

# A history of the museum, which have been researched and written by Chris Stone, a former long serving members of staff.

## Ceely house

Ceely House was originally a timber framed, jettied 'Brother House' of the Fraternity of the Virgin Mary, a religious organisation linked with St Mary's church. The Fraternity was founded in 1450 and dissolved in 1547 so it should not be surprising to learn that some of the timbers, still extant, have been dated by dendrochronology to 1473. This building was originally intended as a communal, ceremonial place for meetings and offices for the Fraternity and was much smaller than the current building. It was not a habitation however, but the upstairs room which could only be reached by an outside staircase, may have been lodgings for a priest. The wall painting, now on display, dates from a little before 1500.

After the suppression, in 1548, Sir Edward Warner and John Gosnold petitioned the Crown to purchase various chantry lands including those at Aylesbury which were granted in 1549 and held by them as part of the Honour of Eye in Suffolk. We have no information for the next hundred years or so until 1649 when we find that a survey of the Honour of Eye did not include the Brother House.

It is thought (though without evidence) that from the late 1500s the Heywood family were in residence here. Richard Heywood, who died in 1701, being the Registrar of the Commissary Court for the Archdeaconry of Buckingham.

During the latter years of his lifetime the house was panelled, the upstairs rooms ceilinged and the ceilings of the downstairs rooms plastered and a new wing constructed to serve as a kitchen. This new wing now serves as the 'Garden Cafe'.

The next occupier was Joseph Bell who became Registrar on Heywood's death and was related to the Heywoods. In 1717 Hugh Barker Bell, third son of Joseph, was born and upon his father's death in 1739, for some obscure reason came into possession of the house instead of his elder brothers. He was married by then but in 1749 his wife died aged only 33. He remarried in the mid 1750s to Mary Thornbury, widow of the Rev. Samuel Thornbury who, we think, was responsible at a slightly later date for the construction of the rear wing of the house, the part containing what we now call the 'Baker Room' with its fine plaster ceiling. About this time, the timber framed building was encased in brickwork and the jetty underbuilt in brick to 'Georgianise' the house. It is probable that the iron railings around the Church Street frontage were also erected around this time.

The panelled staircase (which is a listed feature of the building) is contiguous with these alterations and a bed alcove was formed in one of the upstairs rooms fronting Church Street. This alcove was infilled with a partition wall in the 1950s and has only recently become accessible to the public as for many years this room was used as a Museum storeroom.

Hugh Barker Bell died in 1776, probably not in Aylesbury and it is not known if he still owned the property at that time. What is known is that the next occupier was named as the Rev. John Stevens DD who was Headmaster of the Grammar School from 1744 until his death in 1770.

In 1780, Joseph Burnham, Gentleman, was the owner of 'Bell's House' but was probably not the occupier. He moved in 1784 and was yet another Registrar. Around 1796 an extension to the main house was built fronting Church Street to be used as offices for the Registrar. Burnham died in 1799 leaving all of the property to his wife and nine nephews and nieces but it appears that his clerk, Thomas Hatton, continued to use the Registry Office for some time after his death. It also appears that a large window was converted into a doorway (still extant as the Museum's staff entrance) during Hatton's tenure to provide an independent entrance for this wing. After Mrs Burnham's death, a nephew, Joseph Rose bought out the interests of the others to become the proprietor and is thought to be responsible for the building of an extension to the kitchen wing mentioned above. This may have been a scullery and it is known that, much later, it was part of the butler's area. This part is now used as public toilets though in the 1970s/80s a small boiler room was sited here.

Around 1810 the imposing front doorway and pillars were erected. It is thought that they came from Eythrope House when that house was demolished.

Rose was a solicitor and practised at No. 7 Church Street, the former Registry Office and now the Museum shop area. He was still there in 1841 but had gone by 1847 by which time one Henry Pickess, a surgeon, was in residence for a few years, though Rose was still the owner.

By 1851 Pickess had moved on and the house was let to Joseph Parrott, a solicitor.

In 1866, Rose's son Richard and his mortgagees sold the property to James Henry Ceely but the house became known as 'Ceely House' after this older brother, Robert Ceely FRCS, who was in residence and practised there and had been prominent in establishing the Bucks Infirmary (Royal Bucks Hospital) in 1833.

