

In Conversation with Heidi Meyer

Dr Heidi Meyer is Master of the Lord Leycester Hospital, a four hundred-fifty-year-old charitable organisation founded by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. Master and Brethren continue to inhabit the original half-timbered medieval guild buildings in Warwick chosen by Dudley for his Hospital, forming an on-site living community that is directly connected to the Tudors.

Q Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your education and work prior to your role at Lord Leycester Hospital?

I have been the Master of the Lord Leycester for seven years now and locked in this sequestered Tudor world I have almost forgotten what I did before – I think it was a lot to do with US government defence policy and working in war zones! Along those lines I have worked at the Pentagon in Washington DC, NATO headquarters in Naples, the US Embassy in Kabul Afghanistan, another NATO headquarters in Turkey and some tramping around central America as well – and I did six years as a British Army Officer in Germany, Cyprus and London a very long time ago! That other life is about as far removed from the Lord Leycester

Q That sounds fascinating. How did you move from that world to Warwick and the Lord Leycester?

Like most jobs, I applied for the position – and after four centuries of male Masters, I was selected by the Lord Leycester Governors as the first female Master. One of the requirements to be Master is to have served in the military – and I ticked that box with a five-year stint as a young officer in the British army. I travelled to Warwick overland with my husband and dog – it was quite a transition moving from sun drenched coastal Mediterranean life on the Aegean to a drafty medieval house in England in November, full of Tudor ghosts.



Above: Dr Heidi L Meyer, Master of the Lord Leycester, in the academic robes and Tudor bonnet that is worn on high days and holidays.



Q Please tell us about the Lord Leycester Hospital, which isn't a hospital as people know it today.

When Elizabeth I came to the throne she was faced with a huge challenge of homelessness and poverty created by her father's Reformation policies. Lord Burghley said if she didn't do something about the poor on the streets there would be civil unrest in England. A good and responsible queen, Elizabeth set out to support the Poor Laws which required every parish to create places of philanthropy for the "deserving poor." These charitable sanctuaries were called Hospitals!

The Queen's best friend since childhood, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, was eager to support his Royal friend's policies. Was it because he was a man of Puritan values or simply that he wanted to please the woman he was keen to marry – who knows! We do know that he rode out one day in September 1571 from his castle in Kenilworth and came to Warwick to speculate on the possibility of creating a "Hospital" in the old Guild buildings on the high street. These magnificent half-timbered halls and courtyard had

been built in the short space of forty years by the Guilds of Warwick. The size and grandeur of the medieval buildings left no doubt as to their power and influence. A man like Dudley, with huge influence in England, would have settled for nothing less. By November 1571 the records show that the Guilds held their last meeting in their Guildhall and by December they had handed the entire site and their extraordinary buildings over to Dudley. Shortly thereafter Dudley moved Master Ralph Griffin into his new Hospital as leader and then twelve Brethren – the recipients of the charity. And thus began the four hundred- and fifty-year-old story of the Master and Brethren living at the Lord Leycester.

Today I am the 33rd Master and I currently have six Brethren who live here with me. We have a strong military connection – all of us having served in the military. On high days and holidays the Brethren wear their Tudor robes and hats and I wear academic gowns and a Tudor bonnet. We are part of a charitable legacy that stretches across the centuries back to Elizabeth I and we are very aware that our world is a time

Above: The half-timbered buildings of the Lord Leycester Hospital were constructed in the late fourteenth century for the Guilds of Warwick.



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trap – cocooned within the old Guild buildings and structured around the rules and principles of Tudor England.

Q What is a Master and what does your role encompass?

Robert Dudley put a Master in place at the Lord Leycester in 1571 to lead the corporation of Brethren and manage the charity. Really the job hasn't changed since Tudor times – keep the lights on and the grass cut, make sure there is enough money coming in to cover the bills, protect our magnificent buildings, keep the Brethren warm and happy and participate in Historic Warwick formal life, pageantry and ceremonies.

Q What is it like living on-site?

Since Tudor times the Masters have lived in the Master's house. This is likely the oldest part of the medieval buildings: the central part of the Master's House is made from trees planted in the 1200s. In the 1800s the Victorians undertook major restoration

Above: The Chapel of St James the Great, built over the West Gate in 1123-26, rebuilt in the late fourteenth-century for the 12th Earl of Warwick and restored by Sir George Gilbert Scott in the nineteenth-century, continues to be used for prayer by the Master and Brethren today.

and improvement of the Lord Leycester, building two wings onto the Master's House and cladding much of the face of the buildings in Victorian bling. Much of that was taken down or fell off by the 1950s – except the Master's House which has retained the faux black and white frontage. It is a very cold house in winter with gaps in the wattle and daub where light shines in - but on the other hand who has a guest bedroom where one wall is covered with paintings from the 1500s?

Q Who else lives on-site?

Apart from the Master's House, we have self-contained flats for our residents to live here on site. In Tudor times when Dudley moved the Brethren into his Hospital they likely lived in partitioned spaces in the Guildhall and ate together in the 'Kitchen Commons', where a cook would have prepared their dinner. It wasn't until the 1950s, and as the result of an extensive restoration project, that the Brethren moved out of the Guild hall and into their own self-contained flats with kitchens and bathrooms!

