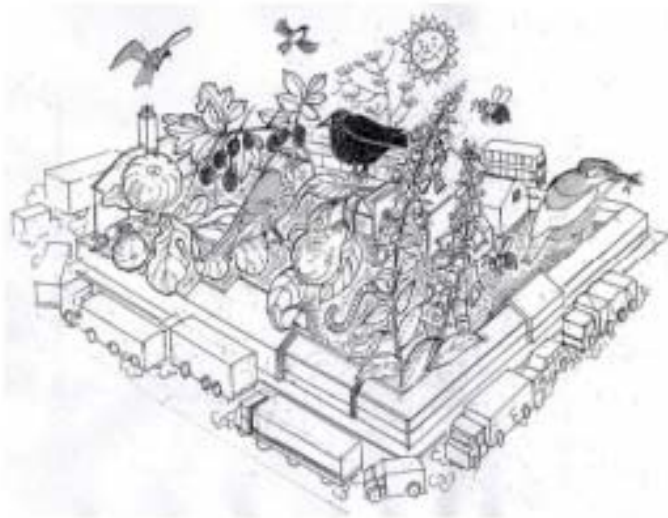




# **Shropshire Wildlife Trust**

## **The House, the Garden and the Old Infirmary**



*Shropshire Wildlife Trust protects wildlife where you live*

Surrounded by roads and car parks, Shropshire Wildlife Trust's headquarters appears from the outside about as peaceful and wildlife-friendly as a traffic island. But step inside and you will discover an oasis of nature, lots of history and a rare sense of tranquillity.

## Shrewsbury Abbey

Nine hundred years ago this bit of land, then right on the banks of the River Severn, belonged to the newly founded Shrewsbury Abbey, a Benedictine monastery founded by Roger de Montgomery, a relative of William the Conqueror. The abbey buildings occupied ten acres of ground, specifically chosen, according to one historian, for "the sequestered gloom of its low-lying meadows and melancholy boughs". A more realistic though less romantic explanation is that the location offered excellent commercial opportunities with three profitable mills within its bounds and first class transport via river traffic on the Severn.



Only fragments of the original monastery survive today. In 1540 it succumbed to Henry VIII's order for the dissolution of the monasteries and many of the buildings were sold off to speculators and plundered for stone or demolished over the centuries. The old monastery grounds were carved up in 1836 when Thomas Telford built a new road, slicing its way through the southern side of the abbey remains.

The nave of the abbey has survived, along with the refectory pulpit (next to the car park) and one of the three wings of the Infirmary buildings, now in the garden at Shropshire Wildlife Trust. Stand at the top of the steps leading to the upper door of the Infirmary and, with

the car-packed roads largely hidden, you get a fine view of the abbey's intricate and graceful west window and the isolated remains of the pulpit. The area of car park between the Wildlife Trust and the refectory pulpit is actually a scheduled ancient monument and it is hoped that one day, the temporary planning permission that was given for the car park will be revoked and the land restored to gardens in keeping with its history as part of the abbey.

Recent theories suggest that the building known as the Old Infirmary may not actually have housed the sick at all, but was used as a guest hall; a place where pilgrims flocking to see the bones of St Winefride could stay. Her bones— it is believed— were brought to the abbey in the 12th century. Relics were an essential feature of monasteries. The search for a suitable saint led to Wales, where the questing monks found the remains, thought to be of St Winefride, a 7<sup>th</sup> century virgin, who had taken a vow of celibacy, much to the frustration of a young nobleman, Caradoc, who cut off her head in fury. Fortunately her uncle, St Beuno, took swift action and replaced her head. She lived and a well of pure water sprang from the earth, while the wicked Caradoc fell to the ground, dead.

On the ground floor of the Infirmary, to the right of the entrance door, you can see an arch in the stonework. This may have been a watergate leading directly to the river, a braided arm of which once flowed where Old Potts Way is now. If not that, it was almost certainly a passageway for wagons loading and unloading in the building's days as a warehouse.



