



St Benedicts Priory – Deeping St. James

St Benedicts Priory is a grand 17th century home built on the site of the 12th century priory that was formerly sat at the centre of the village until 1539. Today, the house retains a number of original historic features, most significantly the original 17th century staircase. The house has been owned by great men, who were in the favour of successive kings, but for most of its history it has been the home of gentleman farmers, who played significant roles in the life of the village of Deeping St. James. At one point the farmhouse was at the centre of a farm covering almost 3000 acres, but today it has been sympathetically restored to become a comfortable family home with landscaped gardens.

Medieval Benedictine Priory

St Benedicts Priory was built on the site of the early Benedictine priory of Deeping. It was founded by Baldwin Fitz Gilbert in 1139 and dedicated to Saint James. The priory was a small cell attached to Thorney Abbey and suffered the same fate as the Abbey under Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539. The lands and buildings were given to Thomas, Duke of Norfolk (Anne Boleyn's uncle) in 1540.

Building on the old Priory grounds

It was a number of years later, in the 17th century, that the current home, St Benedicts Priory, was built. However, the house was known as the 'priory farmhouse' for most of its early history. It was built on the site of the former ecclesiastical buildings of the Priory and it is believed that some of the stone came from the dismantled 12th century priory buildings. Today, the house still retains some beautiful original features, including a dogleg staircase with turned balusters, a number of stone fireplaces and the original heavy studded wooden front door. Other features include moulded mullions and even a carved stone face on the western chimney stack.

The Wymondsold Family

The Manor of Deeping St. James was in the hands of the Wymondsold (sometimes also spelt Wymonsold and Wymonsole) family during the 17th century and it is probable that they were responsible for building on the old priory lands, including the priory farmhouse. An indenture dated 1659 between William Wymondsold of Putney and his grandsons, clearly identifies the transfer of the manor of Deeping St. James "late called the cell of Thorney otherwise called the late priory of Deeping St. James" encompassing all the land, church, parsonage, houses and even the yards, orchards, barns, meadows and cottages.

Wymondsold's and the favour of the King

William Wymondsold was from a prominent family mainly residing in Putney and who was also High Sheriff at the time of the Civil War. Most notably, William Wymondsold was present at the time of the Putney Debates in 1647 and General Fairfax was billeted at Wymondsold's house, the largest house in Putney (believed to have been located where Putney train station sits today). However, the Wymondsold family were noted royalists and at the Restoration were rewarded for their loyalty to the King. Sir Dawes Wymondsold was favoured by Charles II and William Wymondsold is recorded as a "Royall Ayd unto the King" in 1664-5 and again in 1672 and 1679 ('Ayd' given in the form of finance). Records for the Kings Remembrancer (judicial post) records members of the Wymondsold family still linked with the manor of Deeping St. James during the 1680s, while Robert Wymondsold was knighted by James II in March 1684.

Manor house?

In a 19th century Lincolnshire directory, the house on the grounds of the old priory is referred to as 'the manor house'; however this appears to be an error. It is possible that when first completed it was a home to the lords of the manor, the Wymondsold's, when they visited Lincolnshire, but it appears that from an early stage the house was leased to a prominent member of the gentry or wealthy gentleman farmer.

The Whichcote Family

By the early 1700s the manor of Deeping St. James had transferred into the hands of the Whichcote family. There is a possibility this was through marriage, but there is a reference to a purchase of lands in 1722, but the exact details are uncertain. The Whichcote family were a prominent local family, originating from Sir Jeremy Whichcote, who was created baronet by Charles II in 1660. The family seat from the mid 18th century was at Aswarby Hall near Sleaford, when Sir Christopher Whichcote was head of the family.

Lord of the manor and the priory farmhouse

It is during this period that we begin to see more records directly related to the house on the grounds of the old priory, in particular the direct relationship between lord of the manor, Sir Christopher Whichcote and later his son, Sir Thomas Whichcote with the tenants of the house. In 1775 we find receipts and rent records for the priory between Sir Christopher Whichcote and the then occupant, Mr John Pawlett. Unfortunately, it is uncertain how long the Pawlett family had been residing at the priory farmhouse.

John Pawlett – Gentleman farmer

The rent books and records show that John Pawlett occupied the priory farmhouse and not only farmed around 400 acres of surrounding land, he also owned an additional plot of land in Hall meadows and farmed further land on the common. By the turn of the 19th century, John Pawlett was increasing his land holdings and combined with the land he leased from the lord of the manor, the total value was over £700 in 1807. By 1812 the land he rented from Sir Thomas Whichcote required over £37 in land tax and his own land £1, seven shillings and two pence.

