

## CHILDREN IN VICTORIAN PILTON

Were our Victorian children well fed and clothed? Only if they were the lucky ones, born into wealth and comfort. The vast majority of the population in Pilton lived in cold, damp houses, often ten or more people to a two-bedroomed cottage, water from an outside tap shared with other cottages, together with a shared outside toilet. Needless to say, there was no gas or electricity in poor homes – candles and occasionally oil lamps were the only source of light and heat was from the solid fuel cooking range in the kitchen.

So what did children do when they were not at school? Mostly they would have to make themselves useful – chopping wood, running errands, minding the younger children while the mothers were at work, and there was also part-time



employment from a young age in the lace factory at Raleigh. They were often cold and hungry, never having new clothes to wear, and above all, having little prospect of rising above the poverty trap. Hard labouring manual work into old age was normal, with no retirement or pension, the only alternative being the workhouse. This must have been the most depressing feature of all.

The well-heeled ladies of the parish were concerned about the drunkenness of the working men, who spent most of their time when not at work or sleeping in the public houses, to the detriment of their wives and children, who lived in greater poverty as a result. An opportunity arose to attempt a change for the better, when in the 1880s, the Unicorn Inn, now the Pilton Church Hall, was sold. The ladies decided to support the growing temperance movement by turning the building into a coffee house and reading

room for working men, in an effort to improve their lives and those of their families.

However, this was not an unqualified success and the coffee house quickly closed through lack of business. It was soon after this that the Band of Hope was introduced in Pilton, presumably in an effort to influence the children, where the local gentry had failed with their parents. We can imagine tired little children from six years old being harangued on winter nights in a cold hall on the subject of alcohol from 6.30 to 7.30, when all they really needed was warm clothes, a hot nourishing meal and a cuddle before the fire until it was time to retire to a cosy bed – an impossible dream for most of them.

These little Band of Hope children took a pledge of total abstinence, and met each week to listen to lectures on the evils of drink. The thought of such young children, not yet able to read or write, taking oaths vowing never to allow intoxicating liquor to pass their lips, seems quite bizarre. It is clear from the number of public houses in Pilton at that time, that many of the parents, and particularly the fathers, were not wholeheartedly behind them in this respect – certainly not in spirit.

At Easter 1896 the children in the Band of Hope performed in a cantata called *Red Riding Hood*. This was not a light-hearted bit of fun, but a serious moral tale, with the evil gin-sodden wolf playing the villain – the spectre of drunkenness as the main message of the performance. In 1897 the age to join the Band of Hope was raised to eight years and the children were charged a penny to attend with the promise of a cup of tea. Soon afterwards the Band of Hope was disbanded in Pilton – perhaps as a result of the charge being boycotted by poor families. It is surprising that it was ever started by an Anglican congregation, as the Band of Hope was generally embraced by the non-conformist chapels, where they were preaching to the converted as total abstinence was normal until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The children of Pilton were never again used as pawns in an effort to change the lives of their parents, for whom drink was the only respite from the miseries of poverty and hopelessness.

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Picture of 'Poverty in Victorian Britain' borrowed from the [Style Council in the City Blogspot](#) with many thanks.