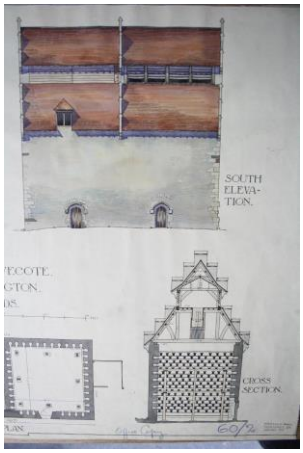
BE INSPIRED:

by National Trust volunteers, and others, at Willington Dovecote and Stables from 1912 to 2021.

As National Trust re-adjusts after COVID, and re-opens both the Tudor buildings at Willington to visitors, this seems a good time to look back and appreciate the important contributions made by Willington volunteers for more than 100 years.

The back story:



1912 – Caroline Orlebar, with the assistance of Lyndon Bolton, *who was president of Bedford Arts Club at the time, campaigned to buy the Dovecote to save it from demolition.*



A public subscription raised the money in less than 3 months. They intended to give the building to the Board of Works (later English Heritage) or the National Trust.



1912-3 – a measured drawing of the dovecote *(upper left) was produced by the Office of Works and is now held by National Trust at their Head Office in Swindon.*

1914 – The transfer of the building to the National Trust took place at the end of this year. A condition of the acquisition by the Trust was that they would care for the Orlebar graves; land round the dovecote was to be let to Mr. S. Nicholls of Cople to provide income



Early 20th century - Visit by Bedford Archaeological Society (?) exact date unknown – there are other copies in the Willington Village Archive.

1925 – The tenancy of the field to the east and north of the Dovecote was transferred to Mr. Wilkinson who grew flowers. Members of his family still rent

the land today and now use it for grazing horses. They grow plants and flowers in their glasshouses.

1938 – Samuel Whitbread was approached about the care of the Dovecote in January this year.

1939-45 - There was a proposal to use the building as the village morgue if there was a disaster due to enemy action. It is said that during the Second World War local boys and girls used to climb up inside the dovecote and sit on the beams in the roof.

1945 – Key-holder at this time was J.W Wilkinson, who had informal use of the dovecote for storage. Isaac Godber offered the Stables to the National Trust.



1947 – The Trust accepted the Stables at the end of the year. The Godber family continue to take an interest in both buildings. Richard and Candida, see right, have visited our events and they continue to pay for the grass to be cut all round the buildings, which is quite onerous this year (2022) as grass has grown so quickly.

1951-53 - A visitor suggested that the Dovecote should be restocked. National Trust very politely said 'no.' In 1953 the site was said to be 'a reproach to the Trust' with untidy fences and buildings. Local builder, 'Titch' Endersby, was asked to fill in the pond by the Dovecote to make it into a car park, and plant some trees. A brick collecting box was also built, but later removed, as it spoilt the view of the buildings. At this time, the key-holders for the Dovecote were Frank Wooding and his wife, who lived in the white cottage on the corner opposite the church. In the nineteenth century this had been the Sunday School, but over the years had been much extended.

1958 – An architect's report on the Dovecote and Stables suggested that the render that had fallen away from the Dovecote walls should not be replaced.

1961 – the Trust paid £30 to extinguish the obligation to care for the Orlebar graves.

1962 - there was considerable delay in fixing a new door to the Stables. When the National Trust made enquiries, it was found to have been made the wrong size. Eventually one was made and fitted in August that year.

1967 – A new staircase was installed in the Stables. A fee of 1s. for opening the buildings to visitors was suggested. That year the church asked whether they could use the Stables for their fete that summer, if it rained.

Joyce Godber became the key-holder for the buildings, but the exact date of this is not known. Visitors used to call at her cottage for the key and then show themselves round. She was an important person in the village and the county. In the early years of World War 2 she became acting clerk to Bedford County Record Office and was promoted to County Archivist in 1946. Her *History of Bedfordshire* was published in 1969 and reprinted in 1984. She wrote her autobiography for Bedfordshire Archives, which was not to be opened until 20 years after her death, which was in 1999.



