

# *Narratives*

*The Nuance Counselling Newsletter*



**Review of Mental  
Health Apps**

**A Brief History of  
Small Thatched Cottage**

**The Joy of  
Journaling**

**The Importance of  
Internal Narratives**



**W**elcome to the latest edition of *Narratives*, the newsletter of Nuance Counselling: please feel free to take a copy away with you and perhaps share it with friends or family.

Few of us have navigated the past 18 months unscathed, as the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic continues to impact on all sectors of society. Quite apart from the tragic loss of life, the economic hardship and adverse effects on mental health have also been inestimable. And yet, at the time of writing (April 2021), there seems to be a new sense of optimism as the easing of restrictions gathers momentum and the rollout of the vaccination program continues apace. But as a new wave of infections continues to rise exponentially across the continent, there seems to be little certainty as to what the future may hold, making it almost impossible for each of us to plan our lives. Against this backdrop, it is our hope that Nuance will continue to provide a reliable service, whatever challenges the pandemic may bring: whether clients prefer to meet in person or online, we will always seek to accommodate your needs and be as

flexible as possible.

The purpose of *Narratives* is three-fold. Firstly, we hope that some of the short articles will prove informative and thought-provoking. We explore, for instance, the origins of our internal narratives, the blueprints by which we live our lives, and contemplate the potential benefits of maintaining a journal during counselling. And for those intrigued by the history of Small Thatched Cottage, we have provided a brief account of its close association with the Abbey that dominated Enysham and the surrounding area from the 11th century onwards.

Secondly, we seek to provide access to resources and sources of help. In addition to reviewing new books and recently-released films that may be of interest, we have provided an overview of a number of popular mental health apps that are available for use with any smart phone, a feature we intend to continue in future editions.

And thirdly, *Narratives* aims to provide a means of expression for those who would like to share something of their story with others in an anonymous way. Our hope is that this forum may provide the voice that some never felt they had, indeed, we have named the series 'Voices' in recognition of the opportunity we hope it provides for them to be truly heard. In the first of the series, Kiri shares her recollections of the mental health issues that came to define her student days in Oxford, a story that may well resonate with many. Naturally, not all those seeking counselling would wish to share their stories in this way: for

many the struggles are intensely private. And yet for others, the prospect of committing their story to paper for the benefit of others can feel both therapeutic and liberating. Indeed, it can sometimes feel an appropriate ending to a period of counselling, drawing a sense of closure to a painful period of reflection. If you would like to contribute your own story to the *Voices* series, you would be welcome to do so entirely anonymously. If, on the other hand, you prefer to find expression in other media such as poetry, we would likewise be more than happy to consider publishing your work in *Narratives*: in either case simply contact me direct to discuss the possibility.

I do hope you enjoy reading this edition of *Narratives*!

Paul Fairchild

## There's a Hole in my Sidewalk

by Portia Nelson

### Chapter 1

I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost ... I am helpless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes forever to find a way out.

### Chapter 2

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in the same place.  
But it isn't my fault.  
It still takes a long time to get out.

### Chapter 3

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in ... it's a habit.  
My eyes are open.  
I know where I am.  
It is my fault.  
I get out immediately.

### Chapter 4

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

### Chapter 5

I walk down another street.

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## Column:

# The Benefits of Keeping a Journal during Therapy

**T**he 19th century playwright, Oscar Wilde, was a prolific diarist. Indeed, he is said never to have travelled without his diary for the simple reason that “one should always have something sensational to read on the train”. Although keeping a diary may have become rather passé in recent years, the art of journaling has become far more mainstream and has even emerged as a hallmark of the ‘self-care’ movement. Its benefits are claimed to include improved sleep patterns and self-confidence, reduced anxiety and even better immunity to infection! Having worked as an immunologist for over 30 years prior to retiring from science and academia, I have to question the latter claim, but there is certainly good evidence that keeping a journal has a positive effect on many aspects of mental health.



Jess Bailey

Although the roots of journaling can be traced, rather unexpectedly, to 10th century Japan, it has evolved in recent years into a daily routine that many have begun to embrace. I am told that spending 15 minutes at the beginning of each day writing a ‘stream of consciousness’ about any pressing issues that may impact the day ahead can be transformative. Since, early in the morning, I lack the cognitive ability to focus on any issues, pressing or otherwise, before imbibing gallons of

strong black coffee, I must confess that I have yet to experience its benefits at first hand. Nevertheless, one variant, of which I have some personal experience, is the practice of keeping a journal during therapy, the positive impact of which has been endorsed by numerous clients, past and present.

