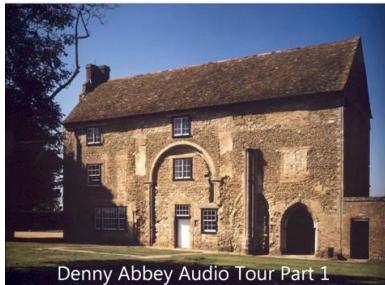


Denny Abbey Tour – Audio Transcript



Hello, and Welcome to Denny Abbey.

This tour intends to give you an introduction to the history of the abbey, and to some of the more interesting features of the site.

From the entry kiosk, please walk around the black grain store, following the one-way system, across the play area and to the gate by the road leading to the abbey.

This is the first stop of the tour.



Point 1
At each point, look for the symbol:



You should now be at point 1, as shown by a marker on the gatepost. If you look towards the abbey you will see the signs of 850 years of history. A mixture of brick and stone and concrete, of differently-shaped windows and doors, some blocked off, others superimposed on originals, a confusing mish-mash of styles and materials.

Perhaps you can think of what you see now as a palimpsest, like one of those medieval parchments that has been partly erased so that it can be written over, something too valuable to be thrown away and so it must be reformed and reused in a different idiom. This is hardly surprising, for building stone is not to be found in this part of Cambridgeshire, and a building such as Denny has always been seen as far too good to pull down, or to be allowed to crumble.

You should be able to make out 3 sections to the abbey from where you are now standing – left, central and right. The central one is the most helpful to begin with as it is the original east-west nave of the first church – the west door is the one you can see at the near end of this central section. Just below the roof of this section you should be able to make out 2 rounded, clerestory windows, one almost obscured by a later window. These, too, are original.

The left-hand section is the transept, or crossing, of the first church, and you are looking at the north end. The faint outline of a blocked-up clerestory window can just be seen on the west face of this transept at a similar level to those in the nave. What seems to be a large window half-way up the north face of the transept is, in fact, a door which led into a two-storied building whose upper floor housed the dormitory, or sleeping quarters. For, of course, an abbey was a self-sufficient community whose inmates lived here for much of their lives. You may be able to make out the outlines of two earlier doors which once led into the same building, as well as marks of its lower roof line. Between you and the building you can see the remains of various monastic buildings:

perhaps an early refectory, cellarer's building, storehouse, though there is disagreement over the exact function of each.

The founders of this abbey were a cell of Benedictine monks attached to Ely Cathedral just 10 miles away. Exactly why they chose to come here is not entirely clear. It is possible that their previous quarters, a mile or so to the north, were flooded out, and so they decamped to one of the few 'islands' in the Fens, or it may be that they came in search of solitude to escape the temptations of the big city! At any rate they began building in 1159, from the east end, and got almost as far as the end of the central section by 1170 when they, equally mysteriously, left to return to Ely.

In truth, they must have had a difficult time of it. Denny was surrounded by water for much of the year, and so cannot have been healthy. Stone for the abbey had to be brought from Northamptonshire over 50 miles away, probably by waterway, which would have been expensive and time-consuming, and during this period the monks would have had to live in temporary, uncomfortable accommodation.

However, if you look to the nearest fields to your right you may see evidence that they were not the first to see the benefits of this site. You may be able to see the remains of a causeway that runs through the car park and bends round to continue towards Waterbeach, a mile away to your right. In the field you can still make out the bumps and mounds of Romano-British farmsteads, more of which can be found in fields to the south of the abbey. The road you came along to get here— the A10 – is a Roman road, which would have linked the cities of Ely and Cambridge, as it still does, so the site was not as isolated as it may first appear.

Please go across now to the west door of the church to point 2 of the tour.



Point 2



You should now be standing by the west door (arched, with decoration)

In 1170, the abbey was sold to another religious organisation: the Knights Templar. Although officially named the Poor Fellow-soldiers of Christ, and set up with the simple aim of protecting Christian pilgrims en route from Jaffa on the Mediterranean coast to Jerusalem, by 1170 this organisation had become the richest and most powerful body in Christian Europe with armies, navies, castles, a diplomatic service, a banking network, huge swathes of land throughout the continent, and headquarters in the centre of Paris, London and Jerusalem.

In England they owned numerous estates, or preceptories, which were geared to furthering their economic interests, but Denny was selected as one of only two properties to serve as a hospice for elderly and sick members of the order.

When they arrived, the west front where you are standing would probably have been an empty shell. The Benedictine design had called for a much longer nave, but the Templars had a more realistic view and they closed off the end with the decorated doorway that you see before you. If you look up, there was probably a window where the brickwork is now, to let in light at this end. Most of the stone ancillary buildings which you can see around you were built by the Templars, who remained here for another 135 years.

