3. History of the site and buildings

Legends of St Edith

3.1 The origins of Polesworth Abbey and the life of St Editha its founder-saint are shrouded in legend, and late medieval and modern writers offer a number of different and conflicting accounts.

3.2 Dugdale gives an account of the founding of the abbey taken from an old roll in the possession of John Ferrers of Tamworth Castle (VCH 1908, 62, quoting Monasticon ii, 365-6). According to this story Arnulf, the son of King Egbert (d.839) was sent to Ireland to be cured of leprosy by the nun St Modwenna, daughter of the King of Connaught. Modwenna was then invited by Egbert to come to England with the promise that he would found a monastery for her. She was provided with a dwelling at Trensall, in the Forest of Arden where she was joined by Egbert’s daughter Editha who was to be instructed in religion after the rule of St. Benedict. Modwenna and Editha then moved to a monastery founded for them at Polesworth, on the bank of the Anker, where Editha became abbess. Modwenna subsequently moved to the isle of Andresey on the River Trent, near Burton where she lived as a hermit, her remains eventually being enshrined in Burton upon Trent Abbey (Bartlett 2004). This is the legend shown in the stained glass of the west window of the nave which has depictions of St Modwen, St Edith receiving the grant of lands from her father King Egbert, and St Benedict. It also produces the traditional date for the foundation of the Abbey of 827 AD.

3.3 Other late medieval writers identify two other, different Edithas. According to Matthew Paris writing in the mid 12th century (Luard 1872, 446-7) Editha was a sister of King Athelstan (d.939) who was given in marriage in c.926 to Sihtric, the Danish King of Northumbria, but was then repudiated or widowed, after which she returned to live as a hermit at Polesworth until her death. This Editha is unrecorded in other sources, but given Athelstan’s strong Mercian connections it is not impossible that his sister might have retired to a community close to the Mercian royal centre of Tamworth. The 11th-century writer Goscelin (Wilmart 1938) has another Editha, sister of King Edgar (d.975), and aunt of St Editha of Wilton (d.984/7), who founded the monastery at Tamworth in Staffordshire, or in later versions Polesworth in Warwickshire (VCH 1970, 309 n 5). This Editha is also otherwise unknown. There is much confusion in the stories between Polesworth and Tamworth, whose Collegiate church, now the parish church, is also dedicated to St Editha, identified tentatively as Athelstan’s sister, wife of Sihtric (VCH 1970, 309). This has led to suggestions that there were two saints, Editha of Polesworth and Editha of Tamworth, but given that Polesworth and Tamworth are only 3 miles apart and in the Anglo-Saxon period Polesworth lay within the mother- or minster-parish of Tamworth this seems too much of a coincidence.

3.4 Another account, that of John of Tynemouth, ascribes the foundation of Polesworth to Ettenwulf, son of King Edgar (d.975), whose son Alfred was healed of some incurable complaint (VCH 1908, 62), although it is suggested that this reference may be to a refounding or reform of the house, possibly when it adopted the Benedictine rule (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, 263).

3.5 Editha or Eadgyth was a common Anglo-Saxon name and modern scholarship (Blair 2002, 527-8) identifies three Anglo-Saxon saints called Eadgyth: St Eadgyth of Aylesbury, St Eadgyth of Wilton, and St Eadgyth of Polesworth who is likely to be identical to St Eadgyth of Tamworth.

3.6 The first documented mention of St Eadgyth of Polesworth is in the Secgan, a list of saints’ resting-places (Liebermann 1889, 14). It occurs in the first part of the list (Secgan A) which is widely accepted as a source of later 9th-century date. This
suggests that the cult was pre-Viking and that the first church at Polesworth already existed by c.850. It may actually have been founded somewhat earlier still; it has been suggested that Editha of Polesworth may have been a Mercian saint of the 7th or 8th century (Yorke 2002, 22, 77-8).

3.7 Even if they may have acquired anachronistic identities in later writing, a common factor of the legendary accounts are the royal connections of the participants - a high proportion of early monasteries were founded by royalty and headed by princess-abbesses. To become an abbess was one way outside of marriage that a princess could advance the interests of her family, and this, with the proximity of the royal centre of Tamworth offers a plausible context for the life of St Editha. Early abbesses often achieved sainthood, partly because of their personal piety but also in recognition of their upholding of the interests of their foundations in complicated political times. Honour and respect during life would often transmute into veneration after death and then to sainthood (Blair 2005, 141-8).

The Cult of St Edith

3.8 Unlike those of many local Anglo-Saxon saints who had become ‘bare names’ by 1100 (Blair 2005, 143), and despite the lack of a surviving shrine, the cult of St Edith
seems to have remained rooted in the locality in the middle ages. In addition to those of Polesworth and Tamworth, the nearby church of Orton-on-the-Hill is dedicated to her. Further afiel the churches of Church Eaton, in Staffordshire and Shucklach in Cheshire are dedicated to St Editha of Polesworth, while that of Monks Kirby in Warwickshire may also be. Those of Pulverbatch and Eaton-under-Heywood, Shropshire, and a group around Louth, Lincolnshire are dedicated supposedly to St Editha of Wilton but the attributions are not certain. The survival of the cult in North Warwickshire is demonstrated by the new 19th-century dedication of the church in Amington, Tamworth to St Editha of Polesworth.

3.9 Dugdale also records a St Edith's Well in Pooley Wood close to the Hermitage. The Hermitage belonged to the Abbey in the middle ages, and both hermitages and holy wells were common features of Anglo-Saxon monasteries (Blair 2005, 216-20, 375-82).

The Anglo-Saxon monastery

3.10 The exact location and layout of the original monastery at Polesworth is unknown, but it is assumed that it was in the area of the later Abbey. The focus of the medieval Abbey would have been to the east of the present church and it is possible that the early buildings were also in this area. They would have included a church or churches and other buildings, and a cemetery, all possibly within a fenced or earthwork enclosure or vallum monasterii (Blair 2005, 196-204). It is possible that the Mound in the churchyard may date to this period, if it is not prehistoric or a post-medieval garden feature. The three early graves found below the late 13th/early 14th-century building in 2007 Trial Trench 1 could also belong to a cemetery of this period (Gethin and Palmer 2007, 6).

The 12th-century Marmion refounding

3.11 The next stage in the Abbey's development is also accompanied by a miraculous story. It is recorded that at the time of the Norman conquest the nuns were expelled from Polesworth by Robert Marmion and moved to Oldbury (VCH 1908, 62). However within the year, after a heavy feasting session at Tamworth Castle, Sir Robert had a vision of St Editha who reproached him for his treatment of her nuns. As a result of this they were forthwith restored to possession of Polesworth.

3.12 Whether or not as the result of this intervention, in c.1130 the house was reinstated in Polesworth by Robert Marmion II and his wife Millicent. Certainly a charter of this period exists recording the gift by the Marmions to the Abbey of all their land at Polesworth (VCH 1908, 62; 1947, 189). According to Dugdale (1730, 1108) the 16th-century antiquarian Leland regarded Robert and Millicent as founders of the Abbey. They were clearly important patrons and Dugdale's account (1730, 1107) of the return from Oldbury talks of the rights of the Marmion family to burial in the chapter house and of their associates the de Somerville family to burial in the cloister.

3.13 The earliest surviving architectural remains of the Abbey also date to the early 12th century and it seems that the refounding was accompanied by the rebuilding of the church, cloister and chapter house. The new church, built of olive sandstone, was on a lavish scale. Although only the west end survives, it is probable that it followed the standard Benedictine cross-shaped plan with the nuns’ choir to the west of a crossing with a central tower, presbytery and transepts (VCH 1947, 195). It would have been c.50m long to the crossing, giving an estimated total length of 74m, assuming a crossing the same width as the nave and a presbytery twice the width. It had a north aisle with a clerestory over the arcade (Fig 3.4), and a cloister to the
3. History of the site and buildings

Fig 3.3: 12th-century west processional doorway from cloister

Fig 3.4: 12th-century nave arcade

Fig 3.5: 12th-century Chapter House façade, 1785, drawing by E Stringer
surviving properties artisans there west It

3.14 It is possible that other claustral buildings, the dorter, frater, reredorter and the west range were also rebuilt as part of this campaign of building, although no details are known about these. The positioning of the windows in the eastern part of the south wall of the nave may suggest that the west range was single-storeyed. The parts of the reredorter excavated in 1959 do not seem to have included any diagnostic architectural details (Mytum 1980, 81).

12th- and 13th-century benefactions

3.15 During the 12th and 13th centuries the Abbey received gifts of property from a number of different benefactors (VCH 1908, 62-3). These included land in Pooley Wood and Hoo in Polesworth, in Oldbury, Kingsbury, and Drayton (Leicestershire), the churches of Quinton, Ansley and Barwell (Leicestershire), the chapel of Hoo, and mills at Kingsbury and Hurley. In the Taxatio of 1291 (VCH 1908, 63), the Abbey held temporalities (secular property) with an annual value of £20 2s 11d in the deanery of Arden and £9 6s 11d in the archdeaconsry of Leicester. The appropriated churches of Polesworth and Ansley were worth annually £14 13s 4d and £4 respectively and that of Quinton, subsequently appropriated in 1398, produced a pension of 40s.

The Abbey and the development of the market town

3.16 Polesworth is not mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086; it is possible that there was no settlement here at that date, and that it developed later after the refounding of the Abbey. The medieval topography of Polesworth would have hinged on two elements: the Abbey and the river crossing. The existence of a bridge at Polesworth is first recorded in 1221 (Gover et al 1936, 230), but before the bridge there would have been a ford.

3.17 In the 13th century the Abbey was instrumental in the development of Polesworth into a market town by the acquisition from Henry III of a market charter in April 1242. This entitled Margery, Abbess of Polesworth and the nuns to hold a weekly market (on Thursday) and an annual three day fair at the feast of St Margaret (20th July) (CChR 1226-57, 269-70). The acquisition of a market charter was a common practice of lords, lay and ecclesiastical, who wished to develop their estates. They could profit from market tolls and by renting plots of land to tradesmen and artisans who would be attracted by the market. It is therefore likely that new properties were laid out at this time and the Abbey precinct and the town plan took on much of its existing form.

