

# *Lacock Abbey*

## *by Cyril May*



PICTURESQUE Lacock Abbey lies in West Wiltshire, three miles south of Chippenham, alongside a meadow which borders the River Avon. It was founded as a religious house in 1232 by Ela, Countess of Salisbury, in memory of her deceased husband, William Longspee, the son of Henry II, and she became the first Abbess in 1240.

The Abbey was the centre of some exceedingly good work, for besides those who entered the professional life of a nun, whole families could be received, as temporary guests of the Abbess if they were in need of shelter. It was also the centre of relief when there was illness in the adjoining village.

The Abbess remained in control for eighteen years, when she resigned her office on account of age and infirmity, and died five years later at the age of seventy-three.

A scheme for suppressing all monasteries came in the reign of Henry VIII and the Abbey was visited by the King's Commissioners in 1535 where they found no disorder of any kind and the nuns were carrying out their work in an efficient manner. After a reprieve of several years as one of the lesser monasteries, Lacock was surrendered to the King. On July 16th, 1540, the Abby and its lands were purchased from the Crown by William Sharrington, afterwards Sir William Sharrington, who converted the conventual building to for a residence for himself. He was appointed by Henry VIII in 1546 as one of the Masters of the Mint at Bristol, and was knighted in 1547, but two years later he was arrested for fraudulent practices and sent to the Tower. Sharrington was also condemned to death and his estates were forfeited, but on February 1st, 1550, an Act was passed pardoning him, and most of his property was restored a year later. He rose again, under the favour of the Duke of Northumberland, but died whilst in office as Sheriff of Wiltshire in July, 1553.

Sir William Sharrington was responsible for some beautiful Tudor work in the domestic part of the Abbey and he also preserved all the monastic buildings. Sir William destroyed the Abbey Church which occupied the south side of the Cloisters and nothing now remains except part of the south wall of his house. This Church was originally an aisle less parallelogram 143 feet long by 29 feet wide, vaulted into seven wide bays without any structural division between the choir and the nave, having upon its south side a wooden-roofed Lady Chapel added in 1315.

During the Rebellion the Abbey was fortified and garrisoned for Charles I, and in 1645 was besieged by a detachment of the Fairfax's army, whom it surrendered by capitulation.

John Ivory Talbot succeeded the estate in 1714; he died in 1772, aged 85, and his son John having died childless the succession passed to his sister, Martha Talbot.

The Abbey is intimately associated with the early history of photography, where William Henry Fox Talbot made his first negative in 1835 and working independently he invented several other photographic processes. In 1841 his improved process called firstly calotype, and afterwards Talbotype, was patented and from that date for several years a great deal of photography was executed in the Abbey.

Fox Talbot died in 1877 and Charles Henry Talbot owned the estate from 1877 to 1916 when he bequeathed the property to his niece, Matilda Theresa, who after succeeding took the name of Talbot. She was a lady of remarkable charm and personality, and in 1944 presented the Abbey together with the whole of Lacock village and 248 acres of land to the National Trust.

Two years later Matilda Talbot gave to the British Museum one of the principal possessions of the family, the original copy of the Lacock Abbey Magna Carta, the only legible copy as re-issued by Henry III in 1225 and once in the custody of the Countess of Salisbury, as hereditary Sheriff of Wiltshire.

## **ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY**

The **Cloister Court**, about eighty feet square, is of the early 15th century period, its eastern, northern and southern sides being richly vaulted alleys with a lierne roof with elaborate bosses; they are of excellent Perpendicular design.

The general view of the Cloister Court gives a good picture of how Sharrington adapted the existing buildings without destroying them in making his dwelling house. His extremely fine exterior work can also be seen in the twisted chimneys and in the dormer windows whose projecting eaves are supported on consoles carved with a Tudor rose.

In the **South Walk** is an Early English doorway of the Abbey Church which led into the nuns' choir, and further west there are traces of another doorway of similar character.

