

BUNYAN'S BEDFORDSHIRE



Social and economic conditions in 17th century Bedfordshire

Bedfordshire was a county with strong Puritan sympathies during the 17th century. The Puritan household would aspire to have the father lead his wife, children and servants in prayer, provide religious instruction and teach his children to read the Bible at an early age. In everyday Puritan life there was meant to be no idleness, swearing,

lying or frivolous amusements. In business, there were meant to be no unjust prices, high wages, money-lending or cheating. Above all, the Sabbath was holy, a day given over entirely to worship, sermons and reading the Scriptures.

The county of Bedfordshire was rural and most ordinary people worked on land owned by the local gentry. Their

modest homes would be heated by a fire of wood, peat or coal and the floors would be made of earth. A cottage garden would be devoted to herbs and vegetables, with perhaps one or two fruit trees. Most children would receive no education at all, although some would go to a country school to learn the three Rs, and some to the free school in Bedford. Children of the gentry would be taught at home or sent away to school. For leisure some enjoyed music, either learning tunes by ear or playing instruments such as the lute, virginals (early form of keyboard) or fiddle. Books were mainly religious, although some drama was read.

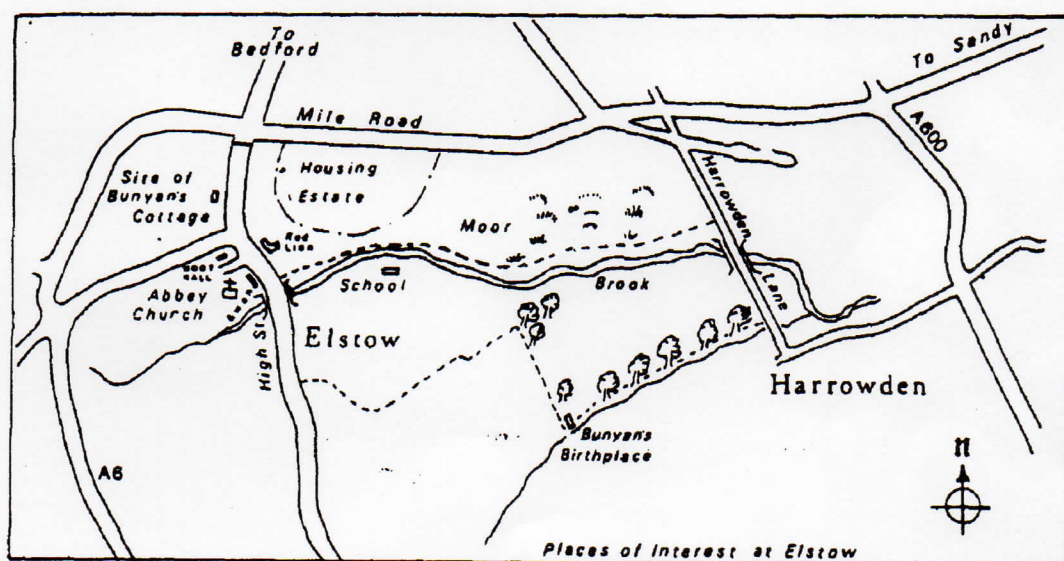
In general medical care at this time was scarce, and therefore herbal and traditional remedies prepared at home were very popular. Outdoor games included archery, bowls, football, stoolball (early form of cricket), tip-cat and nineholes. There were also great May celebrations as well as all the festivities associated with fairs. Sometimes the latter could be a time of temptation and contemporary crimes include theft, sheepstealing, highway robbery, drunkenness and alleged witchcraft. Imprisonment was usually in the county gaol and also the town lockup, but there would probably have been cages in market towns, not forgetting the stocks and whipping as punishment. For the most serious crimes the guilty would be executed or transported overseas.

