

History and background to Abbey House Museum

The Building of Abbey House



The oldest part of Abbey House was originally the Great or Inner Gatehouse of Kirkstall Abbey, built some time between 1152 and 1182.

The road into the abbey grounds cut through the room now known as the Norman Hall (now the restaurant). There was a large rounded arch intended for travellers on horseback, carts and livestock and a small one for pedestrians.

Before reaching the gates, travellers would find themselves in the Gate Porch. If they were allowed entry they would pass through the Gate Hall and on into the Cistercian abbey.

The arches to each side gave access to the porter's lodgings and spiral staircases led up to a chapel built over the gatehouse in the thirteenth century. One of these staircases still survives and can be seen to the right of the De Lacy room, as well as through a window on the landing.

It was at these gates that Henry VIII's commissioners arrived on 22nd November 1539 to demand the surrender of the Abbey and all its property into their hands.



According to tradition the former abbot, John Ripley, retired to live in the gatehouse, blocking each end with windows removed from the abbey and inserting a large central fireplace for heating (now removed).

A stone coffin containing a skeleton (once thought to be that of Abbot Ripley), a silver spoon and a silver farthing of Edward I was discovered under the floor of the Norman Hall in the 19th century.

A home

Following the death of the last abbot, Abbey House became a farmhouse. Between 1584 and 1779 the building was extended using stones taken from the Abbey ruins. By this time the estate was owned by the Earls of Cardigan and in 1779 the house was leased to George Beecroft of Kirkstall Forge. Members of the Beecroft and Butler families occupied Abbey House on and off until the 1880s, sometimes sub-letting to other tenants, such as the Coopers.

After 1888 Colonel North bought Kirkstall Abbey and presented it to the people of Leeds in January 1889. In 1893 he sold Abbey House to Colonel W.T. Harding who was responsible for the present gothic decoration of the De Lacy room and the oak staircase with its medieval style stained glass windows.

A museum

In 1925 Major Butler sold the house to Leeds City Council for £6,000. After debating its future use, including suggestions for a Judges' Lodgings or a Mayoral residence, the Council decided it should become a museum to preserve and display the history of the people of Leeds. Appropriate collections were then brought here from the City and Kirkstall Abbey Museums and the new venture, the Kirkstall Abbey House Museum, was opened by the Lord Mayor of Leeds, Alderman Hugh Lupton, on July 11th 1927. Since that time the museum has considerably extended Abbey House, especially by constructing a series of attractive Victorian streets in the former yards and stables, Abbey Fold of 1954 being followed by Harewood Square of 1955 and Stephen Harding Gate of 1958.

The Lottery project

In 1995 (the centenary of the reopening of Kirkstall Abbey after being saved for the City) it was decided to raise the money needed to redisplay and improve facilities at Abbey House Museum. The Heritage Lottery Fund approved the bid in autumn 1997 and work began in 1998, with the help of Leeds City Council and the Friends of Leeds City Museums.

As well as providing new exciting displays, the building work also involved major alterations to the roof and installing a lift to provide full wheelchair access. The museum has also gained a new licensed café and gift shop.

Abbey House reopened to the public on 20th January 2001.

The People of Abbey House



Henry de Lacy

Descendent of Ilbert de Lacy who was granted the Kirkstall area by William the Conqueror. Henry de Lacy made a grant of the land to the Cistercian monks who started building Kirkstall Abbey in 1152.



Stephen Harding

Saint Stephen Harding was the abbot of the monastery of Citeaux in Burgundy, who drew up the constitution of the Cistercian Order. As far as we know, there is no family connection to Colonel T.W. Harding!



John Ripley

John Ripley was the last Abbot in charge of Kirkstall Abbey, before its dissolution in 1539. He was granted an annual pension of £66-13-4d. He is said to have retired to live in the gatehouse (which later became Abbey House) until he died in 1568.

Savile

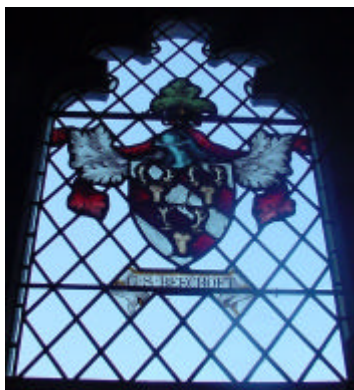
The Saviles acquired the Kirkstall estates in 1584, which remained in the family until 1671 when they passed by marriage to the Brudenells, Earls of Cardigan.



