

St Ethelwold's House

30 East St Helen Street, Abingdon

A Short History of a Long House



Introduction

The evolving story of St. Ethelwold's House has been interwoven with the life and works of Dorothea Pickering. Her legacy continues to this day, as described in a companion booklet *The Fellowship of St. Ethelwold*.

The history of St. Ethelwold's extends over 800 years and, of course, in the beginning, the house was neither long or anything like as large as it is today. And as estate agents are wont to say, it is all about location – the dry land, the proximity to the River Thames, and the house's position in East Saint Helen Street and in Abingdon-on-Thames which was once the county town of Berkshire.

There are four phases in our history:

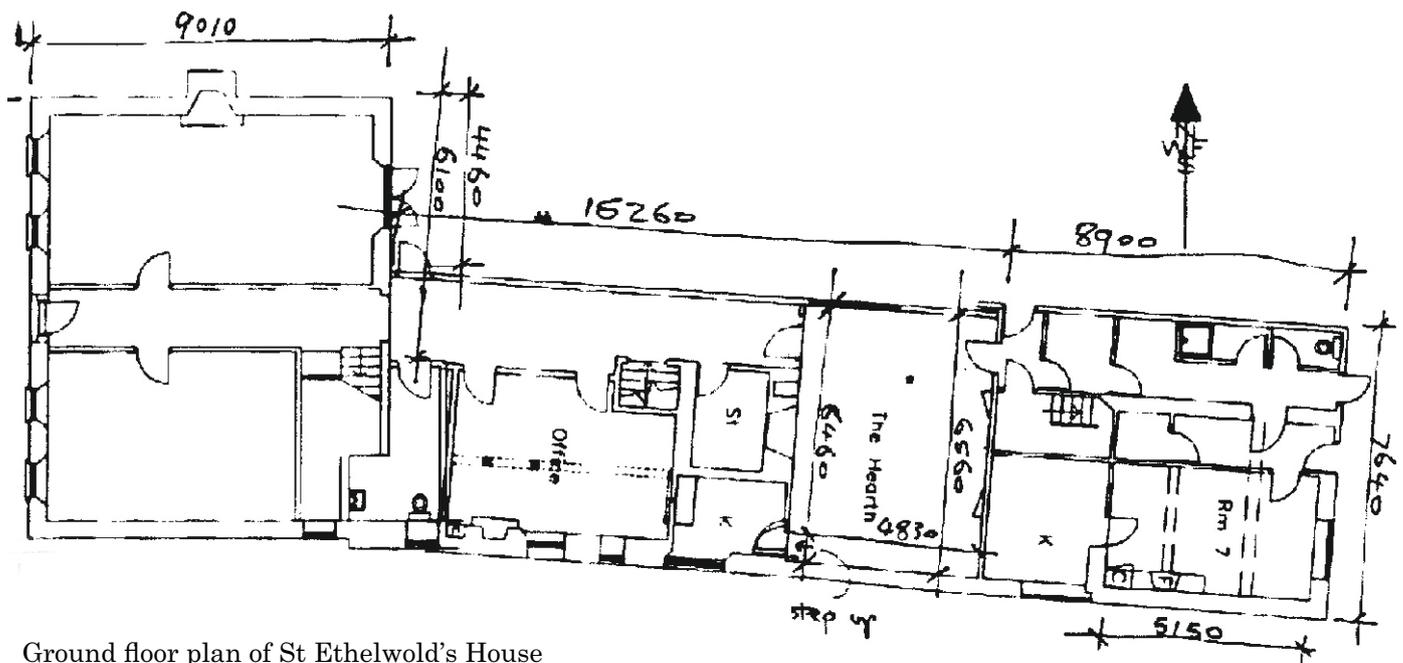
- Early settlement
- The breweries
- Coal merchants
- War (and peace)

Early Settlement

In 1980, just after the Fellowship of St. Ethelwold was established, Dorothea Pickering invited a local team of archaeologists to survey the grounds of the house. Many hundreds of items had been found in the garden in several excavations. It is clear that the area has been in use or settled since the Iron Age, and the River Thames has been navigable to Oxford from Roman times.



