Castleton’s Medieval Hospital

Blessed Mary in the Peak
Finding Blessed Mary in the Peak

The mystery of the hidden hospital.

The Challenge

Discovering Castleton’s medieval hospital is a challenge. No buildings remain.

So where was it? Who ran it? Who benefited? When was it built and how did it change over time?

We are sure it existed. Historic documents tell us so. Some suggest a link with Peveril Castle. But what?

Local place names suggest a hospital to the east of the village – Spital Field, Spital Bridge, Spittlecrosse, even ‘Spital Buildings’.

In 1999 English Heritage scheduled lumps and bumps in the field opposite Losehill Hall as the site of the ‘Hospital of the Castle of the Peak’. They referred to a 1920s article by retired vicar, Revd J.H. Brooksbank. But do the historic documents back this up? Does the archaeology agree?
Ask a Local?
From 2007 to 2013, Castleton Historical Society delved into documents, listened to local knowledge, and unearthed archaeology in search of Castleton’s medieval hospital.

Hours in the archives uncovered details. The hospital held land, cultivated the King’s Forest, fattened a pig at Edale.

Archaeological surveys suggested turf-covered wall remains in Spital Field, but the first digs yielded little evidence.

Then in 2012-13 came some exciting finds.

A Bigger Picture
Gradually the glimpses have accumulated, filling out a bigger picture. Much remains tantalisingly hidden. We know little about the people treated, their diseases, cure or relief. Yet thanks to our HLF-funded research, we now have a far clearer view of the Hospital of Blessed Mary of the Peak.

Opposite page, top: Medieval hospitals offered food, rest and prayer. © The British Library Board. Royal 14 C VII f.121v.
Bottom Excavations below Peveril Castle. Photo: Bill Bevan.
Why build a hospital at Castleton?

**The Peveril Connection**

Castleton’s medieval hospital was founded by the Peverils. The first William Peveril was rumoured to be an illegitimate son of William the Conqueror. From Peveril Castle, this favoured Norman baron ruled over the Forest of the Peak. Was the hospital a bid for popularity? An investment in the family’s immortal souls? Or a show of power? Whatever the motivation, if a William Peveril was involved, then the hospital must have existed by 1153. For in that fateful year the family forfeited the Peveril estates in a murder scandal.

**Says Who?**

In 1478 William of Worcester noted, *Domus hospitale de Peke fundatur per uxorum Domini Peverelle* – the Peak Hospital was founded by the wife of Lord Peveril. A 1394 document shows John of Gaunt confirming William Peveril’s grant of hospital lands to the Warden.

*Top:* Medieval nobility often granted funds to the Church. © The British Library Board. Royal 14 E III f.91.

*Left:* John of Gaunt sits at the top left, dining with the King of Portugal. © British Library Board. Royal 14 E IV f.244v.
A Sound Investment

To found a medieval hospital was to invest in the health of your eternal soul. The Bible famously warns that it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Doing charitable work was one way for the rich to avoid the eternal fires of hell, or even a lengthy stay among the torments of Purgatory. Founding a hospital weighed heavily for the good in the scales of Divine Judgement.

For Ease and For Salvation

Medieval hospitals offered rest to the sick, and prayer for their souls.

Castleton’s hospital is thought to have been founded for the ‘sick poor’ and served for some 400 years. Initially it was one of about 70 hospitals in England. By 1348, when the Black Death reached England, there were over 500.

Most medieval hospitals were religious foundations, with a chapel at the east end. They offered prayers in their chantries or chapels, and had an infirmary with a few beds for inmates.

Castleton’s hospital was small, valued in 1377 at ‘£3 and 4 bushels of oatmeal’. It held arable lands at Castleton’s Spital Field and livestock, pastured in Castleton and Edale – a mare with her foals, 8 oxen and a sow with her litter in the forests at Edale. Two hundred years later at the time of Dissolution, the Rolls tell us, there was a house with a chapel, and land around Castleton and Edale.

Below: Many hospitals used cubicles to offer patients some privacy. © Alan Darlington.
**Medicinal Herbs**

In 1925 the Revd Brooksbank described how Castleton’s hospital had a garden and speculated on the medicinal herbs grown. But Brooksbank had mistranslated the Norman French *gardon* – in truth, a Warden! Nonetheless, Blessed Mary may well have had a medicine garden, as did many medieval hospitals.

