

Witham Friary

The name Witham Friary probably came from the Anglo-Saxon, meaning homestead of Witta and a corruption of the French word *Frerie* meaning brotherhood. The village is mentioned in the Domesday Book as supporting eleven people. An archaeological dig in 1985 discovered a Neolithic axe and a Roman road and, in 2010, a metal detectorist, Dave Crisp, unearthed a large pottery vessel containing 52,503 Roman coins. It was one of the biggest Roman coin hoards ever found in Britain.

The village of Witham Friary has a long and important religious history. In the time of Henry II the first Carthusian Priory was established here in an attempt by Henry to appease the Church for the murder of Thomas Becket. There were nine Monasteries or Charterhouses in England, the first of them built in Witham by Hugh who became the Bishop of Lincoln, later raised to the Communion of Saints and arguably one of the greatest figures of his time. Sadly the Priory did not survive the dissolution of the monasteries but the church, originally the lay brothers chapel, continues as the parish church. The thirteenth century dovecote, opposite the church, is also associated with the Priory. This building was once used as a village reading room and the village lock up. In 1903 the original use became apparent after the Duke of Somerset commissioned a restoration of the building and more than 1000 pigeon holes were discovered .

The Church is grade one listed and dates back to the time of the monastery and possibly before. It was altered in a transitional style in 1828, and then rebuilt and extended in 1875 by William White. It is the only Carthusian building in existence to be open to the public.

After the dissolution of Witham Priory the lands and privileges were granted to Ralph Hopton. Hopton was a Royalist who led his forces into battle on Lansdown Hill near Bath. Although the Royalists gained control of the hill they suffered heavy losses and were forced to retreat.

Witham became a Peculiar over which the Bishop had no authority allowing Hopton to appoint and dismiss curates and even to prove the wills of parishioners at a local court. Ralph Hopton left the Manor of Witham to the Wyndham family The Hoptons converted the monastery buildings into a residence but the next owners, the Wyndhams turned it into a stately mansion in the Palladian style. The property was bought in 1762 by Alderman William

Beckford, a well-known political figure renowned for his interest in British civil liberty despite being the biggest slave owner in Jamaica. Beckford had a new house designed but he died before it was completed. It was left to his son, another William Beckford whose properties included Fonthill Manor and Beckford's Tower. William couldn't afford to complete it resulting in the building being dismantled and the materials sold.

One of the most interesting eighteenth century buildings was the Red Lion Inn which stood near the Church and Village Hall. It was run by the Mussell family. Forming three sides of a square it contained the village prison, the club house, a dairy and taproom together with a courtyard paved with flagstones where the villagers used to dance. The old Inn was partly demolished in 1867 when the building of the Seymour Arms was completed presumably to provide railway travellers with food and accommodation. William Munday was the first landlord of the new village Inn and it is flourishing today run by the descendants of William Salvidge who took over the Seymour Arms in the 1889. Herbert Salvidge bought the pub in 1954, his daughter Jean and her husband John Douel took over in 1978. Now grade 2 listed, it's interior has remained largely unchanged and is recognised in "Britain's Best Real Heritage Pubs"

The village school was built in 1838 by the Duke of Somerset. Previously a little education was provided in conjunction with the Sunday school but in 1861 the parish agreed to levy an educational rate and to provide a school master or mistress who would also play the organ in the church. The school closed in 1965 but the building still plays an important part in village life as the Village Hall.

The coming of the railway in 1856 to Witham changed the isolated parish for ever. Not only would the residents be able to travel to nearby Bruton and Frome but there was an influx of new people and jobs working on the line and at the station. The station closed in 1966, when it became a victim of the Beeching axe.

Farming and Forestry have always been the main industries but evidence exists that an iron industry flourished here from the Middle Ages. The manufacture of silk took place in cottages near The Yard and bricks were made at Upper Holt until the start of the First World War.

Life for the villagers was hard but probably not as hard as it was for people living in towns and cities. The weekly agricultural wage was only eight shillings

a week by the middle of the nineteenth century but they were able to supplement their meagre income by growing their own produce, keeping a pig and being allowed to “glean” take produce such as turnips and mangolds from the edge of a farmer’s field. Daily food was bread, potatoes, butter and cheese with half the pig being sold off to pay for the salt for pickling the other half. The parish registers, now held at the Record Office in Taunton, tell us more about the lives of the eighteenth and nineteenth century residents. The familiar surnames in the baptism register show the large numbers of children born to each household, the lack of second names for labourers’ children and many illegitimate births. The marriage register shows us that most marriages were between people resident in Witham, a reflection of the isolation of the parish before the coming of the railway. The register also tells us that many people could not read or write signing the register with an x. This situation would change gradually through the nineteenth century thanks to education being available to everyone. The Burials register often states the cause of death, the railway being the cause of at least three with agriculture and forestry the cause of many more.

An important part of village life was the village Friendly Society which still exists today, one of very few to survive in Somerset. In Victorian times villagers paid in 1s 3d (7p) per month and received sick pay of 7s per week for three months and 3s 6d for a further three months. £3 was paid out on the death of a member. The club is thought to be over 300 years old.

Many of the residents of Witham were affected by the decision of the Duke of Somerset to sell off his estate owing to death duties. The auctions took place in three separate lots in 1951, 1954 and 1955 when in addition to the Seymour Arms, most of the village cottages and many of the farms were sold off.

In the twenty-first century the village continues to thrive with many organisations hosting village events making it a popular destination for young families with the Church, the Pub and the Village Hall all contributing to village life.

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