Although it may sound somewhat daunting, in its simplest form, keeping a journal during counselling provides a first-hand account of the journey you have undertaken: the highs and lows, the unexpected detours, the defeats and victories along the way. It can take just a few minutes to note down some of the key issues covered during each session together with some of the thoughts and ideas they triggered and the emotional legacy they left behind. Needless to say, the closer a journal entry is to the relevant counselling session, the more likely it is to faithfully capture the most significant elements before they mysteriously evaporate, although thoughts and memories that come to mind between sessions can, of course, be added later to be shared with your counsellor at an opportune moment. Clients are always welcome to stay for coffee at Small Thatched Cottage after their session has ended to enable them to evaluate, reflect and re-equilibrate before returning to the busyness and demands of modern life, a rare moment of peace and tranquillity that some devote to their journal.

But the benefits of keeping a journal during therapy extend beyond the record of progress it provides and the opportunities for spotting recurring themes and links between past and present. It has been suggested that the act of writing engages the left hemisphere of the brain, the analytical and rational side, thereby allowing the right hemi-

sphere free rein to be intuitive and creative in its expression. There is something very therapeutic, even cathartic, about express-



Negative Space

ing feelings in writing, of finding the right word or phrase to accurately convey your emotions. Crafting a metaphor that describes precisely how events or experiences have impacted your life can likewise be surprisingly liberating, perhaps serving as the first step towards bringing closure to some of the traumas of the past. In essence, journaling has a purging quality about it, freeing an individual to create a more fitting narrative for their life, rather than one shackled by the past.

If the practicalities of keeping a journal make you hesitate, there are plenty of options to help. For the technologically minded, there are numerous Apps for the smartphone to ensure that your thoughts and reflections are always accessible and can be added to, whenever the need arises. But if, like me, you lack the manual dexterity to write anything longer than a simple text on your phone, any dedicated notebook will suffice, although Nuance Counselling also provides bespoke journals as a way of keeping all your thoughts and ideas in a single, convenient place. Whatever medium you choose, however, be sure to take it with you wherever you go, to ensure that you have something thought-provoking to read on the train...

# Narratives: Taming the Internal Dialog

Paul Fairchild explores the extent to which we are influenced by the subconscious narratives we share with those around us.

Each of our lives tells a story, a unique story of love and loss, of intrigue and adversity, of success and failure. But beneath each of our stories lies a rather more subtle and complex narrative which, for the majority of us, remains private, sometimes hidden, even from our own consciousness. And yet we may unwittingly provide glimpses into our narratives to those with whom we interact, conveying a subliminal message which influences the way others may view us. By responding and behaving towards us in a manner that is congruent with the narrative we project, our family, friends and colleagues may inadvertently reinforce our internal narrative, helping to create a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Narratives embody the fundamental beliefs we hold about ourselves and are the blueprints by which we live our lives: if our internal narrative tells us we are a failure and don't deserve to succeed, our chances of success may well be reduced when the next challenge confronts us. Ironically, further failure may even serve to reinforce our original belief, setting in motion a self-defeating positive feedback loop. You may like to cast your mind over various friends or acquaintances and explore what narrative they may be telling. For some it may be surprisingly easy to identify, for others rather less so. So where do such narratives come from and what can be done to free us from their constraints?

Although our beliefs about ourselves are based objectively on what we know to be true (our talents, achievements, strengths and experiences), all too frequently a disproportionate emphasis is placed on the negatives we see in ourselves (our weaknesses, faults and failures) and what others tell us about ourselves, which may be rather more subjective. Furthermore, specific events may contribute to our narratives more than we may realise: unexpected redundancy, the loss of a loved one, the diagnosis of chronic illness or a period of intense depression can all begin to define us, ambushing the narratives we convey.

You may find it illuminating, if not potentially a little unsettling, to ask a partner or valued friend to share what they see to be your narrative. If it is not what you had anticipated, it may be worth contemplating its origins and how you might like it to be different.