3.18 The medieval settlement lay on both sides of the river with Market Street to the south, and to the north, Bridge Street and High Street, running to the west and north of the Abbey precinct. To the north of High Street and to the west of Bridge Street, a series of the long narrow properties typical of medieval planning can be seen surviving on early maps (Fig 3.6). It is striking that virtually none of these properties belonged to the Polesworth Hall estate which inherited the Abbey lands at the Dissolution, when it was sold off in 1912 (Fig 3.7, WRO EAC15), suggesting that they may have been sold off by the Abbey at an early date. To the east of Bridge Street the
Fig 3.6: Polesworth, 1886 (1st edition Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map)
Fig 3.7: Polesworth Estate Sale Catalogue, 1912 (WRO EAC 15)
properties appear to have been shorter, but with a continuous rear boundary which will represent the western boundary of the monastic precinct. Its eastern boundary is probably represented by the eastern limit of the land belonging to the church after the Dissolution (Churchyard Croft) and the gardens of Polesworth Hall (Fig 2.1). The northern limit of the precinct is probably represented by the more ragged continuous boundary to the rear of the properties on the south side of High Street on the early maps. It is also noticeable on the early maps that the Gatehouse and the properties immediately to the west were set back from the main frontage. It is possible that these properties were always occupied by the Abbey for their own purposes – they were part of the Polesworth Hall Estate in 1912 and had also probably come to the Estate as part of the former precinct. This would put the Gatehouse in the centre of the northern side of the precinct and a driveway would have led southwards from it to the west end of the Church in the middle ages as it does today, although the original driveway was narrower. There seem to have been other, longer settlement plots fronting the south side of High Street to the east of the precinct.

13th- and 14th-century development of the Abbey buildings

3.19 In the absence of much documentary evidence for the history of the site most of the evidence for its medieval development is archaeological and architectural. Some evidence for 13th-century building work in the church is provided by the single-light window in the south wall of the nave (Fig 3.8).

3.20 However, the most significant survival from the 13th century is the, apparently unique, effigy of an abbess, now placed on one of the 15th-century table tombs towards the east end of the aisle arcade (Figs 3.9-3.10). This is of a recumbent figure, quite flatly carved, wearing a pleated robe with long hanging sleeves and a veil and wimple. In her right hand she holds a pastoral staff and in her left a book. Her head rests on a cushion and her feet on a small running hart. The effigy is popularly identified with the 12th-century Abbess Osanna, who led the nuns back from Oldbury, but Pevsner dates it to c.1200 (Pevsner and Wedgwood 1966, 373), and Chatwin to c.1280 identifying her as Sara de Manestre, Abbess from 1269 until her death in 1276 (Chatwin 1923, 32). The effigy is said to have been found in the area of the Abbey church presbytery at the end of the 19th century (George 1971, 5). The location is plausible but the date of finding wrong, as it was noted in the church in the 2nd edition of Dugdale in 1730 (Dugdale 1730, 1117).

Late 13th/early 14th-century buildings south and west of the Vicarage

3.21 In the late 13th/early 14th century the Abbey seems to have expanded its buildings both south-westwards and westwards. The 2007 Trial Trench 3 revealed a large east-west range south of the Vicarage (Gethin and Palmer 2007, 15). This had a tiled floor, a north wall 1m wide and it was possibly over 20m long, although it is uncertain whether it contained one large hall or a series of rooms (Figs 3.11-3.12). It is apparently too far south to be the frater (refectory), but may have been part of the Abbess’s Lodging which is traditionally believed to have been under the Vicarage.

3.22 The 2007 Trial Trenches 1 and 2 also revealed stone buildings of this period to the west of the Vicarage (Gethin and Palmer 2007, 3-12). In Trench 1 there was a truncated north-south aligned range with a west wall 0.6m wide and probably an earth floor. A fireplace had been inserted into the wall probably in the late middle ages (Fig 3.13). To the south in Trench 2 there was an east-west aligned range, over 6.35m wide with a south wall c.0.85m wide, which may have belonged to the same building. This also had a fireplace and chimney base set into the wall and earth flooring (Fig 3.14-3.15). The fireplaces suggest both these ranges were accommodation for abbey servants or guests, but the earth floors suggest they were of lesser status than the building to the south of the Vicarage.
3. History of the site and buildings

**Fig 3.8:** St Editha’s Church, structural development (after VCH 1947)

**Fig 3.9:** Effigy of 13th-century abbess

**Fig 3.10:** Effigy of 13th-century abbess (Engraving by M Bloxham, 1878)
3. History of the site and buildings

Fig 3.11: 2007 Trial Trench 3. North wall and tiled floor of late 13th/early 14th-century range south of Vicarage, from south

Fig 3.12: 2007 Trial Trench 3. North wall of late 13th/early 14th-century range south of Vicarage, from north-west

Fig 3.13: 2007 Trial Trench 1. Fireplace in late 13th/early 14th-century north-south building range

Fig 3.14: 2007 Trial Trench 2. Earth floor and south wall of late 13th/early 14th-century range west of Vicarage, from north

Fig 3.15: 2007 Trial Trench 2. Hearth, south wall and chimney base of late 13th/early 14th-century range west of Vicarage
14th-century rebuilding of west end and north aisle of Church

3.23 In the 14th century the west end of the church was rebuilt and the north aisle widened (Figs 3.8, 3.16). This probably took place in two stages as the west walls of the nave and aisle are of different widths. The new aisle was wider and taller than its predecessor, enclosing the 12th-century clerestory. In the west wall there is a 14th-century pointed-arched window with a hood mould and two cinquefoiled lights and a quatrefoil spandrel, and a pointed-arched doorway with two chamfered orders. Two new windows, square-headed with two trefoil headed ogee lights, dating to about 1340 were also inserted in the eastern part of the south wall of the nave (VCH 1947, 195).

The 14th-century Gatehouse, 1340s

3.24 The 14th century also saw the construction of the existing Gatehouse on the northern edge of the precinct. According to dendrochronological analysis its roof timbers were probably felled in the early 1340s (Arnold & Howard 2007). It is unlikely to have been the first gate structure on the site, but whether it was preceded by an earlier gatehouse or a simple gateway cannot be said. The 14th-century Gatehouse was two storeyed, with a stone ground floor and full height end walls and a timber-framed upper floor and roof structure. At ground level there was a main archway to the west, and a stone-vaulted pedestrian archway with a small porter’s lodge to its east. To the east of the pedestrian archway, within the precinct there was a doorway to a very steep stone stair leading up to a mezzanine room, and then to a first floor apartment. Half the floor of the mezzanine room is taken up by a substantial shelf over the vault of the pedestrian arch. The room may have served as a store or as sleeping accommodation for the porter or possibly for a servant of the occupant of the first floor apartment, although it lacked both a fireplace and a latrine.

3.25 The stair which was in an aisle along the south side of the building originally opened onto the first floor into a two bay hall with a stone fireplace to the east (Fig 3.17). In the south-east corner off the hall there was a closet over the stair. To the west of the hall there was a chamber spanning the full width of the building. This may have been divided originally although no evidence now survives. In the north-west corner of the chamber the west wall was cut by a pointed-arched doorway into a former turret which probably contained a garderobe. The upper storey was surmounted by a fine crown post roof. The accommodation offered on the first floor was quite commodious and would have been suitable for a relatively high status occupant. This might have been an important member of the permanent Abbey establishment, a priest or lay official, or the rooms may have used to provide hospitality to important guests or patrons of the Abbey.

Church tower and steeple, pre-1389

3.26 In the later 14th century a new tower was added to the east end of the north aisle of the church, probably on the site of an earlier tower. The tower is massively constructed with a very tall 14th-century pointed-arched window with three cinquefoiled ogee-headed lights and net tracery, and a transom at half-height under which the lights have cinquefoiled pointed heads in its north wall. It has a bell chamber with pointed-arched windows with two-trefoil lights and a quatrefoil above, surviving in the north and west walls. It seems that the new tower originally supported a steeple, which survived until the early 18th century when it collapsed and was not replaced. This would explain the heavy diagonal buttresses which seem excessive for a structure of its current height. This is an unusual position for a tower and seems specifically designed to enhance the parish part of the church. Its building was probably sponsored by Sir Richard Herthill of Pooley Hall whose arms appear on it below the parapets. It has also been suggested that he might have supported the building of the Gatehouse (Meeson, Meeson and Alcock 2007, 9). Sir
Fig 3.16: West end of church, showing 14th-century west end and north aisle, 15th-century nave window and buttresses, and 19th-century gables

Fig 3.17: Hall of 14th-century Gatehouse first floor lodging
Richard died in 1389 so the tower must have been built before then. Sir Richard was buried in the Abbey; his tomb, again emblazoned with his arms, survives under the nave arcade and now supports the effigy of the abbess.

3.27 Some building work also took place in the cloister in the later 14th century. The doorway shown on the antiquarian views north of the chapter house and now rebuilt in the north-east corner of the cloister dates to this period. It originally seems to have given access to a slype or passage between the chapter house and the south transept of the church. It has previously been suggested that this doorway was in situ in its current location and gave access to the south transept of the Abbey church (Warwickshire Museum 1996; Palmer and Jamieson 2001, 9, fig 8, phase 2). The fact that the 1785 Stringer view shows it adjacent to the chapter house façade was taken to be artistic licence. However, the Aylesford Collection drawing also shows it in the same position which probably indicates that Stringer was accurate and it was only moved to its current position in the early 19th century.

Other undated and possible medieval buildings

3.28 By the end of the middle ages the Abbey would have had a full suite of monastic buildings. Some other undated buildings beyond those previously described have been seen in excavations, while the presence of others is only indicated by the geophysical survey (Fig 2.12) – to the east of the chapter house there is a possible building group that might be the infirmary and there are probably other buildings in the field south of the cloister garden.

Abbess’s Lodging

3.29 The Vicarage has a stone-built, north-south aligned cellar with three truncated window openings to the east that certainly belongs to an earlier building. It is 5.3m wide and 13m long but the 2005 entrance building excavation showed it to have originally extended at least 7m further north, a total of over 20m (Palmer 2006). It is on the wrong alignment to be a cellar of Polesworth Hall and may represent the undercroft of part of the Abbess’s Lodging.

