

## From Riches to Rags, then Restoration - King John's House

**Intro:** Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

**Richard:** Hello and welcome to today's episode of Hampshire HistBites. I'm Richard North, your podcast host, and for today's episode I'm in the magnificent setting of King John's House in Romsey, a beautiful, but until relatively recently, little known or at least little remembered historical site in the heart of one of our county's finest market town.

I'm joined by Mark Udall, who is the general manager of King John's House in Romsey, and who prior to this role worked for English Heritage and beforehand in academia.

So Mark, thanks very much for hosting me today in the amazing space that we're in here in, in King John's House in Romsey. I know you are gonna tell us a little bit about the story, and a little bit about the incredible hidden history that's both here today and has been here in the past. Why don't you kick us off with a sense of, of what's at the top of your mind?

**Mark:** Well, we're a hidden history in more ways than one. In that, although we're in the centre of Romsey, we're a little off the beaten track. And very often people find us almost by accident. And that, coincidentally, is exactly how the building that we call King John's House was discovered.

**Richard:** Brilliant. So. I think it's right isn't it? That if we were here even a hundred years ago today, there was very little recognition, very little sense of the amazing history and the stories that are around us. What happened to, to change that?

**Mark:** Yeah. A hundred years ago, you would've had no sense that there was any significance to the buildings that we're in now. So if you were standing just outside, you'd be right in the beating heart of a place that was known as Church Court and in Romsey terms, which itself was not an affluent town at that time, Church Court would've been seen as a very poor place to live. So right in the heart of Church Court was King John's House, but it wasn't known as that because as far as people were concerned, it was just one part of a large complex. And even now it seems extraordinary that the buildings that were here were divided into 17 dwellings and at their height, they had as many as 70 people living here. And that really tells you something about the density of population in this part of Romsey and quite how poor it would've been.

**Richard:** That's incredible. So 70 people at one time in 17 dwellings, it's a lot. So outside of King John's House itself, are we right to visualize, sort of tenement buildings, relatively low quality housing, and I'm, I'm guessing by the name Church Court, it would've all been around a sort of central courtyard, much of which doesn't remain today, but is that right?

**Mark:** That, that's absolutely right. And it's very classical courtyard housing, which is often in, in big towns and cities associated with tenements. And very often you could only access the buildings from

the courtyard. They were blanked off at the back. So they were squeezed into little spaces in the town or city.

And indeed the building we call King John's House and the adjacent Tudor cottage are the last two buildings that once made up Church Court, it's quite amazing to think, but physically attached to the end of King John's house was a three story terrace, which in itself contained eight individual houses. And they were very old and they were very creaky and they were very damp and they were very poor.

**Richard:** Crikey! So it's really quite a striking picture that we can imagine here of the world into which somebody, coming in a hundred years ago, would've walked. So what changed that? What, what happened a little close to a hundred years ago? How did the discovery of what we now know as King John's House happen?

**Mark:** The discovery story is an amazing one in many ways, and it's a coincidental one too. So the story goes that a gentleman came here in 1927 and he was an antiquarian because this was the era when things like archaeology and building archaeology weren't professions, they were gentleman's interests. And he looked at the building and peeled back a little of the fabric and came very rapidly to the discovery or the conclusion that underneath was a medieval building. He wasn't quite sure what or what form it took, but it did lead to the step of peeling back the layers and finding out what was under there.

**Richard:** And what had caused him to come here in the first place? What is the, the situation, the scenario? Was there local press coverage? Was there a sympathetic owner or was it just that this, this chap was passing by one day and sort of happened on something beautiful?

**Mark:** Well, there, there are lots of different stories in terms of what switched him on to the site.

So there is a story that says there was a workman on the roof of the Tudor cottage and he spotted something you can see from Church Street even now, which is a tiny little fragment of a very medieval looking trefoil arch and word got around and our gentleman antiquarian became interested and came and had a look at the building. But other stories suggest that the then owner of the building, Miss Moody, had invited him along because she thought that there was something special about the building and she wanted someone who was a bit expert to come and find out more. But whichever way it was, the important thing is that at some stage in 1927, he made this quite extraordinary discovery.

