk. At the further end of this lane was the main entrance to the precinct, the abbey gatehouse (p. 56), and we shall encounter its site presently. Beyond Abbey Walk is the Westminster Hospital, a Victorian foundation much altered and expanded, and somewhere close to its octagonal extension must be the site of the abbey dovecot or pigeon house (p. 57).

Continue in the same direction past the public shelter as far as the end of the low wall enclosing the hospital extension.

4 At this point a path (Stoney Path) begins to diverge down the slope to the left. This led to the abbey laundry house behind St James's Street (p. 57). Straight ahead the tree-lined path (Pine Walk) must represent the position of the earthen defences along the south side of King Alfred's original Saxon town or burh, established in about 880; and beyond the low wall to the right Love Lane is probably the successor to an early road which ran along inside the defences (pp. 10, 12).

Turn to the right and slightly back, and go through the kissing gate into Love Lane. Turn right and follow the lane round the bend (where it becomes Magdalen Lane) past the entrance to Westminster Hospital on your right. Continue to the end of Magdalen Lane, where it emerges on to the road called Bimport.

5 You have been walking along the eastern edge of the Saxon town, where it abuts the abbey precinct. The town was to your left, the precinct to your right. And you have arrived at about the point where there would have been an entrance from the east (your right) into the town. This is probably what Asser, Alfred's biographer, meant when he wrote that the abbey was established next to the east gate of Shaftesbury (see p. 144 note 12 where alternatives are also discussed). Near this entrance, too, stood one of the town's medieval churches, dedicated to St Mary, but this had gone before 1500. Magdalen Lane takes its name from an almshouse, the Magdalen or Maudlin Hospital, which occupied a site behind you and to your left from the fourteenth through to the seventeenth century. Bimport (meaning 'within the port or town') is so-called because it led into the Saxon town and formed the main street through its centre. There is another street with this unusual name in Malmesbury, which has similar Saxon origins (p. 10).

Cross Bimport (with care) and continue in the same direction along the driveway opposite. This becomes a path with an open grassed area to your left and railings ahead of you. Follow the path around to your left and stroll along as far as the viewpoint marker.

6 You have now completed the eastern flank of the Saxon town and have walked about halfway along the northern defences, which are protected by the steep slope of the promontory. The grassed area to your left has probably always been open land since the inhabitants of the first Shaftesbury decided to move further east to colonize the site of the present town. This process seems to have been under way by the eleventh century (p. 25-27). Consequently this area is now protected from modern development because of the likely wealth of archaeological remains beneath it.

The panoramic view across the countryside north of Shaftesbury is just as spectacular as that to the south where our tour began. Much of the distant view towards the right lies in Wiltshire, including the wooded hillslope (Kingsettle Hill) nearby on the right. Beyond this hill, in the Vale of Wardour, lay some of the abbey's largest and most lucrative estates, the Donheads and Tisbury (see map, p. 20). Somerset lies in the far distance towards the left, its boundary marked by the wooded ridge of Selwood Forest (look for Alfred's Tower, erected in the eighteenth century to commemorate the victory in 878 after which Alfred built abbeys at Athelney and Shaftesbury). The large, relatively flat area in the middle distance, surrounding the town of Gillingham (you can easily pick out its industrial estate) was in the middle ages the royal forest of Gillingham, from which the king allowed the abbey servants to collect firewood for the community every day (p. 69). And in the foreground, at the foot of the hill, is the suburb of Enmore Green, the principal source of water for the medieval town and abbey.

Continue along the tarmac path to the far corner, where it turns left, and (optionally, since this stretch may be muddy) go through the gate at the corner and walk on about 70 metres.

7 From here (and also from the gate) you can make out an area of rough, broken ground to the left. This is the site of the twelfth-century castle, built at the far corner of the promontory (p. 26). The castle site would have been beyond the limit of the Saxon town, since its defences must have turned southward somewhere near here.

Retrace your steps to the gate and follow the tarmac path alongside the high fence until you reach Bimport. Please supervise dogs and children, as the path ends in a busy road with no pavement.