John Manning and Joyce Godber wrote an article 'Willington Stable: an Architectural Puzzle' which was published in the *1977-8 National Trust Year Book*. Her brother, Frank Godber, wrote six short articles, about Willington for the *Bedfordshire Magazine*, volumes 25 and 26, between 1993 and 1998. He later checked over the design for the new interpretation board, in 2003 to 2006.

Harold Askew who lived at 72 Church End regularly spoke to visitors and took an active interest in the buildings.



About 1975 – A scale drawing of the Stable was produced by Terry Hinchliffe for Bedford National Trust Association.

1977-8 – There was a change of key-holder to Judy Endersby and in the same year Bedford National Trust

Association was formed, largely because of the enthusiasm of Bruce and Sue Edwards. The Association arranged teas, shops, a flower festival and other events in the Stables.

1996-7 – Repairs to the Dovecote roof, and timber-ring dating of the roof timbers in both the Dovecote and the Stables took place. It was established that the Stables were built first, about 1539, and the Dovecote was built after the visit of Henry Vlll, about 1543. The chairman and some members of Bedford National Trust Association, including the chairman Tom Greenaway, went up the scaffolding to explore the dovecote roof.



Dorothy Jamieson became vice-chair of Bedford Association in 1996, and followed this by being chair for 3 years from 1999. She began a research project into the Dovecote and Stables which received financial support from Robin Mills, Regional Director for Thames and Chilterns at the time. He visited the buildings in July 1997, with Tracey Avery, the Assistant Historic Buildings Representative for the Trust, to thank Dorothy and Bedford Association members, especially Terry Hinchliffe, for their work and support.
Dorothy went on to translate the Willington Manor Court Rolls into English, from the medieval Latin, with the help of friends and the Bedfordshire Archives.



Some of the Bedford Association members visited in the Record Office to look at documents which they helped to buy in 1997, with the donation from Sam Whitbread of Southill Park. Bruce and Sue

Edwards can be seen standing behind Chris Pickford the County Archivist.

The Marquess of Tavistock had given the Bedford Association a generous cheque to help them to support the Bedfordshire Archives to begin to catalogue, translate and interpret the Russell papers in their care.

1999 – Measured surveys and drawings of the Stable were begun with the help of Gary Marshall, NT archaeologist for the Thames and Chilterns Region at that time. Dorothy Jamieson listed items in the Willington correspondence file at Regional HQ (Hughenden).

2002-3 - Willington Jubilee Heritage Map was drawn by Terry Hinchliffe and edited by Dorothy Jamieson. One or two copies are still for sale for £3. The buildings were opened as part of the Heritage Open Days programme from this date**.**



2003-6 – The Heritage Lottery Fund project took place and Willington Local History Group was formed. The Project produced the interpretation board near the National Trust car park, the time-line in the Stables, a professional survey of the Stables by Nicholas Cooper and the Willington Heritage Trail leaflet. The History Group began to accept donations from local people to begin a Willington Archive, with Sheila Ward as Archivist and Mervyn Askew as her assistant. When the Archive moved from her house to the Methodist Church, he continued as Archivist for them.

Summer 2013 – archaeology weekends for school children were organised by Albion Archaeology and Bedford Museum's Saturday Archaeology Workshops, now the Young Archaeologists Club. The image below shows work in progress with Angus Wainwright (then National Trust Archaeologist for the East Region) and volunteers. A series of other similar weekends took place in other years. Photo by Julie Shearer.

