



# Magdalen Tower

## Stony Stratford



### Introduction...

The church of St Mary Magdalen, in Stony Stratford, dates from as early as the 13th Century. It has seen the Plague, Medieval Fayres and Civil War. It was destroyed by fire in 1742. The fire originated in the Bull Hotel, having been started by a maid who had scorched some sheets – she heard her mistress approaching and quickly pushed the sheets up the chimney and out of view. The sheet caught alight and the ensuing fire went on to destroy much of the east side of Stony Stratford (and some of the west) including 146 houses, several famous inns and the Mary Magdalen Church of which only the tower now still stands. Total damage was then estimated at £22,000.

Intertwined with tower are the people of the town who once worshiped in the church or are buried nearby, along with kings and queens who have passed by, the maid who sealed its fate and Browne Willis, known as the 'Dragon' of Whaddon, who tried to save it.

The church was named after Mary Magdalen, a sometime maligned character whose own name means tower. The Tower is embellished by local folk lore and its image is carried on in local institutes, but its detailed history is vague. There is no certainty of how the church would have looked although it was said it was one of the finest in the county. Uncommonly it was one of two churches in the town, a statement of power or control by the opposing Parishes and their Lords. Perhaps this competition led to its down fall, or perhaps there was no need for two churches. Whatever the truth the Tower remains, and this project has helped it stand over both the town and within people's minds.



St Mary Magdalene  
by G. Tattarescu

**Funding raised by  
The National Lottery**  
and awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund





# Magdalen Tower

## Stony Stratford



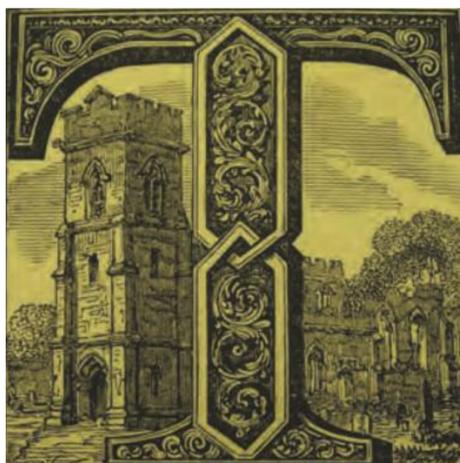
## History

The site has **ancient monument scheduling** which incorporates the church tower of St Mary Magdalen, the buried remains of the church and the surrounding churchyard, a rectangular area of ground orientated north east-south west, together with the associated graves and gravestones.

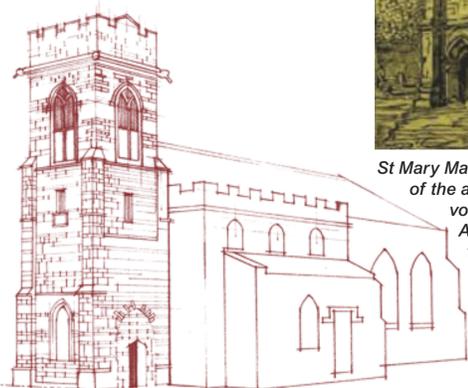
Stony Stratford emerged in the medieval period, growing up along either side of the former Roman road of Watling Street (now the High Street) which formed a boundary between the two ecclesiastical parishes of Calverton and Wolverton.



The church of St Giles



St Mary Magdalen church is illustrated at the beginning of the article about Stony Stratford in the fourth volume of George Lipscomb's 'The History and Antiquities of the County of Buckinghamshire, 1847'. This appears to be a representation of the building shortly after the 1742 fire



It is not known when the two churches were first built, but references dating to 1202 and 1203 mention three clerks and one priest at Stony Stratford and therefore suggests the presence of at least one church at that time. The two churches are first mentioned by name in 1476 when a chantry is recorded as being founded 'in the chapel of St Mary Magdalene and St Giles'. However, it is probable that both churches were in existence by 1290 when Hugh de Vere was granted an annual fair on the vigil and feast of St Mary Magdalen, in addition to the fair granted to him in 1257 on the vigil, feast and morrow of St Giles. In 1487 John Edy, who was founder of the town guild, left funds in his will for the repair of the chancel of St Mary Magdalen.



