

THE KING'S HOUSE: TOUR



*Watercolour of the King's House, showing alterations made by John Slade, c 1805.
John Buckler 1807*

INTRODUCTION

The Salisbury Museum is housed in the King's House, a fine Grade I listed building, dating back to the early 13th century. When the Cathedral was built the dean and canons were granted large plots of land to build 'fair houses of stone'. Sherborne Place, later the King's House, was the residence of the abbot of Sherborne occupying a splendid site opposite the Cathedral on the West Walk. The house was rebuilt in the 15th century and it is the core of this building that survives (phase 1). After the Reformation the property was leased to lay tenants with extensive alterations taking place in the late 16th and early 17th centuries (phase 2). In the 18th century the house was divided into several different tenements. Further changes occurred in the early 19th century, the King's House subsequently becoming home to the Diocesan Training College for female students, later the College of Sarum St Michael, from 1851 – 1978 (phase 3). Salisbury Museum moved here in 1981.

TOUR OF THE MUSEUM BUILDING



Front of the King's House - different phases. See plan below for colour code

FRONT FORECOURT

Stand in the forecourt in front of the museum. Even with a cursory glance the visitor can see that the architectural history is complex because of repeated alterations, but the medieval core remains despite the changes over time.

Until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539 this large dwelling had been the residence of the abbot of Sherborne, who lived in the Close while on duty at the Cathedral, and at Sherborne Abbey for the rest of the year. The 13th century buildings were replaced by a 15th century hall house, mainly flint with herringbone tile courses and tile roof (phase I), much of which survives as the central range of the King's House. Originally it consisted of a great hall with a parlour to the north and the abbot's chamber on the first floor over it. Most obvious to the visitor is the fine late 15th century entrance porch, with its small upper chamber, of flint rubble and warm orange ham hill stone which added dignity and status. Note the fan vaulting and grotesque animal carvings. The diocesan architect, TH Wyatt, added the second 'antiquarian' archway on the north side of the porch in about 1850. The front walls also contain the remains of hamstone window dressings (part of the great hall) and the use of this Somerset stone is intriguing in medieval Salisbury. It suggests that the abbot of Sherborne wanted to use his local stone and had it transported at great expense from Ham Hill near Yeovil. The use of hamstone therefore dates the building to the period when the abbot was in residence (before 1539).

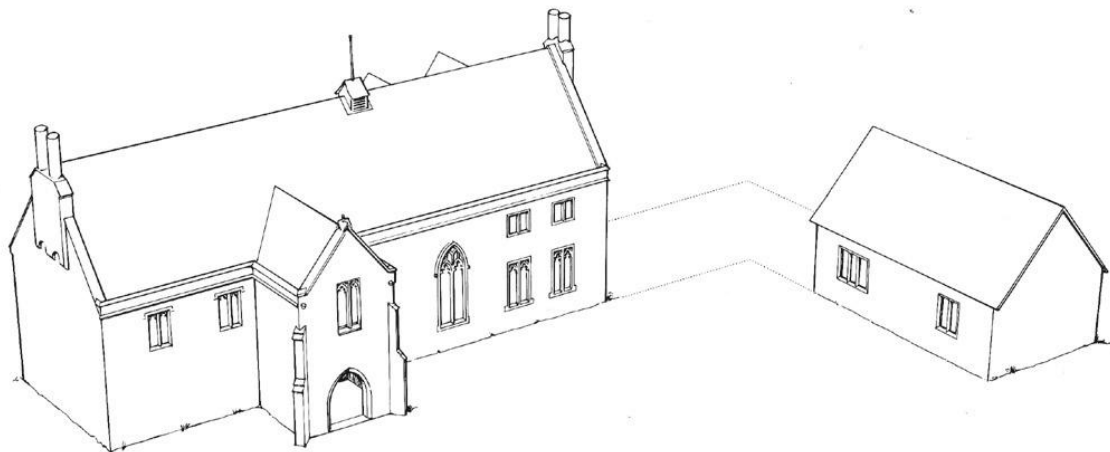
The small range to the northeast (the café) is largely 15th century and appears to have been detached originally. It was probably used as guest accommodation, with the upper storey a late 16th century addition. The curious medieval 'chapel' window, of Chilmark stone, was inserted later.

After the Dissolution the house eventually passed to the dean and chapter (who still hold the freehold), and the property was leased to lay tenants. By this time hall houses were old fashioned and Hugh Powell from Great Durnford, a registrar to the bishop,

leased the house from the 1560s-1580s and made considerable alterations (phase 2). Externally the roof was raised, adding the attic windows, for aesthetic purposes only, giving the impression of a more imposing building. Powell died in 1587, but his widow Elihinor continued in residence, marrying Thomas Sadler nine years later. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries they made ambitious improvements. From the entrance forecourt can be seen the magnificent brick cross-wing, with Chilmark stone dressings, added in about 1598 to the north of the 15th century range, the first use of brick as a 'show material' in the Close, filling the gap between the house and the range to the northeast (the café). Lit by huge, mullioned windows it contained a great parlour (the temporary exhibition gallery) on the ground floor, a magnificent oak staircase and two splendid first floor rooms (see later).