Of course, narratives are neither permanent nor refractory to change but rather evolve over time, giving an opportunity to evaluate their suitability and determine whether or not they are fit for purpose. If our narrative has somehow become dominated by our problem-saturated lives, it might be worth assessing whether our resilience and determination to survive the challenges we face might prove a better narrative. The choice is, of course, ours: both may be accurate, yet they convey very different messages and invite different responses. Constructing a different narrative does not require us to deny reality or fabricate the truth: everybody's story is complex and we chose those aspects that feature in the narrative we construct. From the same set of ingredients, many different meals can be produced by combining them in different ways and proportions, indeed, different chefs might construct entirely different dishes from the very same ingredients. Likewise, there may be numerous narratives that each of us could construct, all of which are equally valid but which may not be equally beneficial.

Herminia Ibarra<sup>1</sup> has written that 'Life stories assume that the past is linked to the present and that from that trajectory we can glimpse the future'. A period of therapy can provide a useful opportunity to explore our internal narratives to ensure that they reflect the future to which we aspire rather than anchoring us uncomfortably in the past.

1. Ibarra H, Lineback K. What's your story? *Harvard Business Review* Jan 2005

## Voices

## Shadows Cast by the Dreaming Spires:

## Experiences of depression while studying at Oxford

Oxford is where my journey of self-discovery truly begins. I write to lend my voice and my story to countless others who may have themselves, or witnessed those they love, suffer through mental health problems or endure trauma. I want to share my story so that it may in some way bring comfort to those that feel alone; to educate those who wish to learn more about the grave impact of mental health issues; and for myself, as to share my story is to lift a weight off my shoulders with which I have long been burdened.

Throughout my teenage years, I worked steadfastly to gain straight A\*s and to follow in the footsteps of my sister to study at Oxford. I would later learn that these teenage years were where my depression and anxiety really rooted themselves, and that upon winning my university place, I would start to steadily decline into a most profound and near fatal state of being.

There was not just intense pressure to *look* perfect, but to *be* perfect – perfectly kind, perfectly polite and most excruciatingly, perfectly intelligent. I recall becoming so stressed in the days leading up to my exams, that I would actually sleep during the afternoons, and stay up all night before heading straight to an exam, lest all the knowledge should fall out of my head while I slept.



At the end of my first year, I found out that whilst I had passed Physiology and Neuroscience – which was to become my specialty area – I had failed Biochemistry. I was heartbroken but knew that the low mood that had raged through me in the days leading up to my exams had hindered me greatly. This failure catapulted me into the very depth of my depression. Whilst my peers spent their summers relaxing, or holidaying, I spent them revising again. Moreover, it was the first time I had failed at anything, and I had not the mental capacity or resources to handle it.

And so, the summer was not without its fury. In addition to having to break this news to my father and return to a broken home – my mother had died when I was 3 years old, and my household was fraught with arguing – my depression had taken a new and unfamiliar hold. Two weeks into the summer holiday of revision, I became so low that suicidal ideation became apparent in my thoughts and mind. A strange and dark force within me induced me, without anyone's knowledge, to take the sharpest knife from the kitchen drawer and hide it in the drawer next to my study desk in my room.

My mind continued to absorb more knowledge through my revision, but it was an extraordinarily draining and uphill battle. Since my thoughts continually drifted towards the knife, I would occasionally be forced to take it out of the drawer and place it in front of me on the desk just to satisfy the urge. Every so often, I would run the sharp blade across my wrist, pressing hard enough to leave a white dent or a small scratch, but never enough to physically scar or to kill. I could not go that far; I was too scared. I had to let it out and let the shadows take over for some brief moments, but never to completely destroy me. I had to fight it and I did.

I passed my exams at the end of the summer and was ready to begin my second year at Oxford. The blip in my academic record disturbs me to this day, but I came out alive. I survived this year; however dreadful and traumatic it was. But the year to come was not without its own fresh challenges, and now that the depression had taken hold, I knew deep within that the fight was not over.

I would struggle through my subsequent two years, focusing on my academic studies and stabilising on my new medication (sertraline, an SSRI) undertaking counselling (both individual and group for the first time) whilst maintaining an outward appearance of togetherness.