At the dissolution of the chantries during the 1540s the church of St Mary Magdalen was referred to as a free chapel with two priests, one of which was 'maintained by the guild of Stony Stratford'. Not long after 1641 the chapels of St Mary Magdalen and St Giles in Stony Stratford were united and services held in them alternately.





# Magdalen Tower

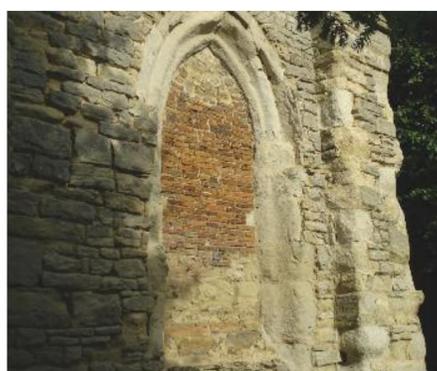
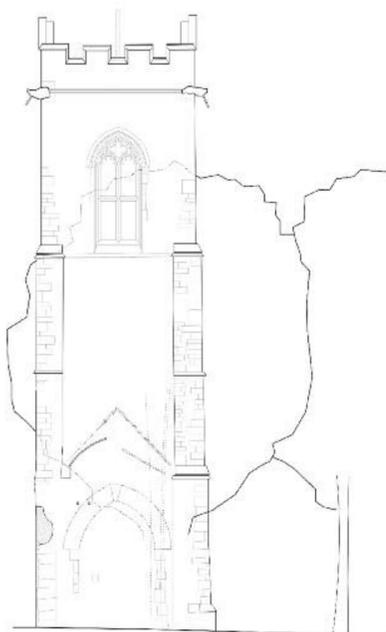
## Stony Stratford



### The Tower

The church tower, which is a **Listed Building Grade II**, is built of limestone in the perpendicular style of the 15th century and stands to its original height. It consists of three stages with a parapet at the top, and a string course between each stage. The original internal stone staircase survives.

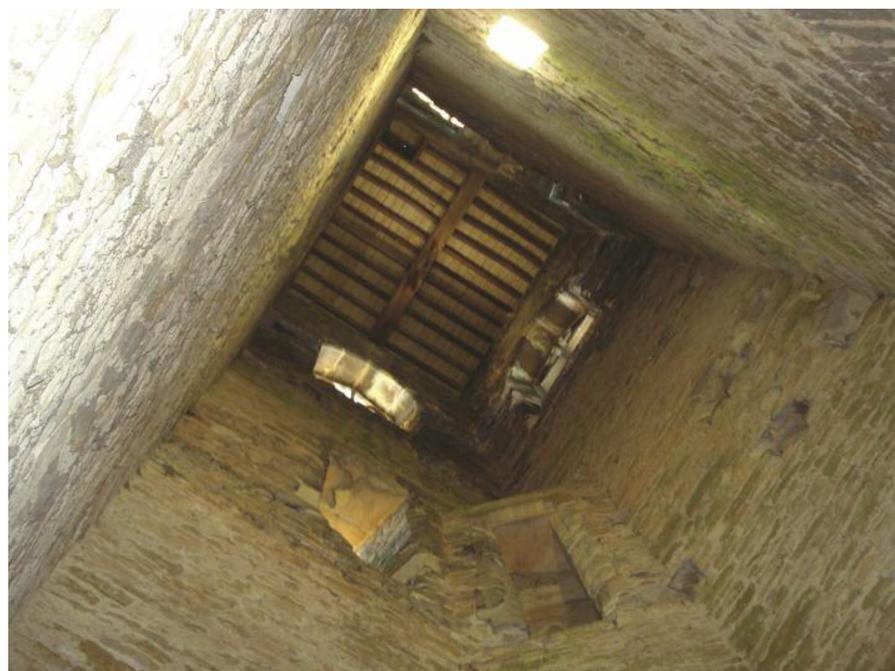
There are blocked-up arches on the north east and south east sides of the bottom stage. The north east arch would have provided access between the nave of the church and the tower whilst the south east arch would have provided access to the tower from the churchyard. This pointed arch has been partly filled-in leaving a low rounded arch, less than 1.52m high, with a brick voussoir (a wedge-shaped stone, used in building an arch or vault).

