

THE REFORM INN, PILTON

The Reform Inn, in Reform Street, Pilton, anciently belonged to Ilfracombe Parish Church, and was certainly already in existence in 1717, but not then called the Reform. The church accounts for that year referred to it as 'the Pilton house' at an annual rent of £2, and the Pilton Church Rate for 1792 names only three fully licensed public houses in the parish – the White Hart, the Combe Martin Inn and the Gardeners Inn. Other 'beer-houses' certainly existed in Pilton, but these traded without a licence and were obliged to close at 10 pm, while fully licensed inns fixed their own hours and could stay open all night.

The White Hart was at 62 Littabourne, the site of the Combe Martin Inn is uncertain, but the 1792 parish rate names the Gardeners Inn among other properties at the lower end of Pilton Street towards the quay and this is clearly the former name of the Reform, as the inn was re-named to commemorate the Reform Act of the 1830s.



Some early information about the occupants in the 1851 census reveals that Mary Grigg, widow, was the landlady, living there with her two daughters – Eliza age 28 and Sophia, age 26, both unmarried. In 1858 both Mary and her daughter Eliza died in the space of three weeks, while Sophia, with two children, was already married to John Knill and he became the landlord on his mother-in-law's death¹. In 1871, the census returns record him at 43 as innkeeper and mason, with his wife Sophia, six daughters, one son and a servant. He was the last innkeeper in Pilton to be described as a 'malter', not only making his own malt but also brewing his own beer using grain and yeast, but he may not have been using hops at this stage. His malthouse occupied the site of Barnstaple Auctions on Pilton Quay which had certainly been used for making malt since 1698 as recorded in some Pilton parish papers, and quite possibly prior to this date. In November 1878 Ilfracombe parish church sold the Reform for £370 to Wivells of the Taw Vale Brewery, which was soon afterwards taken over by Starkey,

Knight & Ford, the Tiverton-based brewers. The tenancy remained in the hands of John Knill until the end of the 1880s, and shortly afterwards it was completely rebuilt with a white Marland brick façade as seen today. The first tenant after the rebuild was Thomas Harding, R.N., who took up occupation in 1892 and left due to ill health in 1905, when William Alfred Reed from Braunton became the landlord. He died aged 33 in 1908, when his wife Beatrice, and then his eldest son Harold, followed in the business until 1957, when it once again passed through the hands of several landlords. Starkey Knight & Ford ceased to be the freeholders after about 100 years and it is now, after centuries of corporate ownership, in private hands, and beer is once again brewed on the premises, as it was centuries ago.

Margaret Reed

¹ From the above information it is likely that the photograph from the Knill family, dated about 1867/70 shows John as landlord with his only son, George, who was born in 1857.