In 1882 the practice was purchased by Robert Harvey Hilliard MD, FRCS who died in 1891 aged only 52. Hilliard's trustees then let the property to a Dr Weaver who, apart from being a doctor, started a factory on the site which is now Cooper's Yard car park for making non toxic ale. In 1901, Hilliard's trustees let Ceely House to Dr John Charles Baker and in 1918 he purchased the freehold. Dr Baker used the former Registry Office as his surgery and dispensing room, the waiting room being a rather draughty corridor accessed by the previously mentioned doorway converted from a window. This area is now the Museum shop and if you take a look at the door behind the shop counter you will notice a curious flap. This was the dispensing hatch where the patients received their medicines, however, the door is not in its original position. The small cupboard with glazed doors between the windows fronting Church Street and the one next to the internal door are original and are where Dr Baker kept his medicines and instruments.

At some time, probably in the 1920s, a room was constructed at first floor level between the former Registry Office and the wing to the rear to serve as a nursery. This was a predominantly wooden structure with a glazed front overlooking, and overhanging the yard which was used during the 1970s and 80s as a secretary's office for the Museum. It was considered to be of no architectural importance and during the recent refurbishment work was demolished to provide the light and airy entrance foyer that you now see.

Under the floor of the foyer is a large cellar which was accessed by wooden steps from what is now the 'Garden Cafe' and by a large double trap door in the floor just about where the statue of 'Mona' now stands. All the Museum's junk' was stored down here (and still is!). When the building was being cleared in preparation for the recent refurbishment an intrepid party of Museum Assistants explored the cellar to recover any valuable Museum artefacts and discovered a previously undisturbed doorway. After removing the door we found that the small room behind had once been used as a wine store. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) there was no wine in there but we did find several bottles of ginger beer, still with contents intact, dating from 1942. After carefully removing the bottles to a place of safety (the Assistant's Tea Room) we thought that we had better inform the Curator of our find. Was he interested? Well, actually yes but more interested in whether or not the contents were still drinkable. After a completely democratic decision had been reached about who was to test the liquid ("You found it, you drink it") the youngest (at the time) Assistant had a sip. I can personally tell you that it was still as good as when it was bottled. The remaining bottles are now on display in the Aylesbury gallery, still with their contents.

Dr Baker joined the Bucks Archaeological Society in 1903 and in 1906 was appointed Honorary Assistant Curator of their adjoining Museum. In about 1921, owing to ill health, Dr Baker sold the practice, but not Ceely House, to Dr A.W.D. Coventon who practised just across the road at 'The Chantry'. In 1924 Dr Baker died leaving the house to his daughter Cicely who, in 1944 sold the property to the Society. However, Miss Baker remained in residence on the first floor as the Society's tenant until 1950 when funds allowed the Society to incorporate the house into the main Museum. Miss Baker then moved to Bierton where she lived for many years.

During work to make the house suitable for Museum purposes, workmen found four gold Rose Nobles of Edward IV and a bone seal in an upstairs room amongst dust and rubble when an old cupboard was being removed. The find was declared treasure trove, was purchased by the Museum and an electrotype of one of the coins is on display in the Aylesbury Gallery.

The Ceely House extension was formally opened in July 1954 and an agreement was entered into with Bucks County Council to jointly share the running expenses. It was subsequently found that these expenses were too great for the Society to fund and in 1957 sole responsibility for running and staffing the Museum was assumed by Bucks County Council in return for a lease with a peppercorn rent.

The last alteration to Ceely House before the recent refurbishment was in 1956 when the Society fitted out Dr Baker's study as a library and named it the 'Grinnell Room' It is still used as such.

## Coach house

The coach house, now the Roald Dahl Children's Gallery, was probably built about 1755 as stables for a horse and cover for the carriage. The type of bricks used and the building style matches the 'Baker Room' extension mentioned previously. At a later date a harness room in the area where James's Giant Peach now resides in the new Discovery Gallery' was added along with a range of cottages used as servant's accommodation. Upstairs was a hay loft and another room, both now converted to the 'Imagination Gallery'. The carriage entrance was the large opening in the garden wall which is now used as our Pebble Lane entrance and the exit was via the Museum yard. Above the large doors facing the yard can still be seen the remains of a lamp bracket which had to be lit during hours of darkness by the groom whenever the doctor had a call out. Behind it is a bricked up hatchway which was the way that the hay found it's way into the hay loft.

