Midsomer Norton Audio Trail - The Old Priory

[Ambient sound: medieval chanting/prayers, gardening/birds/trees, watermill]

Standing by the churchyard at the entrance to Church Square and looking up towards The Old Priory, you get a strong feeling that you're looking back into another time.

FATHER JOHN, an older, more experienced monk is gardening in the Priory. FATHER BENEDICT, a new monk, approaches him.

FB: Father John, Father John!

FJ: (surprised) Goodness!

FB: why are we here?

FJ: that's a rather big question, young one – I suppose we're here to live our devout lives in peace, away from the hustle and bustle, to read and learn and serve the community

FB: that sounds a bit boring. Why was this weird little priory built here in the first place?

FJ: the "Norton Canonicorum" was built to accommodate us who worship in St John's Church of course. The Norton monks built it at the same time, so we can live nearby

FB: When did the Priory get built? It seems very old.

FJ: Well, look – it's red sandstone, just like the medieval buildings around. The first buildings were erected around 1170 I believe.

FB: 1170! But that was more than three hundred years ago! It's 1525 now

FJ: it certainly took us a while to get where we are. It wasn't built in a day, young man. As the church got bigger, so have we – this Tithe Barn was built – oh, about a hundred years ago – to store all our produce.

FB: what do you do all day anyway?

FJ: I pray. And tend this lovely garden, of course – pick fruit, get rid of the weeds.

FB: that sounds easy

FJ: I'll have you know I helped divert that stream to power the watermill you see there. that's more than enough work for a lifetime

FB: do you think the Priory will always be here Father John?

FJ: what a silly question young one. Of course the Priory will always be here. And us Friars will always live inside its walls

FB: but what about in the future - if…say…religion changes?

FJ: such blasphemy! How could you ask such a thing? That could never be. We would never allow our beloved Priory to be anything else – certainly not sold off or changed

But the young Father John was right. Everything changed for the Norton friars when King Henry VIII closed down the English monasteries in the late 1530s. All their property and wealth, including the priory and the church, was confiscated and granted to Christ Church College, Oxford. From then on the “College” played an important part in the life of the town.

As for the old priory building itself, the College sold it to a private buyer in the early 1700s. It was modified over the years, part of the building becoming a schoolroom, known as Norton Villa School from 1872 to 1929. In more recent years it became a high end restaurant called The Moody Goose, which was excellent! Now it’s a hotel.

During the course of its various restorations, interesting earlier features have come to light, such as two inglenook fireplaces and a fragment of a wall painting from the 1500s. The Old Priory has certainly had a long and interesting life.