St. Ethelwold's House, from above, with its Georgian front and 120ft medieval tail. There were once many outhouses but only the cottage above the stable and two huts remain on the path towards the River Thames (image credit: Google Maps)



Ground floor plan of St Ethelwold's House showing the long narrow 'tail' of the medieval house behind the Georgian front. (credit: Vernacular Architecture Group 2011)

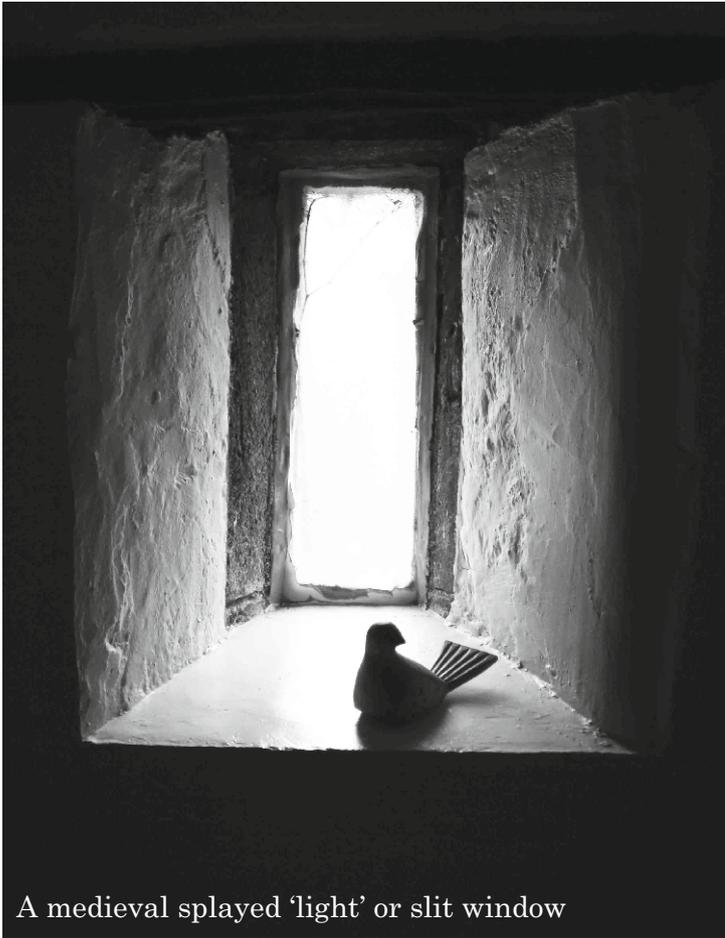
The house backs onto the Thames - not today's main flow of the river, but a side channel to the north of Nag's Head Island. The great, post-1875 garden walls give a clue to the enduring geographical success of St. Ethelwold's house; they drop several metres towards the river. Even in times of extreme flood the top of the garden remains dry and the old cellar, though often damp, never fills with water.

Abingdon was a defended town (or oppidum) in the Iron Age, before the Romans arrived in 43 A.D. Roman finds include coins, and parts of fine, 1st century Samian wheel turned pots or beakers. Masses of medieval rubble may have diverted the river bank slightly to the south. Similar items are on display in the Abingdon Museum at the County Hall.

Why 'St. Ethelwold's House'?

Æthelwold, a 10th century Benedictine monk, embodied the qualities that Miss Pickering admired. King Eadred, in 954 AD, instructed Æthelwold, as Abbot of Abingdon, to rebuild and restore St. Mary's Abbey. His efforts were repaid: in 963 Æthelwold was consecrated Bishop of Winchester and, until he died aged 75 in 984, he remained the main advocate of Benedictine thinking in England. "His life as a scholar, teacher, [gifted artisan,] prelate and Royal counsellor was ever austere" says Wikipedia.