Anchorage

3.30 The 2005 excavation also located a north-south stone foundation roughly in line with the east wall of the possible undercroft which could represent the north end of the putative Abbess’s Lodging range (Fig 3.18). Alternatively, or in addition, the foundation may have formed the west end of a building built against the south side of the church, with either an internal or external chimney or stair base. It has been suggested by Rev P Wells that this building may have been an anchorage to house a permanently enclosed nun or anchoress. There are references to anchoresses among the community at Polesworth from the 1420s until the Dissolution. Anchorages were typically two-storied, single cell buildings set against and with a view into churches (Clay 1953). Dugdale (1730, 1117) notes that ‘on the south side...[of the church]...there is a place for the including of an Anchoresse’ and Clay 1953, 79 states firmly that ‘one nun was enclosed in the south aisle of the church. Judging from architectural traces and also from a record the anchorage was built in the 13th century and was still in occupation in the 15th century’. The relevant architectural traces would appear to the presence of the piscina, the blocked doorway and the 13th-century window in the eastern part of the nave, and this evidence is perhaps not really as clear as Clay suggests. There is no south aisle; the south side of the nave has been rebuilt since Dugdale’s time; the recess and piscina probably relate to the post-Dissolution period when this was the east end of the church; and, the presence of the 13th-century window is not evidence for the construction of a cell at this period; indeed, it would argue against the construction of a two-storey building at this point.
Fig 3.18: Medieval building south-west of church, 2005 Excavation

Fig 3.19: Rear of Gatehouse and West Range, 1785, Drawing by E Stringer
3.31 However, Dugdale’s statement is definite and it is possible, either that there was a cell built into the north end of the west range or that there was a separate building to the west set against the section of south wall rebuilt in the 18th century. In the latter case the excavated foundation could have formed the west wall of a cell between the west range and the abbess’ lodging.

**Possible medieval western range to Gatehouse**

3.32 In its surviving form the building range to the west of the gatehouse is largely post-medieval. However there are some indications that there was a previous, later medieval, building on the site. The west wall of the Gatehouse has sockets for the roof of an earlier, lower building of a similar width to the existing one (Alcock, Meeson & Meeson 2007, 26). The earliest illustration of the building, which dates to 1785 (Fig 3.19) shows the west range as a T-shaped building, with a west wing now demolished. The southern wing has a large pointed-arched ground floor doorway with a hood mould to the west and a blocked window opening, apparently also pointed-arched above. The west wing also has a small pointed-arched window at ground floor level. These features are of medieval appearance which may mean that the footprint and the masonry of the building was of medieval date and that the later work was only a remodelling which involved heightening and re-roofing (Alcock, Meeson & Meeson 2007, 30). Unfortunately none of the possible medieval features now survive, and their dating cannot be verified.

3.33 If the range did have a medieval origin, its imposing entrance suggests another building of some status. It might have been a guest house, as suggested by the 1886 Ordnance Survey (Fig 3.6). A local, medieval parallel for this arrangement might be the mid 14th-century guest wing with a two storey porch on the eastern side of the gatehouse at Stoneleigh Abbey. Alternatively it might have been used for the school for 30-40 children of the gentry maintained by the Abbey recorded in 1536, as suggested by Wood (1983), or as an almonry for dispensing charity (Morant 1995, 160), or as accommodation for Abbey servants.

**Later medieval activity**

3.34 One class of documentary evidence for the Abbey that does survive are reports of visitations or inspections by Bishops of Lichfield (VCH 1908, 63). These tend to concentrate on matters of discipline. A visitation by Bishop Northburgh in 1352 produced a general decree dealing with minor matters of ritual, silence and the exclusion of secular women. In 1456 Bishop Boulers uncovered various irregularities and produced decrees forbidding the residence of secular men and women within the precinct, demanding the removal of those currently there, and prohibiting the granting of corrodies (pensions with rights of residence). All the nuns were to take meals in the refectory and not be served by secular servants. They were to sleep in the one dormitory in single beds. Silence was to be observed in the refectory and dormitory as well as in the cloister. No one was to leave the precinct without the Abbess’s permission. No property was to be alienated without the consent of the whole convent and annual accounts should be produced.

3.35 In contrast to the large amount of building carried out in the 14th century evidence of 15th-century building activity in the standing remains is confined to the west end of the church (Fig 3.16) where a large buttress had to be built against the end of the north wall of the nave and a smaller one against the north wall of the aisle. In the late 15th century the century the window in the west wall of the nave was replaced with a pointed-arched window with vertical tracery and four cinquefoiled lights below a transom.
Dissolution of the Abbey, 1539

3.36 In the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535 the annual value of the Abbey was given as £87 16s 3d. A Commissioners’ report of June 1536 gave the annual value of the house as £110 6s 2d and stated that it had fourteen nuns, including the Abbess and an anchoress. They were described as of ‘a very religious sort ... and in vertue very excellent’. The nuns were supported by an establishment of thirty-eight, comprising three priests, eight yeomen, seventeen servants, nine women servants and an aged retired cook (VCH 1908, 63-4).

3.37 The Commissioners wrote to Thomas Cromwell in greater detail advising him to mediate with the king to exempt the house from suppression. The Abbess, Dame Alice Fitzherbert, was a very discreet religious woman, sixty years old, who had ruled there for twenty-seven years. There were twelve virtuous nuns under her, of good repute in the county, none of whom wished to leave the nunnery. Thirty or forty gentlemen’s children were brought up in the house, and it was said that the town would be ruined if the nunnery was dissolved. As a result of this appeal and on payment of £50 in January 1537 the Abbey was granted letters patent to remain unabolished (VCH 1908, 64).

3.38 The payment for exemption was, however, to no avail and the Abbey was ‘surrendered’ in January 1539. The Abbess Alice Fitzherbert, described as a lady of virtuous reputation and great age, was assigned a pension of £26 13s 4d, the Prioress, Joan Penge and an aged nun were given pensions of 53s 4d, while the other twelve nuns received 40s (VCH 1908, 64).

Sale of the Abbey site to Francis Goodere and conversion of church to parish church

3.39 In 1544 the site of the Abbey was sold to Francis Goodere, a relatively minor speculator in former monastic property, who also acquired the manor of Baginton which had belonged to St Mary’s College, Warwick. The grant for Polesworth only refers in general terms to the site of the late monastery, with all buildings, barns, stables, orchards, gardens, ponds, fishponds, etc within the precinct, and one dovecote (TNA E315/11/499), but it does not seem that Goodere acquired the whole of the former precinct. The Crown continued to hold the rectory of Polesworth, and the west end of the Abbey church was retained as the parish church with an area of graveyard to the north, and apparently, the land in the north-east corner of the precinct known as Church Croft. Apart from a few fragments, the claustral buildings were demolished along with the eastern part of the abbey church, leaving just the tower, nave and north aisle which had probably always served the parishioners. In the northern part of the former precinct the Gatehouse and early western range were also retained and incorporated into the Gooderes’ estate.

Sir Henry Goodere I and the building of Polesworth Hall

3.40 Francis Goodere made Polesworth his base, but he died in 1546 to be succeeded by his 13 year old son Henry. It was probably Henry Goodere who built a new manor house, Polesworth Hall on the site of the current vicarage which had previously reputedly been that of the Abbess’s Lodgings (VCH 1947, 186). Henry Goodere was educated at Gray’s Inn and became a member of Queen Elizabeth I’s household in 1558 (Graves 2004). In 1562 he was described as ‘the Queen’s servant’. From 1563 he was a Warwickshire JP and from 1563 to 1566/7 he was MP for Staffordshire. He fell from royal favour because of his support for the deposed Mary Queen of Scots, ending up in the Tower in 1571. However over the next decade he
gradually rebuilt his reputation as a soldier with the Earl of Essex who knighted him after the battle of Zutphen in 1586. In 1588 he was one of seven colonels appointed to defend the queen in the face of the Spanish Armada. He was High Sheriff of Warwickshire in 1591 and prominent in county administration serving on various county commissions between 1589 and 1592. Sir Henry Goodere died at Polesworth in 1595 having settled the estate on his daughter Frances and his nephew Henry Goodere (II) on their marriage in 1593.

3.41 Sir Henry had literary tastes, even writing a verse defence of his dealings with Mary Stuart while in the Tower. The poet Michael Drayton (1563-1631) who was born at Hartshill in Warwickshire, the son of a tenant farmer working on land owned by the Gooderes is recorded as serving as a page in Sir Henry’s household and subsequently enjoying his patronage and friendship (Graves 2004, VCH 1947, 189 n 20). Drayton’s time at Polesworth and his unrequited devotion to Sir Henry’s daughter Ann Goodere, who later married Sir Henry Rainsford, led him to celebrate the River Anker (Sonnet 53):

‘Clear Ankor, on whose silver-sanded shore,
My soul-shrined saint, my fair Idea lies,
O blessed brook, whose milk-white swans adore
Thy crystal stream refined by her eyes,
Where sweet myrrh-breathing Zephyr in the spring
Gently distils his nectar-dropping showers,
Where nightingales in Arden sit and sing,
Amongst the dainty dew-impearled flowers;
Say thus, fair brook, when thou shalt see thy queen,
Lo, here thy shepherd spent his wandering years,
And in these shades, dear nymph, he oft has been,
And here to thee he sacrificed his tears:
Fair Arden, thou my Tempe art alone,
And thou, sweet Ankor, art my Helicon.’

3.42 There is also a suggestion that William Shakespeare may have served as a page at Polesworth Hall alongside Michael Drayton. This is a theory advanced by Arthur Gray in 1926 (Gray 1926) which has strong support locally (Wells 1998). Gray suggests John Shakespeare, William’s father who held the offices of High Bailiff of Stratford-upon-Avon in 1568-9 and Chief Alderman in 1571 would have been acquainted with Sir Henry Goodere because of his prominence in Warwickshire county affairs, and that he might have entrusted his talented son to Sir Henry who could provide him with a superior education and patronage in a future career.

Polesworth Hall

3.43 Little is known about the original form of Polesworth Hall. There is an early photograph which shows only later, 18th-century alterations (Fig 3.25), and some timber-framed gabled ranges at the north end of the east side are visible on early views of the church (Figs 3.20, 3.29). The only surviving plans of the Hall are small scale and date to the 1850s (Fig 3.28; WRO CR 328/37/2) and 1876 (Fig 3.37). The building seems to have been timber-framed and it seems likely that there was a main north-south range to the west with a series of gabled wings running back to the east. Some wall foundations at the north end were excavated in 2005 and there was evidence of cellarage, in addition to the current vicarage cellar which may have belonged to the Hall or to a monastic building (Palmer 2006). The 2007 Trial Trenching suggested that there may have been a walled courtyard to the west (Gethin and Palmer 2007), but this seems to have fallen out of use in the 18th century.