For many years this building served as a Museum store and behind it, where the gallery foyer is now located, was an area of stinging nettles and brambles known universally to the staff as 'The Jungle'. In 'The Jungle' stood a small brick shed which, amongst other things housed the Curator's official transport - an old bicycle. Every couple of years attempts were made at taming this area but to no avail. A bulldozer eventually won the battle. The foyer area and the 'Great Glass Elevator' are entirely modern structures constructed in 1994 and were designed by the Buckinghamshire County Council Architect's department.

The cottages that line the far side of the yard were constructed as servant's quarters. In No. 1 Cottage, now 'Matilda's Library', at one time lived the housekeeper who was married to the groom. Next to this was a very tiny cottage (No. 2 cottage) where the maid lived and next to this, where we now keep our dustbins, was an open area with a small well below a York Stone slab. A hand pump was located her, similar but much smaller than the one in Pebble Lane, and was the water supply for Ceely House. What appears to be relatively modern cement rendering around the cottages is in fact original.

Finally, the brick building nearest Church Street was the coal shed, at least it was in later years and is still referred to as such.

## The former Church halls

At the corner of Pebble Lane and the churchyard we find the former St Mary's church halls. The easternmost hall, abutting Pebble Lane is the oldest, having been built in 1840 as a home for the Latin School, part of the Grammar School, which moved here from the small chapel attached to St Mary's Church. It is now used as the Museum's auditorium and schoolroom. The building became part of St. Mary's Parish Halls in 1907 when the Grammar School moved to a new site in Walton Road (of which, more below) and a new hall was constructed alongside complete with a date stone set above the window facing the churchyard. This, since 1984, has been the Museum's 'Aylesbury Gallery'.

The older hall was built of hand-made bricks but the new one is of factory bricks which are thicker and great efforts were made to match the courses in the new hall to those in the older structure. At first sight, the two buildings appear to be one.

The small doorway in the wall facing the church, between the newer hall and the main Museum buildings, is in its original position, though with a modern door, and leads into a courtyard between the buildings that was paved with York stone slabs removed from the garden area in 1989. Originally, and before 1907, this area was turfed.

At the garden end of the halls, newer still brickwork is evidence of alterations made by Buckinghamshire County Council in the 1970s when the halls were purchased and converted for Museum use and two small rooms were added. One of these rooms was further converted during the 1989-1995 refurbishment programme to become public toilets.

From now on, the 1989-1995, refurbishment will be referred to as 'the recent refurbishment'.

Between the halls (known to the staff as 'Church House') and the former Grammar School building is a modern glass passageway (known as 'The Link') constructed in the late 1970's to 'link' the buildings together.

## The former grammar school

In the late sixteenth century, Sir Henry Lee, Lord of the Manor of Quarrendon and Fleet Marston, founded a free school in Aylesbury. The original endowment included the rent from two 'small mean houses' which brought in the then reasonable sum of £8.00 per year which is roughly equivalent to £7,100.00 in today's highly inflated currency. In 1598 and again in 1603 he made further bequests to the trustees for the support of the school. The original Free School was not on this site but was in the small chapel attached to the south east corner of the church. In 1714 Henry Phillips of London and a member of a prominent Aylesbury family, bequeathed the sum of £5,000 in his will dated 22nd September to purchase land and to enlarge the existing school. After some wrangling amongst the trustees and executors a Master of the Court of Chancery was appointed to look into how the school could be enlarged or if not, just what was to be done. He reported on 20th March 1717 that the existing schoolhouse was unfit, incapable of being enlarged and that a new school should be built on or near the site of the two old houses belonging to the trustees alongside the churchyard.

In July 1718 work started on the new school buildings and by May 1720 it was complete at a cost of £1.267 18s 2d or just over £1 million in today's money. Note that on some of the still extant rainwater hoppers the date 1719 appears. The school was opened in October 1720 and comprised a lofty schoolroom designed to house one hundred and twenty boys, (girls were not considered to be worth educating in those days!), to be taught reading English, Latin and Greek, writing and accounts. The Latin School however, remained in the chapel until 1840 when a new schoolroom was built in Pebble Lane. School was to start in the summer months at 6am and finish at 6pm with a two hour break between 11am and 1pm. During the winter, school started one hour later and finished one hour earlier. The schoolroom originally had a stone floor but at some time wooden joists with floorboards were installed and a large cellar created below. This cellar has long since been infilled and the bricked-up entrance is still extant though not in a public area. The room was heated in the early twentieth century by an iron stove sited centrally near to the large doorway into the churchyard and a flue led under the floorboards in the direction of the quadrangle. How the schoolroom was heated (if at all) in previous years is not known. At an

