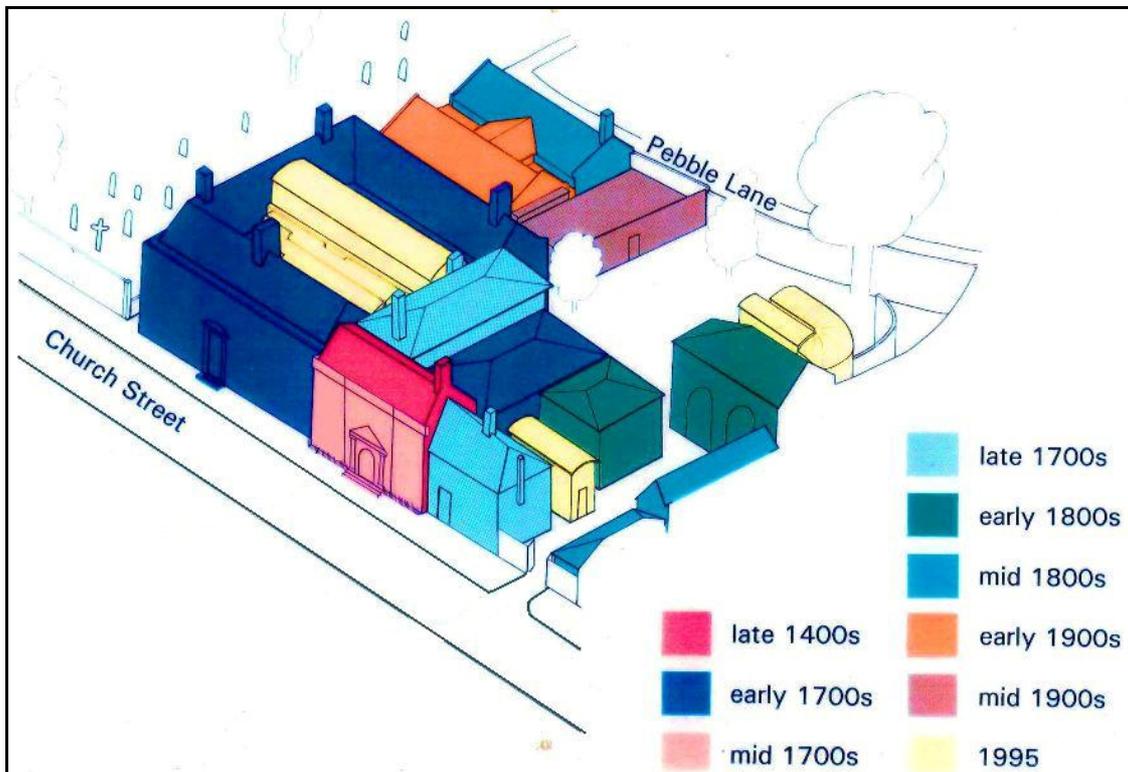


## Bucks County Museum, Aylesbury: people and buildings through 1400 years

The complex of buildings which are now unified as the County Museum stand on a low limestone hill rising from the clays of the Vale, an area of Aylesbury which has been occupied since the Iron Age and lay within a pre-Roman hillfort. Romano-British settlements largely avoided the hill top but from Saxon times this land, bounded by Church Street and Pebble Lane, has related to the church of St Mary nearby. An important Saxon minster church was founded near the present medieval church, probably in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century.

Much of the hilltop, including the museum site, was then occupied by a religious foundation linked to the minster church and the land remained as open sacred ground used for centuries to bury Christians, probably from a wider area beyond Aylesbury. In 2012, renovation work in the museum garden revealed 5 burials dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Aylesbury's first Christians, from the earliest period of conversion to the new faith. A large mid-Saxon Christian cemetery, possibly hundreds of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century burials, is known from excavations slightly further east, under modern George Street. The cemetery was in use throughout medieval times; museum excavations in the 1990s revealed 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century burials, aligned not on St Mary's church but on the line of Church Street.