3.44 Some fragments of internal fittings from the Hall were reused in the current vicarage – panelling and the stone ‘Drayton’ fireplace which was decorated with the crest of the Gooderes, and the existing Refectory roof which itself seems to have been
Fig 3.20: Hall, Church, cloister garden and chapter house facade, c.1800

Fig 3.21: Polesworth Hall, 1846 (Palmer and Crowquill 1846, 92)
reused from a monastic building. These features are shown on a 19th-century illustration of the interior of the ‘Family Hall’ within the building (Fig 3.21, Palmer and Crowquill 1846, 92).

**Gardens of Hall**

3.45 Given the status of the Gooderes the Hall would have been surrounded by, probably quite elaborate gardens, and although there is no evidence of their detailed plan, some idea of their general layout and some of the elements within them can be discerned. After the Dissolution the area of the cloister and the east end of the abbey church became part of the grounds of the Hall and some monastic fragments seem to have been retained for incorporation into the garden. This happened at other former monastic sites converted into houses and may reflect a conscious antiquarianism. The outline of the cloister seems to have been retained with the former west processional doorway converted into a gateway (Fig 3.22) with steps up into a separate garden compartment over the east end of the former abbey church and extending down to the Mound. The Mound may have been built at this time as a ‘prospect’ mound or viewpoint within the garden, or possibly, if it already existed, may have been converted to that use.

3.46 The northern part of the former cloister seems to have been landscaped downwards and the wall along its northern edge east of the doorway rebuilt as a tall boundary wall with a battered plinth and a series of square alcoves along its length (Warwickshire Museum 1996, phase 3d/3e; Palmer and Jamieson 2001). The chapter house façade and the doorway to the slype in the east wall of the cloister were also retained, the chapter house doorway probably leading into another compartment of the garden.

**Rebuilding/remodelling of west range of Gatehouse, 1583**

3.47 One piece of new building work that can be attributed to the first Sir Henry is the rebuilding or remodelling of the west range of the Gatehouse. The 1785 Stringer view of (Fig 3.18) records a date stone of 1583 on the west range and recent work (Alcock, Meeson and Meeson 2007) has confirmed that the western range was built or rebuilt at this time, acquiring or retaining the T-shaped plan shown by Stringer. A new roof structure, using timber felled in 1582 (Arnold and Howard 2007), was certainly built over the whole building, including the south wing. The square-headed mullioned windows shown on both floors of the east and west wings on the Stringer view will also belong to this period. It is likely that there were similar windows along the north wall at first floor level, although the existing ones here are all later replacements (and at a lower level). The small, blocked, square, first floor window in the east wall of the south wing may also belong to this phase.

3.48 It is probable that the large, pointed-arched doorway into the south wing was the main entrance to the building and that the wing contained a stair to the first floor. Little survives however of its internal arrangements downstairs except for a wide doorway into the main range. On the first floor the stair opened onto a passage along the south side with chambers to the north, including one with a fireplace. The character of the new windows suggests that the building was (still) intended for use as accommodation rather than for an agricultural purpose: offices for estate officials or living accommodation for servants would be possible in the context of the post-medieval manor house.

**Sir Henry Goodere II and his literary circle**

3.49 After his death in 1595 Sir Henry Goodere I was succeeded at Polesworth by his daughter Frances and her husband and first cousin, Henry Goodere II. This Henry
3. History of the site and buildings

Fig 3.22: Church, cloister garden and chapter house facade, c.1785, drawing by E Stringer

Fig 3.23: Sundial, c.1785, drawing by E Stringer
was the son of Sir William Goodere of Monks Kirby, the youngest son of Francis Goodere (Considine 2004). He was educated at St John’s College, Cambridge and admitted to the Middle Temple in 1589. He married Frances in 1593. The estate came encumbered with debts and their inheritance was challenged by another branch of the family, litigation continuing until 1606, by which time Frances was dead or dying, leaving five small children.

3.50 Henry Goodere served with the Earl of Essex in Ireland, being knighted by him in 1599. He paid court to James I, reminding him of his uncle’s support for Mary Stuart, and he became a gentleman of the privy chamber in 1603. He became a figure at court taking part in a number of masques. In 1604 he became MP for West Looe and in 1605 he attended an embassy to Brussels.

3.51 Like his uncle Sir Henry II had literary interests (Considine 2004). By 1602 he had formed a close friendship with John Donne which continued until his death and the two men corresponded frequently - between 1608 and 1613 they wrote each other almost weekly letters. Goodere read a number of Donne’s poems in manuscript, and they wrote together: Goodere’s best-known work is a verse letter he wrote in alternating stanzas with Donne at Polesworth, which begins ‘Since ev’ry Tree begins to blossom now’. He was also friendly with other poets and intellectuals meeting regularly with Christopher Brooke, Inigo Jones, Thomas Coryate and others. He continued his uncle’s friendship with Michael Drayton who dedicated a number of works to him and to Frances, his wife. Drayton remained a regular visitor to Polesworth and in 1619 he dedicated his ‘Lyrick Pieces’ to Goodere with an ode recalling his hospitality and the music of the harper ‘which oft at Powlsworth by the fire hath made us gravely merry’. Ben Johnson was another friend and visitor to Polesworth, celebrating Sir Henry in one of his epigrams (61):

‘When I would know thee, GOODYERE, my thought looks
Upon thy well-made choice of friends, and books;
Then do I love thee, and behold thy ends
In making thy friends books, and thy books friends.’

Donne also mentions Goodere’s books and his own borrowing of them, referring to ‘my study (which your books make a pretty library)’ in a letter of c.1608. Apart from prefatory poems included in Drayton’s Matilda (1594) and Coryate’s Crudities (1611) most of Sir Henry’s own verse was court related: an elegy on Prince Arthur (1613), epithalamia for Princess Elizabeth (1613) and the Marquess of Buckingham (1620) and poems on Prince Charles’ journey to Spain in 1623 and one addressed to the Marquess of Hamilton.

3.52 Sir Henry’s life at court was very expensive and he ran further into debt, so that by 1611 he needed a royal grant of immunity from his creditors (Considine 2004). In 1618 he sold his manor of Baginton and by 1623 he claimed to be trying to sell Polesworth as well. In 1624 with his son John he leased the Polesworth estate to trustees for 100 years to raise money for portions for his four daughters, Elisabeth, Lucy, Mary and Anne (£500 each) and to pay his debts. In 1626 Sir Henry petitioned to be made a gentleman usher of the queen’s privy chamber in terms that suggested he was most interested in the board and lodging allowance that went with the post. Given these circumstances it is unlikely that any significant building work was carried out at Polesworth during this period. After his death in March 1627 his daughters and the sureties for his debts were granted immunity from his creditors.

**Sir Francis and Lady Lucy Nethersole**

3.53 Sir Henry Goodere’s son John had predeceased him leaving his daughters as co-heirs. The lease of the Polesworth estate was acquired by Sir Francis Nethersole of Kent the husband of Lucy (Alcock, Meeson and Meeson 2007, 6). Sir Francis was baptised in 1587 and from 1603 he had studied at Trinity College, Cambridge
subsequently becoming a Fellow of the College in 1608 (Purcell 2004). In 1611 he was elected public orator of the University.

3.54 In 1619 he left the university to begin a long and frustrating career in diplomacy. He accepted the post of secretary to an embassy to the Holy Roman Empire intended to negotiate a settlement to the dispute over the throne of Bohemia which was to lead to the Thirty Years War. This dispute lay between the Elector Palatine Frederick V husband of James I’s daughter Elizabeth, and Ferdinand Hapsburg, the reigning king. While the embassy was underway Ferdinand was elected Holy Roman Emperor and Frederick seized the Bohemian crown. Later in 1619 Nethersole was knighted and appointed English agent to the protestant union and secretary to Elizabeth. However Frederick and Elizabeth’s forces in Bohemia were defeated in 1620 and after the Palatinate itself was invaded by Spanish troops they were driven into a long exile in The Hague. As envoy to the Palatine court-in-exile Nethersole continued to intrigue on Elizabeth’s behalf for many years.

3.55 In or before 1624 Nethersole had married Lucy Goodere and also became involved in English politics. From 1624-1628 he was MP for Corfe Castle, Dorset and active in Parliament. He was still working for Princess Elizabeth and from 1629 to 1631 he returned to The Hague with Lucy. For years he petitioned the English government to relieve Palatine debts. He lent them money himself, selling his plate on their behalf. Following the death of Frederick in 1632 Nethersole finally obtained permission from Charles I to raise money for a military intervention on behalf of his heir. However the scheme failed and the King became convinced that Nethersole had misled him. Matters worsened in 1633 when Nethersole wrote an intemperate note saying that James I had lost the Palatinate once through negligence and that Charles appeared to be about to let it happen again. The King was grossly offended and ordered his arrest and imprisonment in the Tower. He was released in 1634 only after Elizabeth had agreed never to employ him in her service again. Nethersole then retired to Polesworth. It was two years before the king relented and allowed him to be received at court again.

3.56 During the civil war Nethersole was initially for parliament, but then adopted a line of moderate neutrality, publishing a series of pamphlets urging both sides to make peace. He was opposed to the execution of Charles I and by the end of his life was advocating the restoration of the monarchy (Pursell 2004).

3.57 In 1638 Sir Thomas and Lady Lucy made their most enduring mark on Polesworth by founding a school for the children of the town and the outlying villages of the parish. Lucy Nethersole died in July 1652 and was buried in the church where there is a fine memorial to her (Fig 4.28). In 1653 after protracted litigation Sir Francis managed to acquire the remaining interest of the Goodere daughters in the Polesworth estate. This settling of his affairs enabled him in March 1655, in accordance with Lady Lucy’s wishes, to set up Sir Francis Nethersole’s Charity with an endowment of land to support the schools and to provide a house and support for the Vicar of Polesworth. The Charity continues to exist today, although in 1906 its endowments were split between the Educational Charity and the Ecclesiastical Charity. Sir Francis died in August 1659 at Polesworth and was buried next to his wife.

