

# BILLESDON VILLAGE

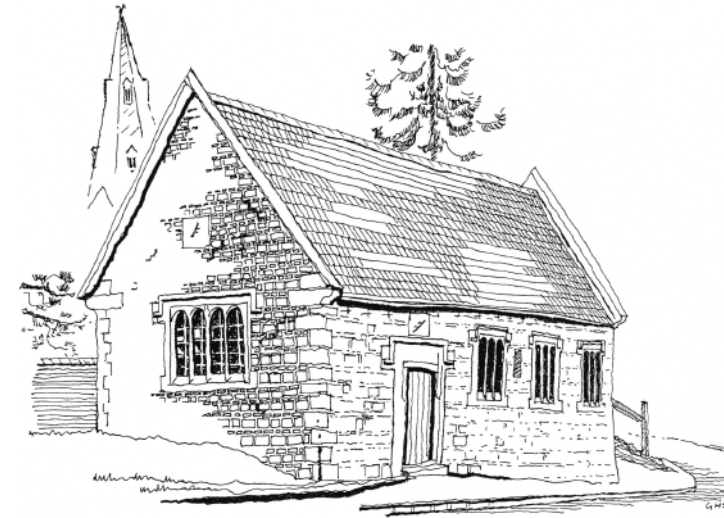


Billesdon - 2,000 Years of a High Leicestershire Village by Mel Vlaeminke, George Bromley, Pamela Geary and the Billesdon Local History Group (reprinted 2000; ISBN: 0-9539645-0-7) gives a full history of the village and is available from shops in the village. For further information, e-mail [billesdon.lhg@virgin.net](mailto:billesdon.lhg@virgin.net).

# BILLESDON

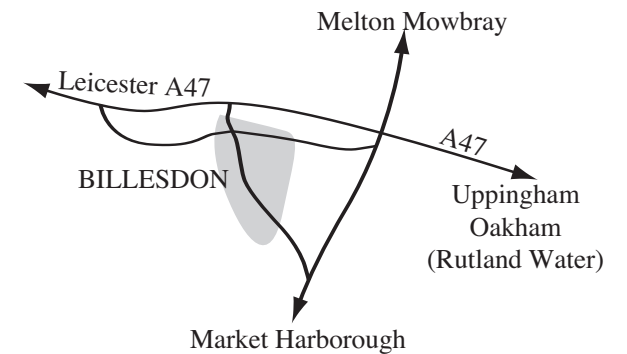
High Leicestershire

## Historic Village Trail



The Old School, Billesdon

## Billesdon Local History Group



## BILLESDON

Located nine miles east of Leicester within open rolling countryside, Billesdon has existed for over a thousand years as an agriculture based community.

The name meaning 'Bill's Hill' was first applied by the early Anglian settlers to the prominent hill nearby. The burial site there yielded three Saxon brooches now in the Leicester Jewry Wall Museum collection. The village took the name and was written as 'Billesdone' in the Norman Domesday Book in 1086.

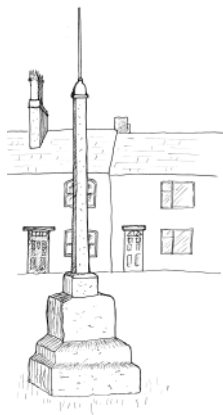
Agriculture followed the three field pattern in which all the villagers had long narrow strips in large communally farmed fields. This method lasted for hundreds of years until 1764 when the fields were enclosed. Today the 'ridge and furrow' field pattern which can be seen all around the village is evidence of this early form of cultivation. Enclosure produced the basis of the present system of land usage - relatively small farms devoted to the raising of stock. Hedges were compulsory and most fields were put to grass, producing ideal hunting country - a major influence on Billesdon for a hundred years.

The traditional building styles are varied as Billesdon incorporates both the stone and brick traditions of Leicestershire. However some humble outbuildings, walls and cottages were built of mud or 'cob' - unbaked clay bound together by straw. The cobbled footpaths and yards and the variety of doors and doorways are also worthy of note.

*The walk starts from the Market Place, a central location with parking spaces and where buses stop.*

1) The ancient market cross pre-dates the weekly Friday market which came into being in 1618 along with two annual fairs. Its more recent finial was restored to the earliest recorded design as part of the Millennium activities.