unknown date the tall windows fronting the churchyard had their cills raised by six courses probably to prevent the boys from being distracted by outside happenings and this alteration can be clearly seen from the path running alongside. Above the churchyard door is a square depression in the brickwork that may have been intended for a commemorative plaque of some kind and above the two flanking windows are niches to house statuettes. It is not known if these features were ever used. Around the main doorway and along the walls underneath the windows can be seen grooves about 3" - 4" long worn into the brickwork at irregular intervals. These grooves were made over the years by the pupils as they sharpened their slate pencils and the remains of some of these pencils were found when the floorboards were lifted during the recent refurbishment along with a broken pair of 'pebble' spectacles. At ground level, flanking the main doorway are a pair of iron bootscrapers. These were needed as the footpath and indeed, Church Street, have not always been paved. Underneath the tarmac in Church Street and still to be seen the gutters are stone setts dating from around the last half of the nineteenth century. Before this, the street would have been surfaced by compacted earth and loose stones - dusty in summer and boggy in winter. Many people refer to these setts as 'cobblestones' but this term is incorrect. 'Cobblestones' are water worn rounded natural stones but setts are always man-made. At each end of the schoolroom a master's house comprising two floors of three rooms each and a range of attics was constructed. The house fronting Church Street was the Headmaster's residence and is thought to incorporate parts of the older house on the site and there is evidence to show that a brick skin was constructed around the outside of an older building.

The house nearest Pebble Lane was the domain of the Usher or Latin master.

It will be noted that some of the windows in both houses have been bricked up. This may have been done to avoid the payment of window tax but could alternatively have been an architectural feature. If there really had been glazed windows in these areas, living in the houses would have been like living in a greenhouse with very little privacy, and the walls would have been structurally weak.

As can be seen from a superficial glance around the outside, the living accommodation for the masters seemed to be of more importance and was certainly much larger than the area allotted to the school. So much for education!

Under a scheme by the Board of Education, a new school was built in Walton Street to admit both boys and girls from public elementary schools by competition and in 1907 the school moved to the new site. Parts of the former school buildings here were purchased by Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society to provide a Museum in the former schoolroom and headmaster's house with living accommodation for a curator in the attics above. At first, the purchase excluded the former Latin master's house which was purchased by the church to be used for a while as a nursery school but in 1965 this part was bought by Buckinghamshire County Council and integrated into the Museum.

To the south of the schoolroom and flanked by the two master's houses was the school quadrangle. In 1934 a waterproof cellar was constructed under this area for use as a muniment room by the Society and in the 1950's this was roofed over at first floor level to expand the Museum's display area.

During these alterations, a passage into the quadrangle between the former Headmaster's house and the adjoining 'Ceely House' was blocked off at both ends and a window inserted in place of a doorway at the Church Street end. The site of this doorway can still be discerned by a slightly different colouring of the brickwork around the window at the church end of the iron railings around Ceely House in Church Street.

As part of the recent refurbishment work an entirely new muniment room was constructed, roughly in the same position as the old one and a basement work area made for Museum use. This new work necessitated the enlargement of the cellars and an archaeological dig was carried out which uncovered the remains of a well abutting the northern wall of Ceely House. Our archaeologist dated the well to the 12th or early 13th century which pre-dates any of the buildings still extant.

There is an old legend that states that there was a tunnel between St Mary's Church and the former Greyfriars monastery which stood where the new County Offices and Friar's Square Shopping Centre now stand. Reference to a map will show that such a tunnel would have had to pass near to the site of the muniment room but absolutely nothing was found, nor was any evidence of such a tunnel seen during the refurbishment of the houses opposite in Church Street when work was carried out in 1993 to convert them to almshouses. Having said that, the old cellars under the school and Ceely House (and other buildings around here) were of the vaulted type and are reminiscent of a tunnel with side passages but were for an entirely different purpose.

When the lift was installed in 1993, another pit had to be dug adjacent to the muniment room but underneath the former Headmaster's house to take the hydraulic rams. Workmen discovered the skeleton of a Saxon baby which for some totally unexplainable reason was christened 'Eric'. Sometimes when the wind is howling and rain beats mercilessly against the windows the lift occasionally makes a screeching noise as it moves up and down which we believe is Eric's spirit searching for his earthly remains!

