

Early Modern Shillington

Births, marriages and deaths

Shillington's burial records show that nearly 9,000 people have been interred in the churchyard since 1543. Lists of baptisms began in 1559 and marriages the following year. They mention 1,500 family names between them. Some families including the Hanscombes, Hydes, Hares, Ansell and Kitcheners have lived on through the centuries. In 1560, an unknown disease, possibly smallpox, killed 47 people out of a population estimated at 300.

The churchwardens have kept records of their decisions since 1571 and most of them survive. The churchwardens ignored a Church of England ban on May Day celebrations in 1575 when they purchased a calf, raisins and saffron for a feast. The bishop found out and sacked John Keys who had been vicar for 7 years. Nevertheless, people continued to celebrate May Day and the photo shows pupils at Shillington school dancing round their maypole in 1959.



By 1578, the monks based with the church had departed and the Brotherhood House where they resided was leased to Rowland Bolton for 21 years. Part of its structure may remain in the cellar at 52, Church St.

Village life

Some children were getting a formal education locally. In 1578, a different source refers to a schoolmaster named Creke and in 1583 and 1601, the churchwardens paid for repairs to the school room. In 1580, they donated 2 shillings and 6 pence to leprosy victims in London.

They also paid Belle for making a lime kiln and for digging 30 loads of 'hurlocke' (hard chalk), perhaps for making lime for repairs to buildings. In 1626, they gave two shillings to 'two distressed gentlemen licensed 'to travell into Yorkshire from ye Lowe Countries' and donated 3 shillings to gypsies. In 1631, Thomas Burrow was paid 'for conveying a wench to Ampthill'. A collection raised £5. 9s.7d for the people of Marlborough in 1653 after a devastating fire had destroyed many homes.

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy

Hocktide, an ancient celebration on the second Monday and Tuesday after Easter, survived the reformation in Hexton. Frances Taverner described one of the activities, Pulling at the Pole, which began on Waytyng Hill where a pole had been taken. The game began with women attempting to pull it down the slope while the men tried to stop them. The game lasted two or three hours but the women eventually succeeded and brought the pole to the cross by the town house door. After this, a feast was held there and a collection raised 20 shillings (one pound) for church maintenance and sharing among the poor. More contests between men and women followed including base- an early form of rounders. Taverner concludes by observing that 'these nice tymes of ours would not only despise these sports, but also account them immodest if not prophane, but those playne and well-meaning people did solace themselves in this manner, and that without offence or scandall.'

Invest in property

The quality of life for many continued to improve and inventories suggest that more people now owned property and land. About 30 houses from the 1600s survive to this day:

6-10 Church St, later used as the village workhouse and now divided into 3 homes

18 Church St, which became the Five Bells pub, now the Old Bells

36-40 Church St

42 Church St, now the Old Bakehouse

52 Church St, the White Horse pub before 1740, photographed before closure in 1914



75 Church St

77 Church St formerly the Commander in Chief beerhouse

91 Church St, the Old Post Office



Green End Farmhouse, High Rd

94 High Rd, Chestnut Tree Farmhouse, High Rd

108, Nutcracker Cottage, High Rd

121-125, High Rd

129 High Rd, Willow Thatch, shown here in the 1930s, with horseman 'Tim' Ingram and Blossom and Sandy



35-7, High Rd

39 Upton End Rd - The Old Red Signpost (pictured in about 1910)



79 Upton End Rd Walnut Cottage,

Upton End Old Farm,

Upton End Rd, Lordship Farm

24, Apsley End Rd,

Apsley End Rd, Apsleybury Farm

Apsley End Rd, The Old Court House (shown here in the early 1900s)



Hanscombe End Farm,
 Hanscombe End Rd, Northley Farm
 5 Hanscombe End Rd, Beam Ends
 15 Marquis Hill, the Old Marquis
 Green End Farm, Pegsdon
 Westhey Manor, Higham Gobion
 The Old Rectory, Higham Gobion
 (pictured right)



Almshouses for old people unable to work were built before 1515 but demolished in about 1960. A small car park at the top of Church St occupies the site.

In 1652, a windmill was operating near Windmill Farm on the brow of the hill near Meppershall. It would have provided competition for the watermill off the Gravenhurst Rd. It had gone before 1746. For a short time, another windmill stood in the field across the road from the Pirton Hall entrance.

Nimble fingers

In around 1600, Luton became a major centre for making straw hats. Straw needed plaiting first and many people in nearby villages (such as the unknown lady in the photograph opposite) earned a little extra money by doing this.

Poverty was common in 1601 when the Poor Relief Act allowed parishes to collect a levy from property owners to provide the poor with bread and blankets. Some wealthy individuals also had the decency to assist them by setting up charities.

Edward Pilsworth founded his in 1601 using income from his London estates. It paid out £12.14 shillings annually- £10.18 shillings for the poor and the remainder for the church. The charity was wound up in the 20th century.



Straw Plaiting, Bedfordshire.

Bunyan of foot

This was a time of great unrest with many people challenging the authorities. Oliver Cromwell and the Roundheads began a civil war in 1642 which led to the execution of King Charles I in 1649. Cromwell was Lord Protector and the most powerful person in the land from 1653 until his death in 1658. It was all in vain though and the monarchy returned in 1660. Some people were disillusioned with the Church of England including John Bunyan from Elstow. He joined the Bedford Free Church and was sent out to preach in the villages. With a close friend, James Taylor, living at Shefford Hardwick, and relatives in Hitchin, Bunyan must have passed this way many times as he travelled through Bedfordshire and north Hertfordshire, often on foot. Many people in this area liked his message but a clampdown on dissent put him in prison until the King permitted religious freedom in

1672. Bunyan continued peaching locally until his death in 1688. His best-known book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, refers to the Delectable Mountains, which are thought to be inspired by the Chilterns.

That's harsh!

The Houses of Parliament were packed with landowners and passed the Game Act of 1671. It stopped their tenants killing the rabbits and hares that ate their crops and formed an important part of their diet. Gamekeepers had the power to search homes for snares or nets. In 1723, the law was strengthened when the penalties for poaching or unauthorised fishing were hanging or transportation to Australia. Occasionally though, the law came to the rescue of ordinary people. In 1685, John Whitbread, a yeoman farmer from Shillington appeared before Hitchin's manorial court. He was accused of using false weights and abusing an ale conner whose job it was to check that ale had not been watered down. He was fined but obviously not deterred as he was fine again for false weights in 1691.

The evil weed

After Christopher Columbus brought back tobacco from America in 1650, smoking became popular. Archaeological test pits in Shillington have revealed many broken stems and bowls of clay tobacco pipes. Larger and more robust 'churchwarden' pipes were also made after 1800 for those that could afford them. A few remains of these have come from test pits and several pieces were recovered when a Victorian floor was replaced at Northley Farmhouse.

Gale warning

The climate became much colder during the latter half of the 17th century and severe frosts froze rivers, even the Thames in London.

A severe gale on 22 November 1701 destroyed much of Shillington's stone church tower which fell and damaged the nave. According to legend, the bells rolled down the hill into the brook.

The vicar opened a fund, but it took until 1745 to raise enough money to start repairs using brick.

A plaque was installed which reads:

The Ancient Steeple of this Church fell down 1701, was rebuilt 1750 by a Brief Rate and Subscription collected by the Rev Geo Storey, faithful curate of the parish (for) 37 years, who died much respected May 13 1765, Aged 63