## The Queen Anne House



Shropshire Wildlife Trust's main offices occupy the building known as the Queen Anne House, a curious name, given that Queen Anne died in 1714 and the house was not built until the 1730s. No records have been found of a precise date or reason for the house's construction, but it has been lived in by a string of local businessmen, including the Hiles family, who ran the abbey mill next door, the odd property speculator, the gentry with their maidservants, children, ponies and traps. Gradually the building crumbled, the final tenant left in 1977 and the windows boarded up.

In 1985-86 an archaeological excavation of the garden in front of the Queen Anne House took place. The star find was a silver bowl, the earliest hallmarked piece of English silver yet discovered, stamped with a leopard's head, almost certainly made before 1478 when the crown became the accepted hallmark for pure silver craft-work. Numerous fragments of dripping pans, ceramic bottles and wooden bowls were also recovered—altogether some 14,467 shards of pottery – along with women's and men's shoes, scattered bones from pigs, sheep, dog, goose, swan, horse, deer, water vole, pole cat, fish, woodcock and many others.



Here too were the foundations of one of the old abbey buildings. Its square shape and the abundance of culinary utensils discovered, suggest that it may have been a kitchen. Later, the site seems to have been used as a place to turn animal hides into leather. Tanning pits, where crushed bark from oak and other trees was used as an astringent to cure the hides, were unearthed by archaeologists.

## The Railway

Another period of dramatic change struck Abbey Foregate in the 1860s, when land was bought up for the development of the Potteries, Shrewsbury & North Wales Railway. Several surviving abbey buildings, including the Abbot's Lodging, were now demolished to be replaced by sidings and platforms for a railway that opened in 1866 and went bankrupt by the end of the same year.

## Brother Cadfael and The Shrewsbury Quest

The monastic life of Shrewsbury Abbey was resurrected in fictional form by Ellis Peters in a series of medieval whodunits, published between 1977 and 1994. Brother Cadfael, the detective monk, herbalist and hero of her stories, became the central figure in a visitor centre developed here in the 1990s, with financial backing from Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council. The near-derelict site was restored; its grounds, contaminated by decades of use as a British Rail engineering shed, were made safe and a medieval herb garden was established.



The Shrewsbury Quest ran into financial trouble and finally closed in October 2000 and Shropshire Wildlife Trust moved its headquarters here the following year.

## The Garden

*“There’s rosemary and horehound and saxifrage, mashed into a little oil pressed from flax seeds, and the body is a red wine I made from cherries and their stones. You’ll find they’ll do well on it, any that have the rheum in their eyes or heads, and even for the cough, it serves too.”* Monkshood, Ellis Peters 1980.

Created specifically as Brother Cadfael's herb garden, a good variety of medicinal, culinary and aromatic plants grow here, including a number of unusual fruit trees such as fig, medlar and quince. The tree with



the bird-feeders hanging from it is a Glastonbury thorn, grown from a cutting of the original Somerset tree. It is said to have sprung from the ground when Joseph of Aramathea tapped his stick on the ground and, miraculously, it bursts into flower at Christmas. Among the more unusual herbs, look out for mandrake in early spring, the roots of which resemble a man and which is said to shriek if pulled up. In early summer, among the lavender, rosemary and sage you may see woad, a tall, branched plant with sulphur yellow flowers that ripen to showers of shiny black seeds. It was valued historically for its blue dye.

Changes have been made to the garden in the years since the Trust moved in, but it remains in harmony with its history provides an example of how anyone with a garden can make it look, smell and taste fabulous – for their own pleasure and for the sake of wildlife.

More than 40 species of bird have been seen in the garden including bullfinch, song thrush, redwing and a pheasant. Perhaps the biggest surprise was the arrival of a young kingfisher in the shop. It stunned itself on the glass doors but recovered and flew back to the river.