My ongoing desire to be perfect and self-destruct was unrelenting into my second and third years at

Oxford. In my second year, I began a vicious cycle of excessive running (often causing terrible knee pain), and a diet of cottage cheese, sugar (mainly Nutella) and red wine. However, my caloric intake did not exceed what I was burning off through over 100km of running each week.

I believe my body was desperately trying to stave off another deep bout of depression in an apparently natural way by constantly exercising (and thereby not having any time to think about feelings), but the excessive nature of my workouts left me fatigued, faint and unable to sleep well for the entire year.

I also remember suffering from severe insomnia and having to call the Samaritans helpline, and to talk to them endlessly until I fell asleep. I repeated this night after night until I eventually decided to visit my GP who prescribed me diazepam (I was advised by a tutor when I mentioned my problem to just “drink a glass of red wine before bed” instead but this did not seem sensible for someone with depression).

Despite being a student of the medical department most of the time, surrounded by not only students, but scientists and doctors at the pinnacle of their profession, not one person noticed I was suffering from depression.

My views about Oxford are jaded by this, but I will equally never forget the kindness of those who were there for me – and still are. I credit my existence and happiness to them. I am now studying clinical mental health sciences part-time in London, have started a company dedicated to NHS mental health service transformation and am living with the love of my life. This would not have been possible without the care, time and dedication of loved ones and professionals over the years to me and my life.

I am grateful to say that after living with major depression for over ten years now – as far as I know – I have come to accept its presence. Over time, it has become less intrusive in my life. With the experiences I have had, and people I have met on the way, I am more confident that I can avoid such near-fatal episodes as I have suffered in the past. Through this process, I have come to appreciate the people in my life so much more: my therapist, my friends and family, and my love.

I have left behind the vision of perfection, and these days, in my spare time, I focus on embracing the new, the creative and the invigorating. This has varied from oil painting, sewing and baking to cycling the North Coast 500 route in Scotland, climbing Mount Washington, and taking ballet lessons. I try not to forget other self-

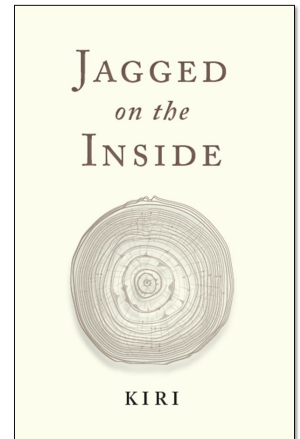
care techniques in all of this: doing yoga, taking a hot bath and listening to a fun podcast (ideally without dropping my phone in the tub!), painting my nails, going for a walk and breathing in fresh air, or simply sitting and breathing. When I do work, it is to learn more about my condition and other mental health conditions and services, and to try and help and encourage others.

There are days when the depression creeps back, seemingly for no reason, causing a few nights of insomnia and low mood. But, with help, I am reminded of my arsenal of self-help techniques to stop sinking further. They don't and won't always work, but that's OK. I try again until something does work, and this may mean doing nothing at all, which is OK too. I try to remember that looking after myself is the most important and kindest thing I can do. It benefits me and those around me.

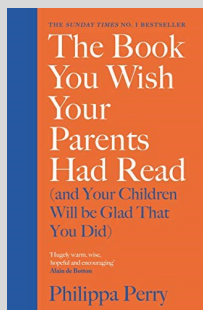
My last words to you, as one of my best friends would say this to me when I was particularly low, "Head down, chin up. You are stronger than you think, never give up".

**Kiri**

*Kiri's new book, which describes her experiences of depression in greater detail, is available for £7.99 from Amazon. ISBN: 978-1-914195-25-9*



## Book Review



*The book you wish your parents had read (and your children will be glad that you did).*

By Philippa Perry

John Wilmot is credited as saying that before he married, he had six theories about raising children but soon found himself with six children and no theories left! Anyone who has experienced the unfathomable joy, yet excruciating frustrations of parenthood will doubtless empathise with his sentiments. There is something about the parent-child relationship which seems somehow to defy all logic and leads us to behave and respond in ways that would be unthinkable in any other context. If you find your-

self smiling knowingly as you read these words, this book will doubtless make an excellent addition to your reading list! And yet it is far from a self-help guide for weary parents, since it is equally relevant to those who have never had children. By seeking to unravel the intricacies and complexities of our relationships with our own parents, perhaps many years ago, Philippa Perry helps to expose their ongoing legacy in our lives and their inevitable impact on our current relationships. As the actor Peter Krause once said, "Parenthood...is about guiding the next generation and forgiving the last."