Alongside is the War Memorial, which was replaced by the War Department after the original had been demolished by a Canadian tank that had become detached from its carrier. Prior to the opening of the by-pass in 1986, the main road from Leicester to Uppingham and Peterborough, which was turnpiked in 1754, ran alongside the Market Place.



Market Cross

## QUEEN ADELAIDE'S TEAPOT

On the 8th August 1842, a carriage containing the Dowager Queen Adelaide stopped to change horses. She was petitioned by 'several aged females, the foremost having in one hand a teapot ornamented with ribbons and a nosegay of flowers in the other'. The Queen deposited a sovereign in each of the proffered teapots, and left Billesdon amidst the laughter and cheers of the villagers.

2) One of the village's two public houses, the 'New Greyhound', has been called that since the 1840s. Its first landlady, Mrs Sarah Jordan, had assisted her husband at the 'Greyhound' on the other side of the Market Place, which then became the 'Old Greyhound'.

3) In Church Street (formerly Front Street) most of the oldest houses in the village are to be found, including the small cottages on the left, which have been renovated in traditional style. The walls incorporate some examples from Billesdon Brickworks, a significant local industry until the beginning of the 20th century.

4) 'The Gables', with traditional cruck construction and a thatched roof, was the home of the famous horse breaker Thomas Tomblin. He was described as 'the cleverest rough-rider in the world', who could 'reduce to tractability the most spirited and obstinate animals.'

5) A narrow path leads to 'Bradley Square', the village's centre for the hosiery framework knitters. The south-facing house to the right - getting the most of the daylight - is typical of buildings adapted for this trade and the allied trades of glove stitching and stocking seaming.

6) The 'Queen's Head' was once a dwelling house, but has been selling drinks for over 200 years.

## A CRICKETING LANDLORD

In the late 19th century, the landlord of the Queen's Head was Tom Plumb, the famous All-England wicket-keeper of the 1860s, described by W.G. Grace as 'about the best wicket-keeper of his time.' He coached two Billesdon players who went on to play for Leicestershire: spin bowler William Finney and fast bowler Arthur Woodcock. Woodcock achieved a national reputation as the fastest bowler in England, and his Wisden obituary opined: 'how much Leicestershire's promotion to the first-class [in 1894] was due to his bowling is a matter of history.'

7) The brick built house end on to the road has a date tablet of 1769 and has many features of that date.

8) The building next door has had a varied history. Originally a dwelling house, it was converted into a Methodist Chapel in 1859. It was disused by the start of the Second World War and was pressed into service as a Fire Station - the chimney was reinforced with concrete for a siren and the bricked-in fire engine doorway can still be discerned. It then had a spell as a shop, before reverting to a private dwelling.

9) The L-shaped Manor Farm House (No. 34) is one of the oldest houses in the village. The four-centred stone doorhead is notable. In 1790, of the owner Miss Mary Heard, it was written 'a plain and single lady supposed to be worth £100,000. Bred up with industrious parents she continues to add something to her immense fortune yearly by farming some part of the land.' The farmyard with its cobbled yard and outbuildings is largely intact; the barn with its Swithland slate roof is a particularly fine agricultural structure.

10) On the other side of the road is the entrance to the 'Quadrant', originally stables and kennels built in 1838 by Lord Suffield, briefly Master of the Quorn Hunt. The buildings were lavishly built round a square courtyard and were used by the Hunt on and off for a further 40 years.

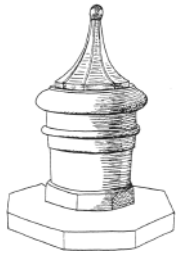
## THE BILLESDON HUNT

The middle of the 19th century saw the unofficial creation of the 'South Quorn' or Billesdon Hunt (south of the Leicester to Uppingham Road, now the A47), which acquired a national reputation for its challenging rides, expert huntsmen and fine hounds. Attracting around 1,000 riders on some days, it seems that none was more popular than Miss Catherine Walters, a former circus equestrienne known as 'Skittles' and described as 'the most famous poule de luxe', who on one occasion lost her skirt in the field! The Hunt must have added to the prosperity of Billesdon, by attracting wealthy enthusiasts who used local inns and stabling and provided work for many others in addition to the Hunt staff. In 1888, control was assumed by Mr Charles Fernie, who gave the Hunt, now based at Great Bowden, its present name.