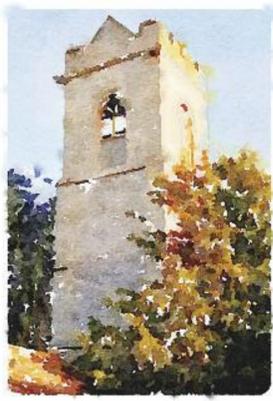


Access to the tower is provided through a padlocked iron gate and a wooden door on this side. On the south west side of the tower there is a blocked-up window with a moulded stone arch. Pilaster angle buttresses rise from the bottom four corners to the top of the second stage of the tower and there are square headed loop lights on the south east and south west faces.

The windows on all four sides of the top stage, or bell chamber, each consist of two cinquefoiled (five leaved) lights with a transom and a quatrefoil under a two-centred head. The string course dividing this upper stage from the parapet has gargoyles on all four corners. The parapet is embattled on the north east and southwest sides and gabled on the North West and south east sides, indicating that the roof of the tower was formerly pitched.

In the east window were the arms of John Plantagenet, who was Duke of Bedford in the 15th century, and on the roof of the church, on stone escutcheons, were the arms of James de la Plaunch, who died in 1305.





# Magdalen Tower

## Stony Stratford



New stone ready to go back in, shaped stone for parapet and other blocks to replace worn structural quoins – masonry blocks at the corner of the tower walls that provide strength to the rubble walls. The stone was chosen to match existing stone from nearby quarries, some material being sourced from Weston Underwood (Near Olney)



Outer parapet wall is having a new ashlar facing to the 'good side', the original stones were in a poor state. The existing stones had a skin of concrete dressed to look like stone which gave the appearance of solidity. The new stone should provide a weather cap for many years to come



Replacement stone above window (hood mould). Pigeons already doing their bit! (new louvers and netting will be installed to prevent them getting inside). Notice the darkened parts of the window stone, assumed soot from the fire



Detail of the east wall showing the infill to the arch that would have led to the main body of the church

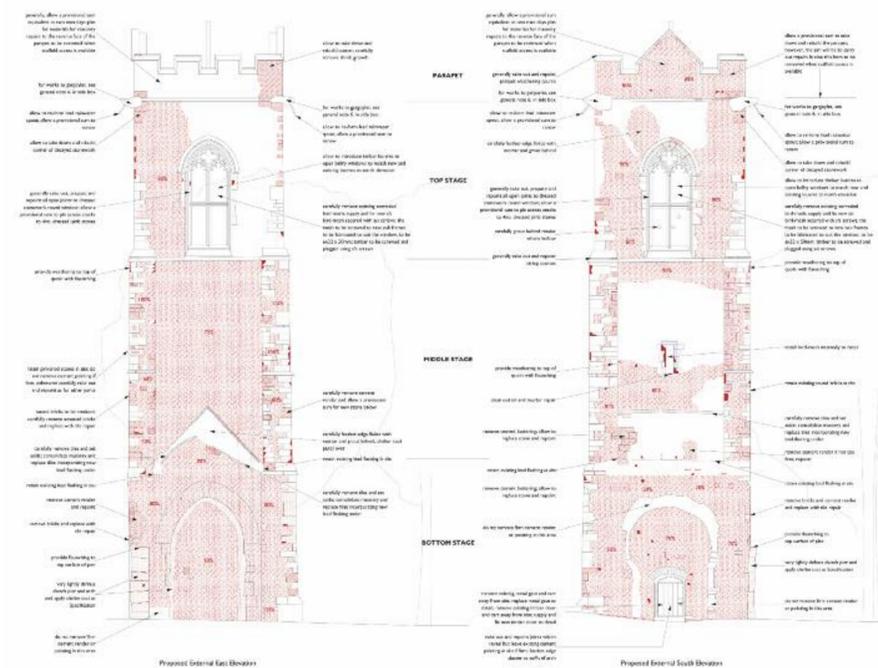
## Restoration

In order to establish a future for the tower, it was identified that a significant amount of repair and restoration work was needed. This was preceded by careful archaeological investigation which revealed that overall the south east corner was in the poorest condition. The stonework overall showed the impact of the fire and many different layers of repair over time; the roof was found to be in need of considerable attention.

