

## St Margaret's Leper Hospital, Pilton



St. Margaret's Leper Hospital, founded almost nine hundred years ago, was sited at the lower end of Pilton Street along the line of the narrow medieval road which was widened in the nineteenth century by the Barnstaple Turnpike Trust, thus demolishing the line of old buildings and making it difficult to identify the precise spot. However, when the white brick houses of St. Margaret's Terrace were built nearby in 1888, it was decided to commemorate the site of St. Margaret's by incorporating a small garden at the corner house, number 122 Pilton Street, with a bell turret to represent the chapel. The original hospital would have consisted of a group of cottages of cob and thatch known from existing records to have included a chapel with a bell.

The actual date of the founding of St. Margaret's Hospital is not known, but it is reasonable to assume a late twelfth century beginning. The earliest positive evidence is a document still in the archives of the hospital, which is a grant of a garden, made by William Taillor to St. Margaret's in 1189. Just thirteen years earlier, in 1175 the English Church Council ordered that lepers should not live among healthy people, and in 1179 it was further decreed that leper hospitals should have their own priests, churches and cemeteries. Most leper hospitals were founded in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but rarely before, so perhaps it is reasonable to suggest that the founding date is likely between 1175 and 1189. Just ten years later, in 1199 a dispute is recorded between the Pilton leper hospital and the Benedictine Prior of Pilton, and it is interesting to note that this is also the earliest evidence of the existence of the Benedictine Priory in Pilton. The dispute, among other issues, was regarding payments due to the Priory by the hospital and the obligation which was agreed in return for three services to be provided each year at the leper's Chapel of St. Margaret – on Good Friday, Easter Sunday and on St. Margaret's Day – to be performed by a priest from the Priory, reflecting the fact that the lepers could not attend the parish church.

So how was the leper hospital governed? The evidence is that from the earliest times a Prior, Brother and Sister were vested with the power to grant leases under their own seal, on lands and properties belonging to the foundation, which formed the basis of their income. Initially these three may have lived at the hospital with a duty of care for the sick, although much later the

terms of their appointment stipulated that they were not to be accommodated on site. During the years up to the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s it is clear that the Prior, Brother and Sister continued to act as lessors of their properties, as a surviving lease of 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1492 confirms, when *'Thomas Spayn, Prior, together with the Brother and Sister, granted under their seal 'a tenement, late Emot Lyllyng's to John Walshe, rent 12d.'*, which is in the collection of documents relating to the United Charities of Pilton in the North Devon Record Office [reference 1239F/T242]. This is the earliest surviving pre-Reformation document in a collection of one hundred leases of lands belonging to the leper hospital in the local Record Office.

The offices of Prior, Brother and Sister of St. Margaret's did not disappear in the 1530s as did that of the Prior of Pilton. The hospital was allowed to remain, together with its meagre possessions, probably because its sole purpose was in caring for the sick. The term 'hospital' did not indicate nursing care in today's terms. Those who entered a leper hospital normally had the disease or some similar affliction, which according to the law prevented them from living in the community, so it was simply a place where the very sick went to be looked after if they were forced to leave the outside world. There are virtually no records of the actual working of the hospital, but it is clear from the following reference in the Barnstaple Borough Records that lepers, also known as lasers, were still being admitted to the hospital in Pilton early in the seventeenth century, although the disease was in decline in Britain by this time:-

*'1606-7 – Paid for carriage of a poor lasar man to Pilton 4d.'* [Reprint of the Barnstaple Records published by J. R. Chanter & Thomas Wainwright in 1900, Vol.II, page 133.]

For two hundred years following the Reformation the Prior, Brother and Sister continued to be appointed for life, to issue leases on properties under the official seal and to share the income between themselves after expenses were accounted for. However, it is clear from the comments recorded at the time of new tenancies that the properties were not being kept in good repair. It was difficult to attract tenants for long leases, which were the subject of heavy initial payments followed by nominal annual rents. As a result the properties became more and more dilapidated with the passage of time and were let at rack rents or not at all. Comments such as *'This house is ruinous, the tenant has rebuilt it, so the rent is small'* were entered on 18<sup>th</sup> century rent rolls. Another stated *'Mary Harding lives in part of this house - the thatch is ruinous'*. Clearly the Prior, Brother and Sister did not pay for any repairs, and if the situation had been allowed to continue, there would eventually have been no houses and no income, so in 1735 the Feoffees of the Parish Lands in Pilton bought all the properties of St. Margaret's Hospital for £70. This agreement included a commitment to pay a pension to the Prior, Brother and Sister out of the income, and they continued to hold the properties in their names and sign all the leases, although it appears from the documentation that any large payments made at the signing of ninety-nine year leases were retained by the Feoffees to allow for repair expenses. An account of annual rents paid to the Prior, Brother and Sister in 1793 for their fifteen properties amounted to a total of just £4. 14s. 8d, revealing 1s. 8d. as the lowest rent recorded, and 10s. as the highest.

The ancient seal of the hospital, which was lozenge shaped with a cross in the centre and surrounded by a Latin inscription, unfortunately disappeared many years ago. Documentary evidence of the search made at the time revealed that it was deposited in the office of a Barnstaple solicitor, Mr. Drake, who dealt with the affairs of the Feoffees, and was last seen there on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1822, but between 1837 and 1842 Mr. Drake was made bankrupt, when his effects were taken into possession for the creditors by Mr. Toller, another Barnstaple solicitor, who confirmed when asked that no seal was received with the effects, and in spite of many inquiries it was sadly never seen again. An image of the seal appears in the stained glass chancel aisle window in the parish church which commemorates the life of Rev. Townsend Hall, who died in 1899.

It is not clear exactly when the Prior, Brother and Sister ceased to sign the leases, or no longer received the income from the rents, although the present holders of these offices are still appointed for life and receive a fixed annual pension to reflect the former importance of their role. According to the Charity Commissioners' Report of 28th March 1911 the various charities of the parish, which included St. Margaret's, were combined under the name Pilton United Charities and governed by a new body of Feoffees or Trustees, although most of the properties once owned by the hospital have now been sold. The present Prior is Frank Pye, the Brother is John Norman and the Sister is Mrs. Monica Deverell, who are all proud to uphold a tradition going back almost nine hundred years, but no doubt thankful that caring for lepers is not part of their job description.

**Margaret Reed  
2013**

**BROTHER  
JOHN NORMAN  
Appointed 2008**



**PRIOR  
FRANK PYE  
Appointed 2011**



**SISTER  
MONICA DEVERELL  
Appointed 2012**