Cardigan

The Earls of Cardigan were absentee owners of the Kirkstall Abbey estate, including Abbey House, from 1671 to 1888. The Brudenells were very wealthy and had many larger estates elsewhere so they do not ever seem to have lived at Abbey House, always leasing it out to others. Their main seat was Deene Park in Northamptonshire.

In 1888 the estates were put up for sale and were purchased by Colonel North.



Beecroft Arms

Beecroft & Butler families

Abbey House was leased to the Butler family of Kirkstall Forge in 1779 and members of the Beecroft and Butler families occupied Abbey House on and off until 1883, and then again between 1912 and 1925.

George Beecroft and John Butler were partners at Kirkstall Forge from 1779 and obtained the lease for Abbey House at the same time.



Butler Arms

Ambrose Edmund Butler married Isabella Holgate of Liverpool in 1841. The courtship letters written between them from 1837 to 1841 were published in 1939 by their son Hugh Myddleton Butler under the title "A Kirkstall Forge Romance".

George Skirrow Beecroft (1809-1869) was the leading partner at Kirkstall Forge and decided in 1841 to turn Abbey House into his family home. As well as being a major ironmaster, he was Deputy Lieutenant of the West Riding and Chairman of the Ebbw Vale Steel Company. He was also elected Member of Parliament for the Borough of Leeds in 1851, 1859 and 1866. His wife Septima was the sister of Ambrose Butler.

John Octavius Butler (1812-1883) another partner of Kirkstall Forge, took over the tenancy of Abbey House in 1869. J.O. Butler was responsible for developing the engineering department at Kirkstall Forge. He had been apprenticed with Fenton, Murray and Wood, an innovative Leeds engineering firm. This enabled him to design the cranes, steam hammers, rolling mills etc. which the company now manufactured. Outside the forge, he served as a Justice of the Peace and as Major in the Leeds Artillery Volunteers. He was also interested archaeology and carried out some restoration work on Kirkstall Abbey.

The Butlers returned to Abbey House in 1912 when Colonel Harding sold it to Mary Elizabeth Butler, and on her death it passed to Basil Harding Butler (1884-1942) who in his turn sold it to the Leeds Corporation in June 1925.

1871 Census

The following people were listed as resident at Abbey House in 1871:

John O Butler	Head	58	Civil Engineer & Iron Master, employed 506 men & 116 Boys
Anne Butler	Wife	58	
Lydia Butler	Daughter	28	
John Butler	Son	27	Civil Engineer & Iron Master
Thomas Butler	Son	21	Mechanical Engineer & Iron Master
Sarah Butler	Daughter	20	
Arthur Butler	Son	18	Solicitor's Articled Clerk
Priscilla [Wearland]	Servant	35	Cook (born in Bramley)
Isabella Allanby	Servant	23	Waiting Maid (born in Leeds)
Annie H. Milner	Servant	19	House Maid (born in Malton)

1881 Census

The following people were listed as resident at Abbey House in 1881:

John O. Butler	Head	68	JP & Major Retired List Artillery, Retired Iron Master & Engineer; widower
Lydia A. Butler	Daughter	38	unmarried
Arthur Butler	Son	28	unmarried
Mary E. Butler	Daughter	26	unmarried
Gwendolen M. Butler		4	
	Granddaughter		
Ormond B.L. Butler	Grandson	10 m	
Sarah Snowden	Sister in law	36	unmarried
Elizabeth Richards	Servant	41	married, Domestic Cook (born in Ashted, Warwick)
Anne E. Smith	Servant	29	unmarried, Domestic Housemaid (born in Nottingham)

Emma Croft Ipswich, Suffolk)	Servant	25	unmarried, Domestic Nurse (born in
Matilda Davis Kirkstall, Leeds)	Servant	21	unmarried, Domestic Housemaid (born in
Frederick Groves (born in Ripon, Yorkshire)	Servant	16	unmarried, Domestic Indoor Servant

Cooper family

The Coopers were tenants of Abbey House from 1883 to 1889. Leonard Cooper ran the Aireside Hematite Company (pig iron manufacturers) in Hunslet. His daughters are thought to have been responsible for a painted inscription in their nursery (now staff offices) which reads “Who goest to be and does not pray Maketh two nights to every day”. They also owned a large doll’s house “Abbey Grange” which is on display in the Childhood gallery.