**Prayer and Care**

As important as care for the sick, was prayer for their souls – and those of the hospital’s founders. Bedrest, regular food, relative cleanliness and medicinal herbs yielded some relief to the ailing. Many infirmaries had cubicles, offering patients some privacy.
Hospital Life

Who were the ‘sick poor’ at Blessed Mary?

Blessed Mary served needy locals and travellers alike, perhaps gathering patients from the nearby market at Castleton, which sat directly on an important cross-Pennine route.

*Medieval lepers carried a bell to warn the healthy away. © The British Library Board. Lansdowne 451.*

**Medieval Disease**

Poor diet, famine, insanitary living and hard physical labour exacerbated medieval ill-health. Sometimes food and rest were good cure. At others, herbal medicines were concocted. Arthritis and rheumatism were common. Leprosy and skin infections too. Fever, wounds and broken limbs took a heavy toll. The medieval *Leechbook of Bald* lists more preparations for eye problems than anything else.

*This lame beggar uses a crutch. © The British Library Board. Royal 10 E IV f.110r.*
Who did the work?

While many medieval hospitals were attached to religious houses, we have no evidence that Blessed Mary at Castleton was.

We do know that lay brothers worked here. A record from c.1240 notes ‘brothers of the hospital at Castleton’ making ‘assart’ at Bradwell – that is, digging land within the King’s Forest. Were they growing food for their brethren and patients?

In most small hospitals there were brothers and sisters to care for the sick, others who welcomed those in need, nightwatchmen, and those who managed supplies. In overall charge was the Warden.

For mist of eye

Juice of betony beaten with its roots and wrung, and juice of yarrow and of celandine, equally much of all, mingle together, apply to the eye.

Betony was used in this medieval eye cure. Photo: Angela Darlington.
Who was in charge?

The Warden administered the hospital and managed day-to-day affairs. The chaplain took charge of prayer and divine service. At Castleton in the early days one man fulfilled both roles. Fourteenth-century hospital Wardens were often well-known figures, holding several posts simultaneously – perhaps as honorary, rather than hands-on, roles.

**John de Hermsthorpe**

John de Hermsthorpe became Warden of Blessed Mary in 1368. Hermsthorpe enjoyed a successful career – vicar, canon, prebend of St Stephen in the Palace of Westminster, archdeacon, Chamberlain of the Exchequer. Did Hermsthorpe really have time even to visit his smaller charge at Castleton?

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**Thomas Brounflete**

Brounflete was a King’s Clerk when he succeeded Hermsthorpe in 1377. His wardenship lasted just 3 years, before Walter atte Grove took over. Brounflete climbed the ladder of Court responsibilities. Following a church role at Beelsby, Lincoln, he was made King’s Esquire in 1384, Chief Butler in 1395, Controller of the Household in 1401 and King’s Knight in 1403. Appointed Treasurer of the Household in 1409, Brounflete went on to become Sheriff of York before his death in 1433.

*Left: Thomas Brounflete’s memorial at St Lawrence’s Church, Wymington. Richard Gough, *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain* (1796).*
The Chaplain

Records from 1330 note an enquiry regarding 60 shillings land rent owed for the ‘sustenance’ of a chaplain to sing daily divine service at Blessed Mary. Religious orders celebrate Daily Offices from pre-dawn till after sunset, and the hospital chaplain may well have done the same. Inmates perhaps participated from their beds.
A Swift End

Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries brought an end to Blessed Mary.

Valor Ecclesiasticus

The Valor Ecclesiasticus (Church Valuation) of 1535 assessed church property and incomes throughout England, Wales, Scotland and parts of Ireland. Newly self-appointed Head of the Church, Henry VIII needed an accurate assessment of Church wealth for taxation.

The Valor Ecclesiasticus values the ‘Hospital de Spyttelhowse in Alt’ Peke in Com’ Derb.’ as having a small average income of 40 shillings with all its ploughland. That said, valuations were often on the low side, especially further north, away from the seat of power.

After Dissolution

Henry began seizing smaller religious houses in 1536. Yet Blessed Mary seems to have survived for some years, with its last Warden, George Savage, in post from 1536 to 1542. ‘Le Spytle of Castlton’ then passed to Thomas Savage.

In 1548 prominent Roman Catholic Thomas Babington was granted purchase of
‘the mansion of the late hospital called Le Spytle of Castlton’. The former hospital is listed as having a little chapel annexed to the house, numerous crofts of meadow, pasture, arable and marshland, livestock and an additional cottage. Bells and lead are mentioned, but were not part of the grant – such valuable assets would have been stripped out for the Crown during Dissolution.