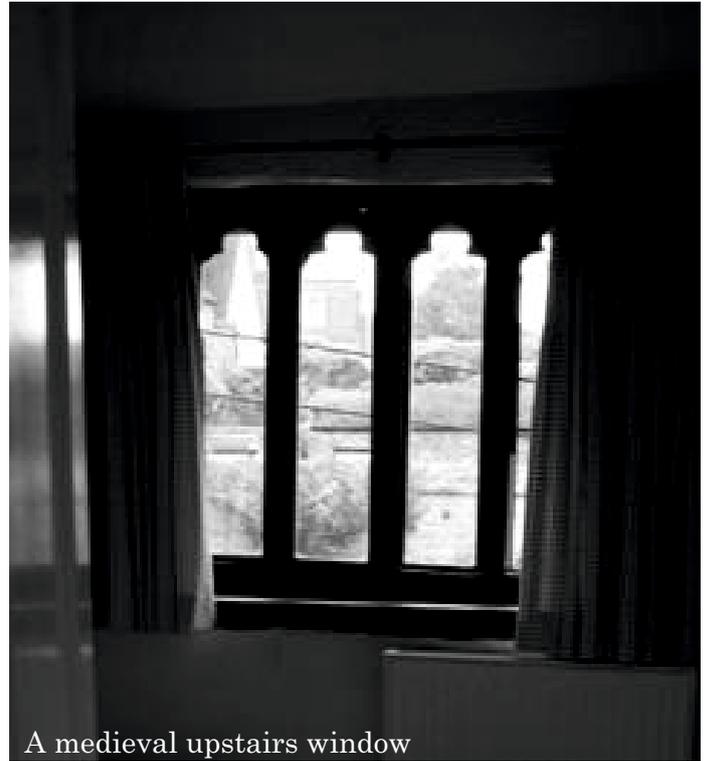
Thus, in the late 1970's Dorothea Pickering named the house St. Ethelwold's House and in 1983 the Fellowship of St. Ethelwold became a Charitable Trust.



A medieval splayed 'light' or slit window

Thirteenth century dwelling

The earliest features that can now be reasonably dated are to be found in the cellar of the house. In the corners, the stone corbels once supported wooden beams. Although the stones are characteristic of early 13th century work, the joists they held in place have been tree-ring dated to 1518-1531. The steps into the cellar are well worn, and this suggests that it was a well-used store-room for a long period of time. Today, steel girders stop the (office) floor sagging. At the sides of the cellar are splayed lights – windows that penetrate the thick walls. These have long been blocked off, not least by the 19th century corridor that extends along the entire length of the medieval tail of the house. When all the doors are open, from the front entrance to



A medieval upstairs window

the laundry at the back, the curvature of the house is clearly visible.

15-16th century expansion

We know nothing about what the front of the house looked like at this time. What you see today is all of the 18th century. However it is clear from the attractive timber-framing at the centre of the house that the structure above the cellar is a much adapted medieval building. This might explain the two fireplaces in what is now the office. One is blocked off; the other is a much grander affair leading to a large chimney that serves another fireplace on the floor above. Beyond the office is a timber-framed range of six bays. Four of these were built in 1454 and the timbers are sooted - probably from open fires, suggesting that this was an open dining hall. The wall panels were filled with wattle and daub and the timbers fixed by wooden pegs. The two end bays were added later.

The first known occupants were Robert and Alice Overthrowe (1548). In 1554 the house seems to have been one of two properties leased to Williame Mattheve, an inkeeper who ran an upholstery business. Unicorn House (No. 28) may have been the site of the inn. After Abingdon was granted a Royal Charter in 1556, No. 30 was leased by the new Borough of Abingdon for 327 years.