St John the Baptist Church

11) The church of St. John the Baptist was probably founded in the 11th century and was recorded in 1162 as having earlier been given to the Abbey of Leicester. The north arcade and the base of the tower were built in the 13th century and unusually the ironstone contains a large number of fossils. The first known vicar, Robert de Haverberge, was instituted by the Bishop of Lincoln in 1244. The bell tower has eight bells; the largest and oldest weighs 12 cwt and was cast about 1380 by John of York.



13th C Font  
with 17th C Cover

A fine collection of Swithland slate tombstones is to be found in the churchyard, whilst just beneath the clock can be discerned the numerals of a previous clockface. The cover of the 13th century font dates from c1607. Substantial renovations and alterations between 1861 and 1865 had a major impact on the church as it is today.

12) Opposite the church, 'Tithe Cottage' was originally a 17th century barn in which was stored the vicar's portion of the crops and stock produced by the inhabitants.

13) Next door is the Manor House, originally a small 18th century ironstone house enlarged in the 19th century. It was frequently occupied by keen huntsmen because of the proximity of the kennels and stables. Early in the 20th century further development took place, adding the bays and a new entrance. Throughout the Second World War it was the home of a girls' boarding school evacuated from Nottingham.

14) The Old School was rebuilt in 1650 of ironstone with a sundial on each wall and was originally thatched. The incumbent was also the schoolmaster, who educated fee-paying scholars as well as those funded by charitable donations. The school bell was on one of the end walls. The building was substantially restored in 1856 under the direction of the eminent Leicester architect, William Parsons, who was an old boy of the school, and again in 1926, 1958 and 2001.

### ANTHONY CADE

The Revd. Anthony Cade (1599-1638) was probably Billesdon's most distinguished vicar. He wrote a number of theological works and his portrait hangs in Caius College, Cambridge. The earliest surviving parish registers (from 1599) date from his time, and he is thought to have been responsible for the building of the vicarage and of the original school, reflecting his reputation as a scholar and teacher. George Villiers of Brooksby Hall, later the infamous Duke of Buckingham, was a pupil of Cade's until aged about 13 and was 'taught the principles of music and other slight literature'; he introduced Cade to King James I.

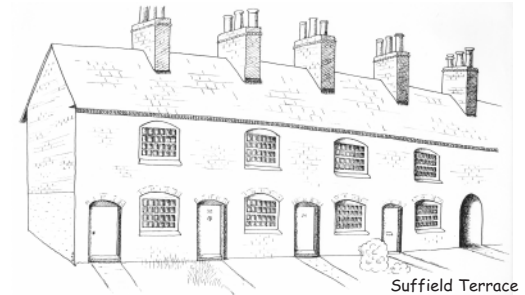
15) The 'Old Vicarage' (because a new one was built in 1991) was started in the early 17th century and has appropriate moulded stone mullioned windows and transoms. The semi-circular brick bay at the rear probably dates from 1770. The brick built west wing is also an 18th century addition.

### THE ELOPEMENT

In the 19th century a vicar's daughter is reputed to have eloped with the young squire from Rolleston from a window in the Vicarage. This was bricked up by her father, but a false window was later installed.

*15a) A walk around the corner takes one past mud walls to right and left, and then into Gaulby Road, home of the village primary school since 1875. Further along, on the left, is the site of the wartime Prisoner of War Camp, now Billesdon Woodland Pool, a wildlife area.*

16) Continuing down Brook Lane (formerly Back Street) Suffield Terrace is on the left. This row of nine two-storey brick cottages is largely unchanged from when it was built in 1838 by Lord Suffield as part of the hunt establishment.



Suffield Terrace

17) The three-storey brick house close to the Baptist Chapel was probably built early in the 19th century and became a boarding school for boys from nonconformist families. The name, 'The Academy', has clung to it. One pupil was the famous Leicester naturalist and explorer, Henry Walter Bates, who was a friend of Darwin.

18) In 1812 local Baptists, encouraged by the congregation at Friar Lane in Leicester, decided to establish their own chapel in Billesdon. Funds were raised, land bought and the church built, with the first service taking place on Easter Monday 1813. The Chapel has been in continuous use since. The building was refurbished in the late 19th century and again in 1999-2000, with the construction of a new school room and of modern windows incorporating some of the original coloured glass of the older memorial windows.

### 'LEWD FELLOWS' IN BILLESDON

Prejudice against Dissenters (or 'Ranters' as they were often known) was very strong in the district and the Baptists were seriously harassed by hooligans and 'lewd fellows of the baser sort'. One incident involved blocking the smoking chimney and then stuffing 'a large black retriever dog' down amongst the suffocating worshippers; on other occasions, services were disturbed and the building damaged. The church elders appealed in 1814 to the 'London Committee for the Protection of Dissenters' and four people were prosecuted 'for repeatedly disturbing the congregation'.