A few years later, the hospital appears to have been sold back to Thomas Savage. What state was it in by then? Was it still habitable or a demolition site? Had its stone been removed for buildings elsewhere? Possibly to Castleton’s New Hall, home of the Savage family, which was re-built in the 1560s.

The remains of New Hall lie in the grounds of the Methodist Chapel.

*Bottom left:* Impression of a small medieval hospital. © Alan Darlington.

*Below:* Did New Hall contain original hospital stonework? © Castleton Historical Society.
Hunting for the Hospital

Documents, archaeology, local knowledge: how to find a missing hospital...

While local tradition has sometimes placed the hospital at the derelict three-storey Spital Buildings near Spital Bridge, in truth this was a cotton mill built in the late 1700s.

Right: Spital Buildings in the background is not the medieval hospital but a 1700s cotton mill. Photo: Angela Darlington.

What’s in a Name?

Castleton has its fair share of Spital place names suggesting the hospital’s location. The earliest record of Spital Field comes in a document from 1305, and Spital Bridge in 1307-8. In 1688 Spittlecrosse was mentioned – was this a crossing point or a monument?

Castleton’s Spital and Spittle place names may help locate the medieval hospital. Annotated extract from Castleton Tithe Map D2360/3/141a, ©Derbyshire Record Office.
**Reading the Records**

Documentary research uncovered many clues.

The earliest reference, from around 1240, mentions ‘brothers from the hospital at Castleton’ cultivating land at Bradwell. In 1382, John of Gaunt’s Register records a gift of timber from an old house on Peveril Castle’s grounds to repair the hospital at Castleton.

The *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535 suggests a small concern with modest income, situated between Hope and Castleton; while a 1548 decree details a chapel, house and cottage and various crofts of land at the Spyttle in Castleton, in Edale and under Mam Tor.

The Parliamentary Survey of 1654 lists a thirty-acre area called ‘Hospitall of the High Peake’, bounded to the south by Peak’s Arse river, east by Over Maston field, north by the road to Hope and west by said river and road.

The National Monuments Record places the hospital at SK15658325, on the right-hand side of the road from Castleton to Hope, in Spittle Field opposite Losehill Hall Lodge.

But what could archaeology reveal?

*Right:* The 1654 Parliamentary Survey records the former hospital estate boundaries. © National Archives e317/Derb/22.
The Hospital Dig

Have we discovered the medieval hospital burial ground?

Below: Local volunteers surveying the ground. Photo: David Price.

Archaeological investigations began in the early 1990s, with small-scale student surveys. In 1999, some 25 metres beyond the scheduled monument, professional archaeologists discovered medieval pottery, but nothing specifically hospital-related.

Setting Out

In 2007 trained local volunteers and students began work supervised by archaeologists from the University of Sheffield. Geophysics and earthwork surveys in 2007-8 were followed by the first test pits in Spital Field in 2009. A disappointing lack of finds here prompted further surveys in late 2009 at Bullock Field, north of Spital Field and over the road.
Exciting Finds
In June 2010 we began excavating the site of the scheduled monument. In 2010 and 2011 we uncovered some pieces of medieval pottery, signs of walls, and a few human bones, including part of a skull. As yet, there was nothing conclusive for the medieval hospital.

Excitement mounted with the discovery of medieval window lead (lead came) and a lead-smelting hearth in 2012.

Could this be where hospital roof and window leading was melted down to be carried away during the Dissolution?

In 2013 came more evidence: high-status medieval roof tiles, and indications of graves aligned east-west as you would expect in a consecrated cemetery. Might there have been a chapel nearby, a hospital chapel? We may soon know!

You can follow the unfolding story at www.castletonhistorical.co.uk.
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Sources consulted include:


Sheffield Archives:
Bag C 3363/11 (Selling hospital back to Thomas Savage).
JC 625 (Spittlecrosse).

National Archives:
SC 8/342/16133 (Sustenance of singing chaplain, 1343).
DL14/125/1 (Confirmation of hospital grant by John of Gaunt, 1393).
Between 2007 and 2013 Castleton Historical Society with Sheffield University and local volunteers combed the archives and dug the earth in their search for Castleton’s medieval hospital.

The Hospital of Blessed Mary in the Peak was founded some time before 1153, and served for 400 years.

Who built it? Who ran it? Where was it? Whom did it serve?

This booklet tells the tale we know so far. Inside you will find barons and chaplains, travellers and lepers, care and cure.


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