



The History of Vale Royal Abbey



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Vale Royal Abbey

A UNIQUE & BREATHTAKING EXPERIENCE

The History of Vale Royal Abbey

Vale Royal Abbey is a medieval Abbey and later a country house. It was founded in 1270 by Edward I for monks of the austere Cistercian order. The King intended the Abbey to be on the grandest scale however financial difficulties meant that these ambitions could not be fulfilled and the final building was considerably smaller than originally planned. The project ran into problems in other ways too; the Abbey was frequently grossly mismanaged, relations with the local population were so poor as to result in large scale violence on a number of occasions and internal discipline was frequently bad.

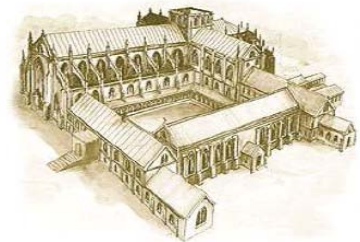
Vale Royal was closed in 1538 by Henry VIII as part of the Dissolutions of Monasteries Act. Much of the Abbey, including the church was demolished but some of the cloister buildings were incorporated into a mansion by Thomas Holcroft, an important government official, during the 1540s.

Over subsequent centuries, this house was considerably altered and extended by successive generations. The building still contains some surviving rooms from the medieval Abbey including the refectory and the kitchen. The foundations of the church and cloister have also been excavated.

The Abbey we now know as Vale Royal was founded by Prince Edward, the future Edward I, prior to his accession to the throne. In 1263 the Prince was undertaking a sea voyage from France when his ship was caught in a terrible storm. He then made a vow that if he came safe to land he would found an Abbey of unprecedented size and grandeur as a thanksgiving to God for saving him.

Political problems and civil war meant that the vow could not be fulfilled immediately, but by 1266 negotiations were in hand for the establishment of a monastery of Cistercian monks in the secluded location of Darnhall in Cheshire.

In August 1270, Edward granted a charter to his new Abbey along with an endowment of lands and churches. As so often in the history of the Abbey things did not go smoothly; preparing the site took considerable time and the first monks, led by Abbot John Chaumpeneys, did not arrive at Darnhall from Dore Abbey until 1274.



The foundation of the new Abbey provoked anger, resentment and strong resistance from the people of the area and the Darnhall site itself was found to be unsuitable for the huge buildings planned.

In 1276 Edward, by now king, agreed to move the Abbey to a better site and a location was chosen in nearby Over, which was henceforth known as Vale Royal. In 1277 the King and Queen and numerous great nobles arrived at Over to lay the foundation stones of the new Abbey. In 1281 the monks moved from Darnhall to temporary accommodation on the Vale Royal site while the Abbey started to rise around them.

Building the Abbey

King Edward had vast ambitions for Vale Royal. It was intended to be an Abbey of the first importance, to surpass all the other houses of its order in Britain in scale and beauty and provide a fitting symbol of the wealth and power of the English monarchy and Edward's piety and personal greatness. The plans for the buildings reflected this.



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Royal masons under the leadership of Walter of Hereford, one of the foremost architects of his day, started work on a huge and elaborate high gothic church the size of a cathedral. It was to be 116m long and cruciform in shape with a central tower. The east end was semi-circular with a chevet of 13 radiating chapels, some square, some polygonal; each of the transepts also had a row of three chapels on its eastern side. South of the church stood a cloister, 42m square, surrounded by the domestic buildings of the house, which were to be of a scale and grandeur to match the church.



Vale Royal Abbey as it is today, the Tudor and later mansion is built around the core of the mediaeval south and west ranges of the former cloister and contains surviving rooms including the abbot's great hall.

At first matters went well. The king greatly expanded the initial endowment and made large donations of cash and materials for the work. Soon, however, things began to go seriously wrong. As the 1280s progressed the royal finance first got into arrears, then dried up. King Edward needed money to pay for his numerous wars and workmen to build the great castles such as Harlech he put up to cement his conquest of Wales. He took not only the money that had been set aside for Vale Royal but also conscripted the masons and other labourers to build his Welsh fortifications and in 1290 announced that he was no longer interested in the Abbey and would have nothing more to do with it.

The monks were left struggling to pay to complete the vast project and provide the running costs of it all by themselves, a task that would prove beyond their means, despite a substantial income and incurring huge debts to other church institutions, royal officials, the building contractors and even to the merchants of Lucca.