Philippa is a psychotherapist with over 20 years' experience and enviable insight into the parent-child relationship that forms the basis of much of her work with clients. Her wisdom and understanding is evident throughout the book as she tries to make sense of ruptures and rifts in relationships and provides insight into how best to heal them. For any who wish to reflect on some of the issues she raises, the book is punctuated with useful exercises aimed at helping readers think through their own experiences of parental relationships and how they have shaped both their lives and those of



their children. Furthermore, Philippa includes numerous case studies, drawn from her own work with clients, which provide relevant real-life illustrations of some of the pitfalls of parenthood and how real people have learnt to deal with them. The book is written in a very accessible and entertaining style that minimises the use of jargon, rightfully earning it the accolade of being the Sunday Times No. 1 Bestseller.

*The book you wish your parents had read (and your children will be glad that you did)* (ISBN 978-0-241-25099-0) is published by Penguin Life and retails in hard back at £14.99.

## “The App will see you now”

### A Review of Mental Health Apps

In an age in which our lives are progressively dominated by smart phones that pander to our every need, it is perhaps little surprise that provision has also been made to care for our mental health. Indeed, there is a bewildering array of apps that have appeared over the past few years, purporting to offer users an increased sense of wellbeing. Given that 29% of people experience difficulties with mental health during their lifetime<sup>1</sup> and yet up to 55% of those in developed countries are unable to access the help they need, it is little surprise that such apps have found a highly-responsive market, and have been fully endorsed by the World Health Organisation. The WHO’s Mental Health Action Plan for 2013-2020 acknowledged the many potential benefits from exploiting mobile health technologies, and not without good reason. The use of such apps promotes self-care and may help fill the widening gap between the demand for help and resources available. Furthermore, access to mental health apps offers an unrivalled level of flexibility, fitting in with any individual’s lifestyle and needs, however complicated they may be: gone are the never-ending waiting lists and inconvenient appointment times.

But mental health apps are not without their drawbacks. Although apps may help clients cope with issues that arise between counselling sessions, they are unlikely to fully substitute for the therapeutic relationship established with a counsellor over a period of time. Furthermore, the evidence base for many of the apps currently available is far from compelling and the majority have yet to be formally tested in clinical trials. Although it is unlikely they would prove to be actively harmful, many may rely rather heavily on the placebo effect that comes from the anticipation that life may improve. When selecting mental health apps, it is, therefore, advisable to confine your search to those that have been tried and tested over several years and have been thoroughly assessed for efficacy. A good place to start is the NHS Health Apps Library<sup>2</sup>, launched in 2013, which uses a rigorously-defined set of criteria against which to assess their effectiveness. In the first of this series, we have reviewed three apps recommended by the NHS, which have accumulated significant evidence of efficacy over recent years.

**Catch It** The Catch It app was developed as a joint project between the Universities of Liverpool and Manchester for the treatment of anxiety, depression and anger and is based on the underlying principles of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). At its core, CBT maintains that it is not the events that happen to us that cause us stress and anxiety but rather the ways in which we interpret them and the negative beliefs about ourselves they tend to reinforce. By helping individuals to monitor their mental wellbeing and chart their responses to events, Catch It helps them spot patterns of be-

haviour that may contribute to their anxiety and depression and challenge the legitimacy of the assumptions they have made. The app is free to download and simple to use with helpful features such as a timer that helps users to calm themselves following a traumatic event and find space and time to contemplate their immediate response and the assumptions on which it was based. The app then leads users through a process of ‘Catch it, Check it and Change it’ to help challenge maladaptive thought processes. A published study of the app has revealed a statistically-significant reduction in negative mood intensity among users<sup>3</sup>, suggesting that it may be worth a try for those prone to anxiety.