Bunyan's Elstow upbringing

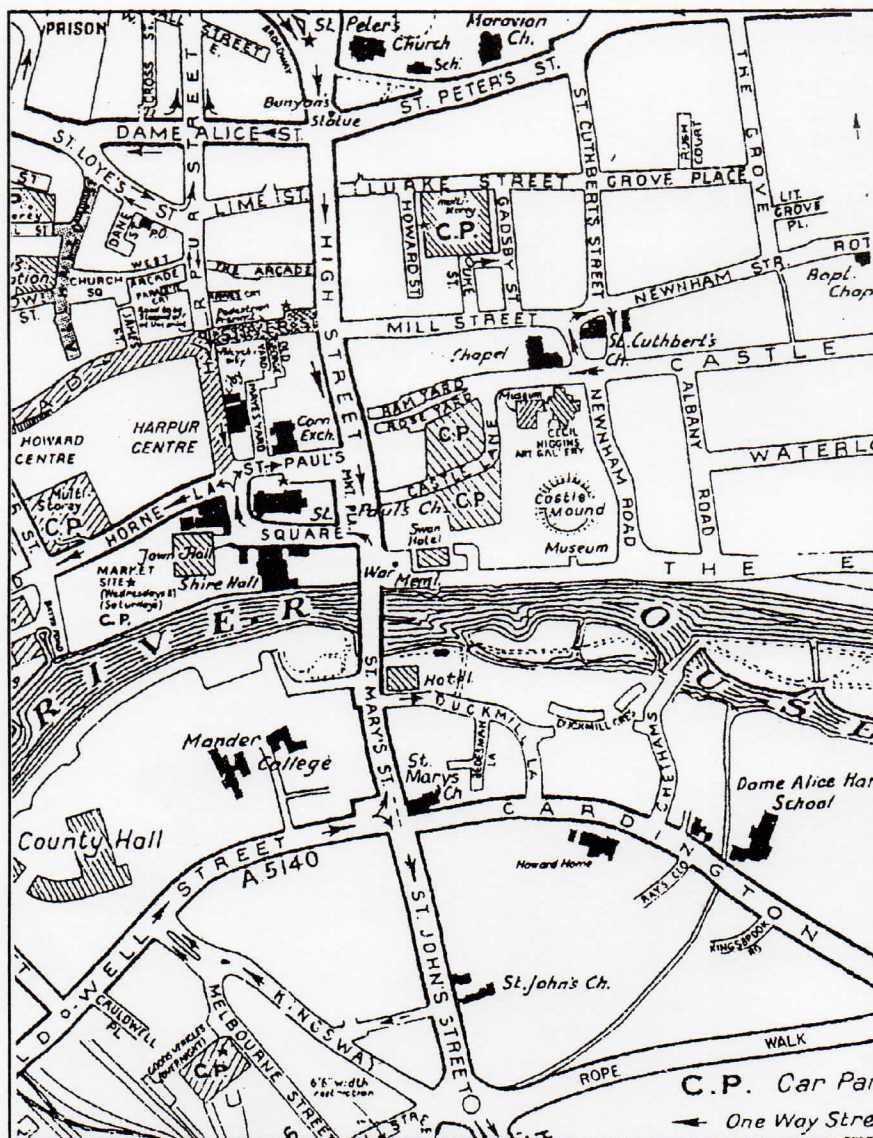
John Bunyan was born in the hamlet of Harrowden at the far eastern end of Elstow parish. The cottage was demolished many years ago, but the site of it is marked by a block of granite placed there at the time of the Festival of Britain. A small oak beam in the Museum is reputed to be part of a beam from the cottage, and there are also two large cottage keys.

The Abbey Church of St Helena and St Mary, which was restored in 1880, is the reduced remnant of a once far larger monastic church of the 13th century. It overlooks Elstow Green and the Moot Hall and has two stained-glass windows, one depicting scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the other from *The Holy War*. It also possesses the communion table used when Bunyan came to the church, and the font where he was christened. The churchyard is where his father, mother and sister are buried. The door and the wicket gate which figure in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and which used to be at the church's northern entrance, can be seen in the Museum. Bunyan was also known to have enjoyed ringing the bell in the belfry tower of Elstow Church in his youth.

The stump of a cross, damaged during the Reformation, marks the site on Elstow Green where the annual May Fair used to be held. It was also on the green that Bunyan



Sketch map of Elstow



Bedford Town Centre

danced and played games of tip-cat, a form of rounders played with a stick instead of a ball. One Sunday, the vicar of Elstow preached against working or playing on the Sabbath. Bunyan ignored the message and was out on the green playing tip-cat when he heard a voice from heaven saying, "Wilt thou leave thy sins, and go to heaven? Or have thy sins and go to hell?"

Elstow Moot Hall was built around 1600 as a market house in connection with the village fairs. It was used for storage and as a place for hearing disputes arising out of the fairs. It is now a museum illustrating English 17th century life and traditions.

Places known to Bunyan in Bedford

St John's Rectory

St John's Rectory, next to the church in St John's Street, is 300m south of the river. Now occupied by St John Ambulance, one room in the Rectory, relating to the times of Bunyan, is open to the public. In the early 1650s, as a young and ungodly man, Bunyan was introduced to John Gifford, newly appointed pastor of the Independent congregation which met at St John's Church. The rectory was the site of long discussions between the two men, which led to Bunyan's conversion and to him joining the congregation.

Baptism Pool

Shortly after his conversion Bunyan was baptised by John Gifford in a little backwater running off the River Great Ouse. The site is thought to be on the south bank of the river between the Duck Mill Lane car park and the weir bridge.

Town Gaol

By tradition Bunyan's second imprisonment in 1675 was in the Town Gaol on the bridge. This lasted only a few months, but it was during this time that the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* was completed. There is a plaque on the present bridge which was built in 1813.

Swan Hotel

During Bunyan's time the Swan Hotel, on the Embankment close to the Town Bridge, had chambers set aside for judges when the County Assizes were being held in Bedford. Elizabeth, Bunyan's second wife, pleaded for her husband in August 1661, when his original prison sentence of three months had already extended into six months and looked like dragging on and on. Unfortunately she was not successful, only persuaded one of the three judges involved that Bunyan should be called to state his own case.