The last main alterations to the former schoolroom before the recent refurbishment was in 1971 when a mezzanine floor was inserted at first floor level to provide more gallery space. This new gallery was devoted to farming and allied industries and was known as the 'Rural Life Gallery'. Its space is now occupied by the 'Harding Room', part of the Buckinghamshire Art Gallery.

The main part of the Buckinghamshire Art Gallery is an entirely new (1994) part of the building constructed at first floor level where formerly there was a flat roof with skylights, the roof that was constructed over the quadrangle in 1950's.

The Buckinghamshire Art Gallery was the brainchild of Sir Timothy Raison, former MP for Aylesbury, who made unstinting efforts to raise the funding needed by instigating a public appeal and by arranging private donations. That his efforts succeeded can be seen and the main part of the gallery has been named the 'Raison Room' in his honour. The gallery was designed by Buckinghamshire County Council's Architect's Department. Alongside the modern glass viewing platform, a brand new rainwater hopper made to match the old ones bears the date 1994.

On the ground floor of the former Grammar School, the area in which the fossil, Romans & Celts and farming displays now occupies in the former schoolroom, was for a number of years known to

the staff as the 'Rocket Room' because, many, many years ago, part of a rocket from the Westcott Rocket Propulsion Establishment was on display here. The area next to this, where 'Tim Burr' the wooden man stands along with the woodland and brickmaking displays, the former quadrangle, was always known as the 'Wilkes Gallery', purely because a bust of John Wilkes was on display here until the main part of the Museum closed for refurbishing in the late 1980s. Until the closure, the now Special Exhibitions Gallery, part of the former Headmaster's house was called the 'Hollis Gallery' after Edwin Hollis FZS, the first curator of the Museum.

The longer serving staff still enjoy confusing the new staff by occasionally using these old names which, of course, mean nothing at all to them!

## Museum garden

The garden belonged to Ceely House but little is known of its design until the turn of this century. The Museum has a collection of photographs taken in Dr Baker's time which show that abutting the Pebble Lane wall and Church Hall was a large greenhouse, the roof line of which can still be seen. Pebble Lane wall was partially rebuilt and heightened during the mid 1960s when the buttresses were also added. At that time, the Museum employed a caretaker who lived above the former school buildings and part of the lawn was converted into an allotment for his use.

A path originally ran around the edges of the lawn, which was used for tennis and croquet and about where the 'well' is now sited was a large flower bed containing rose bushes.

In the paragraph above, the word well is in inverted commas. This is because it never was a well. Our 'well' was, in fact a cess pit and was rediscovered during the refurbishment when a dumper truck almost disappeared into it one day. After an archaeological investigation it was decided to keep the structure and convert it into a wishing well by building a low circular brick wall around the mouth. There are several wells underneath the Museum's property along with other cess pits, all of varying dates so it is not inconceivable that some of the early residents of Ceely House must have been drinking water contaminated by the cess pits.

If you look at the rear wall of the Museum, near to the modern pergola, a roof line shows where a relatively modern toilet block once stood and the drains for this were uncovered during the recent refurbishment. However, during Dr. Baker's time this was demolished and a large glass conservatory was erected in its place, roughly in the area of our patio. The conservatory was subsequently also demolished.

In the wall of the main building, below the aforementioned roof line, can be seen two bricked up doorways, one each side of a modern rebuilt, wall at a right angle towards the former Coach House. We think that the door nearest the 'Garden Cafe' provided access into the old toilets or conservatory whilst the one nearest the yard was access from the yard into the butler's area. But why are the heights different?

The climate within the garden is very mild and is helped by being heated by the out-take vent for the heating system within the former church halls which can be seen on the wall. For many years a 'Peace' rose grew in this corner and flowered all year round. During December, daffodils also flowered here and, during the time that the garden was off limits to the public, the assistants were

in the habit of taking disbelieving people to see the wonder. A grape vine proliferates along this wall and each year we usually manage a good crop.

Overshadowing the Titley memorial fountain is an Aylesbury Prune tree. It is not a damson or plum, but a true prune. These trees once proliferated in this area and the fruit was mostly used for jam making but few now remain. This specimen was presented about 1985 by Jeff Hawkins of Pitstone Green Farm. The other trees around the garden are pears of various varieties, the tall one against Pebble Lane wall being a cooking variety. The others are eaters but we never get any. The birds, always, without fail, get there first!