The **Chaplain's Room** occupies the south-west corner of the Abbey and is so called that it may have been for the use of several Chaplains who lived in the building. A 14th century doorway is seen in the west wall and there is the original fireplace rather mutilated by later building about 1829.

Several mediaeval paintings of St. Christopher and St. Andrew are on the north wall where some of the original plaster still exists. The Abbess's spiral staircase is immediately outside the Chaplain's Room door which she used when going from her private quarters into the Cloister.

## **THE EAST WALK**

On the east side is the Sacristy, and then the Chapter-house, both of which have Early English vaulting, carried by a row of central pillars. The Sacristy contains a various assortment of tiles that have been found and the fragments of stone carving came from the Abbey Church.

In the Chapter-house are traces of a Renaissance fireplace introduced by Sharrington, which was a very fine one, but it was later destroyed.

The Warming Room in which is a huge hooded fireplace was so called from the fire kept burning there in the winter. It contains a massive tank marvelously carved from a solid block of stone. This was brought in from outside probably soon after the Suppression, but as to its use and how it was transported to the inside is not definitely known, although various theories have been put forward.

In the adjoining cellarage stand several empty stone coffins which were found in the grounds, but no information is available from whom they were intended.

Another wonderful relic in the Warming Room is the **Nun's Cauldron**, a huge vessel of bell-metal which was originally in the grounds. After standing there for 150 years it was brought inside in 1903 and the inscription around it in Latin, records that it was cast by Peter Wagheuens in Malines, Belgium, in 1500. The inscription ends with "Deo Lavs et Gloria Christo" and the vessel holds approximately 67 gallons. Various shallow dents seen on it are only impressions made by thieves who at one time tried to smash it up with hammers.

## THE HALL

The old hall was destroyed in 1753 and the present new one finished in 1755 when the Gothic entrance arch was also constructed. Later the arms of Ivory Talbot's friends were emblazoned on the roof and Victor Sederbach, and Austrian worker in terra cotta, made the figures for the niches.

The heraldic glass windows probably date from the time of Sharrington and may have been preserved from the former hall. There is a massive bronze mortan at the southern end, the property of Sharrington, and was doubtless used in the kitchen, a room which has been used for the same purpose for over 600 years.

**The Dining Room** – handsome Palladian apartment – contains a fine collection of some very excellent pictures, the two originals over the mantelpiece "The Arts and Sciences" by Cornelius van Haarlem, but the others of Charles I and the Duchess of Richmond are only old copies.

**The South Gallery** lies over the south alley of the cloister and among its various pictures is one of Charles I's children by Van Dyck. There is a small picture of still-life by a Dutch painter, Hov. a. Vollenhoow, 1619, quite interesting because it was in the collection of Charles I. The rest of the pictures are mainly family portraits.

Of the three oriel windows, the centre one was photographed by Fox Talbot in 1835, and his little negative – the oldest in existence – can be seen in the South Kensington Science Museum.

## THE BLUE PARLOUR

Early in the 18th century this room was re-modelled with the South Gallery. The Aubusson carpet is over 100 years old and the pieces of furniture are 18th century English.

**Sharrington's Tower** on the south-east corner of the Abbey is of exceptional interest. It is an octagonal one of three storeys built to serve the curious double purpose of a strong room and a

belvedere. The strong room contains a Photostat reproduction of the "Great Charter" of Henry III, 1225, and the fragment of silk is a piece of the bag in which the original seas was wrapped.

Sharrington's work is exquisite in design and gives very fine examples of the best early Renaissance.

At the north end of the Abbey stands the **Stable Courtyard** with its picturesque large dormers and a quaint clock-tower surmounted by a bell-turret. The Courtyard remains almost untouched from the day it was built and forms the most perfect example of its kind in the kingdom.

In a comparatively short article such and this I have only been able to give a few of the Abbey's outstanding features and it contains, but fortunately – thanks to the National Trust, it is open throughout the year for you to see.

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