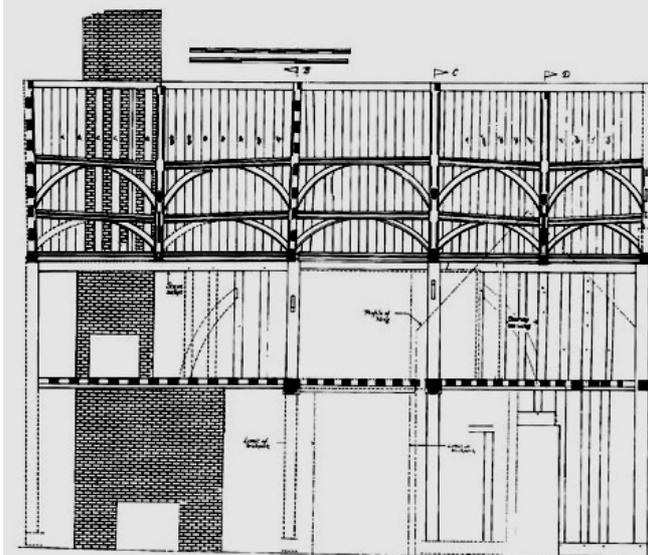


The Museum buildings today - medieval guildhall and later court house, grand private house, coach house, Georgian free grammar school and masters' houses, Latin school, Victorian and Edwardian parish rooms, Registrar's offices, doctors' surgery and 20<sup>th</sup> century museum – together tell the story of 600 years of Aylesbury's history.

### **The medieval guildhall or Brother House of the Fraternity of the Virgin Mary, later Ceely House: 1470s to 1906**

Encased in the Georgian red brick of later Ceely House is a remarkable medieval survival – the 5 bay timber-framed and jettied hall of the Fraternity of the Virgin Mary, built soon after 1473. This was a richly ornamented building of high status, a substantial capital investment by the Guild, founded in 1450 as a pious lay corporation for works of charity and to pray for departed guild members. The hall was always of two storeys, L-shaped with a separately framed rear wing which may have housed the kitchen. Each floor of the guildhall was partitioned into two rooms and the first floor was open to the timber roof structure. As a seldom-used corporate and ceremonial building it was unheated. The Fraternity elected three masters, local men of substance, employed two priests, had their own livery and owned property including hospitals and almshouses.

When the Fraternity was dissolved in 1547 along with other chantries, guild property was granted to absentee speculators and the guildhall became a private house. We do not know who lived in the house but the occupiers speedily put in a fireplace and chimney around 1550. The splendid painted plaster wall decoration on the first floor also dates from the Tudor private residence rather than from the guildhall.



Section drawing through the timber frame of the Brother House



Ceeley House, the Georgianised frontage in the 1980s

Documentary evidence for the house in Tudor and Stuart times is scarce but it seems likely that the occupants were substantial local families of church lawyers in the Archdeaconry Court of Buckingham, first the Heywoods and later the Bell family. In the later 17<sup>th</sup> century Richard Heywood (d 1701) modernised the house by replacing the projecting timber oriel windows on the street frontage with flat sash windows, by installing fashionable wood panelling and putting in plaster ceilings on both floors. He probably also extended and rebuilt the medieval timber-framed rear wing as the kitchen and put in new iron windows.

In the 1750s the front of the house was 'Georgianised', encased in fine quality brickwork with a new, symmetrical arrangement of sash windows to light re-arranged rooms on both floors. A central entrance hall and front door gave access to a new staircase (still in place) which replaced much of the medieval rear wing. The iron railings on the Church Street frontage were probably also erected at this time. This was the work of Hugh Barker Bell, second generation of his family to hold the office of Registrar to the Archdeaconry Court. Bell remarried in 1755 or 1756 a wealthy widow, Mary Thornbury, whose fortune may have paid for such splendid alterations to the house.

In 1796, the brick property to the right of 'Bell's House' was built as offices for the Registrar, completing the Church Street frontage. The coach house and stables (now the Roald Dahl Children's Gallery) and the brick gate piers were built soon after, around 1800.

In 1866 James Henry Ceely became the first of a series of medical men to own what is from that date known as Ceely House after his perhaps better-known brother, Dr Robert Ceely, who also lived here and was an important figure in establishing the Bucks Infirmary (Royal Bucks Hospital) in 1833. By 1901, Ceely House was the family home, surgery and dispensary of Dr Baker. In the Museum shop, you can still see his medicine dispensing hatch in the door behind the reception desk.