3.58 The sundial in the cloister garden was presumably erected by Sir Francis and Lady Lucy. This is now very eroded but Stringer’s drawing (Fig 3.23) shows that on the top where there is now a ball, there was originally a square finial carved with the arms and crests of Nethersole and Goodere. Below this there was a square section with a gnomon to the east and to the north a carving of a tomb with a scroll above inscribed: **Nomercie [or Non est hic] Surrerix – He is not here, He is risen;** and below a second inscription: **Hortius [or hortus] utranque tuit/nos et meditemur in horto – The garden raised us both and we meditate in the garden.** Below that there is a square baluster
with a carved skull. The imagery reflects the passing of time and death and resurrection but also a shared love of the garden.

The Restoration and after

3.59 The Vicar of Polesworth between 1652 and 1664, and presumably appointed by Sir Francis was Rev Richard Bell, an avowed Presbyterian who was subsequently removed for nonconformity. However, in 1654 when church bells, which had been silenced by Cromwell and the Puritans from 1649, were once again allowed, it is significant that the people of Polesworth immediately ordered a new bell for the Church. This bell, cast by George Oldfield I of Nottingham, now the seventh of the peal, is inscribed with the names of the churchwardens, John Young, Thomas Lacklin, John Hollmes and David Corbeson. Further bells, now the eighth and the sixth, also cast by George Oldfield, were added in 1664 and 1667; the latter is inscribed ‘Feare God. Honour the King’.

3.60 In 1656 the manor had been sold to Michael Biddulph of the Middle Temple whose wife Frances was the daughter of Anne Goodere. The manor remained with the Biddulphs until the mid 18th century. Frances Biddulph died in 1670 and there is a memorial tablet to her in the Church. In 1683 Michael Biddulph, son of Michael Biddulph held the manor (VCH 1947, 189), and in 1737 it was George Biddulph.

3.61 In the 17th/early 18th century the timber-framed Tithe Barn (LBS 435602) and in the late 17th/early 18th century Dovecote (LBS 435603), in brick on stone foundations, were added to the complex of manorial buildings in the north-west corner of Hall Court. These will presumably have been built by the Biddulphs.

18th-century works to Church

3.62 During the 18th century a series of works were carried out on the church. However little visible trace of these survive as most of the diagnostic 18th-century details were removed during the 1868-9 Restoration.
1711-12 Collapse of tower and spire

3.63 In 1711-12 the tower and spire on the church seem to have collapsed. As early as 1687 the Churchwardens’ accounts reveal concerns about the state of the spire on the tower which was inspected by two local workmen in April and subsequently repaired at a cost of £11 18s 8d involving stonework and ironwork.

3.64 This does not seem to have solved the problem and in 1711-12 the parish faced a much bigger repair bill for major work on the tower, amounting to over £300 over the two years (information from Chris Pickford). The accounts are vague, but the combined evidence from the documents and from the fabric of the tower seems to suggest that there was a partial collapse of the south-eastern part of the structure. The remains of the spire were taken down in September 1711, and sums were paid to make good a breach in the garden wall of Polesworth Hall to the south of the church in 1712. A payment on 28 June 1712 ‘for Ale att Rearing the Roof of the Steeple’ indicates that the work was nearing completion by this time. ‘A decision seems to have been made to rebuild the tower only to parapet level and not to rebuild the spire. The current appearance of the tower suggests that the south and east walls were almost entirely rebuilt with the rather unusual square-headed belfry windows and the tower parapet with ranges of narrow slits. The shields with the arms of Sir Richard Herthill below the parapets must have been recovered and replaced. Once the tower had been rebuilt or restored, the bells were reinstated. The accounts contain numerous payments referring to this work.

3.65 The repaired breach in the Hall garden wall can be identified with Phase 3c in the cloister wall (Warwickshire Museum 1996), dated post-medieval but pre-19th century (but not therefore ‘soon after the Dissolution’ as suggested by Palmer and Jamieson (2001, 9).

1740s rebuilding of Church and other alterations

3.66 In 1737 an estimate for rebuilding of the church amounting to £1063 and upwards produced by Thomas Moore and John Banks, carpenters, Henry Baker and Thomas Austin, masons, and William Hewson, plumber was discussed at the Epiphany Warwickshire Quarter Sessions. The estimate may have been an overstatement but considerable work seems to have taken place to the nave of the church in the years following, including the replacement of the western part of the south wall. This was rebuilt from foundation level (the construction trench for the new wall was recorded in the 2005 excavation) with three round-headed 18th-century windows and the round-headed doorway, now blocked and visible only as a scar on the outside. These features are shown on the 1785 Stringer view (Fig 3.22). As the south wall was completely rebuilt the works must also have involved the rebuilding of the roof over the west end of the nave. Stringer shows a low pitched roof behind a plain, coped parapet with a string course below it. Stringer also shows a low, rounded gable, of 18th-century appearance over the east end of the nave, which may suggest that the eastern part of the nave was also reroofed. The drawing may not be accurate, the parapet to the south is shown with strange rounded battlements. The slightly later Aylesford collection view (Fig 3.20, BCA Aylesford Coll f 574b) shows normal battlements but no gable.

3.67 In 1740 a new bell, presented by Edward Toon who was born at Dordon and cast by Abel Rudhall of Gloucester, was added to the tower. In 1744 the church was provided with new pews ‘of good dale’, and a new pulpit and desk for which the carpenters, Samuel Mellors and John Kendall were paid £105 (WRO DR(B) 44/110). These will be the box pews shown on W H Crompton’s drawing of the east end of the nave (Fig 3.27) and the early photograph of the north aisle (Fig 3.32). A gallery for singers was also installed in the church in 1750 (DR(B) 44/110). This was one of at least two galleries. The Churchwardens’ Accounts for 1836 (WRO CR 369/20) record
a decision to ‘to take down the old gallery and rebuild it level with the singing
gallery, and to make an entrance door through the west window with steps up
outside’. The location of the ‘singing gallery’ is uncertain. The reference to
the entrance to the ‘old’ (?pre-1750) gallery through the west window ought to mean it
was at the west end of the church. However, an early photograph of the north aisle
(Fig 3.31) and a view of the north side of the church in c.1865 (Fig 3.30) show a
doorway through the western window of the north aisle east of the porch which
would have led to the gallery in the north aisle shown on another early photograph
(Fig 3.32). So this may have been the ‘old’ gallery.

18th-century alterations to Gatehouse

3.68 At some point, probably in the 18th-century (Alcock, Meeson & Meeson 2007,
19), the first floor framing of the north wall of the Gatehouse was repaired with new
studding infilled with brickwork and possibly two new windows, as shown on an
Aylesford collection drawing of c.1800 (BCA Aylesford Coll f572). The drawing
shows the Gatehouse in a state of dilapidation with holes in the roof and bricked up
windows, suggesting that the repairs had taken place some time well before the date
of the drawing. Much of the upper part of the rear of the Gatehouse including the
south-east and south-west corners has also been rebuilt in brick, possibly at the same
time. The repairs to the rear of the Gatehouse are not obvious on the Stringer view
(Fig 3.19) but a change in the masonry is visible along this line, which would allow
the suggestion that the work may have taken place before 1785, although the change
may just reflect the original variation in the construction.

Refacing of Polesworth Hall

3.69 In the first half of the 18th century the western range of Polesworth Hall was
refaced with a pedimented Georgian brick façade with stone details. This which
seems to have been an entirely cosmetic modernisation, ‘the disguise of a fair mansion
of quoined brickwork’ on ‘a mass of straggling brick, timber, and battening’ (Palmer and
Crowquill 1843), is apparently shown in an early photograph (Fig 3.25, Wood 1983).

3.70 The original, southern part of the Coach House may also belong to this period.
It is first depicted on the 1850 Tithe Map (WRO CR 328/37/2), but the stone quoins
surviving on its north-east corner and the cheapjack use of the existing boundary
wall in its construction seem to place it with the refacing of the Hall.

1747 Sale of Hall Estate to Chetwynds

3.71 In 1747 the Polesworth Estate was sold by the heirs of George Biddulph to
Walter Chetwynd of Grendon for £14,000. The purchase seems to have been purely
an investment by the Chetwynds who were based at Grendon Hall and had no need
of another large house in the area. The sale will therefore have marked a decline in
the fortunes of Polesworth Hall which would henceforward either have been let or
occupied by junior members of the family and is unlikely to have had money spent
on it.

Late 18th-century views of the Abbey site

3.72 The series of drawings produced by E Stringer in 1785 (Figs 3.5, 3.19, 3.22, WRO
DR (B) 44/110) and for Lord Aylesford in c.1800 (BCA Aylesford Coll f572, f574a, Fig
2.4, f574b, Fig 3.20) show the Abbey site at the end of the 18th century. As already
Fig 3.25: Photograph probably of Polesworth Hall, pre-1880 (Wood 1983)

Fig 3.26: Polesworth Church, 1825, from north-west
observed, the Aylesford Collection drawing of the Gatehouse (BCA Aylesford Coll f572) shows the upper floor as derelict despite the 18th-century repairs. The Stringer view (Fig 3.19) also suggests a decline in the condition and status of the west range by 1785. The main doorway into the south wing and the window above are blocked up, as is the ground floor window in the east wing. This must mean that the building was entered at this time by one or other of the two blocked doorways visible in the west side of the main archway. It is possible that one gave access to the first floor, the other to the ground floor. The blocking of the ground floor window suggests that this part of the building was now used for storage rather than as accommodation.

3.73 Stringer’s view of the Church and cloister garden (Fig 3.22) shows the chapter house arches and the west processional doorway in the garden of the Hall and the 18th-century alterations to the nave of the Church. The Hall garden is however shown as featureless open ground apart from paths to the doorways. The Stringer views are accompanied by a letter dated June 14th 1785 from the artist to his patron F Penant Esq in which he says of the chapter house arches, ‘The ground they stand in is now a garden. About 60 yards to the south of them is the pillar as expresst in the drawing. The spot it stands on is supposed a burying ground and it is to perpetuate the memory of a lady abess’. This letter also contains the earliest mention of the Mound: ‘about 60 yards without the boundary of the Ancient Buildings is a small mount I know not what to think of. But will give a sketch of it with the others. It is too minute for an observatory one, and resembles much the monumental ones I have seen …’ (WRO DR(B)44/110). The later, Aylesford Collection view of the Church and garden (Fig 3.20, BCA Aylesford Coll f574a) also shows the chapter house arches, but in addition a timber fence dividing off a strip along the northern part of the cloister which contains overgrown shrubbery. The detailed view of the chapter house (Fig 2.4, BCA Aylesford Coll f574b) shows a path running through the central door and, possibly, a depiction of the Mound in the background.

