

# The Armada Door

*In 1967 an Act of Parliament opened a new chapter in the history of Buckinghamshire. A new town was to be built. Over the next 50 years quiet fields were built over and more than 250,000 people moved into a blank canvas of a town. A new city: grid roads and roundabouts, concrete cows, more than 250,000 residents. Modern, vibrant, diverse*

*There were already residents, of course – Bletchley was the home of the code breakers during World War 2, and Wolverton had been a major point in the rail network since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the area, however, was farmland. But not an entirely vacant space.*

*About 4km from the new Milton Keynes city centre there's a small ancient woodland: Shenley Wood. And at one corner – and as old as the woods themselves – lies Westbury.*

Westbury was 100s of years old by the time the Normans passed through in 1066, searching for food on their way to London after the Battle of Hastings. They burned and pillaged – but Westbury was a bit out of the way and they concentrated on fatter prizes. Westbury's lord was Wulfward the White, and gossip had it that he was a lover of Queen Edith, Edward the Confessor's wife. She had a rich manor at Simpson, which was burned down. Westbury was given by William the Conqueror to a knight called Richard Engaine – there is a road in Shenley Church End called Engaine drive named after him.

His descendants built a moated manor house here. If you visit Westbury, you can still see a bit of the moat as you pass through the gate. It was called the Great Stank – we can't think why! In 1670 the owner filled in much of the moat and built a new house.

This, we believe, is when the legend of the Armada Door began.

Certainly, by the time Milton Keynes Development Corporation bought the farmhouse in the late 1980s, the door was part of the Grade II listing placed on the building. It was said that the panels of the door came from the Spanish Armada. A legend.

*The Spanish Armada tried to invade England in 1588 when Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne. Unable to land soldiers as it was beaten off by a combination of the English navy and storms, and unable to travel backwards, it was forced to go north around Scotland, and out into the Atlantic back south to Spain. Many ships failed to make the journey due to storms and high seas - there are shipwreck sites all around the north and west coasts. The defeat of the Spanish Armada became one of the most famous events in English history.*

In 2018 a heritage exhibition about the history of Westbury was mounted. There was plenty of history here, but the story of the door was put to one side. You'd be hard-pressed to find somewhere in Britain further from the sea – how could there be anything in that old story?

But during the exhibition a visitor who grew up in a farmhouse in North Wales told us that she'd heard stories of local farms that had been sold timbers from the wreckage of ships from the fleeing Armada that had sunk off the west coast.

Recently the door has suffered as it is getting very old indeed – and the effects of rain and sun are causing us to fear that the door may be destroyed. The charity that runs Westbury

has asked experts to look at it and to our surprise it dated the door to Tudor times, and confirmed that in ports as far apart as Liverpool and Chatham, traders bought wood from the shipwrecks and sold them throughout the country.

What's more, focus fell on the central motif on a panel on the door – a carved sunflower. In Tudor times, no-one in England had ever seen a sunflower. In fact, only one country in Europe had been to South America, where the sunflower comes from. A country that had imported it and held the flower in great respect: Spain.

So how the Westbury came to have the door is unknown. It may have been bought and stored somewhere waiting for someone to use the panels for something. All we know is that the panels were mounted on a large oak door base and became the front door at Westbury.

In August 2021 the door was removed from its place and is now safe inside and on show, awaiting vital but expensive conservation.