19) The White Hall was for several generations the home, surgery and dispensary of the village doctors, until the surgery moved to its present home, an old farmhouse in the Market Place, in 1948.

*19a) A right turn at the junction of Brook Lane and Uppingham Road leads up to the Coplow Centre, a community and sporting facility built in the 1990s on the site of the former Billesdon Brickworks and of the wartime Land Army hostel; and to Billesdon Cemetery, in use since 1875.*

20) A left turn towards the Market Place leads past the site of the village's old community centre, the Village Hall, the scene of meetings, social gatherings and cultural events throughout the 20th century. Built in 1870 by The Ancient Order of Foresters Friendly Society, it was the only building in the village designed by the noted architect, Goddard.

21) The substantial 17th century ironstone building with the sundial on the front was for nearly 100 years used as a general store run by the Smith family.

22) On the opposite side of the road are several fine houses probably built at the time when the main road was turnpiked in 1754. Nos. 12 & 14 Uppingham Road, 'The Maltings', is a Regency house with elegant windows and front door. There used to be a malting floor at the rear of the building where barley was prepared for use in the very widespread activity of beer making. Most large houses had their own brew and there were around a dozen pubs and beer houses in the village in the mid 19th century.

23) No. 6/8 Uppingham Road is a tall brick residence with side wings. The original Regency bay windows to the wings are distinctive whilst the provision of a round chimney is most unusual.

24) 'Potters Cottage' was the home of two well-known taxidermists - Thomas Potter (c1830-1900) and his son Frank (1869-1944). Here fox heads (sent from all over the country), birds, fish and once a pig with two heads were stuffed and mounted.



Potters Cottage

The Potters were also coopers, making buckets and troughs for the hunt. From local osier beds they made baskets, chairs and cane hampers to supply villagers and gentry in the area.

25) Back in the Market Place, a three-storey building on the north side was the 'Old Greyhound', the oldest pub serving this part of the village until it ceased to be licensed premises in 1916.

26) In Long Lane, Doone Cottage is one of the oldest surviving thatched cottages in the village. It is of mud construction on an ironstone rubble base and dates from the 17th century. The field at the end of Long Lane contains clear evidence of a shrunken medieval village.

27) Along Leicester Road the White Hart was built as a coaching inn to service road traffic before 1800. The daily stage coach between Leicester and Stamford stopped here night and morning for a change of horses. It closed as a public house in 1999.

28) On the same side of the road the 1930s semi-detached houses on 'The Bank' were built of the bricks of the old Billesdon Union Workhouse, which was demolished in 1935. They were some of the first houses in the village to be built with a bathroom - before there was piped water! The Workhouse, opened in 1847, was a substantial building with accommodation for 100 inmates and was used for many purposes, including a hospital for wounded soldiers in the First World War.

29) At the edge of the village is a left turn down the signposted footpath. This is known locally as 'Muddy Lane'. No doubt it was tidier in the mid 18th century when it was the carriage road for the village's principal landowner - the Simmons family - who lived near the church.

30) Leaving the village along Coplow Lane, one passes the 'cricket field', home of Billesdon Cricket Club since 1872. Just over a mile further on is the distinctive hill 'Billesdon Coplow'. The name 'Coplow' is of Old English derivation meaning the summit and mound - probably a burial mound. In 1790 Coplow House was built with a fine white stucco front which, in those days of fewer trees, it was said could be seen from Kibworth. A short distance to the east of the Coplow is Life Hill, where Roman and earlier remains have been found and small-scale quarries produced the ironstone for village buildings and the 19th century extension of the church.

### THE FIRST CROSS-COUNTRY RACE

In 1829, Captain Becher, known as the 'Father of Gentleman Riders', had his original mount in the first 'marked out' cross-country contest in England, from Noseley Wood to Billesdon Coplow. The race was won by Mr Field Nicholson on Sir Harry Goodricke's 'Magic'. Captain Becher was unplaced, but his name will always be remembered in connection with the famous brook on Aintree's Grand National course.



*This leaflet has been produced by the Billesdon Local History Group, with thanks to Kathy Gaskin (illustrations) and Geoff Smith (cover illustration)*