In front of the west door, on the ground, is the outline shape of a coffin. The actual burial was discovered during excavations and the bones of the unknown Templar now lie in a metal case in the Education Room. (currently at English Heritage, Wrest Park for study, Aug. 2020)

If you stand with your back to the west door, on your left is a small building, with a blocked gothic window and cement-filled doorway, which was originally separate from the church. This may have been the house of the Preceptor (the man in charge of the abbey) or possibly a guest-house. Later it was joined onto the church.

Please continue left around the outside of the building, past the modern entrance doorway, to the south side where you will see the next point in the tour, point 3.



Point 3



If you look at the building from this side, you will note that it looks nothing like a church, and indeed it isn't.

By 1307, the Templars had overreached themselves, and the King of France, Philip the Fair, who was heavily in their debt, decided to move against them. The organisation was closed down on the grounds (possibly true) of heresy and its leaders executed. In England, King Edward II, son-in law to Philip felt it was wise to follow suit, and the 11 elderly and frail Templars at Denny were removed to Cambridge Castle, and later the Tower of London. Fortunately for them, Edward was more interested in seizing the lands and wealth of the Templars, than in bothering about what crimes they might have committed, and so they were eventually absolved and pensioned off to live in other monasteries.

Denny passed to the King who offered it to a young and very wealthy widow, the Countess of Pembroke, founder of Pembroke College in Cambridge. Wanting to do, and be seen to do, good works she decided to remove a group of Franciscan nuns, the Poor Clares, from Waterbeach to come and worship at Denny. It is said that it took her 10 years to persuade them to move the one mile, which may not say much for the attractions of Denny!

However, the Countess was ambitious and she had major plans for the Abbey. The part you are looking at was added onto the south side of the nave in the 1340's and was to become the guest quarters for those she would invite to stay with her, though the windows are much later.

Other items of interest include the outline of a gothic doorway at first-floor level on the left side. This may have led into a wooden garderobe, or toilet, as archaeologists have found the evidence in the ground underneath. The Countess also modernised the south end of the transept, converting it into her living quarters. The two thin windows you can see gave light to a spiral staircase, and the irregular rectangular window to their left illuminated her own, private garderobe.

Before moving on, note also the Tudor brick chimney which was built onto the south end of the transept, and which will be referred to later.

Please move now to the front, eastern, end of the church to point 4.



Point 4



You should now be at point 4.

If you study this façade you can unlock the secrets of 850 years of English, religious, architectural and social history, all written into the stonework of the original crossing, or transept, of the first church. Of course, something is missing, for there should be a choir, or east end, to this church, but all that remains is the thick concrete outline on the grass together with a handful of clues on the face of the transept.

The Countess of Pembroke decided that the existing church was not suitable for the 30 or so nuns she was intending to bring from Waterbeach, or, more likely, was not sufficiently large to befit a lady of her status, so she decided to build a much bigger church in its place. Rather than demolish the original structure, which would have been an expensive, time-consuming and wasteful exercise, she decided to use the transept as the west end of her new church. This meant taking down the choir of the first church, which accounts for why it is no longer there. She bricked up the lovely Norman, semi-circular archway of the first church, which can still be seen, as well as the two doorways either side into the transept. The right-hand one is visible behind the pillar. A new, pointed Gothic doorway was inserted in its place to enable nuns to access the church from their dormitory.

This gives us a clue as to the dimensions of the new church which can be made out via the tramlines showing through the grass. We can tell it had two aisles, so it was much wider than the earlier one, but we are less certain as to its length and height, although the lintel just below the top window in the blocked-up Norman arch was apparently the site of an earlier window through which the Countess could look down on the nuns at their devotions, and so must have been within the new church.

The existing church was then converted into private apartments for the Countess and for her guests.

We know little about the Poor Clare nuns who lived here, except that it is highly doubtful that they were poor. Some we know, owned land, and the last Abbess, Elizabeth Throckmorton, was from a titled and well-connected family who corresponded with the great Renaissance scholar Erasmus, and may even have had him to stay at Denny. The motivation for women to enter nunneries in Medieval and Tudor times was not always religious, and some doubtless lived comfortable, though secluded, lives.

This ends part 1 of the audio tour. Please continue with Part 2 (download from website).

Welcome to Part 2 of the audio tour.

You should be standing at Point 4.



Point 4.