1801 Extension to Churchyard

3.74 The first recorded extension to the original churchyard took place in 1801 when a strip of land 56 yds by 12 yds on the east side of the driveway was bought from Sir George Chetwynd by Rev Walter Ross Norton (WRO DR(B) 44/112). The new area was bounded on its northern and western sides by a high stone wall which is shown on an 1825 view of the church from the north-west (Fig 3.26). This is the earliest view of the church from this angle and it shows the north aisle with a low-pitched roof with a presumably 14th-century battlemented parapet. There is a gabled north porch quite plain with a square-headed doorway. At the eastern end of the aisle there are two three-light lancet windows in pointed-arched openings, with another three-light window with cusped heads at a higher level in between. The driveway is blocked by a row of posts at the north-west corner of the churchyard and confined to pedestrian use, although there are apparent vehicle ruts in the grass to the west which may have marked the vehicle route to the Hall.

Early/mid 19th-century alterations to the western range of Gatehouse

3.75 A rather crude drawing of the rear of the Gatehouse dating to the later 19th century (WRO PV Pol Abb 1) shows a number of further changes to the western range since 1785. The gable of the south wing has been refaced, removing all trace of the former ‘medieval’ doorway, and a three light, mullioned window has replaced the blocked pointed-arched window above; there is a opening in the ground floor of the east wall of the south wing, possibly a window, but more likely the existing doorway. The first floor window above is also visible, but it may have been blocked – the existing ashlar blocking is similar to the masonry of the refaced gable. The west
wing of the building appears to be roofless. At some point in the 19th century it was divided off from the rest of the western range and attached to the property to the west, which by now was built up - the 1850 Tithe Map (WRO CR 328/372) and the 1886 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map (Fig 3.6) show the whole frontage west from the Gatehouse built up. The drawing shows a new double chimney, which will be the one formerly supported by the surviving brick partition wall at the west end of the existing building. As can be seen on later photographs at some point in the 19th century the rear of the former west wing was rebuilt in brick and it may be that this rebuilding was in train when the drawing was made. Its front wall was not rebuilt; this was still of stone in c.1910 and 1967.

2.76 The drawing also suggests alterations had taken place to the east wing - the existing wide doorway in the south wall had been cut through the former window on the ground floor, and, at least the southern of the two doorways on the west side of the main archway had been blocked. This suggests that the ground floor of the range had been rearranged. The need for an external doorway into the south wing might suggest that the blocking of the original internal doorway had taken place and the ground floor of the south wing had become a self-contained store. It is also possible that a second partition wall towards the west end, of which a stub only survives, was built at this time – it is of similar brickwork to the western wall. This divided off a second self-contained store which was reached by a crude, straight sided doorway in the north wall, which can perhaps thus also be attributed to this phase. The larger part of the ground floor, entered through the wide doorway, and possibly lit by a new, straight-sided window with a timber lintel in its north-east corner, may have become a stable at this time. The partial brick floor with a drainage gully across the middle which survived until 2009 will go with this use.

Polesworth Abbey in the 1840s

3.77 A rambling travelogue published in 1846 gives a description of Polesworth, the Hall and the Abbey site at that time (Palmer and Crowquill 1846):

'The village of Polesworth is finely embosomed in a valley, well watered by expansive streams, and as picturesque and “Old English,” with its massively turreted church, the statute green, the ruins of the nunnery, and the village thatch and appurtenances of rural civilisation, as well can be desired.

The church ... bears a bulky imposing appearance of deceptive antiquity, containing within as much mutilation and whitewash cruelty as would throw Welby Pugin into convulsions, and paralyse a Flemish architect for his lifetime. Latterly, to be sure, some shamefaced warden has returned the desecrated font from the village green to the interior; but this is poison upon dagger, compelling the spirits of the baptistery to mourn, with the ghosts of the chancel, for the defacements of bigotry and stupidity. There are some effigies of ladies robed in the fashion of the fifteenth century—a few only; the head-dress of one is of much beauty. There is also a strange epitaph announcing a remarkably “long child”.

There are some slender portions of the ruins of the ‘very old church’ in the adjoining garden; their portion is small indeed. In a paddock between the church and the river there is a lofty pillar, with a surmount in the Tudor style, upon which is a dial, and a quaint inscription. Some of the worthies of the place consider this as the “ancientest of all ancient old things!!” but we cannot agree with them.

... the building adjoining—a mass of straggling brick, timber, and battening, faced with the disguise of a fair mansion of quoined brickwork. This is the “Victoria Inn,” the palace of music, clamour, and voracity at the annual fair upon the 23rd of September. It encloses part of the “Old Hall”.

The remains of the manor house, at the rear of the interior, are satisfactory to the curious visitor. ... we present a sketch of the denuded “Family Hall” [Fig 3.21], woefully dejected, and deprived of the gay company of its prouder history.

You leave the spacious green by an arched gateway in the dull ruins of Edith’s Nunnery, the wall between the church and the perforated flat appertaining to this being composed of the worn fragments of Norman masonry.'
Fig 3.27: Proposals for alterations to east end of church, 1857, drawing by W H Crompton (WRO DR(B) 44/39)

Fig 3.28: 1859 Extension to Churchyard (WRO DR(B)44/15)
3.78 The reference to the ‘ruins of the very old church’ perhaps suggests that the chapter house arches had not yet been demolished. The removal of the font from the church seems to have been a local cause celebre. A memorandum book kept by Rev J D Schomberg, Vicar from 1841-1862 (WRO DR(B) 20/13) records its return to the chancel in 1843. The book also records the restoration of two windows in the chancel (ie at the current east end of the nave) in 1847 at a cost of £15 provided by Sir George Chetwynd. During work to the ‘pointed’ lancet window the old sill was found and ‘restored as it was as far as possible’. In 1852 Sir George contributed a further £50 towards repairs to the chancel.

**Alterations to east end of church 1857**

3.79 In 1857 a series of designs was produced by the architect W H Crompton for alterations to the east end of the nave with the insertion of a new gothic east window (WRO DR(B)44/38-39; DR(B) 20/13). An architect’s impression of the proposals (Fig 3.27) show the 12th-century arcade and the existing box pews at the east end of the church. The new window was of three-lights with geometrical tracery. Inside it was flanked with two panels of crocketed, blind arcing with gothic commandment and creed boards on either side. The medieval font was incorporated into the design in the north-east corner of the church. An exterior view shows a low-pitched gable with low battlements – it is not clear whether this was existing or a replacement for the rounded gable shown by Stringer. The work was carried out by J and W Haddon, masons at a cost of £135 15s and completed by January 1860 when Crompton’s bill for £7 9s 6d was paid. The new window and possibly new gable are shown on a watercolour view of the church from the south-east of c.1865 (Fig 3.29).

3.80 There is also a surviving design by Crompton dated 1857 for a memorial to Sir Francis Nethersole in the form of a funerary slab with a cross inscribed ‘In Memory of Francis Nethersole, Knight’ set in a rectangular niche fronted by with three cusped, pointed arches (WRO DR(B)44/40). The slab alone seems to have been commissioned and is now placed at the east end of the north aisle.

**1859 Extension to Churchyard**

3.81 In 1859 a second extension to the churchyard took place involving the purchase of the northern section of the Hall Garden, north of the cloister wall and east of the church from Sir George Chetwynd for £50. This included the Mound which is depicted on the plan accompanying the sale (Fig 3.28, WRO DR(B)44/15). By this time the chapter house façade seems to have been demolished and the existing section of wall along the north part of the east side of the cloister built. The former 14th-century doorway into the skyle seems to have been moved and rebuilt in its current location at this time.

**The Church before the restoration of 1868-9**

3.82 The appearance of the church in the 1860s just before the restoration of 1868-9 is shown by two watercolour views from the south-east and north (Figs 3.29-3.30) and by two early photographs (Figs 3.31-3.32). The watercolours are painted by the same hand and are presumably of a similar date. The view from the south-east postdates the rebuilding of the east end of the church completed in 1860, and the 1859 extension of the Churchyard – in fact there are a number of gravestones in the extension, suggesting that the picture(s) date to around 1865.
Fig 3.29: Church and Polesworth Hall Garden, c.1865, from SE, watercolour at Polesworth Vicarage

Fig 3.30: Church, c.1865, from north, watercolour at Polesworth Vicarage
3. History of the site and buildings

Fig 3.31: North porch and aisle of church, before 1868

Fig 3.32: North aisle of church, interior, before 1868
3.83 The northern view (Fig 3.30) shows the church much as it was in 1825 (Fig 3.26) with the presumably medieval battlements along the north aisle, the gabled north porch and the windows at two levels at the eastern end of the aisle. The watercolour also shows a long diagonal drainpipe on the face of the building and the doorway to the gallery through the blocked window west of the porch. These features are also visible on a photograph of the exterior of the aisle (Fig 3.31) along with the single-light cusped window to the west of the porch.

3.84 The second photograph (Fig 3.32), taken inside the church presumably at the same time, shows the eastern end of the north aisle with the high-level three-light window. The aisle is furnished with box pews, above which is the gallery against the north wall, and there is a panelled cupboard or lobby with a sloping roof to the east, set against the eastern window (the top of which is just visible). There is no sign of any archway through the west wall of the tower, suggesting that the existing arch was a new creation of 1868-9 and not a remodelling of an existing 14th-century feature (pace VCH 1947, 196).

3.85 The watercolour view from the south-east (Fig 3.30) shows Crompton’s new Gothic east window and the low battlemented gable above and the round headed 18th-century windows in the western section of the nave. It also shows the rear of the north end of the Hall with a number of one- and two-storey gabled ranges running back from the main north-south range. The fence dividing off the strip of garden along the south side of the church is shown but the shrubbery beyond it shown in c.1800 has gone. Adjacent to the stone wall along the east side of the cloister there appear to be a brick wall and a tiled roof indicating the existence of garden buildings.

**Restoration of the Church by G E Street, 1868-9**

3.86 In 1866 Rev Nigel Madan was appointed Vicar of Polesworth. During his tenue which lasted until 1881 he achieved a huge transformation of the church buildings. Within a year of his arrival he had commissioned a report on the state of the church by the nationally eminent architect, G E Street (Appendix F, WRO CR 369/9/23). Street took the same view as Palmer and Crowquill about the ‘mutilation and whitewash cruelty’ visited on the building. He considered the church to be ‘a very interesting one but almost completely spoilt by the various alterations that have been made to it’. He recommended a comprehensive scheme of restoration to involve construction of a new chancel, reseating and reflooding the whole of the church, opening an archway from the tower into the new chancel to make a vestry and organ chamber, reroofing the building with steep pitched roofs, restoring the aisle arcade, restoring the windows and the insertion of new ones in the south wall of the nave, reroofing of the north porch, and the repairing of the whole of the walls and stonework. His rough estimate of the likely cost was £2000.