And it does make you wonder how exciting that was because to find something that had been hidden potentially for such a long time, under such an ugly skin, that must have been an exciting moment.

**Richard:** Oh, brilliant. And I would imagine a sort of real local pride as well and, and local interest, right?

**Mark:** Yeah, certainly. The initial discovery caused quite a bit of interest in the press and it certainly persisted for quite a while, because not long after that, the building was actually opened up to the public so that people could come along and have a look and experience this amazing new finding right in the middle of Romsey.

**Richard:** Brilliant. So this is the part of the story where we start thinking about the history actually being uncovered and beginning to peel back those layers.

So I'm dying to ask you obviously about what we began to peel back and, and what we know a little bit about the house, but I suppose really, first of all, I should ask you who was this chap and how did he go about peeling things back? You said that the house was opened up to the public and there was immense local interest. Tell me a little bit about how it happened and how the uncovering really began.

**Mark:** Some of that is shrouded in historical mystery, I think it's fair to say, but the upshot was this gentleman antiquarian who was called Walter Andrew. He, having made his declaration that the building was of interest, very slowly they peeled back the layers of accretions that had built up over what turned out to be hundreds and hundreds of years. And very slowly, very slowly indeed, they revealed medieval stone masonry, medieval timbers, and finally, the most extraordinary thing of all was original medieval plaster work with its original potentially 13th century decoration.

**Richard:** It is, it is brilliant, it is beautiful walking around the house and looking in from the inside and the outside, as we've done previously is, is quite a magical experience I must say. I mean, are there any particular highlights that you'd like to pick out? If I was to ask you for a, a top favourite or a top couple of bits that listeners can identify with and, and sort of visualize to tee them up for when they come along, hopefully and see the house themselves, what would you highlight?

**Mark:** It's tricky because packed into such a small space there are so many quite special things. But I think on my list would be little fragments of original medieval windows. Now they nestle amongst much later brick and I'd like to think that back in the 17th or early 18th century, a builder who put in the much bigger windows did us a considerable favour and left us a tiny fragment of that stone masonry to give later people a clue as to what the building might have looked like. And undoubtedly on that list would be our west window, which is quite an impressive piece of Gothic stone masonry. And it has the tiny fragments or remains of a dog tooth motif at the top. But undoubtedly the number one thing of interest is the plaster because that in its own right, is relatively rare and it is quite extraordinary that it survived at all. But etched into that plaster is original medieval graffiti.

**Richard:** Go on. Can you tell us anything about what it says?

**Mark:** There there's quite a diversity. I think the interesting thing about graffiti is in many ways, it's a fascinating social history. It, it can tell us more about the day to day lives of people than formal written histories, which is why people get so excited about it. But there's all kinds of things nestled in there. There are mottos, like God protect me, written a little bit in Latin, a little bit in court French, maybe some old English and also hidden in there, there is some rather intriguing coats of arms.

**Richard:** Go on any more you can tell us about these?

**Mark:** Well, so the story goes, Edward 1st visited here in 1306 and it rather looks like some of those coats of arms belonged to the barons who followed that particular king. So I always have this vision of them staying here while the king was visiting the abbess, and after perhaps a surplus of mead carved their heraldry at dagger point into the plaster as a kind of, "we were here" historical record.

**Richard:** Which is brilliant, isn't it? It's a real sense of how the house has been a witness, not just to local events, but also potentially to national events and yet we knew nothing about it, as a community until well, about 95 years ago this year.

**Mark:** Yes, absolutely. Yeah, and it was genuinely lost in the mist of time and it's a remarkable survivor because the building got used and reused because you quite simply don't knock something like this down and replace it. It's of such beautiful construction and the very fact that it got used and reused meant that over time, these original medieval features got covered up.

**Richard:** Why don't you give me a bit of a sense over the course of that 800 year history, of the different uses of the house and, and it's different, differing fortunes.

**Mark:** I think it's fair to say that once the layers were peeled back this house at some time, whatever its medieval origins might have been, was a very high status building. But it went into a period of spiral decline that ended up hundreds and hundreds of years later, in it becoming part of a complex of tenements. But quite a lot happened in between, I think it's fair to say.