Work stopped for at least a decade after 1290 and was resumed only on a much reduced scale thereafter. Nevertheless, by the 1330s the monks had managed to complete the east end of the church (the rest remained a shell) and sufficient of the cloister buildings to make the place habitable, though far from complete.

In the 1350s there was cause for renewed hope. Edward the Black Prince took an interest in completing the Abbey and donated substantial funds to the job. Work began on completing the shell of the nave and making the east end even grander. However, in October 1360 disaster struck yet again. A hurricane swept across Cheshire and brought the arcades of the unfinished nave crashing down in ruins.



This set the seal on things. It was subsequently agreed under the patronage of Richard II to finish the Abbey on a much reduced scale from what was originally planned.

A troubled life

As well as the burden of trying to finish the Abbey buildings, Vale Royal faced many other serious problems. From the beginning the monks' relationship with their tenants and neighbours was usually poor and sometimes abysmal.

As noted above, the initial foundation was resented by the people of Darnhall and Over who found themselves under the lordship of the Abbey. The monks proved harsh and oppressive landlords and the people responded fiercely, sometimes going to law, sometimes resorting to violence. The people of the area



Vale Royal Abbey

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attacked monastic officials on many occasions (even killing the abbot in 1339), and more than once rose in arms against the Abbey.

Relations with the gentry were no better and they too often came to blows with the monks. The Abbey was involved in feuds with a number of the prominent local families and these frequently ended in large scale violence. Vale Royal was often beset by scandal of other kinds too. Many of the abbots proved to be incompetent or venal, and the house was frequently grossly mismanaged.

As time went on discipline became lax and in the fourteenth century and early fifteenth century there was much disorder at the Abbey, with reports of serious crimes including attempted murder being committed by Vale Royal monks. Another abbot, Henry Arrowsmith, a man with a reputation for lawlessness, was hacked to death in 1437 by a group of men including the vicar of Over. This abbot was slain in revenge for a rape he was alleged to have committed.

The Abbey was taken under royal supervision in 1439, but there was no immediate improvement: in the 1450s the scandalous doings of the monks of Vale Royal were still attracting the attention of the government and even the General Chapter, the international governing body of the Cistercian order who, in 1455, ordered senior abbots to investigate the Abbey, which they described as "damnable and sinister". Thereafter things improved somewhat and the last years of Vale Royal were fairly peaceful and well ordered.

St. Mary's Whitegate, once the gate chapel of Vale Royal Abbey, provided by the monks to serve travellers, has been a parish church since the Dissolution.

Dissolution of the Monasteries

In 1535 the Abbey was valued in the Valor Ecclesiasticus as having an income of £540, a very comfortable sum, which leads one to wonder how many of the Abbey's financial problems were due to bad management. This figure meant that Vale Royal escaped being dissolved under the terms of the First Suppression Act, King Henry VIII's initial move in the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

The last abbot was John Hareware (elected 1535), who had previously been abbot of Hulton Abbey. He pursued a two-pronged policy of attempting to ensure the survival of his Abbey and, should that fail, the security of himself and his brethren thereafter. He bribed courtiers, influential nobles and in particular chief minister Thomas Cromwell with money and property in the hope of gaining respite; he also leased out most of the Abbey lands to friends and associates of the monastery to keep them out of royal hands should the Abbey fall (many of these leases had a clause which stated that they should be void if the Abbey survived). He began to realise the other assets such as livestock and timber for cash.



The process of dissolution at Vale Royal was begun in September 1538 by Thomas Holcroft, one of the king's commissioners, and occurred in very shady circumstances. Holcroft claimed that the Abbey had surrendered to him on 7 September, however, the abbot and convent strongly denied that they had done so and questioned Holcroft's authority. To defend himself, Holcroft then alleged that the abbot had attempted to take over the Abbey for himself and had tried to conspire with Holcroft to engage in land fraud involving the Abbey estates. The Vale Royal monks petitioned the government, in particular Thomas Cromwell who, in his role as Vicar General was in charge of church affairs under the Royal Supremacy. Abbot John appealed to Cromwell in person and in the course of his journey to London to see the chief minister wrote to him:



Vale Royal Abbey

A UNIQUE & BREATHTAKING EXPERIENCE

"My Good Lord, the truth is, I nor my said brethren have never consented to surrender our monastery not yet do, nor never will by our good wills unless it shall please the King's grace to give us commandment to do so."

—John Hareware, Abbot of Vale Royal.