3.87 Street’s recommendations were accepted and he was commissioned to draw up plans, a number of which survive among the parish records (Figs 3.30-3.33). A faculty for alterations to the Church and churchyard was obtained on 27th February 1868, based on plans prepared by Street, to add an new chancel, to form a vestry in the present tower, to take up the present floor of the church and lay down a new one, to move the font, pulpit and reading desk from their present position, to reseat the church so as to obtain 200 additional sittings, to restore the nave and aisle roof and the Norman arcade and also the north porch and south front of the said church (WRO DR(B) 44/47).

3.88 Tenders to carry out the work were obtained from four building contractors and these came back at £2763 from Fox of Atherstone, £3173 15s from Clarson of Tamworth, £3197 3s from Lilley of Ashby and £3403 5s from Higham of
Fig 3.33: Polesworth Church, scheme for restoration, 1867, by G E Street
Fig 3.34: Polesworth Church, Design for Chancel, by G E Street
Fig 3.35: Polesworth Church, Design for Chancel, by G E Street
Fig 3.36: Detail of design for paving east end of nave, 1869, by G E Street
Wolverhampton (WRO CR 369/8/11). Fox’s were therefore commissioned. Tiles for
the paving of the church were produced by William Godwin of Lugwardine Tile
Works near Hereford. In the nave and aisle there were plain tiles in red, black, buff
and chocolate (Fig 3.36), but for the chancel new slip decorated tiles were
commissioned using examples of medieval tiles from the church as models. Stained
Glass for a number of the new windows was commissioned from Messrs Clayton
and Bell. A new carved alabaster pulpit was designed by a Mr Earp and a new organ
was also commissioned from Jardines of Manchester at a cost of £260. The final bills
for the building work amounted to £2996 0s 11¼d from Fox and £110 10s from Street.

3.89 A successful application for funding was made to the Incorporated Church
Building Society (ICBS file 6672) and an appeal was launched in the local community.
The largest subscribers were Sir George Chetwynd (£300) and the Rev Madan
himself (£200). Earl Beauchamp contributed £100 and the Nethersole Trustees, C
Wynne Finch, F Tibbits of Pooley Hall, W Paul of Ivy House and Mr C P Stewart each
contributed £50. Other members of the Madan family also subscribed (WRO CR
369/9/1-37). The church was reopened after the restoration in August 1869 in the
presence of the Bishop of Worcester and the Dean of York.

3.90 Street’s restoration transformed the church inside and out, and its effects still
dominate the appearance of the church today. Such restorations were carried out in
many parish churches across England in the Victorian period and they swiftly
became controversial, being attacked by those who regarded them as far too radical
and over confident in their replacement or restoration of early features. Nearly a
century later the Victoria County History (VCH 1947, 195) described Street’s
restoration as ‘very drastic’ counting it among the ‘vicissitudes’ suffered by the
church after the Dissolution.

Rebuilding of the Vicarage, late 1870s

3.91 Having achieved the modernisation of the Church, Rev Madan’s attention now
turned to his vicarage, which at that time was the so-called ‘Donative House’ on
High Street occupied under the provisions of Sir Francis Nethersole’s will. The
Donative House had probably been rebuilt between 1819 and 1824 by Rev William
Madan. However it was now regarded as ‘small and inconvenient and not adapted
to the residence of the Vicar’ (WRO DR(B)16/150). In 1876 Rev Madan arranged with
Sir Henry Chetwynd an exchange of the Vicarage and the Church Croft land in
return for the site of the Hall and its gardens and a right of way through the
gatehouse and along the driveway to the Hall (Fig 3.37; WRO DR(B) 16/148-9).

3.92 Rev Madan then arranged to demolish the Hall and appointed another
nationally eminent Victorian architect, John Douglas of Chester to design a new
Vicarage to be built on the site. Although he was not London-based Douglas had a
distinguished client list including the Duke of Westminster and the Prime Minister,
W E Gladstone (Howell 2004; Hubbard 1991). His style was eclectic but most of his
buildings incorporate elements of English Gothic. Douglas was influenced by W E
Nesfield and the ‘Old English’ domestic revival and he is most noted for
incorporating vernacular elements, particularly timber-framing into his work. For
Rev Madan he produced the existing part timber-framed, part decorative brick-built
house with tall chimney stacks on stone bases which is a typical example of his work.

3.93 With the agreement of the Nethersole Trustees and the Charity Commission the
building of the new vicarage was financed by a mortgage of £1200 secured on a farm
belonging to the Nethersole Charity and to be paid off over 30 years by the future
income due to the vicar from the Charity (WRO DR(B) 16/150).
Fig 3.37: Plan accompanying 1876 exchange of Vicarage (1) and Church Croft (2) for Polesworth Hall and Gardens (3-5) (WRO DR(B)16/148)

Fig 3.38: Polesworth Vicarage (from Building News 41 (1880), 880)
3.94 The new Vicarage will have been completed by 1881 when a drawing of it was published in Building News (Fig 3.38). The accompanying text notes that parts of the former Hall adjoining the parish church, had been used for religious purposes, including the former refectory which had been used as a library or parish room. It records that the roof over this room has been preserved and repaired along with the old stone chimney-piece. This must have been the room depicted by Palmer and Crowquill (Fig 3.21), and the roof and the fireplace those now installed in the Refectory in the Vicarage. It is likely that this was the second reuse of the roof Douglas was noted for his use of joinery and panelling from the former Hall was also reused in the new Vicarage, in the porch, in the vicar’s study and again in the Refectory. The Refectory was built as the Vicarage dining room and continued in that use until the 1960s. A photograph of the 1920s (Fig 3.39) shows it in that role.

3.95 The 1st edition Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of 1886 (Fig 3.6) shows the new Vicarage south of the church with a wide forecourt and a track leading down to the Coach House which has a number of small outbuildings to its west. The garden to the east is smaller than now, with a section of the south-east part of the cloister incorporated in the field to the east. There was an orchard to the south of the cloister and osier beds in the riverside plots to the south-west and south-east of the Vicarage.

3.96 In 1881 plans were produced for the Rev Madan’s successor, Rev Laurence Whigham for alterations to the Coach House, involving the creation of a gated stable yard with the southern half of the coach house converted into a cottage with the addition of a timber-framed upper storey and a new coach house in the north-west corner of the yard (WRO DR(B) 16/289/21). The plans were never implemented but they show that the central and northern sections of the building had reached their current form - three-stall stable with hayloft over and harness room with store room over - by this date.

**Late 19th-century alterations to Gatehouse**

3.97 The building of the new vicarage seems to have left the parish without a meeting/reading room and in the late 19th century the upper floor of the west range
of the Gatehouse was converted into a reading room, by courtesy of Sir George Chetwynd. The conversion is dated to c.1882 by Wood (1993, 57), which is plausible, although no source is given. The work involved the insertion of a new doorway from the street at the east end of the north wall which opened onto a new stone stair along the eastern wall up to the first floor. The first floor itself appears to have been lowered at this time, leaving the threshold of the original doorways into the south wing c.0.68m above the new level. The three windows in the north wall were also lowered at this time. A drawing of the north side of the Gatehouse of 1855 (by P Gresley; Alcock, Meeson & Meeson 2007, fig 7) shows the easternmost of these with its top flush with the eaves of the building while a postcard of c.1910 (WRO PH 352/144/53) shows all three at their current lowered level.

3.98 This period also saw alterations to the rear of the gatehouse. The framing of the south wall over the main archway was replaced and infilled with diagonal boarding. The original stairway seems to have been remodelled with blue brick treads so that it ran straight up into the south-east corner of the former western chamber, rather than into the former hall. This would have made it less steep. The timber head of the new doorway at the top of the stair has a low-pointed top, similar to the head of the new doorway into the western range, suggesting that they may have been contemporary.

**Late 19th/early 20th century works to Church and Churchyard**

3.99 In 1884 a new heating system was put into the church by Messrs J Jackson of Newcastle, with pipes running around the edge of the building and along the north side of the aisle arcade, heated by a boiler in a new heating vault just to the east of the passage between the church and vicarage (WRO DR(B) 44/58). The new system replaced a number of free-standing stoves, one of whose stove pipes had caused a fire in the church in 1844 (WRO DR(B) 20/13).

3.100 By now further land was now needed for burials in the churchyard and in 1888 Sir George Chetwynd provided a triangular extension to the north-east which had been part of the former Church Croft exchanged in 1876. This land was conveyed in April 1888 and consecrated in August (Worcester Diocesan Records, Registrar’s Index).

3.101 In 1901/2 a new chancel screen was installed as a memorial to Lt Charles Trotter. It was carved by George Ostrehan (WRO DR(B) 44/52). This represents the only substantial addition to the interior fabric of the church after the restoration of 1868-9.

**Sale of Polesworth Estate 1912-13**

3.102 In 1912 the Polesworth Estate which had become increasingly encumbered with debt was offered for sale by the Chetwynd family in a series of lots (Fig 3.7). These included all the former precinct not owned by the Church, apart from Nos 28/30 High Street which had been already been sold some time after 1865. Lot 16 was a field and osier beds east and west of the Vicarage, already occupied by the Vicar. Lot 17 was the Hall Court and Lot 18 the property to the west of the Gatehouse including the west wing of the west range. Lot 19, the Gatehouse was described in the auction catalogue as ‘the stone-built building used as a Reading or Recreation Room, with Stable etc underneath, and Garden appurtenant thereto: also the Archway known as the Dungeon Entry’. Lot 20 was the remaining part of the former Church Croft. Lots 16, 17, 19 and 20 are overprinted in the catalogue as ‘withdrawn’.

3.103 Presumably because the Reading Room was a benefit for the whole town efforts were made to purchase it by public subscription and a number of fund-raising
events were held locally, including a pageant procession photographed under the Gateway (Wood 1984, 5). Lots 16 and 19 were purchased by the Church, in advance of the sale, and Lot 18 acquired at the sale. These were conveyed to the Vicar, Canon Trotter and two other trustees in March 1913. These purchases must reflect presumably reflect a desire to reacquire the some of the area of the former Abbey precinct for the church. The land of the driveway was not included in the sale. It is likely that it already been added to the churchyard; the existence of the right of way to the vicarage granted to the church in 1876 would have precluded its use for anything other than a driveway.