So the first time this building is mentioned in writing and we really can associate the document with the building is in a deed of transfer called the 'bargain and sale', and that's dated 1571. And the fantastic thing about that document, apart from its mere existence, is that it tells us that at the dissolution of the monasteries, this specific building was in the ownership of what was then a Benedictine nunnery, what we now know as the Abbey in Romsey. And that's where the documented story starts. After that it fell into the hands of a Tudor, shall we say gentleman? He has an interesting story in his own right, but I'm afraid I'm just gonna have to tease you with that!

After that it, it had a succession of small industry roles, so it may well have been a workshop for a brazier, a worker in brass. It may well have been a brewery, not a big surprise in Romsey, I have to say. It was used by a fellmonger, a dealer in skins, and perhaps interesting from a social history point of view, it also at one stage became a Georgian workhouse where women came to learn to weave. Again, not surprising for Romsey, which had built its wealth in wool and cloth.

**Richard:** So obviously there was a link to the Abbey that you mentioned, and we've said that this is a high status building. What was it, do you think that led to the slightly chequered elements of the, the history of the house? I mean, so we, we seem to have gone from a position where it was a high status building in the medieval period, the interesting origins, then we know that it came into the ownership of the Abbey, certainly by 1571, I think it was that you said, so that's Elizabeth's reign, if I'm right. But after the dissolution, how do we track right up until the present day where we've got this, this history that's being uncovered from a tenement block and from a building that's clearly fallen on, on hard times.

**Mark:** Mm-hmm. I think at some stage, and there are still gaps in our understanding of the history, which in itself is quite exciting because there's still so much more for us to discover, but at some stage, the house was subdivided and became dwellings again. And, it's potentially around the Regency that that would've happened. Certainly the very first recognized national census in 1841 has entries for people who live in Church Court. And we know that it was sold in the 1850s lock stock and barrel as 17 individual dwellings. So it's around the beginning of the 19th century that it started its final descent into the kind of poverty that we were talking about right at the beginning.

**Richard:** And it's right, isn't it, that we're only just really beginning to scratch the surface of all this kind of history?

**Mark:** Yeah. I, I think, I mean like a lot of heritage properties, you know, we have a guidebook and there's an official history, but I think that there is more archival material available to us, which perhaps hasn't been studied

**Richard:** Which is really exciting, I mean, it just shows there's so much underneath our noses that we can all kind of do a little bit to dive into, to scratch the surface of. And you are doing quite a lot at the moment, aren't you, as a House, as a community organization, to dig into these stories and, and to tell them, but I wonder whether I ought to start in terms of the present day, just by asking a little bit about, how you're organized. I know there's a really strong community element. We obviously have walked to get to where we are today through a beautiful series of gardens. And I know that you've, you said that on certain days I might come and I might be even bump into a Tudor gardener. I mean, tell me a little bit about the house today and, and how it's run and, and what you're trying to do as well to uncover those hidden stories.

**Mark:** Yeah, there's a number of aspects to that and I'll work through them bit by bit. So essentially at the moment, the house is run by a charitable trust and the charitable trust fundamentally its role is to preserve this wonderful, wonderful building and to use it to engage with the public and to share its very interesting history.

And the, the charitable trust is also the custodian of the museum, and its volunteers do a beautiful job of maintaining these fantastic gardens that sit around the buildings. And it's interesting that there's a certain continuity in that, back in 1927, the foundations of a trust began. And so it's been looked after for charitable purposes almost since its initial discovery.

The challenge, I think at the moment is that because we are a piece of Romsey's hidden history, we're off the beaten track. And because people tend to discover us by accident, we have a little bit of a challenge to reach out and get more people engaged and that's really what we're focusing on at the moment.

So, essentially, we're looking to bring the site alive. So our volunteers. we're slowly starting to costume them. So as you say, from the summer onwards, you are as likely to bump into a heavily armed bodyguard for the Queen, as you are to bump into a Tudor gardener, and you can overhear the day to day conversations of the previous occupants of the house, because that's what's really interesting is their day to day lives. Who knows? You may even bump into the odd Victorian urchin, if you are lucky, fresh from a day's work up a chimney somewhere in Victorian Romsey

**Richard:** Brilliant. Brilliant. Well there's obviously an exciting array of, of stories that that could be told here. And it's all again about that theme, isn't it of, of different aspects of lives. And it's not just that Royal history, which strikes you first in the name of King John's House Romsey. And I know there's been plenty of that, there's the barons of you talked about, but it is really about those kind of interim stories and, and also the kind of wider social life that we've hinted at a bit when we talk about the tenements and what have you.

