



The majesty of *Woburn Abbey*

As the home of the Dukes of Bedford for nearly 400 years, Woburn Abbey is steeped in a vast amount of history. But it's not just the antique furniture and stunning art collection that are the attraction; many of the previous residents of Woburn have very interesting pasts...

The history of Woburn Abbey begins in 1145 when Hugh de Bolebec (descended from the de Bolebec family from Normandy, followers of William the Conqueror) founded a religious house for a group of Cistercian monks, with the monastic buildings following the usual Cistercian pattern. The present north wing is on the site of the monastic church, while the courtyard marks the great cloister and garth.

In 1538 the Abbot, Robert Hobbes, was found guilty of 'reasonable utterances against the

King' and the monastery was confiscated under the orders of Henry VIII. According to legend the Abbot was hanged from an oak tree at the Abbey's gate, using an oak still growing in the park.

The first ancestor who can be identified with certainty is Stephen Russell of Dorset, who in 1394 represented Weymouth in Parliament. His great-great-grandson John established the family fortune thanks to his royal connections that were advanced by an invitation from a neighbour.

In January 1506, three foreign vessels escorting Philip, Archduke of Austria, on his way to Spain were caught in a storm off the English coast and were forced to take refuge in Weymouth Harbour. Sir Thomas Trenchard, the Governor of Weymouth, escorted the archduke to his own castle from where he sent messengers to inform King Henry VII of the situation. Whilst awaiting the king's reply, the governor remembered that his young cousin and neighbour, John Russell, was able to speak a number of languages and he sent for him as an interpreter. Russell had recently travelled

Left: The racing room

The 4th Duke redecorated this room as a drawing-room in the eighteenth century. It was used by Prince Albert in 1841 as a dressing-room. After the ceiling had been restored in the 1970s it was refurbished as a Racing Room by Lady Tavistock, who also set up the Bloomsbury Stud. The pictures are now displayed with contemporary paintings and photographs of some of the stud's horses. The Bedford colours - featured in paintings in the room - are still in use today.

Opposite: Queen Victoria's bedroom

Charles I and Queen Henrietta stayed in this bedroom in 1636, and Charles again in 1647. The room was gutted and completely redesigned during the 4th Duke's rebuilding. It derives its name from the visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, when the royal couple was given the suite for their use. The Queen wrote in her diary, 'In the bedroom and my dressing-room there are some very fine pictures: in the former hangs one of Lord Russell's trial, by Hayter, one by Wilkie, a Landseer, a beautiful St John by Hayter with his portrait of Lord John and a very fine Eastlake.' All paintings except the Wilkie remain in the Woburn collection.





The majesty of *Woburn Abbey* cont.



Above: The Canaletto room

This is the dining room that the family uses for meals with more than six people. It contains the fine collection of Venetian views by Canaletto (1697-1768). Commissioned by the 4th Duke, they have hung in this room since 1800.

Right: The book room

This room formed part of the family quarters until the end of the eighteenth century. During the nineteenth century it was the housekeeper's room; it now houses a small part of the very fine collection of natural history books to be found at Woburn. The 6th Duke was a very serious book collector and it was possibly he who acquired the volumes from the Cabinet du Roy, and the works of Pierre-Joseph Redoute. This room was redecorated in 1976, with wallpaper from a design by Pugin; the ceiling dates from the mid-eighteenth century when the 4th Duke was remodelling the Abbey.

through Austria and was able to converse with the archduke on topics connected with his own country. The archduke was so delighted with the ease with which Russell spoke several European languages that when he was invited by King Henry VII to proceed to Windsor Castle, he asked Russell to accompany him. Henry, in turn, was struck by Russell's manner and conversation – apparently he was also a very good-looking young man - and having entered the royal service of Henry VII he later enjoyed the privileged position of a Gentleman of the Privy Chamber, entrusted with many state offices and diplomatic missions under Henry VIII. Most of the family estates were granted in recognition of his services; he became Baron Russell and was installed in the Order of the Garter.

King Henry VII died in 1547 but his son, Edward VI - to whom Lord Russell was appointed a counsellor - granted Woburn Abbey to John that same year. In 1550, following the instructions in his father's will, Edward created John the first Earl of Bedford. John Russell died in 1555.

Woburn Abbey did not

become a family home until 1619, when the childless 3rd Earl relinquished Woburn to his cousin and heir, Francis, Lord Russell, later 4th Earl. The latter established it as the principal family seat, building a two-storey wing on the north side, including the fantastic Grotto chamber in the centre of the ground floor. The Earl's improvements were almost certainly the work of sculptor and architect Nicholas Stone (1586/1647), the king's future master mason and the foremost sculptor and architect of his time. It is through this wing

that visitors enter the Abbey today.

Social enterprises were carried out by the family, such as the draining of the fens by the 4th Earl to reclaim fertile agricultural land. During the English Civil Wars the Earl's sons and sons-in-law chose differing sides. The future 5th Earl at first became General of the House for Parliament, but changed sides after becoming disillusioned with the latter's politics. Charles I's third visit to Woburn Abbey was as a prisoner in 1647, when he was interviewed there by



Right: 4th Duke's Bedroom

The family moved from this wing to the south wing towards the end of the eighteenth century, but this room was used by the 4th Duke (d.1771) as his bedroom. The tapestries originally hung in the family parlour (now the public entrance) and were seen there in 1751 by Horace Walpole on his tour of England. They would have appeared very old-fashioned as they were woven for the 5th Earl at the Mortlake factory between 1661 and 1664. They are based on the Acts of the Apostles, painted by Raphael in 1515 for Pope Urban X, who had commissioned a set of tapestries for the Sistine Chapel. The original cartoons (as they are known) are owned by the Crown and are on permanent loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum.



Oliver Cromwell.

Others in the Russell family became prominent in Parliament, most notably the 5th Earl's son, William, Lord Russell, leader of the Whigs in the Commons during the Protestant Succession Crisis in the reign of Charles II. His wrongful execution in 1683 for his alleged role in the Popish Plot to assassinate the king led to a complete posthumous pardon by William III in 1694, which also gained for his father the title of Duke of Bedford and later Marquess of Tavistock, in recognition of the family's sacrifice in this cause. The Russells have also distinguished themselves in other spheres of public service, including as ambassador to France, when the 4th Duke negotiated in 1763 the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Seven Years' War.

In 1747 the 4th Duke commissioned the Palladian architect Henry Flitcroft to rebuild the west range, including the grand series of state rooms, and it was he who turned the Abbey into the graceful Palladian house that stands today. When the 5th Duke came of age in 1786 he chose Henry Holland to work at Woburn. Today, there remains his Chinese dairy, sculpture gallery and the south wing containing the dining room and library.

The 6th Duke, who succeeded his brother in 1802, was interested in gardening and he employed Sir Jeffrey Wyatville to design the flower houses. The famous landscape gardener Humphry Repton was commissioned to landscape the park as it appears today, with around 30 acres of formal and natural garden environments and complete with a recreation of the aviary established by Repton as part of his design.

Lord John Russell, brother of the 7th Duke, carried the first great electoral reform bill through Parliament in 1832 and twice became prime minister under Queen Victoria.

Several nineteenth century family members entered the diplomatic service and army.

The 11th Duke, a military man, played a constant and unostentatious part in the business of the House of Lords, although his great interest in animals and natural history ensured that he was never more content than during his thirty-seven year presidency of the Royal Zoological Society.

On the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the 11th Duke and Duchess turned both the Cottage Hospital in Woburn village and the Indoor Riding School and Tennis Court in the Abbey grounds into military hospitals. Duchess Mary took on

the punishing role not only of administrator, but also of nurse.

During the Second World War the house and grounds were used for the dissembling of black propaganda and for the billeting of Wrens working at the code-breaking centre at nearby Bletchley Park. The park was used as a satellite airfield.

Woburn Abbey's east wing and the great Indoor Riding School and Tennis Court, also designed by Henry Holland, were demolished in 1949-50 after it was discovered they were irretrievably infected with dry rot. Sir Albert Richardson sealed off the truncated walls of the house and designed the flank walls and the ornamental feature now marking the site of the east range.

The 13th Duke, faced with huge death duties, decided to keep up the family home and to help finance the operation he opened the house to the public in 1955. Woburn Abbey was one of the first to do so, at a time when there was little competition from other great houses, theme parks, computer games or shopping centres. The house was open virtually all year round and crowds queued to see its treasures and perhaps catch a glimpse of the Duke or Duchess, who had a keen eye for opportunities to publicise the attraction. In 1970 the Duke

Above: The State Saloon

The family and their guests would once have 'withdrawn' into this room from the State Dining Room. This striking and beautiful room is two stories high, its coved and coffered ceiling richly ornamented and gilded. The walls were originally hung with blue silk damask, but after this became very faded and torn the Duke commissioned Roland Pym in 1973 to paint the murals that can now be seen. They illustrate some of the characters, achievements and places that add colour to the Russell name.

The very English tradition of afternoon tea is said to have originated around 1840 due to the habit of Duchess Anna Maria, wife of the 7th Duke, of entertaining her friends in the Blue Drawing Room at Woburn Abbey. She had found the time between luncheon and dinner too long, so a light tea was served mid-afternoon.

The majesty of

Woburn Abbey cont.

Flying duchess room

In the nineteenth century this room was called the Polonais Room; it is now known as the 'Flying Duchess' Room in memory of Mary, the wife of the 11th Duke. Mary was a lady with a multitude of interests: nursing, aviation, ornithology, ice-skating, fishing, photography, painting and handicrafts; she was a first-class shot and excelled at everything she did. One afternoon in March 1937 she took off in her de Havilland Gipsy Moth aircraft from her hangar in the park on a short flight towards Cambridge to view the floods in the Fen district and complete her 200 hours of solo flying. By late afternoon she had not returned and a search was immediately organised by the Duke, but she was never found. Some parts of her aircraft were eventually washed ashore on the sea coast near Yarmouth.

A day at the Park...

As if the Abbey wasn't amazing enough, there are also several other attractions for visitors to Woburn Park. These include Woburn Abbey Antiques Centre, which offers one of the most interesting collections of quality art and antiques outside of London, selected and presented by around 40 dealers housed in the Abbey's elegant 18th century South Court. The Centre is open daily from 10am. The Park is also home to the 3000-acre Woburn Abbey Deer Park, which is one of the largest private conservation parks in Europe and home to nine different species of deer, including the Pere David, which was saved from extinction at Woburn and is now the largest breeding herd in the world. There are three championship rated golf courses at Woburn Golf Club (the Duke's, the Duchess' and the Marquess'), and at Woburn Safari Park you can do everything from taking a walking safari to going behind the scenes and joining in the feeding time of the animals.



opened Woburn Safari Park, the second of its kind in Britain. In 1974 the Duke and Duchess moved abroad and left the estate in the capable hands of Robin, Marquess of Tavistock. His great legacy was the creation of three international golf courses and, together with the Marchioness, he became a television favourite via the ever popular series Country House. His tragic death in June 2003 after only eight months as Duke meant the helm passed into the hands of his eldest son, Andrew, 15th Duke of Bedford.

Today at Woburn there are on display many beautiful objects that the Russell family has collected throughout the centuries as patrons of the arts, including many fine historical portraits: those of Queen Mary and Elizabeth; a picture of Mary and her husband, Philip of Spain; Lady Jane Seymour, Henry VIII's third queen; Anne of Denmark, James I's queen; and William Lord Russell, who was beheaded in 1683, and his wife Lady Rachel, who is said to have wept herself blind after her husband's death. Also preserved in gold letters is Lord William's speech to the sheriffs, with the paper delivered by him to them at the place of execution. Little

wonder, then, that the Abbey is celebrated for housing one of the most important private art collections in the world, including paintings by Cuyp, Gainsborough, Reynolds, Van Dyck and a series of 21 views of Venice by Canaletto (1697-1768), with the latter being commissioned by the 4th Duke of Bedford, who visited Venice while on the Grand Tour in 1731. These paintings, which hang in the dining room, remind the viewer of the fascination of this beautiful city for the traveller. One of the family's favourites is *The Entrance to the Arsenal*, where the great fleets of the Republic were built; this view has been virtually unaltered since the 18th century. Used today by the family whenever there are more than six guests to dinner, during the residency of the 4th Duke the dining room was a beautifully decorated library.

Another important painting hangs in the Long Gallery. The portrait of Elizabeth I was painted by George Gower in 1588 and commemorates the victorious sea battle against the Spanish Armada and portrays the Tudor Queen as Empress of the world and commander of the seas.

Amongst the highlights on display you will also find a celebrated selection of porcelain from the Sevres dinner service presented to the wife of the 4th Duke by King Louis XV in appreciation of his role in negotiating the Treaty of Paris in 1763. A selection of some of the family silver and gold includes the 4th Duke's wedding present to his second wife Gertrude, commissioned from Paul de Lamerie - one of the finest Huguenot silversmiths.

There are numerous state rooms at Woburn that were reserved mainly for visiting royalty. The rest of the time these rooms were kept shuttered and furnishings covered, which is why they remain in such excellent condition. Notable royal visitors to Woburn include Elizabeth I, Charles I and Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Etchings drawn by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, a gift to Anna Maria, who was one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, can be seen in Queen Victoria's bedroom along with a letter written by the nine-year-old Princess Victoria to Elizabeth and two brooches presented to her by Victoria and Albert when she was bridesmaid at their wedding in 1840.

Our thanks to Woburn Enterprises for information supplied – some passages excerpted from the 2009 Woburn Abbey guidebook.

Woburn Abbey is at Milton Keynes in Bedfordshire, UK. The trip from London takes around an hour by car and about 40 minutes by train. Tel: 01525 290 333. www.woburnantiques.co.uk

Additional information from Camelot International – Britain's Heritage and History. www.camelotintl.com