For much of the 18th century the house was divided into separate tenements but in the early 19th century General Slade spent 'many thousand pounds' making 'great alterations', most of which have now disappeared. His central door and buttresses were removed by TH Wyatt. (see *Buckler watercolour above*)

On the left, the knapped flint south wing (originally single storey) was built by TH Wyatt (phase 3) in the mid-19th century in a neogothic style for the new training college, as a model school for the students to practise their teaching skills. In the 1870s a brick extension was added above to provide a new dormitory. The modern addition dates from the 1950s.



Reconstruction drawing by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England showing how the King's House may have appeared c. 1500 (Crown Copyright NMR)



Ground floor plan of King's House showing different phases – plan drawn up in 2011 so does not reflect changes in 2014 and 2023

GROUND FLOOR

Enter through the porch and the original fine nail studded door. You are now in the 15th century screens passage with its contemporary ceiling, moulded cornices and central beam, to the south of the great hall (phase 1). There is an exposed section of wattle and daub infill to be seen in the cross-passage just to the left inside the main entrance.

The rope marks the original back of the building and you can still see the bar opening for the door. To the left of the screens passage, the service area would have contained kitchen and buttery. The museum shop/reception occupies the former great hall (phase 1) which would have been open to the roof.

In the late 16th century (phase 2) this great hall was divided horizontally by Hugh Powell to create a second floor. The fine brick fireplace with its herringbone fireback and Tudor arch dates from this reconstruction. Here too can be seen Sir John Slade's four neo-classical ionic columns of the early 19th century which extended the room into the screens passage.

From reception walk through what was the abbot's parlour to the temporary exhibition gallery, Sadler's great parlour (phase 2). (If closed, use back corridor).

FIRST FLOOR

Turn left and climb Sadler's fine oak staircase of 1598 with its newel post extending the full height of the house. Enter the first-floor ceramics' gallery, once two rooms. You are now in Sadler's great chamber, with its superbly decorated ribbed plaster ceilings, a key part of his ambitious scheme after 1598 (phase 2).

Continue into the adjacent natural history gallery (phase 1 & 2), once the abbot's chamber, which dates from the 15th century with its fireplace and fireback of stone, flint and herringbone tiles. Enhanced by Sadler, it perhaps became the master bedroom, with decorated ribbed ceiling, and plaster frieze above the fireplace incorporating a Scottish thistle design. These new rooms would certainly have provided fitting accommodation for King James I when he was entertained here with his family in 1610 and 1613. A window in the Natural History Gallery has the coat of arms of James I's eldest son Henry, Prince of Wales, who died, aged eighteen, of typhoid fever. The change of name to the King's House commemorated these royal visits although the title was not adopted until the 18th century. Later, the abbot's chamber fittingly became the principal's office for the Training College.



Rear of the King's House - different phases. See plan above for colour code

BACK GARDEN

Retrace to the back corridor behind the shop and proceed outside to look at the rear of the building, the western elevation. For the best view, stand well back on the grass. *(see plan, and picture of rear of building)*

Much of the older structure at the rear is obscured by later buildings but the 15th century ridge of the medieval building can be seen clearly. The fine chimneys and the three dormer windows were added in the late 16th century. Sadler's brick cross-wing extension is towards the left (facing you) with its splendid windows. A possible structural problem may be indicated by the relieving arch with its keystone dated 1661.

Significant alterations were made from 1850 when TH Wyatt was employed to convert the building into a teacher training college. Later, the Salisbury architect E Doran Webb made further extensive changes. The back connecting corridor was added by Wyatt, to the rear of the abbot's house and later rebuilt as two storeys.

Webb's additions of 1898-9 (on left/north) and beyond Wyatt's classroom extension (see plan) face the courtyard and are of ashlar dressed rubble in Jacobean style. The ground floor classroom is now part of the Salisbury Gallery while the dormitory above houses the library. The Wessex Gallery to the right/south, was built as a dining room for the college and extended in phases throughout the 20th century. Webb was also responsible for the Chapel of the Holy Angels (currently the end of the Salisbury Gallery). The superb stained-glass windows are from the studio of Charles Kempe (1837-1907). The large double door was added in 2023 when the Salisbury Gallery was extended into the former chapel.

Today the King's House is home to a vibrant and innovative museum, but this fine building with its changing features is undoubtedly worthy of study in its own right.

Further reading

RCHME (1993), Salisbury, the Houses of the Close, 215-225

Conybeare, Clare (1987), The King's House Salisbury: A Short History: Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum

Ruth Newman, 2012, updated by Adrian Green 2024