As you look around you will see that almost nothing remains of the new church – and for this we have to thank Henry VIII and the English Reformation. For reasons that are too complex to explain fully in this guide, Henry saw the religious communities as a threat and, perhaps more importantly, a source of easy wealth. He ordered them to be dissolved, or closed, their wealth ransacked and their buildings destroyed. What happened at Denny sheds light on the real workings of this process, and how far from any religious or political motivation it really was.

The king's secretary, Thomas Cromwell, sent round commissioners in 1536 to assess the wealth of these houses and decide which ones should be closed. Perhaps due to the status of its Abbess, Denny survived this initial purge, but three years later, the commissioners returned. Their report told of how the nuns came out with 'tears in their eyes and begged to be dismissed', a chilling insight into the web of deceit and fear that shrouded the process.

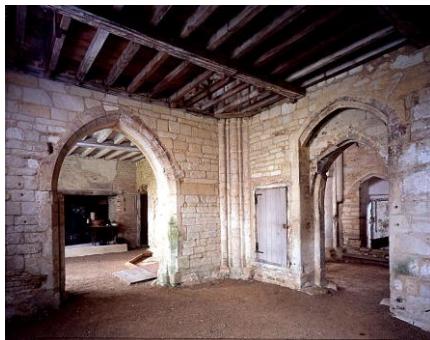
The nuns were sent away, and the new church destroyed. But the first church was now living quarters, and far too valuable to be knocked down, so it was sold to a speculator, making some persons a tidy profit. This happened all round East Anglia and the Cromwell family was not averse to helping itself to the pickings, a possible extra justification for the subsequent execution of Thomas Cromwell.

And so for the next 400 years Denny Abbey became a farmhouse, owned by families, corporations and businesses. This was not such a new departure since the abbey had always been the centre of a farming estate; it was just the status of the owners which changed. These owners included Thomas Hobson, the Cambridge inn-keeper of 'Hobson's Choice' fame, the City of London, and Chivers Fruit Company from nearby Histon.

Although the inside of the building changed to create a more domestic feel, few major architectural alterations were made. Windows were modernised, doors knocked through, an impressive chimney built onto the south end of the transept, and the dormitory block demolished, but apart from that the fabric of the building remained more or less the same, so that when in the 1960's the Ministry of Works removed much of the outside coating, and inside panelling, there was no difficulty in recognising the features and layout of the original abbey church which lay behind.

Please follow the direction signs back along the south side, past point 3 and near point 2 to the front entrance door. Go inside the door to the next point of the tour.

*On your way along the walk-way, read the text between * and * below.*



Point 5



You are now standing at the crossing point of the first church. In front of you is the main part of the nave, with the north transept to your right and the south transept to your left. In front you may see behind a wall an ante-room with models of 2 Templars. Their clothes reflect their poverty, or certainly of those who lived here. When the order was closed down in 1308, each man was said to have only a tunic, a clothes bag, and a bed in the communal dormitory.

If you move into the north transept to your right [*the bottom of the stairs*] you will see the doorway which led into the dormitory, first of the Templars, and later of the nuns. In the plaster beside this doorway you may be able to see the mark of a banister from a previous staircase. The nuns, at least in theory, had to rise for the Matins service at 2.00am and perhaps you can imagine them rubbing their eyes and maybe even grumbling a little as they came down the cold stairs and out through the archway into the aisle of the new church!

If you move through to the south transept, the main feature is a magnificent Tudor farmhouse kitchen with an open fireplace large enough to roast an ox! The later, iron, cooking range is probably late 18th century, with a bread oven on the left, heated by the smaller 'perpetual' oven below it, a sign of how kitchen furniture was becoming smaller over time. In the walls there is evidence of original church features. The pillar, half-hidden in the corner is in a remarkable state of preservation – its scalloped capital a clue that it was put there by the Benedictines, and with traces of (probably) original paint remaining – due to being bricked over during the 14th century changes and thus kept safe from natural weathering. In the corner to the right of the fireplace is a spiral staircase which led to the second floor and above (no access).

* If you carry along the walkway you can see some of the farmhouse interior decoration tacked onto the earlier walls. English Heritage (in the 1960s) adopted a policy of not restoring the building to any particular period in its history, but rather to peel back some of the layers to reveal traces of earlier use. This has resulted in the building being on one level a confusing mish-mash of periods, but on the other a fascinating source of investigation and discovery as the visitor tries to piece together and imagine all the different stages of its history. *



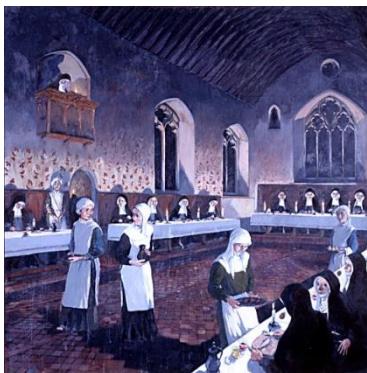
Point 6



*In the 2020 season, visitors will **not** be able to access the upper floor due to covid-19 measures. Please see the display of pictures near the metal drawers for this section:*