There must have been some disquiet in governmental circles as to whether the surrender of Vale Royal was in fact legitimate, so steps were taken to put the matter beyond doubt. A special court was held at the Abbey on 31 March 1539, with Cromwell himself as judge. However, instead of investigating the circumstances of the surrender, the court charged the abbot with treason and the murder of a monk who had committed suicide in 1536, serious crimes that would have earned the death penalty. The abbot was found guilty and Vale Royal was declared forfeit to the crown because of his crimes.

However, Abbot John was not executed; instead he was given the substantial pension of £60 per year and the Abbey's plate, indicating that the trial was a method of putting pressure on him to acquiesce to the wishes of Cromwell and Holcroft regarding the fate of his monastery. The rest of the community were also pensioned off. Pension records indicate that Abbot John lived until at least 1546.

Later history

After these transactions Thomas Holcroft was now in charge at Vale Royal. In 1539 he demolished the church, telling King Henry in a letter that it was "plucked down". On 7 March 1544 the king confirmed Holcroft's ownership by granting him the Abbey and a great deal of its estates for the sum of £450. Holcroft then took down many of the Abbey's domestic buildings, retaining the south and west cloister ranges including the abbot's house and the monks' dining hall along with their kitchen as the core of his very large mansion on the site.



Holcroft's heirs lived at Vale Royal until 1615, when the Abbey came into the hands of the Cholmondeley (pronounced "Chumley") family (subsequently Lords Delamere). The widowed Lady Mary Cholmondeley (1562-1625), a powerful woman with extensive properties in the area, bought the Abbey as a home for herself when her eldest son inherited the primary family estates at Cholmondeley.

In August 1617 she entertained James I to a stag hunting party at Vale Royal. The king enjoyed himself so much that he gave knighthoods to two members of the family. Shortly afterwards, in a letter he offered to advance the political careers of Lady Mary's sons if they would come to court. This offer was so firmly refused that the king named her "the Bolde Lady of Cheshire". At her death in 1625 Lady Mary passed the Abbey and estate on to her fourth son, Thomas, who founded the Vale Royal branch of the family.

During the English Civil War the Cholmondeleys were supporters of Charles I. This resulted in serious consequences. There was fighting at Vale Royal, the Abbey was extensively looted and the south wing of the building burned down by Parliamentary forces under the command of General John Lambert.

Following this disaster, and subsequent rebuilding, the Cholmondeley family continued to live in the Abbey until 1907, when Vale Royal was rented out to Robert Dempster, a wealthy stockbroker from Manchester.

In 1934, another Cholmondeley, Thomas, 4th Lord Delamere, moved in to the Abbey, only to be forced out in 1939 when the government took over Vale Royal to serve as a sanatorium for soldiers of World War II.

The Cholmondeleys regained possession of the Abbey after the war, but in 1947 they sold it, at which point Vale Royal began to experience many vicissitudes.



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A UNIQUE & BREATHTAKING EXPERIENCE

Vale Royal was purchased by ICI in 1947. The chemical company initially used the Abbey as staff accommodation and then, from 1954 to 1961, as the headquarters for its Alkali Division. ICI moved out in 1961 and for some years the future of Vale Royal was in doubt. There were abortive schemes to use the Abbey as a health centre, a country club, a school and even a prison (this latter proposal was resisted by local inhabitants as strongly, though less violently, as the original foundation of the Abbey had been, and did not occur). In 1977, the Abbey was made into a residential care home for people with learning difficulties. Since 1998, Vale Royal has been home to a private golf club.

Present day

Nothing remains of the great church, though archaeological work has revealed many details of its structure. A stone circular monument, known as the 'Nun's Grave', traditionally commemorates a fourteenth century Cheshire nun, Ida, who tended a sick Vale Royal abbot, and on her death was buried at the site of the high altar. The monument was erected by the Cholmondeley family, possibly to lend credence to the legend of the nun. The material in its construction comes from three sources: the head made from a medieval cross with four panels depicting the Crucifixion, the Virgin and Child, St. Catherine, and St. Nicholas; the shaft, made in the seventeenth century and made of sandstone; and a plinth made from reclaimed Abbey masonry. The present country house on the site incorporates substantial parts of the south and west ranges of the Abbey plus Holcroft's Tudor house.

Today, the buildings bear the Georgian splendour introduced by the Cholmondeley family in the 19th Century and just as you'd expect, the surrounding gardens and grounds are exquisite – offering the perfect backdrop for beautiful wedding photographs and wonderful surroundings in which you and your guests can enjoy a relaxing reception drink.

Flower clad walkways, formal gardens, panoramic views and a serene lake all help to create a truly picturesque setting that speaks of romance.

