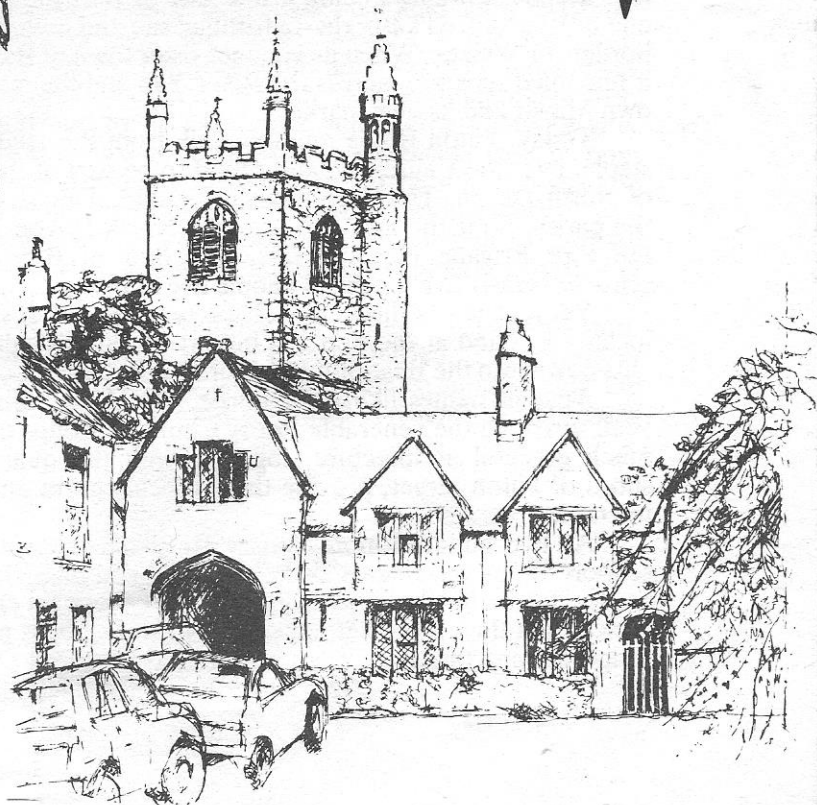




The Village
of PILTON

Oldest Barnstaple

'The Green Man'
detail on 15th century
Parclose Screen in the
Raleigh Chapel, Pilton Church





PILTON

—established as a Burgh by King Alfred the Great circa 882 A.D.—

Pilton has always had an independent spirit and a strong sense of identity, despite nowadays being just a part of Barnstaple. It began life as one of King Alfred's Burghs—a fortified site and township to protect the borders of Wessex. When its younger sister town of Barnstaple emerged it remained separate, across the River Yeo and the marshlands, with its own Mayor and its own market.

Today, Pilton is five minutes walk from the High Street of Barnstaple, over the Causeway, and proud to be part of the regional capital of North Devon. The large industrial estate of Pottington is located in the parish. So is the new and splendid North Devon District Hospital, the Fire Brigade Headquarters, and four of Barnstaple's principal schools. Nearly five thousand people live in Pilton.

Yet it retains a distinctive character. The oldest site of Man in the locality is found at the iron age hillfort of Roborough. A Nature Trail cuts down into the Beautiful Bradiford Valley.

Ancient names like Littabourne, The Rock, Bull Hill and Lady Well surround the venerable Priory Church. Groups of almshouses and much graceful architecture, together with the quaint and delightful shops of Pilton Street, provide the physical charm and integrity of the township.

As two hundred more houses are planned; as children from the schools fill the pavements at the start and end of each day; as the Pottington Estate bustles; and as Pilton Street shoppers chat and queue—it is clear that the earliest settlement of North Devon is no backwater, but a vigorous and thriving community.

Potted Pilton History. . . .

BEGINNINGS

Roborough Hill Fort is a defensive earthwork built by people of the Iron Age, several hundred years before Christ. These folk were of Celtic origin, peasant farmers and herdsmen. They became known as Dumnonii or 'people of the land'. Roborough could have been in use for upwards of one thousand years.

The Saxon occupation of Devon was gradual. The invaders tended to settle below the hill forts. PILL means creek, and a TUN is a stockaded farmstead. 'Pilton' probably developed from such a holding on or near 'The Rock' around 682 A.D.