The Willington volunteers are very grateful for the many professional and volunteer archaeologists who have helped us over the years, an account of which deserves an article of its own. There is only space here to express our thanks to Gary Marshall

and Angus Wainwright (the National Trust archaeologists), to Bedford Museum (The Higgins), the archaeologists in the Borough Planning Department, those in Central Bedfordshire, and in Albion Archaeology. The many volunteers have included Kris Lokyer, Andrew Johnson, Terry Spencer, Kevin Faddon, John and Julie Shearer, other local people, with school-children, students, and members of Bedford Association of National Trust Members.



For several years an open-air theatre Group came along on a Friday evening, once a year, before performing on the Saturday at Houghton Mill. These happy family events were great fun; people brought their rugs or chairs with a picnic and there was a small team of players, with lots of audience participation. Most people bought their tickets on line or on the night, although Mervyn sold tickets in the village as well. Here is Melford Hys performing in 2013.





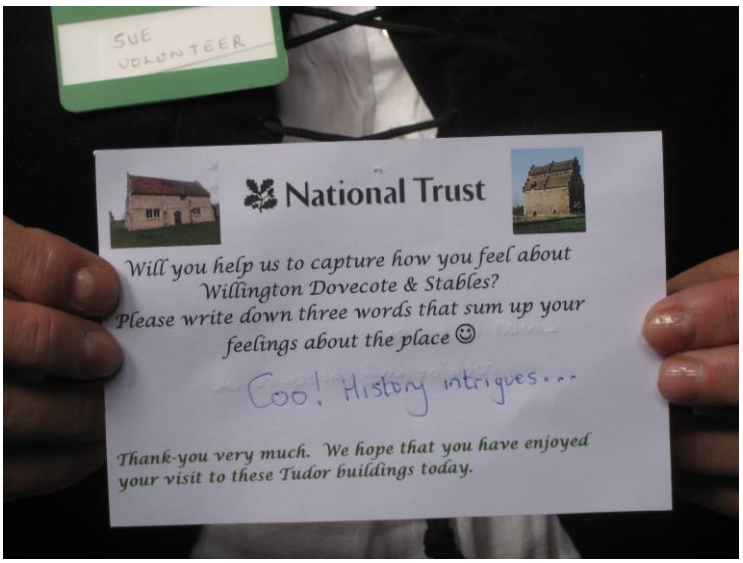
2014 – Celebrations were held on September 13th, Heritage Open Day, for the centenary of the donation of the Dovecote to National Trust by Caroline Orlebar, the vicar's daughter, and her friend, Lyndon Bolton. The sun shone, and thanks to a generous donation from Bedford National Trust Association: Bedford Town Band (Concert Brass Group) played and Franklyn's Hog Roast roasted. There were displays and a cheerful team of National Trust staff and volunteers welcomed more than 100 visitors of all ages. National Trust provided a banner to say 'Saved for the Nation' and members of Caroline Orlebar's extended modern family came to represent the donors. This photograph is from Shane Horlock's collection.



Classic Car Events – for some years Mervyn Askew arranged two Classic Car events each summer, usually a Tuesday evening and a full Sunday. They were very popular and informal; participants made donations to National Trust and cleared up after themselves.

Here is Mervyn with his next-door neighbour, Sheila Ward, at one of the classic car events.

Heritage Open Days – one Heritage Open Day we invited visitors to tell us what they thought of the Dovecote and Stables. Below are Sue Sheppard Smith, who took a special interest in pigeons, with Gordon Vowles, author and historian.





In 2018 - Trevor Banyard-Smith began to arrange the volunteers' rota; he would be happy to pass on his experience of volunteering if anyone would like to contact him on Trevor.bs@talk21.com

In 2019 - He and his wife Valerie sorted out the large portfolio of display material held in the Stables, and listed the items in alphabetical order.

In 2021 – Here is Trevor with Lydia Neil (Operations Manager of Houghton Mill) and a group of volunteers and friends, before the COVID shut-down.

Might you be inspired to join the Willington Volunteers and enjoy sharing the history of the buildings with the general public, and the friendships which will come from being a member of the team?