In terms of the archives work, you mentioned briefly there's a lot that's going on to dig around here. Is this something that you are interested in looking for volunteers for, is that something that people could get involved in if they'd like to?

**Mark:** Certainly, I mean, work hasn't gone on with the documents, but what I'm interested in is how exhaustive that's been. I think there's evidence that there is historical material that perhaps hasn't been touched yet and what we're trying to do is pull together a decent archive that is accessible to the public, ultimately. So if you are interested in the rent books from the 19th century tenements, you can have a look at those and inspect them, but it would also be interesting to professional historians. Because undoubtedly there's material in the archive, which tells a fascinating social history, which provides evidence for other researchers, for example, who are interested in late 18th century workhouses or whatever.

So we're set - that's a very intensive job, partly sifting and cataloguing material, which isn't in our possession. It may well sit in Hampshire Archives or the National Archive in Kew - cataloguing intensive, but some of it, we would want to digitize and keep in our own archive for people to access. And so volunteers who are interested in doing that sort of work in the medium term are always welcomed with open arms here.

**Richard:** Brilliant. And I know if people want to dig around and look for a bit more detail on how they can get involved, there's a good page on your website isn't there, where they can have a look?

**Mark:** Yeah, certainly, for a house that has its origins in the 13th century, we're actually surprisingly modern! So people can also find us on most social media as well. And we post regularly. So you'll see stories about the architecture of the building or the next event that's gonna happen here. And even some quite nice pictures of the garden as it goes from spring into summer.

**Richard:** Brilliant. Yeah. And it is, it is magical out there. Well I think towards the end, I think we should also say a couple of words, shouldn't we, about the exciting stuff that's coming later this year? And I know that there's gonna be the fruits of some of the labours in those archives and some of the really interesting tough nuggets of the history and the historical debate around whether this is indeed, King John's House or perhaps something slightly different. We don't wanna go too much into it today, I know, because we might well return for a future episode, which we can all stay tuned for. But do you wanna give us a bit of a sense of the excitement that's coming up later this year?

**Mark:** The original discoverer of the house, Walter Andrew was the one who initially made the association with King John. So if you looked at 19th century maps of Romsey, you wouldn't see, oh, look, there's King John's House opposite the Abbey. What you'd see is Church Court. And that association was made because of some interesting entries in medieval documents. Come visit the house and find out more about that!

But that history is a very contested history because there are other views about when and why this house was built and what the purpose of the house was. So for example, local historians might tell you that this building was erected by the Abbey itself, and that's why it was in the Abbey's hands at the dissolution. And they would have a story to tell you about why it was built and what it was used for.

And I think the exciting thing, having done some of the preliminary research now, at the end of the year, we're going to do one of our pop-up exhibitions, and it's gonna compare and contrast some of those differing stories about the house's medieval origin and in an almost legal sense, weigh up the evidence for each of those. I have to say that on a personal viewpoint, I have a sneaking suspicion that it might fall on the side of King John, but watch this space.

**Richard:** Brilliant, brilliant. I can't wait to pop down and, and to see the results and indeed, to get stuck into that debate myself, having a good look over the documents that are on display. This is a, a really exciting hint of all the stuff that's to come. And indeed those layers that keep being peeled back and back at King John's House. So thank you very much, Mark. It's been brilliant just to get a bit of a sense to uncover the story and to see around us and hear around us some of the things that can pique our interest if you pop down to King John's House at Romsey, I'm really looking forward to, as I say, digging into the rest of that, that history as we learn more later this year.

**Mark:** I'm glad you've enjoyed your visit and been able to see some of the hints, at least, of more history to come.

**Richard:** Much more to come. Thanks very much, Mark.

**Outro:** We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, [www.winchesterheritageopendays.org](http://www.winchesterheritageopendays.org), click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.