The Brewery Business

The centre of Abingdon in 1556 would be recognisable today and East Saint Helen Street was a main thoroughfare that connected the Parish Church with the town's administrative centre. Yet as trade grew, the River retained its impact: barges loaded ale or malt and coal was unloaded until ca.1907.

Further, 17th century additions to the eastern range (beyond the Sanctuary, towards the River) enabled Thomas Hulcotts, from 1647, and his daughter Hannah to run a brewery, one of



Tudor fireplace in the master bedroom



The fine Georgian dog-leg staircase

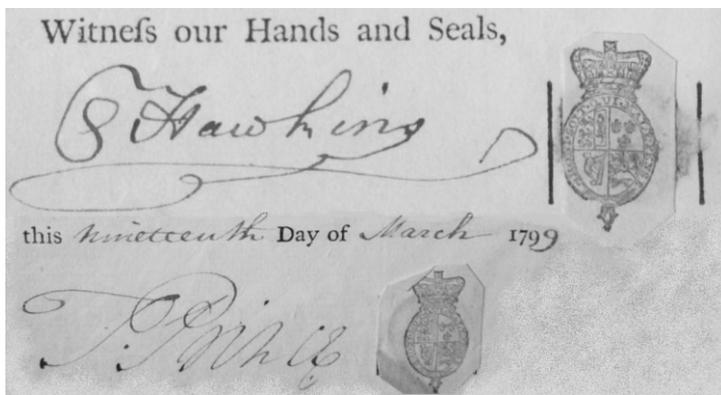
many in Abingdon. After her father's death, in 1700, Hannah carried on the business and she married William Hawkins in 1706 or 1707.

Hawkins was quite wealthy, and it was due to him that the 1707 Georgian (front) section of the house was built. William and Hannah lived in some style, and the medieval part became a service wing with a large fireplace and a bread oven (in the Hearth).

Today's Garden Room remains a large and elegant reception room. The master bedroom, Room 4, has pine panelling and possibly Bible boxes in the cupboard. The fireplace is an anachronism: it is of Tudor origin.



A skyhook possibly used to haul grain into the loft above the cottage.

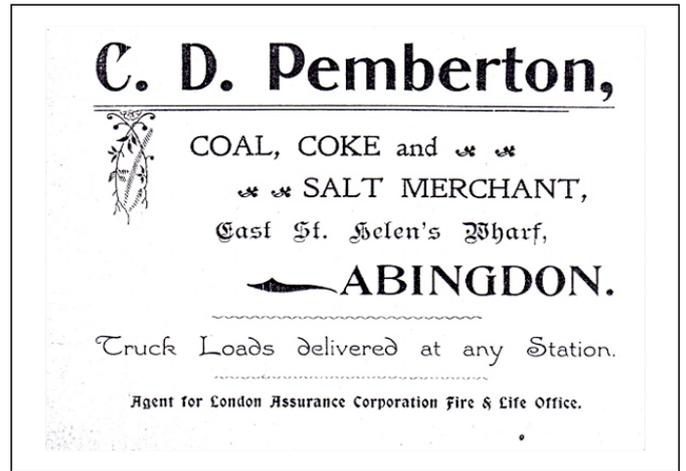


A 1799 tax form signed and sealed: the end of 150 years of brewing at the site of No. 30.

The brewhouse continued: in early 1799 a last payment made on it appears in a tax document signed by George Hawkins, a descendant, and Thomas Prince. The document even mentions the National Debt, but no contribution was made towards it.

Coal Merchants

Mieneke Cox, writing in 2003, states that *“by 1823 the house had become the home and business practice of Thomas Pemberton, a coal merchant, whose son William purchased it from the Borough for £790 in 1883. He became the first private owner since the Middle Ages”*.



An 1875 map shows that the river frontage of No. 30 extended well beyond today's boundaries: this would have allowed two barges to birth at once.