The investigation also revealed a number of archaeological 'finds' including fragments of old newsprint, latterly analysed to be parts of an issue of 'The Radio Times' from 9th March 1934, presumably read and discarded by a tradesman working on a previous repair programme.

Work was designed and commissioned by Milton Keynes Council and undertaken in 2015/2016. The lead roof was refitted, stone gables remade and stonework refurbished, with key elements of window heads, tracery and quoins (masonry blocks at the corner of the tower walls that provide strength to the rubble walls) replaced with new locally sourced stone. The stone was chosen to match existing stone from nearby quarries, some material being sourced from Weston Underwood (Near Olney).

The works will ensure that the Magdalen Tower is sound and available as a cultural resource for the next generations to enjoy.



Blackening and reddening of stone, evidence of the fire (1) temperatures of 200 to 300°C is normally restricted to colour changes, including reddening in the case of stone containing iron. Colour change is considered to be non-reversible  
Area of worn limestone which has been retained but loose fragments removed  
Old fixing for lead on south side possibly for a porch covering  
Area with previous brick repair rebuilt  
Area with cement render, this was solid so left in place



The archaeological 'finds' including fragments of an issue of 'The Radio Times' from 9th March 1934





# Magdalen Tower

## Stony Stratford

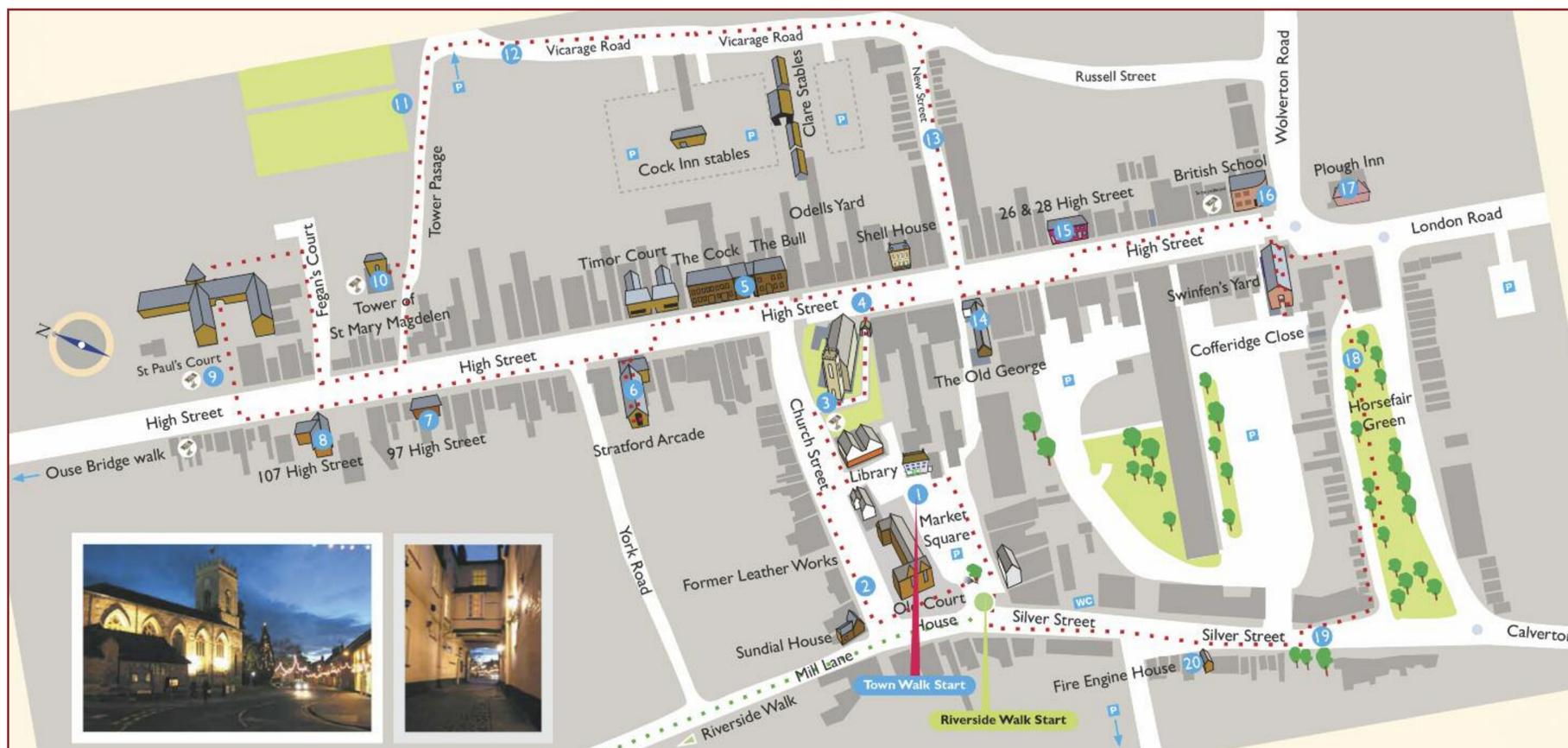


### Heritage Trail



Stony Stratford has a long and interesting history owing to its position at the crossing point of the River Great Ouse. Magdalen Tower features on this town walk which is approximately one mile long and takes about 45 minutes. The walk starts in the Market Square where car-parking spaces are available.

The complete trail leaflet – with detailed descriptions of the sites – can be downloaded from the website:  
[www.magdalentower.co.uk](http://www.magdalentower.co.uk)



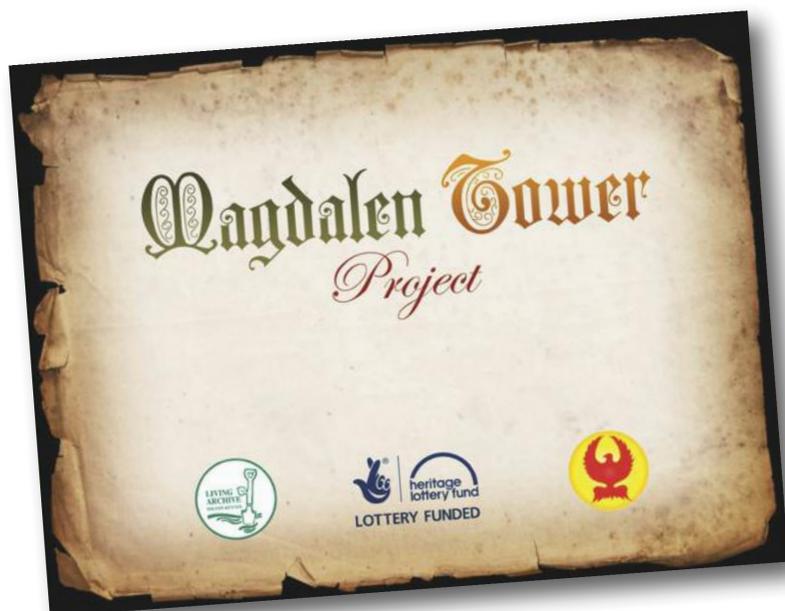
- |                                       |                                      |                                  |   |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| 1. The Market Square                  | 6. Burgage Strips                    | 11. 'Ansell Trust' Sports Ground | 16. British School and famous Stream Tram |
| 2. Church Street                      | 7. Signs of the Times                | 12. Vicarage Road                | 17. Plough Inn                            |
| 3. The Church of St Mary and St Giles | 8. 107 High Street                   | 13. New Street                   | 18. Horsefair Green                       |
| 4. The High Street                    | 9. St Paul's Court                   | 14. The Old George               | 19. Silver Street                         |
| 5. The Cock and Bull Inns             | 10. <b>Tower of St Mary Magdalen</b> | 15. 26 & 28 High Street.         | 20. Fire Engine House                     |

Information courtesy of the Stony Stratford Business Association: [www.stonystratford.co.uk](http://www.stonystratford.co.uk)



# Magdalen Tower

## Stony Stratford



## Education

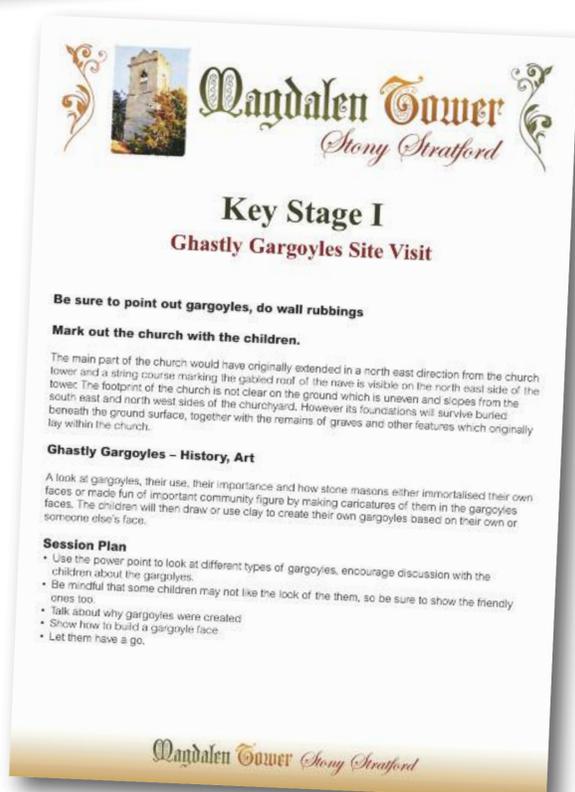
Two schools across three sites local to the Magdalen Tower were involved in the development of the education resources. Russell Street School and St Mary and St Giles (both North and South sites) had full day sessions, including an assembly for the whole school, a visit to the Tower and then focused sessions in class based on the visit to the Tower.

Russell Street School opted for an exploration of the Gargoyles, and to make their own.

St Mary and St Giles chose to become time detectives, finding facts and putting the pieces of the puzzle to create their best guess to solve the history mysteries that surround the Tower.

The resources used for the Magdalen Tower Project include session plans, Powerpoint presentations, and images of some of the work created by the pupils involved with the original project. These resources can be used by teachers to create a cross curricula project based upon the Tower and Stony Stratford, or as stand-alone class sessions.

These resources can be downloaded from the website free of charge: [www.magdalentower.co.uk](http://www.magdalentower.co.uk)





# Magdalen Tower

## Stony Stratford



## Film Project

Living Archive Milton Keynes and **ACT OUT** and **ACT UP** Stony Stratford, worked together to produce a short film to show the history of the Tower.

26 young people between the ages of 6 and 21 took part in the Magdalen Tower Film Project to create a piece of dramatic work which highlights Stony Stratford's heritage and the historical importance of the St Mary Magdalen Church, later to be known as the Tower, in the local area. The students were first introduced to the project by the session leader telling the historical stories of Stony Stratford, and the participants then decided which stories grabbed their imagination. From this point on the project was student lead, with the participants creating various scenes dramatising the stories of the town and Tower. The session leaders supported the students work through development of ideas and clarifying of historical information, but the rest of the work is solely that of the students and how they see and feel about the town they live in.



You can watch the film on the website:

[www.magdalentower.co.uk](http://www.magdalentower.co.uk)



[www.magdalentower.co.uk](http://www.magdalentower.co.uk)





# Magdalen Tower

## Stony Stratford

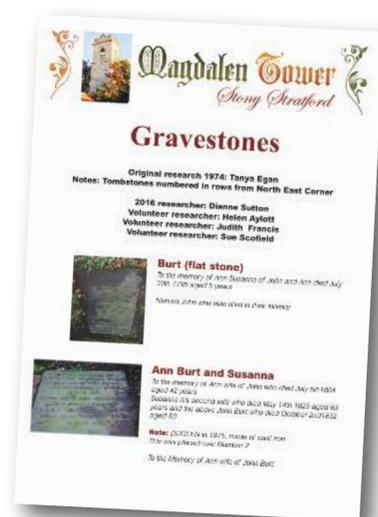
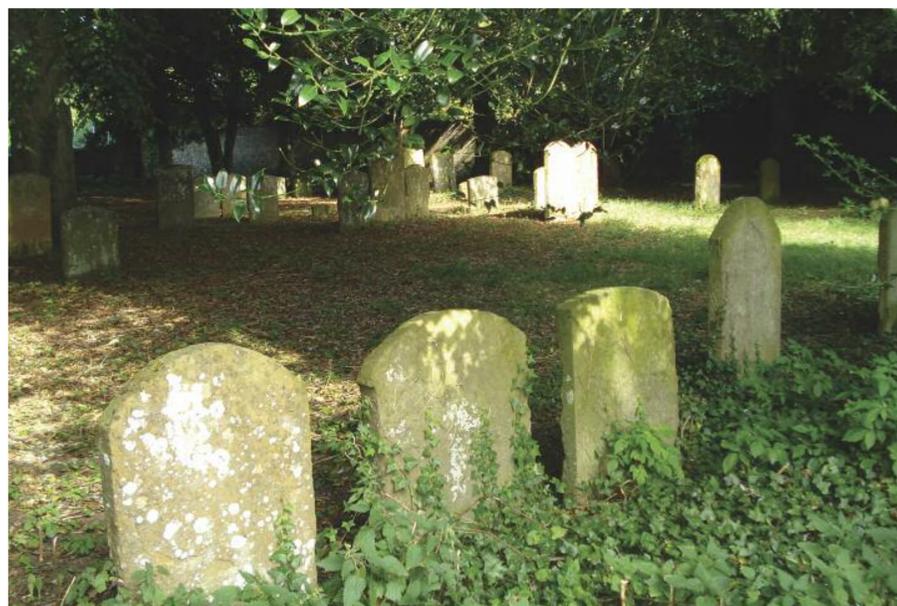
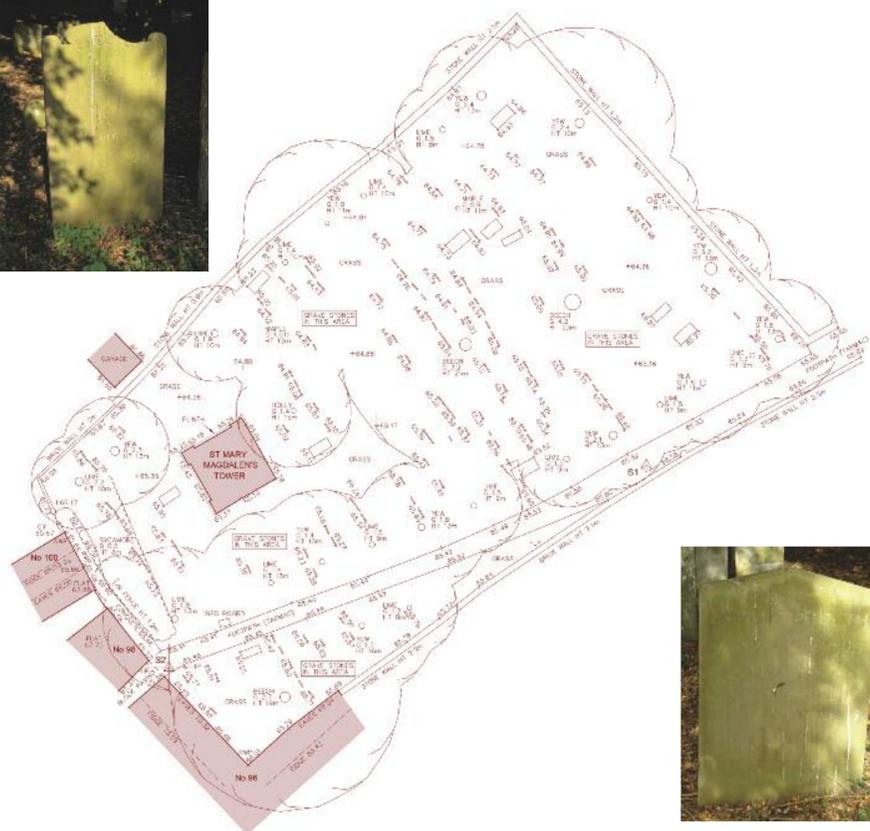
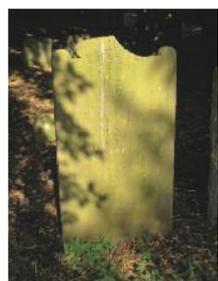


## Gravestones

Volunteers from **Living Archive MK** set about trying to find out more about the lives of people who are buried in the graveyard.

Using the Censuses and checking on Historic Trade Registries in the 1800s, volunteers managed to put the families together and became overwhelmed with the amount of information which came to light. Emotions were aroused for some of the families when their tragedies were noted, such as 'Here lieth the remains of eight infants of the above named' hidden under the lichen at the bottom of a stone and the realisation that many people died at a very early age compared to today, presumably from illnesses of that era and sheer hard work. It was also hard to absorb how many families lost their first infant son and kept producing children until one survived into adulthood; this resulted in several wives dying young and the father taking a second wife within a short space of time to look after himself and the living children. We also established the occupations of some of the families, many of which were innkeepers, of course, and also where in Stony Stratford they were practicing their trade.

The volunteers' research can be downloaded from the website: [www.magdalentower.co.uk](http://www.magdalentower.co.uk)





# Magdalen Tower

## Stony Stratford



Browne Willis's home; Old Whaddon Hall, in the village of Whaddon, to the West of Milton Keynes



Whaddon Hall still stands today, albeit considerably remodelled, and is now divided into several private apartments



The firing of the 'Fenny Poppers' still continues to this day

## Browne Willis

**16 September 1682 – 5 February 1760**

In 1742 the church of St Mary Magdalen burnt down in a fire which destroyed much of the town. Only the tower at the west end of the church survived the fire and its restoration took place led by the local notary, Browne Willis. Thirty pounds was spent in 'setting up, leading' and putting a new roof on the tower with the idea of rebuilding the rest of the church.



Browne Willis had previously made a survey of the church in about 1730 describing it as consisting of two aisles with a tower, 65 feet in height with six bells and a clock.

Willis was born at Blandford St Mary, Dorset, the eldest Son of Thomas Willis of Bletchley. He was educated at Bechampton School in the care of Abraham Freestone and at Westminster School. He attended Christ Church, Oxford and entered the Inner Temple (a professional association for barristers and judges) in 1700. He was grandson of Dr Thomas Willis, the physician and fellow of the Royal Society.

Between 1724 and 1730, Browne Willis built St Martin's Church on the site of the old Chantry Chapel of St Margaret and St Catherine at Fenny Stratford.

In order to perpetuate his own memory, Browne Willis arranged for a sermon to be preached at St Martin's. The firing of the 'Fenny Poppers' (six small cannon) dates from this time. In 1740 Browne Willis bought a house in Aylesbury Street, Fenny Stratford and the rent from this was used to pay for the sermon and gunpowder for the Fenny Poppers. A tradition which continues to this day.





# Magdalen Tower

*Stony Stratford*



## *Community*

The church of St Mary Magdalen has been a landmark in Stony Stratford for centuries. Long ago it would also have been a hub of the community. This project has once again enabled the local residents to embrace the Tower as their own.

From summer fayres and medieval re-enactments to performances and community clean-ups, the Tower is now an important part of Stony Stratford life.



The renovation of the Tower will certainly ensure its physical longevity and the community of Stony Stratford will be able to enjoy this medieval landmark for generations to come. By involving the younger generations through school projects, drama and filmmaking, it is hoped that the link between the Tower and community will be further strengthened.



There will be more events taking place at the Tower in the near future. You can keep up to date with all news and events by visiting the Magdalen Tower Facebook page (@MagdaleneTower) or the events page of the website: [www.magdalentower.co.uk](http://www.magdalentower.co.uk)