John Pawlett – parish overseer and chief constable

The poor rate assessments during the early 19th century also show that John Pawlett was very actively involved within the village of Deeping St. James, acting as vestryman (early council member) and was an overseer of the poor, responsible for the distribution of the poor rate funds to the needy in the parish. At some point during the early 1800s John's son, also called John, took over the running of the farm. Unfortunately, it is unclear as to which John Pawlett was played such an active role in the village community as overseer of the poor. However, it is certain that it was the younger John Pawlett who became the chief constable of Deeping St. James during the 1840s.

The Pawlett family

As we enter the 1840s we also begin to gain a much clearer picture of who else was living at the priory farmhouse through the census records. The 1841 census shows John Pawlett (junior), aged 55 recorded as 'farmer', with his wife Elizabeth and their two sons, Samuel (merchant aged 30) and Edmund (farmer aged 25). Also in the house at this time is Susan Greaves, listed as 'independent' aged 40 and three servants, Ann, Rebecca and William.

During the 1840s, John Pawlett passed the farmhouse and the responsibility of the farm to his youngest son, Edmund, as by 1847 the parish rate book shows Edmund was the occupier of over 455 acres of land, still owned by Sir Thomas Whichcote. In the same records, John Pawlett is still working on his own land, now over 118 acres and his eldest son, also leases land from Sir Thomas in Lynchfield.

The priory farm in the 1850s

The 1851 census shows John Pawlett was head of the house at the priory and 'farmer of 250 acres employing six labourers'. Elizabeth was recorded as 'farmer's wife' and son Edmund as 'farmer 440 acres employing 15 labourers'. John Pawlett passed away in 1853 and by the 1861 census Edmund Pawlett was recorded as 'farmer about 700 or 800 acres employing 20 men, 14 boys and 4 women'. At this time, Edmund's mother, Elizabeth was still also in the house, almost 80 years old (although she died a short time later in 1862) along with Susannah Greaves, a visitor recorded as 'fundholder' aged 70, along with three live-in servants.

Edmund Pawlett – prominent village gentleman

Edmund Pawlett followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, being a prominent member of the community. Employing the number of men and occupying the priory was a well-respected position, and alongside this he was involved with the formation of the school board in 1876 and sat on the board into the 1880s. At this time, the 1881 census records that Edmund was occupant of 'The Priory' aged 66 and 'farmer and grazier (2900 acres employing 40 men & boys)'. He was in the house with three live-in domestic servants, Elizabeth, Ann and Rebecca.

Richard Ward

Edmund Pawlett passed away in 1885 without marrying and having children, so for the first time in over 100 years the priory farmhouse transferred to new occupants. The 1889 Lincolnshire directory shows that the priory farmhouse became the home of Richard Ward. The 1891 census also shows Richard Ward as head of the house at the priory, along with his daughter, Ada and son, Albert. Sadly, there are no specific documents showing the transfer of ownership at this time, but it is believed that the new occupants, Mr. and Mrs. Ward eventually acquired the ownership of the house and a small amount of land.



Albert Ward – farmer and grazier

By the turn of the 20th century, the priory was in the hands of Richard's son, Albert, only 27 years old, with his wife, Sarah and their one year old daughter, Doris. The family also had two live-in housemaids at this time. Albert and his family remained at the priory throughout the early 1900s and he was still recorded as 'farmer and grazier' at the priory after World War I, in 1919. However, shortly after this time, the priory passed to Albert's son, John and his wife, Alberta.

The priory house in the early 20th century

A local history of Deeping St. James compiled by the local history group in 1998 tells us that at this time 'the interior was quite impressive...with dining room, drawing room, breakfast room...[and] the main staircase came down to the front hall and [was] cased in rich mahogany wood.'

Land sales and owners

John Ward died in 1920 and the running of the house and farm became the responsibility of his widow, Alberta. During the inter-war years there was a great change in Deeping St. James, along with large parts of the country, as many people were forced to sell landholdings and estates. By the 1930s the manor of Deeping St. James had been sold to the crown and Mrs Alberta Ward was forced to mortgage the farm. During this time the priory farmhouse was rented to Mr. and Mrs. Cooper, however, it appears that the farmhouse was rapidly deteriorating and by 1940 the derelict farm was taken over by Ernest Harwood.

The war years into the 1950s

Ernest Harwood held the ownership of the priory farmhouse and land throughout the war years, until in 1949 the house was transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. They then passed the land and house to 'The Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral Church of Christ in Oxford', who sold the property (comprising 5.255 acres forming part of Priory Farm together with the dwelling house known as 'Priory farmhouse') to a Mrs Doris Hall in 1959.

Restoration and Renovation

Mrs Hall lived in the priory farmhouse from 1960 until 1987 when she sold it to Mr and Mrs Rickard. By this time, the house was almost 400 years old and was in dire need of some care and attention. The Rickard family set about restoring the once grand 17th century home and bringing it back to its former glory. The Rickard's also spent some time and effort including some additions to the house, sympathetic to the original 17th century construction.