William's son C.D. (Charles) Pemberton died intestate in 1907 but there was an Australian heir.

Thomas Pemberton lived in Victoria, Australia. He leased the property to the then tenant Miss Julia Sandys, a retired headmistress from Scotland, for £55 p.a. (no trade allowed). In 1914 she bought the premises for £1,100 and lived there until she died in February 1930.

The Gathering Storm

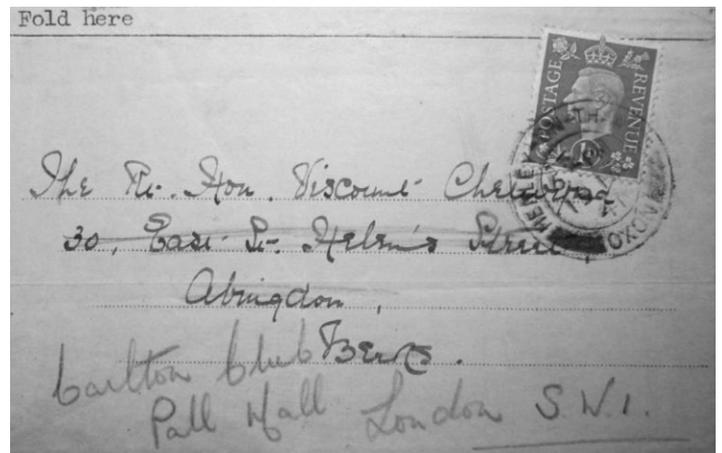
Before the Second World War, the Hon. Adam D. Chetwynd (from 1937 a Viscount) would have found No. 30 to be a 'gracious residence'. £2,600 was the price he paid. Modern features had been added; central heating, one bathroom, main drainage and a kitchen with a double Eagle-range. In addition there was a heated linen cupboard, a servants' hall, a scullery and a wine cellar. The garden had a 'secluded Old World charm'.

There were paths, rose beds, box bordered flower beds, espalier and wall fruit trees, a heated greenhouse, summer house and 'delightful' access to the river for bathing, fishing or boating. But all that was about to change.



In September 1939, at the outbreak of the European hostilities, the house was requisitioned by the Army. By 1941-2 it was a War Office billet. Only a few signs of that period remain. After the war, the house remained in Government hands until 1953 – firstly as a food stamp office for the Ministry of Food while rationing continued (1945-1952) and then for the Ministry of National Insurance for a year. It was unoccupied in 1954. The buildings must have been in a rather dilapidated state: the central heating had gone, the garage roof had been badly damaged in a fire and the garden was unkempt. Although the Rt. Hon. Viscount Chetwynd was probably compensated for the damage, he made no repairs to the property. Indeed, it appears he did not live in the property again. His life had moved on.

The 1953 sale prospectus was cautious, but still the house's underlying charm shone through. For example, it notes the fireplace (in Room 3) which is surrounded by exotic Dutch tiles. The £3,500 paid by Mr. and Mrs. Harmar Brown in 1954 probably reflects the



Time of difficulty: a 1941 letter to Viscount Chetwynd referring to the constraints of wartime.

work that needed to be done, but it appears that little changed over the next decade. The front rooms, with their large, street-facing windows were used to display furniture in Mr. Brown's shop "Granny's Antiques".

The Dorothea Pickering Era

In the 1950's Dorothea Pickering had made the Vineyard school, by then at 25-27 Park Road, Abingdon, into a successful preparatory school.

Dorothea Pickering, in 1934. Taken while she was teaching in Palestine from 1928 to 1935. By 1937 she had established a kindergarten school at 45, The Vineyard in Abingdon



Strict attention was paid to teaching and good manners and sports days were a highlight. But the building of Stratton Way meant the playing fields would be lost. Dorothea sought new premises in 1964 and found No. 30 was being sold by a Mr. R. E. Kemp.