**Landscaping of driveway and restoration of Gatehouse, 1920s**

3.104 In November 1920 the vicar and churchwardens purchased a strip of land along the west side of the driveway and the eastern edge of Hall Court ‘for the purpose of enlarging the churchyard’. The strip is described as 560 sq yards ‘more or less adjoining or near to the churchyard... forming part of...the Hall Court. This purchase seems to have been made to enable the landscaping of the driveway and the construction of the War Memorial on the eastern side towards the southern end. As part of the scheme the widened driveway was gravelled, fenced to the west with metal estate fencing and lined by the current avenue of lime trees. The War Memorial sculpted by Henry Charles Mitchell was unveiled in April 1921 by Earl Ferrers.

3.105 Around the same time, in 1922-3 proposals were produced for the restoration of the first floor of the Gatehouse as a Club Room. Plans were drawn up by the architect, J H Beckett of Longton, Stoke-on-Trent (WRO CR 369/16). The restoration was limited by the funds available and conservative, ‘strictly abstaining from any interference with the architectural features of the building’. The work involved supporting the ends of the joists over the gateway, removing the concrete (lime-ash) floor, opening the blocked windows in the north wall, creating a new central window, putting a dog grate in the fireplace, closing off the stair up from the south-east doorway and creating a new entrance from the western range through the 14th-century, north-west doorway. The existing wainscoting and bench in the south-east corner of the room also probably date to this period, as do the SPAB-type tile masonry repairs on the rear of the building. A postcard of the rear of the Gatehouse dated to the 1920s shows the building looking neat and newly pointed – the tile masonry repairs seem to be rendered over and are not visible (WRO PH 767/35).

3.106 In January 1929 a strip of land running west from the church (Fig 2.3, Area 10) was conveyed to the Vicar and Diocesan Trustees to create the approach to the Church from Bridge Street now known as ‘Church Walk’. There had been a path along this route since at least 1886 (Fig 3.6) but presumably the purchase of the land regularised its existence. The newly purchased strip will have been fenced off and the existing iron gate at its west end erected at this time.

**Extension to the Vicarage Gardens and other mid 20th-century developments**

3.107 The garden on the eastern side of the Vicarage was extended in the early 20th century. The sundial is first shown in its current location on the 1903 Ordnance Survey map (although it may have been there since before 1785), but it was only by 1927 that a drawing (WRO DR(B) 44/110) shows the garden to have been extended to its existing area, taking in the whole of the former cloister and surrounded by the existing, now very dilapidated, metal estate fencing. By c.1900 the western side of the coach house had been whitewashed and fake timber-framing, traces of which still survive, had been painted onto it (Fig 3.40).
Fig 3.40: Coach House, Vicarage and Church from south of river, c.1900

Fig 3.41  Church and Vicarage, from west, c.1910
3. History of the site and buildings

**Fig 3.42:** Church and War Memorial, 1950s

**Fig 3.43:** Polesworth Vicarage, 1950s
3.108 Various photographs and postcards of Polesworth chart the use of the Abbey site through the mid 20th century. The favoured subjects were the Gatehouse, the Church, exterior (Figs 3.41, 3.42) and interior, and the Vicarage (Figs 3.41, 3.43). A photograph of the Gatehouse doorway labelled ‘Headquarters CLB’ identifies the club room in the western range as the home of the Polesworth Church Lads Brigade. Another of 1940 (WRO PH 108/9) shows the doorway protected by sandbags, an indication perhaps of its use as an ARP post during World War II.

3.109 Apart from the driveway works the Ordnance Survey maps show little change to the Abbey site between 1903 and 1938/9, other than the disappearance of the osier beds in the fields to the east and west of the vicarage and the extension of the eastern vicarage garden and the creation of the tennis court in the garden, and none at all between 1938/9 and 1956 (Fig 3.44).

3.110 In April 1958 another extension to the Churchyard was purchased to the east (Fig 2.3, Area 11). The northern section of this was brought into use in 1962. A new path along the west side of the extension was laid out leading to a new gateway at the north end onto the newly diverted public footpath. The southern section of the new extension remained as a separate plot until after 1972 (Fig 3.46)

**Abbey Open-cast mining 1959**

3.111 In 1959 an open-cast coal mine was developed by the National Coal Board just to the east of Polesworth. It was known as the ‘Abbey’ open-cast and its workings approached within 60m of the Church. The site does not show on Ordnance Survey maps. Its excavation and reinstatement took place after 1956 (Fig 3.44) and before 1972 (Fig 3.46). Only a few altered field boundaries on the later map give any clue as to its existence, but the NCB ‘Abandonment’ Plan (Fig 2.2) and a contemporary air photograph (Fig 3.45) show its massive extent and proximity to the village.

3.112 In addition to the actual pit, as part of the work the River Anker was temporarily diverted and the river diversion was cut across the south-east corner of the Abbey site to within 15m of the cloister garden. This work revealed part of the medieval monastic reredorter which was investigated as an early piece of rescue archaeology by Miss Jocelyn Morris of the County Museum (Fig 2.7; Mymum 1980, 81-2). It is difficult to imagine such extraction being permitted so close to a settlement today, but it needs to be seen against the shadow of post-war austerity, an urgent national need for energy and an unquestioning acceptance of central government decision making hanging over from World War II. Mining started in 1960 and was completed in 1963. The reinstatement of the area took until the late 1960s.

**Demolition of west wing of Gatehouse west range and conversion to flats, 1967-72**

3.113 In 1967 the former west wing of the Gatehouse west range and the property to the west were demolished to make way for a new health centre, although the site subsequently remained vacant until after 1976. The buildings were photographed before demolition in March 1967 by the Royal Commission for Historical Monuments (RCHM BB67/2012, 2018, 2023 and 2134) and the photographs show the stone front and 19th-century, brick rear of the west wing of the western range. In 1968 a scheme by the architect, A L Linford of Tamworth was approved for the conversion of the rest of the building into two flats (Atherstone RDC Application 68/164). The plans for the west range were carried out, but those for the Gatehouse proper were delayed.
Fig 3.44: Polesworth Abbey, 1956 (Ordnance Survey SK 2602)

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Fig 3.45: ‘Abbey’ open-cast site
3.114 A new west end to the building was constructed. The ends of the north and south walls were finished as ashlar buttresses and the surviving brick partition wall with a timber framed gable above was faced with stone below and infilled with brick hung with tiles above. The late 19th-century stair at the east end of the range was widened and rearranged into two flights to provide a better access to the upper floor of the Gatehouse. To the west of the stair new partitions were inserted to make a passage along the rear of the range with three rooms to the south, a kitchen, living room and bedroom. A new two-light, concrete mullioned window was inserted in the north wall of the kitchen, cutting through the back of a former fireplace. At the western end of the passage new stairs were inserted up to the re-opened western door into the south wing which became a bathroom. The ground floor was untouched, the stores to the west remaining, the larger space to the east becoming a garage.

3.115 In September 1972 a revised scheme was approved to create a single-bed flat on the first floor of the Gatehouse (A L Linford Dwg 49/5). Two dormer windows were inserted into the rear of the roof at the back. The medieval hall became a bedroom with a bed bay extending into the former chamber while the rest of the former chamber was divided up into a hall, bathroom and kitchen. The main entrance to the new flat was from the stair in the west range through the 14th-century garderobe door whose threshold was further lowered to create this.

**Late 20th-century decay and the start of the recovery**

3.116 The 1972 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map (Fig 3.46) shows the site with the River Anker returned to its original course and the frontage of High Street vacant, after the demolition of the west wing of the Gatehouse West Range and adjacent buildings, but before the building of the Health Centre. By this time the Memorial Hall, Library and Youth Centre had been built in Hall Croft (then called Abbey Croft). The Church and Vicarage and its gardens were in their current state, although the yard and outbuilding south of the vicarage had been replaced with the existing garage. The northern part of the 1958 extension to the churchyard was in use although the southern part was still a separate plot.

3.117 The late 20th-century history of the Abbey site was one rather of decay as past failures of maintenance due to lack of resources came home to roost. In 1981 a c.2.5m section of the cloister wall just to the east of the 12th-century west processional doorway collapsed. A drawing was made at the time by the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU 1981) but no immediate repairs were carried out.

3.118 The upper floors of the Gatehouse remained in occupation as rented flats from 1972 until 2006. However over this time the masonry structure of the building deteriorated. In 1995 the upper part of the southern gable of the south wing of the western range collapsed causing a structural crack running c.1.5m down the wall below the first floor window. The gable was temporarily shored with scaffolding until repairs, which included the replacement of the window were completed in October 1996. However the rest of the building continued to deteriorate.

3.119 In 1997 a long standing infestation of Death Watch Beetle was identified in the Vicarage, along with dry rot in the kitchen block. Extensive repairs including beetle and fungal treatment were carried out at a cost of £168,000, but it subsequently became clear that the infestation was more widespread. Since 1988 it has been recognised that the Vicarage is unsuitable for its purpose and alternative accommodation for the incumbent needs to be found. In view of the uncertain future of the building subsequent repairs have been limited by the Diocesan Housing Sub-Committee to essential items, although it is recognised that the decay of timberwork due to the infestation continues.
Fig 3.46: Polesworth Abbey, 1946 (Ordnance Survey SK 2602)
3.120 In 1999 English Heritage included both the Gatehouse and the Cloister wall on its Buildings at Risk Register.

3.121 However with the coming of the new millennium the pattern of decay began to be reversed and the conservation of the site and its historic buildings addressed. In 1999-2000 a restoration scheme for the Cloister wall was completed with funding from English Heritage, the Historic Churches Conservation Trust and others. The scheme was awarded the John Betjeman Prize by the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings. In 2005 a new church entrance building with toilets was opened to provide access to the Church and cloister. This was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Advantage West Midlands Market Towns Initiative and was awarded a Civic Award by North Warwickshire Borough Council. In 2009-10 a conservation programme funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Country Houses Foundation and others was carried out on the Gatehouse creating two holiday flats and restoring the Porter’s Lodge and the mezzanine room in the Gatehouse as a medieval History Room for display to visitors.