

Thomas Davey, Pilton Lace Twister

Thomas Davey was born in Goodleigh in late 1802, being baptised on 12 December 1802. He was the son of John and Mary Davey (or Davie). John Davey was a labourer, but Thomas at some point decided to move to Pilton for better-paid work in one of the lace factories there. The Rawleigh lace factory had been set up at Rawleigh (or Raleigh) in 1822, and in 1825 John Boden built his factory in what became known as the Derby area of Barnstaple. These and others attracted many rural workers into Pilton and Barnstaple.

In Pilton, Thomas, a lace twister, met Grace Parker. She was born in 1810, the daughter of a Pilton mason, John Parker, and his wife Sarah, and worked as a lace mender. Thomas and Grace did not get married until 26 May 1839, by which time they had a daughter, Eliza, born in June 1836, and a second child on the way. Such a delay in getting married was not uncommon at the time among the rural working class if a young couple had not enough money to afford a house of their own. Grace's father died in late 1838, and it is quite probable that the money he left enabled Thomas and Grace to marry and to buy a house. In July 1839, shortly after his marriage, Thomas bought a house in Priory Place, Pilton, and the 1841 census lists the family there: Thomas, Grace, their children Eliza and George, and Grace's mother Sarah. They lived a few doors away from Richard Ackland, the Royal Marine whose story appears in the Archive.

The house Thomas bought (leasehold) was on a piece of land originally sold in November 1833 by James Whyte, of Pilton House, to John Gerry, a smith, of Pilton. The land was at the west end of the Priory, and was seven perches in extent (about 212 sq. yds or one twentieth of an acre). The lease was for 90 years at an annual rent (we would call it ground rent) of one guinea (the equivalent of 5 days' wages for a skilled tradesman then, or about £80 now). John Gerry did not have to pay any money for the land (apart from the annual rent), but he was required to build on the land a substantial dwelling-house and outhouses. It seems that, for whatever reason, he did not complete the buildings, for in 1837 he passed on the remaining years of the lease to Daniel Jones, yeoman, of Pilton, again free of any purchase price but with the obligation for Jones to finish the dwelling-house and outhouses and pay the annual rent. Whether Jones completed the buildings is not clear. The deed between him and Gerry is endorsed with a witnessed note that Jones has sold all his rights in the property to Thomas Davey.

The 1841 census shows that there were about a dozen houses in Priory Place and more in the neighbouring Priory Row, so the above transaction of which we happen to possess the deeds was one of many which James Whyte must have made at the time. By leasing part of his land for building James Whyte secured a long-term fixed income from it without the trouble of building houses on it himself. At the same time some of the workers needed by the new lace factories could be accommodated locally instead of having to travel in daily from their villages, though the census shows that they did have to compete for houses with workers in other occupations.

Thomas and Grace Davey had seven children in Pilton, but only four survived to adulthood. Grace died on 6 August 1848, a few days after the birth on 28 July of her seventh child, a son called Edwin, who only survived until the following February.



Later in 1849 Thomas Davey moved with his five surviving children to Tiverton. In the 1830s and 1840s the Barnstaple lace factories suffered first from strikes and then from lack of orders, with the Rawleigh factory having to close in 1844, so it may be that Thomas moved to Tiverton in search of more settled work and better conditions. Presumably he sold his house and the remaining 74 years of the lease, though there is no record of that transaction. In Tiverton he was employed as a silk lace twister in John Heathcoat's lace-making factory. Whereas in Pilton the lace workers had to compete with others for places to live, which in turn depended on

landowners like James Whyte being willing to sell land or to build houses, in Tiverton John Heathcoat owned both the factory and the land around it. He had built streets of houses reserved for his workers to rent on advantageous terms, so Thomas and his children moved into one of those. The children (except for the eldest girl, who went straight to work) attended the school which John Heathcoat had opened in 1841 and, when they were 10 or 11, began half-time work in the factory. Thomas married again in 1855 and, shortly afterwards, changed his name to Davis, the reason apparently being that there were too many other people called Davey in the town.

This photograph of him was taken in a Tiverton studio in August 1864, when he was 61.

Roger Davis, June 2019