THE VINEYARD KINDERGARTEN & PREPARATORY SCHOOL

It would be the new home for the Vineyard School. There were many preparations to be made. A change of use had to be applied for – from shop to school. The driveway needed to accommodate cars, and the lawn required reparations and, meticulously, the finances had to be arranged (the house cost £10,000). Dorothea, however, saw great opportunities in the building.

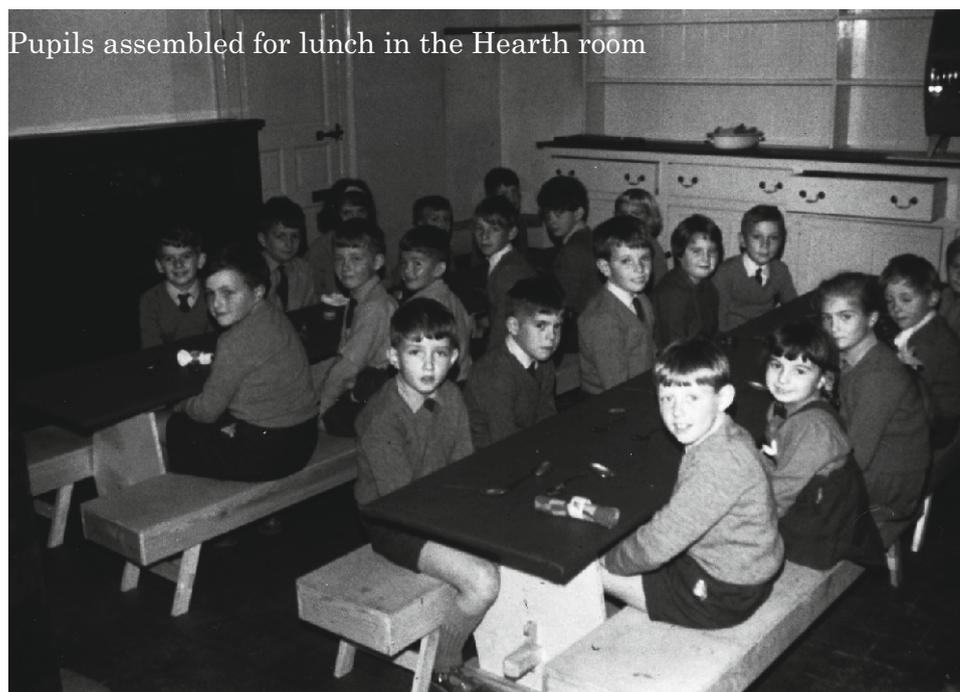
There were four fine school-rooms and the large upper room at the end of the house (The Sanctuary) became an Oratory and in 1964 Dorothea sought permission to dedicate it to St. Ethelwold.

The Hearth Room would be the school's dining room and Dorothea would live in part of the ground floor flat, from where she would prepare simple school lunches for 101 pupils.

Alas, the absence of 'mod-cons', such as heating, sufficient cloakrooms and fire doors caught the attention of School Inspectors. And then there was Selective Employment Tax. After just two years the school closed in December 1966. What happened next leads us to where we are today.

A Close Call

In 2002 an electrical fire caused much smoke damage. Thanks to the nearby Fire Brigade it was soon extinguished: they termed it a 'close call'. By 2003, the whole house had been completely refurbished. Modern central heating, fire alarms, fire doors, bathrooms and new furnishings were installed. The Trustees decided the best way forward was to keep St. Ethelwold's as a retreat, with bed and breakfast facilities. This has raised the income required to run No. 30 as a Charitable Trust that provides a haven of tranquillity and peace in the middle of a delightful old town.



Pupils assembled for lunch in the Hearth room

Text by Richard Clarke, from 2009-11 the Evening Manager at St. Ethelwold's House – with grateful thanks to Mieneke Cox and Beryl Niblet who carried out the original historical research, and to David Clark at the Oxfordshire Buildings Record for his advice.

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