The Bural Hidage is a document listing 29 burhs (fortified townships) established by King Alfred the Great about the year 882 A.D. These towns were a serious attempt not only to defend the borders of Wessex but to urbanise the country for the first time since the Roman withdrawal. Exeter, Pilton, Lydford and Halwell are the only burhs listed for Devon. It is this Saxon record that provides Pilton's proud claim to eleven hundred years of recorded history.

CHURCH

A strong tradition links the founding of the Benedictine Priory at Pilton with King Athelstan. At Easter 928 A.D. Athelstan held court in Exeter, celebrating his victories over the 'West Welsh' — the natives of Cornwall and North Devon. The king at this time was in his late thirties, grandson of Alfred, virtual ruler of Britain. Ambassadors came from foreign courts, impressed by his excellence and bearing fabulous gifts: the Holy Lance, the Sword of Constantine, a classical vase of onyx 'carved so subtly that the corn sheaves seemed to stir, the vines to sprout, and the figures of men to move' (William of Malmesbury)

The Great Priory Seal of Pilton (made much later, in 1412 or so) depicts the King, and says, in Latin, "I, ATHELSTAN, PERFORMED THAT WHICH THIS PRESENT SEALS."

Pilton Priory belonged to Malmesbury Abbey, Athelstan's principal foundation and the place where he was buried. Two priors of Pilton became Abbots there later. It is reasonable to suppose that the present parish church stands on a site occupied constantly by christians for over a thousand years.



TRADE

By the early Middle Ages the Priory and Church at the top of Pilton, and the Leper Hospital by the River Yeo must have been linked by a substantial settlement. In 1344 the Prior was granted a Fair and Market for Pilton by King Edward III. Meanwhile Barnstaple had become a big sister, and in 1394 the Wool Tax showed that the area was producing more wool than Exeter.

Pilton was a parish full of running water, and thrived as a clothmaking community, related to Barnstaple's role as a woollen port. Despite the Black Death's ravages the twin settlements thrived. By 1506 in Raleigh alone there was one corn mill and five fulling mills. (Bailiff's Accounts).

In 1536 the Dissolution of the Monasteries increased the wealth of the merchant and middle classes. More tenants owned their homes and land in Pilton. Barnstaple provided a ready market for farm produce, animals, cloth and leather: products that would come from Pilton for another five hundred years.



CIVIL WAR

Barnstaple declared for Parliament in the English Civil War. Taxes like the Ship Money to fight the Dutch alienated the merchants. In 1643 a battle near Torrington was won by the Royalists and Barnstaple, Bideford and Appledore were occupied. Fortunes fluctuated. By 1645 the town was held for Parliament and General Goring's Royalist forces encamped at Raleigh Court, the great mansion of the Chichesters, were given license to forage in lieu of wages. Pilton suffered. In the same year the Royalists pulled down the lead steeple of Pilton Church, presumably to use as ammunition.

EDUCATION

The monks of the Priory must have provided learning for the district. First mention of a school occurs in Dean Milles of Exeter's Questionnaire of c.1745. A school in a chamber over one of the almshouses was started in 1815. The first account book records:

Paid Barnstaple cryer for putting up advertisements	6d
Paid Pilton cryer for a cry	3d
For cleaning the schoolroom chimneys and pair of bellows	3s
A woman for washing the rooms	4d
For quills, paper and ruler	4s 10d
For $\frac{1}{2}$ doz slates @ 10d	5s

In 1841 a new school was opened next door to the church. Generations of Piltonians remember it with affection, for its doors only closed when the new Bluecoat School was opened in 1968.

Nowadays a 'campus' stretching across the old Abbey fields includes four schools: Pilton Infants, Bluecoat, Pathfield Special, and Pilton School and Community College.



FAMILY LIFE

It is inevitable to pick on the eccentric family of H. H. Munro, the writer who used the pen-name of 'SAKI', of Bellaire, Pilton.

Hector Hugh Munro was born at Akyab, Burma in 1870. From the age of two he was brought up by his paternal grandmother and two maiden aunts, together with his brother and sister. They lived at Broadgate Villa (now divided into 'Fairfield' and Fairmead').

Saki's biography, by his sister Ethel, gives a detailed, sometimes comical, account of life a hundred years ago under the eagle eyes of maiden aunts Augusta and Charlotte, neither of who seemed to have had any idea how to bring up children, and who detested each other so intensely that they countermanded each other's orders to the children. The biography can be read in Munro's book 'The Square Egg', published in 1924.