- (1) Around you, you can see the tops of the 4 magnificent Norman archways that formed the structure of the original church. Directly in front you can see a flattened Tudor arch, suggesting that this was inserted when Denny became a farmhouse, and through it can be seen a more pointed Gothic arch from the time of the Countess.
- (2) If you go through you can see the clerestory windows of the first church on each side, and this gives an idea of how narrow it was.
- (3) The paint on the walls is Medieval, and reminds us that later on these were private quarters for the Countess and her guests, and so needed to be cheerful.
- (4) If you go back into the upper South transept you can see the Countess of Pembroke's own bedroom. Its present austere appearance is a far cry from the comfortable surroundings she would have enjoyed.
- (5) The room would have been dominated by a four-poster bed, with elaborate and luxurious hangings. There would have been plaster and paint on the walls and possibly tapestries. The floor would have been covered, perhaps with rush matting, and there would have been a roaring fire.
- (6) There would also have been a chest and table and chair, and the right hand 'doorway' would have been a clothes cupboard. The left-hand doorway led to her own private wardrobe. The window would have been in the back wall, rather than the side (which would have been blocked by the church) – it was filled in when the chimney was built.
- (7) The beams that you can see through the 'doorways' are 14th century, and were strong enough for that room to hold balls as late as the 1920's.

To continue the tour, go out of the abbey by the entrance following the one-way system, across the site of the new church, through the doorway in the wall by the cottage, and across to the refectory. (Take care of the bumpy ground!)



Point 7



You are now standing in the refectory or dining room of the abbey, built by the Countess in the 14th century. The large painting on the wall gives an idea of how the dining room might have looked, and if you search you can find the architectural details on which the painting was based. For example, the number and shape of the Gothic windows, the small doorway in the opposite wall, with the outline of the pulpit above it, and the magnificent tiled floor. At the far left end there would have been a kitchen. Considering there were only ever about 30 nuns you can see that they lived in some degree of comfort. Food would have come from the surrounding fields, and from the abbey's own fishponds which lie alongside the track leading to the site.

If the Refectory looks a bit like a barn, with its large facing doors, that is because after the dissolution it was used as just such a purpose. This saved it from demolition, and when archaeologists dug down through centuries of cow dung, they found the floor in a surprisingly good state of preservation.

Outside, towards the right-hand end of the refectory wall, you can see the doorway the nuns used. It looks too small, until you notice the ground is banked up before it.

This mound reveals that under your feet lie the remains of the ancillary buildings all abbeys were accustomed to have. The site has not yet been thoroughly excavated and you can imagine that if you could roll back the top few feet of ground, like a carpet, you would clearly see the outline of such structures. For now we have to take the word (largely guesswork) of archaeologists who say that the space between the refectory and the stone wall you have just come through is the cloister, while the stone walls just emerging from the ground between the refectory and the cottage belong to a chapter house.

Walnut Tree Cottage

The cream-coloured cottage [*now pink*] that you see in front is more recent, but still interesting. It is one of perhaps three which were built at Denny in the 1860's to house farmworkers and their families. It perhaps owes its existence to Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria, who was appalled by the squalid conditions endured by agricultural labourers, and who personally designed and promoted 'model dwellings' for their benefit. While this is not an exact copy of his design, it undoubtedly owes its existence to his influence, and perhaps reveals the philanthropy of the owner, or the difficulty of attracting labour at the time. It has been 'modernised' and furnished to reflect the 1940's, but apart from electricity had probably changed little from the 19th century. It seems cramped, damp and gloomy to us now, and it is hard to imagine that it represented the height of luxury to those who lived in it first.

This ends the audio tour, but not the end of things to see in the museum. Do not miss the Village Life shop with its goods and packaging reminding us of the recent past. Nor our display of farming equipment which tells the story of the development of agriculture from the time of the Agricultural Revolution. Much of this is held in the Stone Barn [*not open in the 2020 season*], an uncommon example of a late 16th century barn (most were made of wood), with its wonderful roof structure. The stone for this, we can guess, came from the recently-demolished abbey church. Also, make sure you see the displays of Fenland crafts which give a fascinating insight into this fast-disappearing culture [*the wheel-wright's workshop only is open in 2020 season, pictures of others are on pig shed doors*]

Thank you for your attention. We hope you have enjoyed this tour and that you will have a pleasant and interesting visit.

Tour point locations:

