

# DENNY ABBEY – GUIDE to the UPPER FLOOR

An outline of what can be seen on the upper floor of  
Denny Abbey

The upper floor of Denny Abbey was created by the Countess of Pembroke, when she converted the original Benedictine/Knights Templar church into a residence in the early 1300s. The rooms she created continued to be used, redesigned and lived in for over 600 years. This guide talks about the different periods of the building that can still be seen today.

## How to use this guide

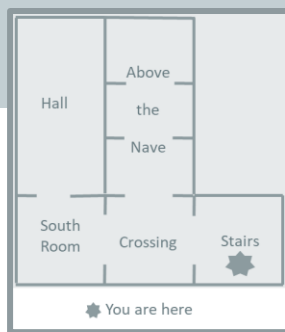
This guide will take you on a virtual walk-through of the upper floor of Denny Abbey. Take a seat at the bottom of the stairs in the north transept and let the guide do the climbing!

You are welcome to take the guide upstairs with you but please let anyone unable to manage the stairs take priority, and remember to leave the guide at the bottom of the stairs when you leave.

If you have any questions or there is anything you are interested in that we haven't described, please let one of the staff or volunteers know and we will try to help.



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Look upwards at the walls around you – see if you can spot these features:

The glazed window high in the wall was originally a doorway that led to the dormitories, used (at different times) by the monks and nuns who lived here. They would enter their church this way for early prayers.



To the side of the dormitory door, you can just make out a small fireplace and its chimney, embedded in an older doorway. This would have been added much later, when the building was a farmhouse and there was an upstairs room here.



Above the staircase, you can see a blocked-in arched window. This is the exterior wall of the original Benedictine church and would have lit the north transept below. There are many of these 'windows' here in different states of preservation.



At the top of the stairs is the entrance to the countess's chambers. This is the first doorway of the Countess's time – note the pointed arch shape, unlike the semi-circular shape of the Benedictine arches.





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As you step through that doorway you enter the room above the Benedictine crossing and are surrounded by the tops of the great Norman arches of the original Benedictine church.

These beautiful archways would have soared over the original church's crossing but were bricked up by the Countess to create the new upstairs rooms and doorways.



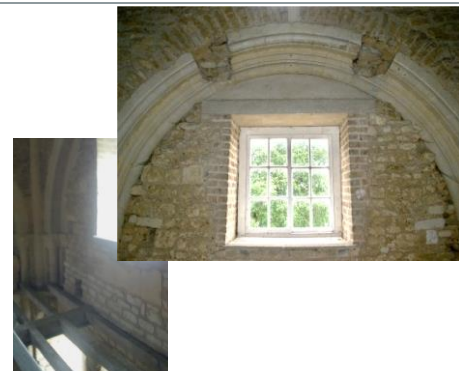
The modernisation continued. You can see the post holes that were cut into the original arches to support a third, now lost, floor.



Looking west, there are a series of openings showing different shaped arches. The pointed Gothic door at the far end and the flattened out Tudor door within the semi-circular arch of the Norman pillars.



The square, probably Georgian, window was added when this was a farmhouse. You can just make out the lintel of an earlier window below it that would have enabled the Countess to view services in the nun's church.



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Continuing to the room above the south transept leads you to the Countess of Pembroke's own apartment. This room would have been richly decorated, with tapestries and a curtained bed.

Here you can see the grand arch of the crossing but in the Countess's time, this would have been plastered over and only a small, central doorway visible. To the west are doorways to the hall.



The hall was used by the Countess for entertaining guests to the abbey. It was still in use in the 1920s, when we have records of dances being held here.



Through the doorways, and from the walkway on the lower floor, you can see the external wall of the Benedictine/Knights Templar church. There are a mix of windows and doors from all periods of the house visible.

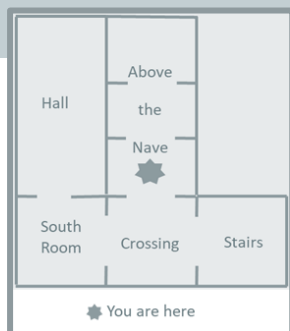


Looking up, you can see the remains of an upper floor, probably Tudor or later, because of the shape of the doorways and the use of the chimney.





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Moving to the rooms created above the nave of the original church ...

The first room shows evidence of the stairway from the modern, ground floor rooms. There was a gallery round to a doorway into the upper hall. Note the overlap with the original Benedictine window.



Moving through the rooms above the nave, you can see evidence of the colourful paint work as well as more decorative arched windows. These were blocked in and cut through by the later owners.



On the farthest wall you can see a small bedroom fireplace, probably Victorian, and the trace of brick work where its chimney would have been built into the original wall.



You can also just make out the trace of the stone surround of an earlier window that would have been here, above the decorative west door created by the Knights Templar.



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These are just some of the sights to see in the upper rooms of Denny Abbey. But what about the people who lived among these amazing places? Here are just a few ...

### **The Knights Templar**

The Knights Templar were here for nearly 140 years. They used the Abbey as a hospital or hospice for older knights. When the Knights Templar were disbanded by order of King Edward II, the Abbey was found to have 11 knights living here, all described as old and infirm. An inventory of the Abbey goods, confiscated by the King, included three silver chalices, a silk altar cloth and various sets of vestments. Not quite as rich a haul as might be expected.

### **The Countess of Pembroke**

Almost twenty years after the Knights Templar left, the Abbey became the property of the Countess of Pembroke. The Countess was a wealthy widow, a distant cousin of the King and she also founded Pembroke College of the University of Cambridge. The Countess remodelled the original church as a home and built a new church to the east for a community of Poor Clare nuns. The Countess is said to be buried at the eastern end of the nun's church – so somewhere near the present day cottage.

### **After the Reformation**

King Henry VIII closed down the religious houses of England in the 1530s – including Denny Abbey. The nuns were dispersed and the Abbey and its lands sold to developers. In the 500 years since then there have been many owners and tenants. One of the better known ones is Thomas Hobson, a Cambridge man who rented out horses. He would state which horse was to be taken, not allowing the hirer to choose, and so the phrase 'Hobson's Choice' entered the language.