

## PILTON CHURCH HALL FORMERLY THE UNICORN INN

The building which is now the Church Hall in Pilton Street has survived many changes during its long history, much of which will never be known as early records are rare, so the building itself tells part of the story, and the surviving records provide snapshots of the more recent past.



Fronting the street near the top of the hill, the Hall is part of a group of ancient houses which were the high-class residences of wealthy merchants and local gentry over 500 years ago, as evidenced in the wills and other legal documents of the period. Charity Cottage across the street and Parminter House, which is just above the Church Hall, are part of this grouping.

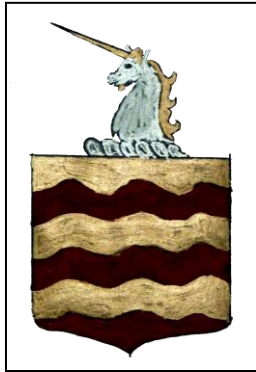


In a large upper room at the Hall there is a recently discovered Tudor fireplace (left) with a rare clay tile herringbone backing, and also both upstairs and down 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century moulded plasterwork and ancient timbers are evident. There is also documentary proof that this house was in use as an inn almost 300 years ago, when it was in the ownership of the Basset family. Possibly the inn existed before their time under a different name, but there is no way to be sure of this.

So let us consider the role of the Bassets in Pilton.

Their ancestor came to England with William the Conqueror in 1066, settled first in Staffordshire, and within 200 years the family was living in both Devon and Cornwall, where they married into many of the prominent county families and held office as Sheriffs of both Devon and Cornwall over several centuries. Sir John Basset of Tehidy in Cornwall and Umberleigh in North Devon, who was born in 1441, married Joan, daughter of Sir Thomas Beaumont of Shirwell, and so began marital alliances in North Devon which consolidated their social position in this area. In 1681 John Basset was elected Member of Parliament for Barnstaple in tandem with Arthur Champneys and later Nicholas Hooper, both of whom were major landowners in North Devon, and other members of his family continued to follow in his footsteps until 1784. The Bassets, by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, were settled at Heanton Court, and the son and heir, John, married Elizabeth, daughter of Nicholas Hooper of

Fullabrook, West Down. It is this John Basset or his son, another John, who gave the inn the name of The Unicorn, which was the armorial badge of the family (below left). The father died in 1686 and his son, followed him to the grave in 1721. However, just before he died, the son sold the family property in Pilton, including the Unicorn, to Robert Incedon, and on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1721 Incedon also bought further lands to augment the grounds for the grand mansion he intended to build there, which he named Pilton House.



As a result, although the Unicorn Inn was owned by the Bassets for only a few years, the name continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By 1746 Robert Incedon had completed Pilton House, which was occupied by three generations of his family, and also in that year he established a charity to provide shoes for poor women of the parish. This took the form of a rent-charge on the Unicorn Inn of 36 shillings per year, 30 shillings of which was to be spent on shoes for ten or more poor women aged 50 or over, not in receipt of parish relief, to be named by Amy and Lucy, daughters of Robert Incedon, and six shillings each year to repair and beautify the pump and its case recently erected near the Unicorn Inn. This was firm evidence of the existence of the Unicorn at that time, and of ownership within the Basset family.

Nothing further is known of the inn for the remainder of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but in 1807, Robert Newton Incedon, grandson of the Robert who built Pilton House, sold the mansion and the adjoining estate to James Whyte, an Irishman, but sold the Unicorn separately to Benjamin Pile Irwin, a victualler from Barnstaple, who paid £420 for it. In 1835 the inn again changed hands, this time to George Rendell. Various tenants took over the running of the inn in the succeeding years, until in 1875 the ownership of Unicorn returned to the occupant of Pilton House for £455. This was Charles Williams, MP for Barnstaple, who was descended from the Bassets and changed his name to Basset by Royal Licence in October 1880. Meanwhile, in 1878 Thomas Knill, butcher and landlord became the last one to hold the licence there as later that year it became the Unicorn Coffee Tavern – a temperance house and reading room set up by the ladies of the parish for the working classes of the locality. The facilities were open to the public from 5.30 in the morning, served breakfast, hot dinners from 12.30 to 2.30 and tea from 2 pm, closing at 11 pm. Within eighteen months the enterprise had closed – presumably it was not the success the ladies had hoped for. This was followed by the establishment of a parish laundry on the premises, which also had a short life, as Mrs Rottenbury, the laundress, advertised her equipment for sale in the local paper on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 1899.

In 1905 the Unicorn was sold by Charles Basset [formerly Williams] to the Church authorities, who replaced the skittle alley at the rear with the large hall we see today, which was advertised at the official opening as seating 280 people. The building was opened as the Pilton Church Hall by the Bishop of Exeter on 4th January 1906, and in the ensuing 100 years it has gradually become a focal point for an ever widening range of community uses. These include the 12<sup>th</sup> North Devon Scout Group, Girl Guides [starting in 2012], Brownies and Rainbows, The Pilton Dance Academy, Pilton Playgroup and then Pre-School, and other regular users. The hall is also much in demand for a range of fund-raising events, wedding receptions, birthday parties, whist drives, and many more. The latest major inclusion is a cinema club – all the equipment is in place and the first film has yet to be shown – which is anticipated to be a great success.

This has all been possible because the hall has been brought up to the exacting health and safety standards currently required for a building in community use, financed with a legacy of £60,000 from Ken Wilson, a much-loved Piltonian who died a few years ago, plus a sizeable grant from a local developer, part of a planning condition.

The Pilton Church Hall Committee consists of the Vicar of Pilton and the two Churchwardens [Managing Trustees], representatives of Pilton with Ashford Parochial Church Council and representatives of the local community, who may be elected or co-opted. Both the church and the local community now have an up-to-date facility capable of accommodating most small to medium sized events, with a well-equipped kitchen and a hall licensed to take up to 150 people – definitely not the 280 proclaimed when the hall was opened in 1905.

**Margaret Reed**