The way in which Brethren are selected to join our community at the Lord Leycester is mostly a process of mutual selection. Usually, a prospective Brother will have had military service and be willing to join a community of Brothers in arms. Partners are welcome to come too and many of the Brethren in centuries

past brought their wives and children to live at the Lord Leycester with them.

Q What does your typical day or week look like?

At the moment we are undergoing a massive restoration project to improve and repair the Lord Leycester, so our days are filled with builders and architects. We reopen to the public this August and then our days will be filled with looking after our heritage visitors and making sure they have a wonderful, inspiring and rewarding visit to the Lord Leycester.

Q What do you enjoy most about the role?

I fell in love with the buildings from the moment I first saw their quirky, crooked and honey-coloured frontage poking out onto the High Street. I enjoy being part of protecting these architecturally precious icons of medieval life. But I also enjoy being part of a community that is directly linked to Elizabeth I and her dearest friend, Robert Dudley. It is privilege to be part of their personal efforts to improve life for 'the deserving poor' of Tudor England.

Q What is your favourite spot within Lord Leycester Hospital, and why?

Surely the garden! It is five hundred years old and a peaceful place with bees, birds and butterflies going about their business among the roses, lavender and



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borage. When Robert Dudley moved his Master and Brethren into the Lord Leycester, he cast his eye over the garden and declared, "let it be left as greensward for their recreation" and so it has been retained as a quiet, calm place ever since. The great American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne thought so too in the 1800s when he often came to sit and muse in the gardens of the Lord Leycester!

Above: The bear and ragged staff, the emblem of Robert Dudley and his younger brother, Ambrose Dudley, 3rd Earl of Warwick, is displayed prominently above the entrance to the courtyard.

Below: The Master and Brethren in the courtyard of the Lord Leycester. The black and white frontage of the Master's House, added by the Victorians, covers what is believed to be the oldest part of the medieval complex, dating to the thirteenth-century.



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The Lord Leycester Hospital is currently closed for a major multi-million-pound restoration and development programme. Can you tell us what work is being done and why?

The Lord Leycester was a very popular tourist destination in the Victorian age – especially for Americans who saw it as a truly authentic medieval and Tudor heritage site. In the modern age the Lord Leycester retreated from public life. The historical significance of the site, as a living community that is directly linked to the Tudor age, as well as the beauty and importance of the



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Above: The two storied, open gallery runs the length of the medieval guildhall.

buildings, means that it should rightfully be at the top of the list of intriguing heritage sites to visit in England. Our current restoration and improvement project is about reclaiming the Lord Leycester's position as a popular and valued tourist destination where heritage visitors can step back in time into a living Tudor museum.

Q What can people expect to see when the Lord Leycester re-opens later this year?

Met at the large wooden gates by one of our Brethren, you will be directed to our new Visitor Centre and thereafter a guided trail takes you through the restored public rooms – the Guildhall, Chaplains Hall, Great Hall, the chapel, Brethren's Kitchen, Master's House – and finally the gardens. In each room new exhibits will reveal our history from the time of the Guilds, through our birth in the Tudor age, all the way to the present day. We have a café and a shop too and our disabled access has been greatly improved – a worthwhile but challenging endeavour in a medieval building!

Q What sources and information are available on the history of the site – both the buildings and the people that have lived there?

The history of the Lord Leycester lies primarily within the stories of the people who have lived within these walls. We have good records starting in 1571 when the Lord Leycester was founded and with our band of loyal research volunteers we are interpreting these records to populate three important data bases: the first is our data base on the Brethren – the four hundred and fifty military veterans who have lived here; the second on the Masters and finally a Visitors data base that records all the many Victorian visitors who came to visit from all over the world.

Our visitors to the Lord Leycester will be able to access and search that data base. And our volunteer researchers will be kept busy populating the data base with new information that they have researched from our archives.

Q Have any new discoveries been made during the project?

Tudor wall paintings have been found throughout the Master's house. But we didn't budget for their restoration in this project so we will have to launch a second fundraising campaign to restore and display them. But that will be great project to plan for...



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Q What is your favourite Tudor place, or places, excluding Lord Leycester Hospital, of course, and why are they your favourites?

Haddon Hall in Derbyshire – it is so authentic, and you feel truly as if you have stepped back in time.

Q Which lost Tudor Place would you most like the opportunity to visit and why?

Joanne Paul who published the acclaimed book, *The House of Dudley*, wrote that she would like to go to the two-storey merchant's house on Candlewick Street (Cannon Street) in London where the Dudley family lived during their rise to power and wealth. Here at the Lord Leycester we have such a strong connection to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leycester as our founder. Given how much Joanne knows about the Dudley dynasty I would very much like to go with her when she visits his ancestral home! ■

The Lord Leycester Hospital buildings, garden and café will re-open to the public in early August 2023. For more information, see www.lordleycester.com



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Above: Cultivated for more than five hundred years, the Master's Garden is a peaceful haven behind the medieval buildings. It was restored by the Victorians, and again in the 1990s.