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Chesterton Tower

Date: mid-14th
century

A HISTORY OF ST ANDREW'S IN 100 OBJECTS

Towards the end of the reign of King John, England was on the verge of civil war. The barons had their own candidate for the throne, Prince Louis of France. Religiously the nation was also in turmoil—the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, was in exile in France. The Pope sent a legate to intervene with the warring factions—Cardinal Guala Bicchieri of Vercelli in northern Italy. He successfully made the peace, saw the reintroduction of the magna carta and, on John's death, was mentor to Henry III, who came to the throne in 1216 at the age of 9. As a reward for his services the king granted him the rectory of Chesterton—that is, the responsibility for the parish church but also the right to collect the tithes (a tenth of all produce) and ownership of considerable rectorial land. The wealth involved was considerable and Guala used it to found a new religious house, St Andrew's Abbey, in his home city of Vercelli. They appointed English vicars to run the church but sent one of their own members to gather the tithes and administer the estate. They built Chesterton Tower in the mid-14th century as their Chesterton residence. The rectory passed to King's Hall and to its successor, Trinity College, who are still the rectors and patrons of the parish today. As such they still own Chesterton Tower, which from the 16th century they let out as Rectory Farm (managed, along with their own freehold land, for many years by the Wiles family).

After inclosure in the early 19th century, Trinity were allocated land in the north of the parish and, together with adjacent land purchased from the Wiles family, this became the new Rectory Farm (and, in 1970, the Science Park). The old farmstead remained in Trinity's possession but the other farm buildings were knocked down and the Tower and its surrounding land were let out to the vicar as an orchard. The west side (right up to the High Street) was sold, part of it for the building of a new Chapel.

In the 20th century, Trinity took back possession of the orchard and the Chesterton Towers flats were built in about 1965. The tower was let out, initially as a workshop for the letter-cutter and craftsman, David Kindersley.