

The Tudor manorial complex in Willington

John Gostwick, who became lord of the manor in Willington in 1529, repaired and extended the church and demolished the medieval manor house replacing it with a fine new house of brick and timber. He built a range of other buildings, including the stables and the dovecote. The other farm buildings he built, including a large half-timbered barn, were pulled down in the 19th century.

Willington Dovecote

The Tudor dovecote that you see here is surprisingly large for a country manor. Its unusual design may have been inspired by the buildings which John Gostwick saw in France in 1520, when it is thought he may have travelled there with King Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey to the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

Timber-ring dating of the beams in the roof, undertaken by the National Trust in 1997, showed that the felling dates for the timbers were Spring 1543 and Spring 1544, indicating that this building was constructed in or after 1544.

You will see that a variety of stone has been used in the coursed rubble of the walls, but most of it is poor quality Bedfordshire Great Oolite or Cornbrash, and may have been recycled from older buildings. The outside was originally rendered.



Pigeons entered through the louvres in the roof and then down the chutes into the safe, dark chambers containing the nesting boxes. It is said that there are 1500 nesting boxes inside. When the cote was fully used each box would have contained a pair of adult birds who could have produced two squabs (baby birds) every six to eight weeks. In the eastern chamber the framework of timber beams, used to help to access the nesting boxes to collect eggs or squabs, can still be seen.

The Stables

The main door faces west, towards John Gostwick's manor house, just visible in the trees. It is possible that the Stables were remodelled from an earlier building on the same site and that some features, such as the gargoyles on the corners of the roof, may have come from demolished ecclesiastical buildings.

Timber-ring dating by the National Trust showed that the felling dates for the timbers date from 1538-40, so the building was constructed after that date, perhaps shortly before Henry VIII and three of his councillors stayed, on 21st October 1541. Perhaps some of the king's men slept upstairs in this building.

There were internal plastered walls upstairs and downstairs, a plastered ceiling to the ground floor, and there is evidence that the windows were originally glazed.

Can you see the evidence of a feeding trough along the inside east wall of the ground floor, going across two doorways which had been filled in? Look very carefully, there are fixings for hay baskets too. There are also hooks to hang harness and tack just inside the front door.

The brick floor on the ground floor is not original and may date from about 1800. The wooden blocks in the floor fill the spaces left when the partitions, which divided the space into 4 loose boxes, and were removed in the 20th century.

Upstairs, there is a very fine, late-medieval roof; 3 different styles of timbers divide the space into five bays, or sections. Mortice slots in the bottom of two of the tie-beams show that originally it was intended to divide the space into three: one-bay spaces at each end and a larger three bay space in the middle.

Willington dovecote and stables were built by the lord of the manor, Sir John Gostwick, in the reign of Henry VIII

In the time of Henry VIII, Willington was a small village and John was born here between 1480 and 1490. He is thought to have been educated by the vicar of Potton.

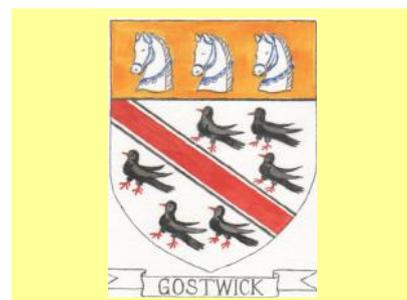
John Gostwick went to work for Thomas Wolsey, who later became a Cardinal and Lord Chancellor. While working for Wolsey, John Gostwick ran a business, importing hats and caps of all colours from Milan, France and Flanders. He also performed tasks for the King and met all sorts of influential people in London and elsewhere. These included another of the Cardinal's men, Thomas Cromwell, who later became Henry VIII's chief secretary.



In the 1520s he travelled a good deal, married Joan, and had a son, William. It is possible that he travelled with Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey to France in 1520 to meet the French king at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. The meeting was a spectacular occasion.

In July 1523 Gostwick was appointed auditor of the Royal Castles and Lordships of Wakefield, Middleham and Richmond and other places in the Duchy of York, and soon afterwards leased a manor nearby. He was granted a coat of arms in the same year. In 1527 he was appointed Comptroller of Cardinal Wolsey's household.

Purchase of Willington – in 1529 he bought a large estate in Bedfordshire, including the manor of Willington, from Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, for £1300. Evidence of John Gostwick's building programme here between 1529 and about 1543 can still be seen today. He repaired and extended the church, demolished the medieval manor house replacing it with a fine new house of brick and timber, built the stables in the late 1530s, the dovecote (and other farm buildings pulled down in the 19th century) in the 1540s.



The Dissolution of the Monasteries: After Henry VIII made himself head of the church in England, he used Thomas Cromwell to close down the monasteries. In 1536 there were more than 800 monastic and other religious foundations in England. Five years later there were none.

John Gostwick worked with Thomas Cromwell and was appointed Treasurer and Receiver-General of the First Fruits and Tenths. His job was to collect all the profits from the monasteries and religious houses which had been closed and account for them to the king. He was paid £100 a year, which later increased to £300.

The 1540s: Thomas Cromwell fell out of favour with the king in 1540 and was executed. Gostwick kept out of trouble with such success that the king made him a knight before the end of the year. The king and three of his councillors stayed overnight in Willington in October 1541. Gostwick became MP for Bedfordshire in 1544 but died in 1545 and is buried in a large plain tomb between the chancel and the Gostwick chapel in Willington church, near to his wife's grave.



The image of Henry VIII is the property of the National Trust, the drawing of the Gostwick coat of arms is by Michael Galley, and the carving can be seen in the roof over the altar in Willington church and was photographed by Laurie Jones of NADFAS.