

Waverley Abbey – A Time Traveller Visit

by Cobbett's Wey DFAS - Farnham's evening NADFAS society

As Cobbett's Wey DFAS evening society were poised ready to travel back in time, it was perhaps only fitting that we should start at a point that was designed to produce a 'big bang'. At the entrance to the lush meadow where the Waverley Abbey monastery was founded nearly 1,000 years ago, stands the immovable brick and concrete foundation of a WWII gun emplacement. Sam Osmond, our extremely knowledgeable and gentle mannered guide for the day, aimed his unanticipated historical opening volley with an outstretched arm pointing across the peaceful meadow towards the ruins of the Abbey; "This 'would be battlefield', formed by the curve of the River Wey on one side and the lake on the other, was thought to be an ideal 'tank killing ground'. It was chosen to prevent any invading army from trying to outflank London's defences". Sam, having successfully opened our eyes to the locations topography continued, "I'll point out the anti-tank concrete blocks that were part of England's defence system all designed to stop any military tank advance. Just behind us is the munitions store... are any of you 'Tank People?'" Sam asked. The minority of men in attendance looked at each other and then around at the predominantly female group of Cobbett's Wey Decorative & Fine Arts Society - expectant with breath drawn - wondering if a personification of Mrs. Thatcher with tank goggles nestling atop a cream knotted silk scarf might stride forward and stop us as it were, in our tracks on our monastic tour. I've learned that one can never be sure with a Farnham evening society that mixes fun and social chat with art and tour adventures across the south of England.

Following the direction of Sam's raised arm we looked across the lush green meadows and saw what remains of Waverley Abbey; built in 1128 its bleak grey walls resemble decaying teeth yawning at the early morning threat of rain filled clouds. Waverley Abbey, the finest ecclesiastical ruins in Surrey, which cannot be said to be rich in such treasures, was the first Cistercian monastery to be built on English soil. The Abbey's scanty remains stand dishevelled in grey lichens and creeping vegetation... nevertheless - WOW! - what a beautiful and historic apparition it is to behold. Still substantial enough to indicate its fallen grandeur, its 900 year old mortar and ironstone walls faced in parts with flint work, seem to stand to full attention as it rises up from the northern bank of the meandering River Wey.



In an orderly fashion we marched alongside the 18th century manmade lake, now fringed with trees which are fresh with spring shades of green through to nature's deep burgundy. The lake frames Waverley Abbey House which has been carefully restored by CWR, a Christian charitable organisation and where very soon we were to enjoy our post-tour luncheon relaxing in its stylishly decorated interior. In the foreground, a resident swan gracefully scooped up tadpoles with the gliding elegance of princess quaffing caviar and champagne at a royal ball. Overhead, crashing the party, two Canadian Geese flew in honking their way towards a landing pad; a small grass filled grazing area. Eyes diverted by nature's shifting scenery, we sidled discreetly through the 'kissing gate' accompanied by the distinctly English chorus of - after you, no, no, after you. Then, mindful of Sam's mention of its relatively recent military background, we gave the mole hill explosions that scatter the meadow a wary and wide berth.

English Heritage on its website reveals the *'Abbey was built on a flood plain in 1201 and consequently most of the Abbey was badly damaged by flooding. It was rebuilt in the 13th century and the surviving ruins date from this period. The foundations of the 'new' Abbey church were laid in 1203-4 but not completed until 1278. In the 14th century, a hospital was then added to the monastic site. The surviving ruins of the Abbey*

include the lay brothers' frater, part of the monks' dorter, the parlour, the chapter house and fragments of the nave, presbytery, and north and south transepts of the church. These are surrounded by a number of earthworks and buried remains within the Abbey precinct. The precinct covered an area of about 24 hectares and was bordered by the River Wey to the south and east and by the remains of the precinct wall to the north. The cemetery is situated to the east and north of the church. The Abbey was dissolved in 1536 by Henry VIII during the Dissolution of the Monasteries'.

Despite this rich history outlined by English Heritage as guardians of Waverley Abbey, they appear to have 'disinherited' it for some inexplicable reason. The information signs and drawings which were beautifully designed to describe the historical significance of Waverley Abbey are sadly faded and completely unreadable. The young people there on this day who might be learning about its historical significance are left seemingly bored and ignorant and climbing the flaking and crumbling walls damaging *their* heritage. What irony the Abbey's maintenance is neglected so badly when English Heritage is the recipient of donations from so many people from Farnham and the surrounding area.

Fortunately, unlike the casual tourist visiting our heritage, Cobbett's Wey DFAS had Sam Osmond to guide and shine light on the historical significance of the Abbey. As if to order, the dark sky cleared and the sun came out to display the beauty of the Abbey's remains, its brightness creating silent shadows which allowed us to conjure up in our imagination what past life must have been like in the Abbey. Visions of White Monks and lay brothers tirelessly working; their plain robes contrasting with sun browned hands and feet and mud streaked faces from their toil with mattocks and hoes making the soil fertile and the local community plump with food and mead. An all but silent existence would have been gifted with the gentle buzz of honey bees and the cooing of doves in cotes. Listening - we could almost hear faint echoes across the cloisters, the distant sounds of a Gregorian chant as the wind ruffled the green sward that surrounds the Abbey.



Imagining – one might picture two by two the hooded monks walking with deliberate steps, heads inclined down, passing under the graceful sweep of the open Gothic arches. It was hereabouts that their artistic hands worked to illuminate our minds even today, witness the surviving images from their labour of love which they bequeathed to us. Their costly pigments and precious gold-leaf created art we can still appreciate in the 21st century depicting eternal images and scripts on cream sheets of hand rolled vellum.

During the first century of its existence, Waverley Abbey's intrepid monks founded six more monasteries and evidence shows that in 1187 it housed 70 monks and 120 lay brothers. Sam outlined to us noteworthy points of interest around the ruins, the lay brothers' refectory, the section of 13th century vaulting, supported by slender columns with circular capitals, the south gabled end that stands almost to full height, displaying two pairs of lancet windows at the lowest level with a single traceried window above each pair and a higher central round window that architecturally balances their ecclesiastic design.

Too soon, Sam led us off to find refreshment as we climbed the gentle hill to Waverley Abbey House after crossing the beautiful three arched grass sown bridge giving us access to a rare opportunity. The eighteenth-century mansion is sited where part of the monks' garden was once laid out, in which William Cobbett, our society's namesake, worked as a boy. Here he got his 'fill of fruit' - Cobbett says... 'the produce could never have been consumed unless the servants lent a mouth.' Sir Walter Scott too made visits here – he used the name Waverly as a fruitful seed that the monks unknowingly planted for him, although his famous novel does not concern itself with the Abbey or the industrious monks and lay brothers.





Waverley Abbey House, attributed to the architect Colin Campbell (d. 1729), was built in 1723 by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Aislabie and like so many other house builders in Farnham he 'recycled' material from the Abbey. In the 19th century the house passed into the hands of George Nicholson, brother-in-law of Florence Nightingale, a frequent visitor to Waverley.

During the WWI the house was used as a Military Hospital, caring for 5,000 officers who no doubt looked out through the full length windows toward the sunlit splendour of the Abbey and its lush meadow and gave thanks for the peace and tranquillity of the Abbey setting.

Waverley Abbey, there to enjoy for young and old alike and for me on this tour it brought back a personal 25 year memory of pushchairs and picnics - now it's more pullovers and pince-nez – only in your mind can you time-travel but a pleasurable memory evoked by a visit to Waverly Abbey never fades.



Our Cobbett's Wey DFAS event was organised by Sue Main
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