Colonel J.T. North

John Thomas North was born on January 30th 1841, at Hunslet in south Leeds, where his father traded as a coal merchant. Having completed his apprenticeship at Shaw, North and Watson the local engineers, he moved to John Fowler’s famous Steam Plough Works. In 1869 Fowlers sent him out to the west coast of South America to erect and commission some of their equipment.

He stayed on in South America and made a fortune from several enterprises including extracting nitrate soda for fertiliser, working large guano deposits, the development of the Huantagaya silver mines, the Queque gasworks etc. Colonel North purchased the Kirkstall Abbey estate in 1888 (after the Borough Council had failed to meet the reserve price of £10,000) and in 1889 presented Kirkstall Abbey to the City of Leeds. He later sold Abbey House to Colonel T.W. Harding in 1893.

Other examples of Colonel North’s generosity to the city of his birth include major donations to the Yorkshire College (now Leeds University), to the Leeds General Infirmary, and to the people of Leeds for whom he acquired Holbeck Moor as a public park. He died in London on March 5th 1896.



Colonel T. W. Harding

Colonel Thomas Walker Harding owned Abbey House from 1893 until 1912. Colonel Harding was married to John Octavius Butler's niece and was colonel of J.O.B.'s old regiment, the Leeds Artillery Volunteers. In addition to operating his family's firm, T.R. Harding and Son, card, wool-comb, steel pin, counter and speed indicator manufacturers, he made enormous contributions to the civic and cultural life of Leeds. He was a City Councillor for Headingley Ward, an alderman, Lord Mayor of Leeds in 1898-9, Chairman of the West Riding Rivers Board, and President of the Leeds Chamber of Commerce.

Colonel Harding was one of the founders of the Leeds City Art Gallery, chairing its committee for almost twenty years and presenting some of its best-known paintings. He promoted the scheme for creating City Square, giving its fine statues of the Black Prince, Dean Hook, Joseph Priestly and the figures of "Morn" and "Even". He also built one of the city's most fascinating industrial monuments, the dust extraction shaft at his "Tower Works", which is based Giotto's campanile at the Duomo in Florence. In addition to this, Colonel Harding wrote romantic historical novels such as "The Abbot of Kirkstall: a Romance of the Time of the Black Prince". All these interests are reflected in the décor he chose for Abbey House.

When he retired to Maddingley Hall, Cambridge, in July 1912, Colonel Harding was awarded an honorary degree from Leeds University. A portrait of him by Sir Hubert von Herkomer was presented to Leeds City Art Gallery.

Servants

The servants listed in the 1871 Census were:

Priscilla [Wearland]	Servant	35	Cook (born in Bramley)
Isabella Allanby	Servant	23	Waiting Maid (born in Leeds)
Annie H. Milner	Servant	19	House Maid (born in Malton)

The servants listed in the 1881 Census were:

Elizabeth Richards	Servant	41	married, Domestic Cook (born in Ashted, Warwick)
Anne E. Smith	Servant	29	unmarried, Domestic Housemaid (born in Nottingham)
Emma Croft	Servant	25	unmarried, Domestic Nurse (born in Ipswich, Suffolk)
Matilda Davis	Servant	21	unmarried, Domestic Housemaid (born in Kirkstall, Leeds)

Frederick Groves Servant 16 unmarried, Domestic Indoor Servant
(born in Ripon, Yorkshire)

Lillian Mary Drew, originally from Jackson Bridge, was in service at Abbey House before 1909, and (according to her descendants) left due to a ghost!

Mr C.M. Mitchell

Before working at Abbey House, Mr Mitchell had been a curator at York Castle Museum. When he came to Abbey House he was inspired to create a similar set of reconstructed streets and it is under his direction that Abbey Fold, Harewood Square and Stephen Harding Gate were constructed in the 1950s. Mr Mitchell was later the Director of Leeds City Museums.