HEALTH

The North Devon District Hospital is a splendid modern hospital built close to the site of the mansion of Raleigh, ancient home of the Raleighs and Chichesters. It is large enough to provide a broad variety of facilities, care, and specialisation, but has managed to retain the warmth and humanity of a Cottage Hospital. Many of the staff have homes in Pilton. The hospital radio, 'TARKA RADIO', recalls the novel 'Tarka the Otter' by Henry Williamson. He is said to have used his knowledge of the local River Yeo and Bradiford Water in his writing.

LEISURE

Pilton commands a panoramic view of river, sea, hill and dune. Many people live five minutes walk from Barnstaple's shops, and not much more from the start of two nature trails. Pilton Park, built on the great loop of the River Yeo upon ancient marshes, is a favourite haunt of small children. Many holidaymakers enjoy Pilton as a pleasant base. Those who live in the district feel they have distinct advantages in terms of urban facilities and rural space and beauty.

Although Pilton has several nonogenarians who have lived their whole life in the neighbourhood, and a healthy share of true born Piltonians, many younger families have moved in, ensuring continuity. Together we are unashamedly proud that

'PILTON WAS A BOROUGH TOWN
WHEN BARUM WAS A MARSH'!

PILTON TREASURES

The PRIOR'S RING dug up in a nursery garden near Pilton churchyard in 1867. It is a large ring of gold inscribed with Hebrew and Latin characters. A large sapphire is held by a rivet of gold. The ring is reckoned by the British Museum to date from 1100. The North Devon Athenaeum holds this priceless relic.

A BOOK OF HOURS, tiny (3½ by 2½ inches) but beautifully written, now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Once the property of the monks of Pilton.

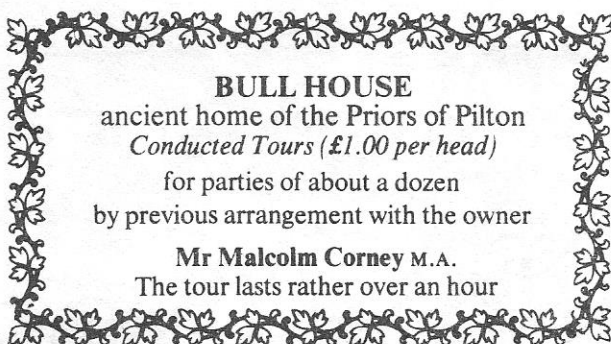
The ANCIENT SEAL OF THE PRIORY. The matrix is in the British Museum. An impression shows, on one side, the Virgin and Child between two angels, and the inscription in Latin "O Holy Virgin, to whom I give myself wholly always, intercede for me." On the other side is the Founder, King Athelstan, standing between two trees with shields of arms, and inscribed "I, Athelstan, performed that which this present seals" The seal is very beautiful and quite intricate. It dates from c.1412.

The LADYWELL (Our Lady's Holy Well). Outside the churchyard, set in the wall of the passageway known as 'Ladywell' is an ancient

stone bowl. Water from Maer Top runs to form a natural spring that has never been known to dry up. The Ladywell passage must once have been an open stream bordering the Saxon burgh (presumably what is now the churchyard and The Rock). From time out of mind this has been regarded as holy water. In 1984 the well basin was restored and the well rehallowed by Archbishop Anthony Bloom of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The **ROOD SCREEN**. Of all the famous wooden screens in the West Country, Pilton is likely to be the oldest. The intricate, deep and individualistic carving make it a breathtaking symbol of the 'Gate of Heaven'. Beneath the varnish, awaiting painstaking restoration, are painted saints on the lower panels. The screen is probably 15th century.

The **BENEDICTINE PRIORY CHURCH** of Our Blessed Lady, now the Parish Church of Pilton, is a Saxon foundation. The old monastic church now forms the North aisle. Early origins can be traced in the external wall, especially around the Tower. The present building was dedicated in the mid 13th century but Christians have worshipped on this site for eleven hundred years.



The Foundation of St. Margaret's Hospital

In an unbroken line from at least 1180A.D. Pilton has had a Prior of St. Margaret's Hospital. The ancient leper hospital stood where No. 122 Pilton Street now stands. The latter house, built in 1880 was given a turret and small garden to remind people of the days when a bell summoned the Prior and brethren across the green to chapel. Metal from the ancient chapel bell is believed to be incorporated in a bell of the Pilton peal of eight. To this day the Feoffees (the dozen and a half men and women who administer the 38 properties of the United Pilton Charities) appoint a Prior, a Brother and a Sister of St. Margaret's who hold office for life.