8 To your right you can see that Bimport is coming to an end, and that it continues around a right-angled corner as St John's Hill. This street leads to the exit from the Saxon town at the south-western corner of its defences, and then off the hill to St James's suburb. It is named from a parish church of St John, which lay around the corner close to a town gate, and fell out of use in the sixteenth century (p. 12). An ancient spreading yew tree remains in its overgrown former churchyard. Looking left along Bimport you can see on the opposite side a long range of greensand cottages, with five chimneys. This is now called Edwardstow, and is the only example of domestic architecture in Shaftesbury to retain substantial medieval work. It dates from about 1500, and so would have existed before the abbey was demolished (p. 30).

Turn left and walk along Bimport, negotiating the busy, narrow road with great care. Pause when you reach a turning (Langfords Lane) on your right.

9 You have been walking along the main street bisecting the Saxon town, the spine road from which the town's properties ran back at right angles. Although the houses are much newer, their property boundaries in many cases probably reflect those laid out in the ninth century when the town was planned. At Langford's Lane (which follows one such

boundary) you will notice that Bimport changes direction slightly and broadens. This is probably to accommodate the original street market of the town.

Continue along Bimport, past Magdalen Lane (where you crossed earlier) until you reach the next turning on your right, Abbey Walk.

10 At the Magdalen Lane junction you left the Saxon town by its east gate and have been following the edge of the abbey precinct on your right. During the abbey's existence this Bimport frontage would have been lined with storage buildings, including a granary, woolhouse and larderhouse; and behind them were courtyards occupied and surrounded by other functional buildings, including a malthouse, brewery and wellhouse (p. 56-57). Evidence for this industrial activity was found by archaeologists when an extension to the hospital car park was built in this area in 1996. The opposite side of Bimport lay beyond the precinct boundary, and here substantial gentry houses were built in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (p. 111-112). The Ox House, although much altered, is a surviving example, and was used as the setting for an incident in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*.

The Abbey Walk turning is on the site of the abbey gatehouse, the principal entrance for visitors to the whole monastic complex. It may have been quite an impressive structure, capable of accommodating distinguished (including royal) guests. Beyond it, lining Bimport, were further abbey buildings, including stores, stabling and offices.

Turn right along Abbey Walk, noticing the buildings of King Edward's Court on your left. Continue towards the war memorial, but stop when you reach Old School House on your left.

11 The suite of Victorian buildings now known as King Edward's Court belong to a former primary school, which is celebrated as the scene of an episode in Hardy's novel, *Jude the Obscure*. They occupy the site, and probably respect the external boundaries, of a series of three linked courtyards around which were ranged important abbey buildings (see plan, p. 54). These were the offices or chambers for the sacristan (responsible for all the equipment used in church services), and the steward (responsible for the abbey's estates). Here too were the exchequer or treasury, accommodation for guests, and a suite of rooms where the novices lived and studied. Old School House, which lies beyond the site of these courtyards, is a mid-nineteenth century school, but you can see that a medieval window (of about 1500) has been incorporated into its structure. Although from its position this might be assumed to have come from the abbey, it is perhaps more likely to be a relic from Holy Trinity church, salvaged when the church was rebuilt during the 1840s (p.XX). Behind this house and to its right you can see the much larger Abbey House, whose entrance gate is here.

Retrace your steps along Abbey Walk past Abbey Court and turn right along the footpath which leads into Holy Trinity churchyard. At the gate take the right of the two avenues of pollarded trees, which leads diagonally across the churchyard to its far corner, where there is a gateway.

12 Holy Trinity is a Victorian rebuilding (1840-2) of a church which began life as a chapel within the monastic precinct, and was later granted the status of a parish church. It is no longer in religious use. A new chancel was provided for it in 1908, and this was designed by Edward Doran Webb, who also excavated the abbey ruins between 1902 and 1904 (pp. 123-126). The ruins lie directly beyond the churchyard wall to the right of the avenue, behind the yew trees. The churchyard was in the middle ages the nuns' cemetery.

The gateway leads out to the corner of two narrow lanes, Church Lane in front of you, Lyons Walk to your left. Walk left along Lyons Walk until it emerges into Bimport. Look out for traffic using this narrow portion of Bimport.

13 Lyons Walk, so called because it ran behind a former inn, the *Red Lion* (rebuilt in the 1820s as the *Grosvenor*), marks the boundary between the monastic precinct and the medieval town. Standing at its Bimport end you are facing a plot (from the Old Rectory to the corner) which was chosen by the Arundell family for their mansion house. Thomas Arundell, who acquired the abbey site at its dissolution, preferred not to adapt existing monastic buildings to make a house, but instead razed most of it to the ground and built instead a 'fair turreted house' here. Parts of it remained until the nineteenth century (p. 99).