Chapel of Herne

In January 1661, immediately preceding the imprisonment referred to above, Bunyan was brought before the magistrates at the Bedford Quarter Sessions, which were then held in an old building known as the Chapel of Herne. (The Town Hall office block stands on the site of the Chapel.) The charge against him was that he had "devilishly and perniciously abstained from attending Church Service and that he had several unlawful meetings". Bunyan steadfastly refused to give the undertaking that he would not preach to a public gathering again. After a lengthy and heated debate with Sir John Keeling, Chairman of the Magistrates, Bunyan was sentenced to three months' imprisonment.

County Gaol

The County Gaol survived until it was demolished in 1801, and it was here that Bunyan served his first lengthy prison sentence from 1660 to 1672. The site is marked by a plaque

in the pavement at the junction of High Street and Silver Street. The prison was dirty and crowded, and the highlight of each day for Bunyan was the daily visit of his blind daughter, Mary, who brought him food and drink.

Bunyan's Home

There is a plaque on number 17 St Cuthbert's Street which marks the site of the cottage Bunyan and his family moved to in 1655. When the cottage was demolished in 1838, Bunyan's Deed of Gift was discovered hidden behind a brick in the chimney corner, and this document is on display at the Museum.

Sites in Bedfordshire thought to have inspired the landscape of *The Pilgrim's Progress*

It was during his second imprisonment that Bunyan completed the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* ... "I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep and as I slept, I dreamed a dream." So began one of the most famous books in the English language.

The Slough of Despond

There are two theories of the inspiration for the Slough of Despond. One is a wet mossy place, which John Bunyan would have had to cross to reach the church in Elstow from his cottage in Harrowden, originally called Squitch Fen and later to be known as Scotch Fen. The second possible site is the Great North Road between Tempsford and Biggleswade called The Souls Slough. It is written in one man's will from the 16th century that he wanted 20 loads of stone put into the road called The Souls Slough. Daniel Defoe travelling through England in the 18th century said that the worst place to cross a river in England was at Tempsford.

The Wicket Gate

Elstow Parish Church had an old gate, and as a boy and youth Bunyan must have passed through it every Sunday on his way to church. He brings his memory of it into *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He tells of how Christian sets out on his journey, but he doesn't know the way to the Celestial City. He meets Evangelist (Evangelist is the name he gives

to John Gifford, the first minister of Bunyan Meeting, who with others was instrumental in Bunyan's conversion). Christian asks him the way, and Evangelist pointing over a very wide field says, "Do you see yonder wicket gate?" It is too far off for Christian to see. So Evangelist says, "Do you see yonder shining light?" (The Light of Christ). Christian says that he can see the light. "Then", says Evangelist, "Keep that light in your eye and you will come to the gate." So Christian following the light comes to the gate, over which was written the words "Knock and it will be opened unto you". And Christian knocks, and a man called Goodwill opens the gate and shows him the straight and narrow path that leads to the Celestial City. The belfry of the Abbey Church appears in *The Pilgrim's Progress* as the strong castle from which Beelzebub shoots arrows at those who approach the wicket gate. Bunyan uses his childhood and youthful memories of the church gate in his story.

The House of the Interpreter

St John's Rectory appears in *The Pilgrim's Progress* as the House of the Interpreter where Christian stopped for guidance. "Then Christian went on till he came at the House of the Interpreter ... 'Sir', said Christian, 'I was told ... that if I called here you would show me excellent things, such as would be a help to me on my journey.'"

The Cross

A 14th century cross stands in the centre of the village of Stevington. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the cross is the point where Christian loses his burden. "He ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream that, just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back and began to tumble; and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more."

Hill Difficulty

As a tinker, Bunyan had to carry his heavy iron anvil around with him. The steep Ampthill Hill, just north of Ampthill, would have been a hard route for Bunyan to take and probably inspired the Hill Difficulty. "I looked then after Christian to see him go up the hill, where I perceived

that he fell from running to going, and from going to clambering upon his hands and knees, because of the steepness of the place."

The House Beautiful

Houghton House, now an ancient monument open to the public, is the House Beautiful that Christian calls at in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. "...and many of them meeting him at the threshold of the house, said 'Come in, thou blessed of the lord; this house was built by the Lord of the Hill on purpose to entertain such pilgrims in.'" Bunyan had visited the house during his time as a tinker.

The Delectable Mountains

From House Beautiful Christian is shown the Delectable Mountains, and the inspiration for these is thought to be the Chiltern Hills near Harlington, Bedfordshire.

The Valley of Humiliation

The steep-sided valley at Millbrook is thought to have been in Bunyan's mind when writing about The Valley of Humiliation.

Vanity Fair

Bunyan would have observed the merchants, jugglers, actors and rogues who attended the May Fair each year, and he later described them when he wrote of Vanity Fair.

Pleasant Meadow

Bunyan must often have stood by the Town Bridge, looking across the river towards St John's Church, and there is a clear reference to this scene in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. "They went on their way to a pleasant river ... on either side of the river was a meadow, curiously beautified with lilies, and it was green all the year long."