

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PILTON

Origins

Pilton is an ancient settlement of unknown origin, the root of the name being *the tun or stockaded settlement on the pill or creek, or the farm by the River Yeo*. It was the site of one of the four Devon defensive forts built to repel Viking invaders by King Alfred twelve hundred years ago. However, a 1970s archaeological dig near Pilton Church failed to find evidence that it was located on that hill. A likely site is the ancient hilltop fortification at Roborough, the highest point in the parish, which has never been excavated. The Domesday Survey of 1086 recorded four Saxon manors in the area now known as Pilton - Pilton, Pilland, Raleigh and Bradiford.

Early History



The earliest mention of St Margaret's Leper Hospital near Pilton Bridge is a grant of a garden by William Tailor to the Hospital in 1189. This photograph shows the hospital seal in one of the church windows. The Benedictine Abbey of Malmesbury founded a Priory in Pilton, the earliest evidence being a document dated 1199 when it was probably a modest affair. By 1259 the church was either built or rebuilt and dedicated by Bishop Bronescombe to St Mary the Virgin, with the office of Prior combining with that of parish vicar.

Pilton had a charter to hold an annual Fair or Market from Edward III in 1344, just two years before the arrival of the first outbreak of the Black Death, which returned again in 1361, reducing the population of the whole country by between a third and a half. Population figures show that there were 750 Pilton inhabitants in 1575 compared with approximately 5,000 in 2013.

Bull Hill House



Bull House (drawing by Margaret Peters), more correctly known as Bull Hill House and situated close to the west end of the Church, is an early 15th century building with later additions, originally part of the Priory, and possibly the Prior's lodging. In 1536, when the Priory was dissolved at the Reformation, the house was sold to Robert Brett, formerly bailiff of the Priory's

lands. During the following three centuries the house was split into separate domestic and commercial uses – for a time as a glove and wool processing factory. Early in the 20th century it returned to one owner, who restored it to its former glory. In 2010 it was bequeathed to the National Trust but returned to private ownership in 2013.

Priory Church of St Mary



St Mary's Church, which was enlarged in the years before the Reformation, is basically as it was in Tudor times, but the interior has seen many changes. The fine rood screen was already in place with painted panels before 1536, complete with rood loft. The paintings of the apostles on the screen panels (left), which were covered with dark paint, are gradually being restored. Two fine Chichester family tombs of post-Reformation date are in the chancel and at the east end

of the south aisle. There is fine 15th century woodwork in the font cover and canopy. A few fragments of pre-Reformation stained glass can be seen at the top of the windows in the north aisle – just too high for the Puritan vandals to reach.



In 1646, towards the end of the Civil War, the Royalist army, which had captured Barnstaple and was desperately short of cannon and lead shot, pulled down the lead spire on the church (very similar to the one on Barnstaple Parish Church today), and removed the peal of bells, destroying the top half of the tower in the process. The lead from the spire was loaded on ox carts and carried to Cornwall to be made into shot. The bells were destined for a Bodmin bellfounder to be cast into cannon. However, it is doubtful if this ever happened as the war ended soon after this wanton destruction. The tower was left in ruins for many

years, and not completely rebuilt with turrets and a clock bell tower until 1853. A clock, made by a local blacksmith in 1713, never had a face on the tower, but struck the hours until recently.

Trades and Industries

The main trades in Pilton throughout the late medieval and early modern periods were wool processing and agriculture, with ship-building on Pilton Quay, lime-burning and pottery from the early 16th century. The large number of water-mills on Bradiford Water and the River Yeo provided power for a variety of small industries. With the collapse of the wool trade, the large factory at Raleigh was taken over in the 1850s by Shapland & Petter's cabinet-making business, which remained until it was destroyed by fire in 1888, causing the factory to relocate in Barnstaple. The establishment of glove factories provided hundreds of jobs for men and women, but these gradually ceased to operate during the mid 20th century. Until the Pottington Industrial Estate was established after World War II, most Pilton workers were employed in Barnstaple factories.

Pilton Street

There are examples of many types of architecture from the last five centuries in the parish, particularly in Pilton Street, where the facades often hide older buildings. The present Church Hall dates from at least the 16th



century, and is almost certainly older, with fine Tudor moulded plasterwork and an ancient main doorway. For at least 300 years, and possibly longer, it was the Unicorn Inn. The unicorn was the badge of the Bassett family who owned the

premises intermittently from the 17th century until 1905. For a very short time from 1878 it was a Temperance Reading Room and Coffee House, which failed to attract customers. In 1905 the building was sold to the Church of England, when the old skittle alley at the rear was demolished and

the present Hall erected in its place.

Another significant building, No 80 Pilton Street, is an early medieval house with much interesting woodwork and other architectural features, some of which were imported from other buildings in the 1960s when the owner removed the Victorian sash windows and other 19th century features. This house was owned by Pilton Priory until 1545, and then by the Rolle family, who leased it to various tenants including the Parminter family, who were prosperous clothiers. Until about 1830 this was known as Parminter House, but this name was dropped until recently when it was revived.

Pilton House

Pilton House, behind you as you read this board, was completed in 1746 to replace a former building on land owned by the Bassett family. After occupation by various gentlemen of means it was sold in 1948 to the Barnstaple Old People's Housing Association who established a residential home for the elderly which still operates there.

Almshouses

There are three sets of almshouses in Pilton, the oldest being at Lake, established in pre-Reformation times by the ancient Guild of the Blessed Virgin of Pilton. These were completely rebuilt in 1863 at the expense of Thomas Wrey Harding of Upcott House. In recent years they have been



converted from four units into two, and occupied by families. The Lower Almshouses, near the bottom of Pilton Street with gardens in front, were built in 1860 on the site of the Parish Workhouse, and have recently been augmented by eight purpose built flats called St Margaret's Gardens. At the top of Pilton Street, with the archway in the centre giving access to the Church, there are ten almshouses known as the Feoffee Cottages or Higher Almshouses which were

rebuilt in 1849, partly at the expense of Rev. Thomas Bowdler in memory of his daughter. This photograph of the Feoffee Cottages is dated around 1855 and shows the village pump.

Pilton Festival

The fair and market first held in 1344 were reinstated as Pilton Festival in 1982, an event now held annually usually over the third weekend in July.



This has developed the theme of the Green Man, commencing with a parade from The Square in Barnstaple to Pilton Street, led by the Town Crier, Tom Evans, a Samba Band and many colourfully dressed children and adults. In the Street and in Rotary Gardens there are food and craft stalls, music and an enactment of a Green Man

Pageant. The Church often has a Flower Show and Summer Concert and is popular with Festival visitors for rest and refreshment.



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For more on the history of Pilton visit
www.thepiltonstory.org