Turn right along Bimport, and right again at the corner. The road opens out into a wide area, The Commons. Keep on the pavement past the Grosvenor Hotel and Church Lane until you reach the cobbled road. Cross and continue in the same direction along High Street for about 25 metres until you are standing opposite the town hall, which is across the street on your right.

14 You have now left the abbey precinct and walked into the centre of the town which was established here (in preference to the Saxon town on the promontory) from the eleventh century, and which flourished outside the wealthy abbey's walls. Until the modern ring road was built the High Street formed part of the main road from London to Exeter and Cornwall, and at times would have been thronged with travellers (p. 109). The broadening of the street at The Commons (opposite the *Grosvenor Hotel*) and here at the corner of High Street by the town hall enabled stalls to be erected and flourishing markets to take place (p. 112-113). After the dissolution of the abbey, during the 1560s, a butter cross and cistern were built in The Commons, and a guildhall or market house on columns in front of St Peter's church. This area was then known as Cornhill. St Peter's church (opposite you, to the left of the town hall) was and is the principal place of Anglican worship for the town (pp. 107-8). The present building dates mostly from the decades around 1500. The town hall dates from 1826-7, with additions (the clock tower and porch) made in 1879. If you look back towards the start of the cobbled road you will see a mock timber-framed building, now a restaurant. This is on part of the site of the abbey's broad hall, from where alms were dispensed to the town's poor (p. 55).

Continue along High Street, past Lloyds Bank, and turn left into Swan's Yard. As you turn glance across the street to the gable above Squire's outfitter's shop, where you will see a stone carved with the Abbey's coat of arms. About halfway along Swan's Yard turn to your left to find a modern mural painting.

15 The mural, by Janet Swiss, was created in 2002 and depicts the centre of Shaftesbury (close to where you have just been standing) as it might have looked in the 1700s, including the Tudor guildhall in front of St Peter's church. Swan's Yard occupies two medieval burghage plots, one running north from High Street to meet another running south from Bell Street. Long rectangular plots such as these are characteristic of most Saxon and medieval towns, and suggest that areas of the town were deliberately planned. It is very common for medieval property boundaries to survive even when all the standing buildings that occupy them (as in Shaftesbury) are later. Look to the top of Swan's Yard. The building in Bell Street opposite, a Methodist chapel, is on the site of one of the town's many parish churches, St Laurence's, and Bell Street in the middle ages was known as St Laurence's Street.

Continue to the top of Swan's Yard and turn left into Bell Street. Follow the pavement around The Commons, opposite the Grosvenor Hotel, until you reach the start of the cobbled road. Cross and turn left, following round in front of the town hall. Descend with care the narrow cobbled steps and path between the town hall and St Peter's church beyond.

16 As you make your way down this path you will see above you the Sun and Moon sign of a former inn. This building is on the site of 'Kilpeck's Place' (p. 105-106), and at one time the property extended beneath the church to incorporate part of its crypt. The path opens out behind the town hall into a famous view, of cottages climbing down the left side of a steep cobbled hill (Gold Hill), and facing a massive masonry wall on the right. Try, in adjusting to this scene, to imagine it without the town hall behind you (which is a relatively late intrusion), and to visualize medieval peasants and tradesmen toiling up from Blackmore Vale below to where Gold Hill at its top would have broadened and funnelled out into the market place (picture p. 58). There was a market cross in this area, next to the stocks (p. 101); and the original town guildhall stood in the middle ages at the top of the great wall, now the first cottage in Park Lane. The wall itself is the only substantial remains in Shaftesbury of the medieval abbey complex. Much of it dates from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and it defined the edge of the abbey's property, its sloping park which lies beyond.

You could end your tour here, with a visit to the town museum on your left, or return to the abbey ruins entrance. To do this take the narrow path, Park Lane, on your right (as you look down Gold Hill). It opens out into Park Walk, where you began.

17 Although Shaftesbury Abbey's fine buildings were all swept away at or soon after its sixteenth-century dissolution, medieval properties which were built and owned by the abbey remain elsewhere. Notable among them are Place Farm and barn at Tisbury (not open to the public), the so-called tithe barn and related buildings at Bradford on Avon, and the Saxon church of St Laurence, also in Bradford on Avon. These and other survivors are discussed on pp. 86-88.

