

The Priory, Warwick

By far the nicest way to get from Warwick railway station into the centre of the town is to take a short-cut through Priory Park. It's always a bonus to have parkland quite so close to the middle of town, and almost makes up for the fact that the station is so far from it.

But what exactly is Priory Park, and why, despite my best efforts, have I not found anything there apart than grass ?

It was in 1109 that the first Earl of Warwick, Henry de Newburgh, founded the Priory of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre on the north side of the town, at a time when chivalrous knights were more likely to be doing their crusading at home than in Jerusalem.

After the Dissolution the Priory land and buildings fell into the hands of the Fisher family, wealthy burgesses in the town. Thomas Fisher owned it first, then John Fisher, the man responsible for much of the famous Black Book of Warwick, which describes what the town corporation was up to in the middle of the 16th Century.

Fisher's house was undoubtedly one of Warwick's most prestigious addresses, even before a fine Jacobean frontage was added around 1620. When Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, made one of his occasional forays into the county town (as he did in 1571) it was always at the Priory he tarried longest.

In the early 18th Century the house was owned by the Wise family, including Henry Wise, Royal Gardener to Queen Anne. A century and more later it was snapped by the Lloyds, bankers of that ilk, but was proving too expensive to maintain even by that well-heeled lot, and the house was sold for scrap in 1925.

So where is Warwick's famous Priory now ? A tad further from town than it used to be. It's in Virginia.

The 1920s was something of a time of crisis for the great English houses. Woollaston Hall in the Black Country went to the knacker's in 1926 and ended up in the States, and Warwick Priory was to go the same way.

The buyers were Alexander and Virginia Weddell. He was a career diplomat, with spells in India, Mexico and Argentina behind him, and enough money (prior to the Wall Street Crash, that is) to indulge in a little vanity project. The idea was to ship as much of the house as could be salvaged to Richmond, and to erect it on a hill overlooking the river. The Weddells would live in it for their lifetime, and then hand it over to the Virginia Historical Society as its headquarters, library and museum.

By the time the Weddells moved in to buy the house at auction, it had already been stripped of most of its furnishing, including the staircase. Don't ask me how they got to view the upstairs.

Now you can put rollers under a house and move it across the country, but this doesn't really work for an overseas relocation. For one thing, there was concern that the Priory stonework was already too far gone to be dismantled, and so the Weddells came to the surprising decision to blow the place up. The argument went that whatever survived the explosion would be robust enough for shipping to the US.

In fact, the Priory was made of sterner stuff than anyone anticipated. Almost all of the stonework survived the blast, and in the Spring of 1926 a cargo of stone (almost heavy enough to sink the boat) made its slow progress across the Atlantic for re-erection in Virginia.

In addition, the Weddells employed an English antiques dealer to ferret out what was left of the fixtures and fittings, and the old staircase was tracked down in London, along with much of the timber.

What the Weddells built in Richmond (to designs by the architect, Henry Grant Morse) was not so much an Elizabethan mansion as three houses for the price of one. The left wing was based on Sulgrave Manor, the ancestral home of Washington family in Northamptonshire, while the right wing took its inspiration from Wormleighton Manor, also in Warwickshire, which the Weddells visited. The central section of the new house was based on the Priory, which also provided much of the interior panelling.

For understandable reasons, the Weddells did not wish to engage too closely with 16th-century standards of hygiene; they added their own toilets to the mix, along with central heating and no less than seven bathrooms.

Sadly for the Weddells, the plan to live out a long retirement in their dream home by the James River was cut short by a train crash in January 1948, when both of them were killed, after which the house passed automatically to the Virginia Historical Society. The society still owns it today, a little piece of Warwickshire transferred to New England.

As for Warwick itself, it waved goodbye to one of its great houses, but at least the town still has the park where it stood. Priory Park also contains the County Record House, which moved there in the 1970s.

As far as I can tell, Warwick Castle is too big to move.