

## **PILTON CHURCH SEATING IN VICTORIAN DAYS**

In the past, and in fact right up until the eve of the First World War, members of the congregation in English parish churches paid an annual sum in 'pew rent'. In return they had reserved seats in the church throughout the year according to their station in life and the revenue helped to maintain the nave in good repair.

So what do we know about this arrangement in Pilton Church? The North Devon Athenaeum has a detailed plan of the pews there dated 1835, showing us that there was room for an amazing 832 people, seated as dictated by the rigid class system of the day.

The gentry and professional classes were each allowed 2 feet 6 inches in the main seats of the central aisle and each side of the south aisle as far back as the font. Their servants and the lower classes who could pay for their sittings were allotted 1 foot 6 inches each at the back of the church, along the north aisle and in the two galleries – one on the north wall and the other on the west wall. There were also 37 seats in the chancel of unspecified size.

Lower down the social scale were three pews containing eighteen sittings, where they only had 1 foot each, at the back in the north west corner of the church – perhaps these were for the almshouse people. The only acknowledged 'free' ones were twenty-one seats in the west gallery for the singers and eight tightly packed 6ft benches behind the main door – probably just forms with no backs – which were for the children of the school. According to the plan these were to accommodate 200 children – which meant that they had 3 inches each! The implication from these details suggests that wealth was measured in inches around the hips.

Unfortunately there seem to be no Pilton records in the local archives to tell us how much these seats cost, but a very full set of details exists of pew rents in the Barnstaple parish church from the 1850s to 1912, which were probably similar. Here 5 shillings [25p] was the average annual charge for the best seats in the nave. In today's money this would be something like £45 for each 'season ticket'.

It is hard to imagine over eight hundred people in Pilton Church on a regular basis for Sunday services today - how times have changed! However, in 1835, with no welfare state and each parish looking after its own poor and needy, the church was a catalyst for Christian charity and

the parish magazines of the time were full of references to various charitable activities organised to help the sick and destitute, the children of poor families and the elderly in the almshouses. There was a 'care in the community' spirit then, emphasised by the coming together of rich and poor on Sundays, whether in the 'best seats' or at the back behind the school children and attendance at church would have been an indication of 'worthiness' on the part of the poor. Even today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a preference is shown for regular communicants of the Church of England, when choosing replacements for the posts of Brother, Sister and Prior of St. Margaret's Hospital.

At the same time, there is evidence that the poor may not all have been fired with religious zeal. In 1835, the same year as this plan of the church was produced, the worthies of the parish decided that in the light of disturbances on the part of inmates in the parish workhouse in Pilton Street [where the Lower Almshouses now stand], all capable of going should attend Public Worship or have six pence docked from their pay. As they probably received very little anyway, this would have been a serious matter.



It is not exactly clear why the practice of charging ended when it did. Was the War a factor? Certainly the loss of so many fathers, husbands and sons must have had a serious effect on the parish. There is also no doubt that there was a great falling-off of attendance at church in the years after the war which must have meant that finding a seat there was no more a problem. The galleries were also removed as no longer necessary, the one at the west end replaced by a window commemorating those who fell in the war<sup>i</sup>. Those days of packed houses for Sunday services are never likely to return and if they did it is doubtful if those skinny hip

measurements would still apply.

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<sup>i</sup> The photograph shows the stalls on the south side of the Church as they are arranged in 2012 with the memorial window visible in the background.