Ceely house staff in front of the coach house, now the Roald Dahl Children's Gallery in 1905



Dr Baker in Aylesbury's first motor car in 1912

## The Free Grammar School: 1720-1906



The Grammar school buildings of 1720  
photographed from St Mary's tower in 1995



The Grammar School master's house  
fronting Church Street

The first grammar school in Aylesbury, founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Sir Henry Lee of nearby Quarrendon, was in a small chapel attached to the south east corner of St Mary's church where the Latin School remained until Gilbert Scott's restoration which began in 1840. The school was also endowed with two small houses for the schoolmaster's residence, on the corner of Church Street and the churchyard. The trustees of the Free School – familiar names including members of the Heywood and Bell families – were presented with a superb opportunity in 1714 when Henry Phillips, gentleman of a prominent Aylesbury family, left the large sum of £5000 for the enlargement and improvement of the Free School. Two of the lead rainwater heads, on the eastern façade of the assistant master's house, are dated 1719 with his initials 'HP'. After a local legal dispute, settled in the Chancery Court, the new grammar school opened in October 1720. A lofty schoolhouse, facing onto the churchyard, was designed to house one hundred and twenty boys, who were to be taught English, Latin, Greek and accounts. The schoolhouse was flanked by master's houses on either side, with two floors of three rooms each and a range of attics. Fronting Church Street was the Headmaster's residence incorporating parts of the older houses on the site. The other, smaller, house nearer to Pebble Lane was home to the Usher or Latin master.



The watercolour painting by John Buckler of *The Free School, Aylesbury* is dated to 1837, shortly before the changes to the school site in 1840. The Latin School moved from the church to a newly-built brick schoolroom on the corner of Pebble Lane. From 1840 until 1906, as the photograph shows, there was a gated courtyard between the Assistant Master's house (Church House) and the Latin School.

## County Museum buildings: the 20<sup>th</sup> century

In 1907 the Grammar School moved to new premises on a green-field site and the 18<sup>th</sup> century building was bought by the Bucks Archaeological Society as a public museum for its collections and a residence for the curator, Edwin Hollis, appointed in 1908. Church House, the assistant master's house, and the Latin School were separately owned by the church. The courtyard between the old Latin School of 1840 and Church House was infilled by a new parish hall, dated 1907.

In 1934, an underground Muniment Room was constructed in the central school courtyard and the yard roofed over to provide a single-storey exhibition room, named the Wilkes Gallery. Many human bones were found during the construction but not recorded. They were dismissed as displaced during previous construction.

Ceely House and its garden remained a separate home for the Baker family. After Dr Baker died in 1924, Ceely House was occupied by his daughter Cicely who sold the house to the Society in 1944. Miss Baker remained in residence as the Society's tenant until 1950 when negotiations began with the County Council towards joint operation of the County Museum. The Ceely House extension was formally opened in 1954 with an Art Gallery funded by the Pilgrim Trust. In 1957, the former Grammar School and Ceely House were leased by the Society to the County Council who have operated the museum since then.

In 1965 the County Council purchased Church House and in 1979 the two Church Halls from St Mary's PCC. The Aylesbury Gallery opened there in 1985. In 1971, a new floor was inserted into the lofty grammar schoolhouse to form a new exhibition gallery on *Rural Life*.

This significant complex of historic buildings was in dire need of repair by 1989 when the Museum closed for 6 years for large-scale restoration; two galleries in the former parish halls remained open during the 6 year project. In 1990, the Tudor wall painting was revealed in the former Brother House and integrated into the refurbished building. A fundraising and public appeal, headed by Sir Timothy Raison, raised £0.5m to build a superb modern Art Gallery in the central courtyard of the Grammar School. The County Museum re-opened in 1995 and was awarded *Museum of the Year* in 1996 following the opening of the Roald Dahl Children's Gallery in the former coach house of Ceely House.

## The Garden

The garden of Ceely House, part of the former burial ground, was probably always open space. Little is known of its layout until photographs taken in Dr Baker's time, c1905, show greenhouses, flower beds, tennis and croquet.



In 1905 looking towards Pebble Lane



The garden and Cubitt Car in 2006



The latest addition to the Museum buildings is the oak-framed 'garage' built in 2005 to display the Museum's rare 1922 touring car, made at the Cubitt car factory in Aylesbury which operated from 1919 until 1926.

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