**Sleepio** Although insomnia and chronic sleep deprivation are not considered mental health conditions, they may significantly enhance susceptibility to issues such as depression and anxiety. Achieving a healthy pattern of sleep is, therefore, essential for mental wellbeing and is highly recommended for all clients in personal therapy. The Sleepio app was developed by researchers at the University of Oxford and has been rigorously tested in clinical trials and



evaluated by NICE. Based on data published in 40 peer-reviewed articles, the app boasts that 76% of users achieve a healthy sleep pattern. Sleepio is available through the NHS to those living in Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire and, like Catch It, is based on the principles of CBT that help users to overcome the racing mind and intrusive thoughts that interfere with sleep and develop behaviours that help reset sleeping

patterns naturally. During the six week online course, the app helps users to manage the worries and thoughts that make sleep difficult, rebuild a healthy association with sleep and create a sleep optimization plan to achieve a sustainable outcome.

**CalmHarm** Self-harm comes in many guises and continues to increase in prevalence. Although it affects all sectors of society, it is especially common among young people: the University Student Mental Health Survey, published in March 2019, reported that 50.3% of students experienced persistent thoughts of self-harm. And yet in spite of being so widespread, self-harm is one of the issues that individuals report finding hardest to divulge to others which is why the CalmHarm app has become such a lifeline for many, providing a discreet and private source of help when the temptation to self-harm seems almost irresistible. The app has won many awards for its simplicity and ease of use and can be downloaded free of charge from the CalmHarm website ([www.calmharm.co.uk](http://www.calmharm.co.uk)). Although aimed primarily at young people, the principles are equally relevant to all struggling with this issue. The app helps an individual resist the urge to harm by providing a choice of tasks such as distracting, comforting or expressing themselves, practicing breathing exercises or seeking other forms of release. By doing so, the app helps the user ‘ride the wave’ until the urge has passed.

1. Steel Z et al. (2014) *Int J Epidemiol* 43:476–493

2. <https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>

3. Kinderman P et al. (2016) *Br J Psych Open* 2:204-209

## In the Shadow of Greatness: The History of Small Thatched Cottage

**S**mall Thatched Cottage is thought to date from c1600 and is one of Eynsham's oldest buildings. It is, however, impossible to get a sense for the history of the cottage without first appreciating its close relationship with the nearby Abbey which not only dominated Eynsham for over 500 years but was widely regarded as one of the most influential abbeys in the country.

The first recorded reference to Eynsham can be traced to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 571, but occupying one of the few sites along the Thames that could be crossed safely without a bridge, it was always destined for greatness. The foundation of the original Abbey in 1005 by Aethelmar, Earl of Cornwall, reinforced its early influence. The Abbey occupied grounds behind what is now St Leonard's church, a few yards from the cottage and was one of the first in the country to boast cloisters surrounding a central courtyard. The aerial view shows the exact location of the subsequent Norman Abbey founded in 1109 and its close proximity to Small Thatched Cottage.



The first abbot is known to have been Aelfric, a Latin scholar with an unusual talent of making Latin texts accessible to lay readers: his name is still found around Eynsham, including Aelfric Court on the Highstreet. As the Abbey's influence grew, Eynsham was granted a licence by King Stephen in 1150 to hold regular Sunday markets in the nearby square which attracted visitors from the surrounding towns and villages. Fishponds were dug in the Abbey grounds in 1217 to

supply the monks with fresh fish and remain one of the few vestiges of the Abbey still clearly visible today. As such an influential institution, the Abbey attracted various royal visitors over the years, including King Richard II in 1390 during one of his retreats to the royal hunting lodge at Woodstock. Despite boasting such patronage, the Abbey was finally handed over to Henry VIII in 1538 during the dissolution of the monasteries and rapidly fell into disrepair and ruin. Nevertheless, during his visit to Eynsham in 1657, Anthony Wood sketched what remained of the Abbey, revealing that portions of the west wing were still standing some years after Small Thatched Cottage is believed to have been built: the date 1735 carved into the main beam of the cottage near the inglenook fireplace is rather misleading and is believed to mark the date of renovations.



Quite what happened to the remaining structure of the Abbey remains uncertain, but it is likely to have been dismantled and the valuable stone incorporated into local buildings together with some of its more decorative features. A prominent example is the stone shield inserted over the doorway of the 18th century Market House in the square which is thought to bear the arms of a benefactor of the Abbey, since the bugle-horn and lion are unlikely religious symbols. But Small Thatched Cottage has also retained a small memento of its close brush with grandeur since two fragments of the Abbey's columns are incorporated in the garden wall, a fitting reminder of its close association with an important piece of English history.

