

Pilgrims' progress

A tranquil part of the East Midlands was in the forefront of the foundation of the USA. **Barry McLoughlin** follows the Mayflower Trail in Pilgrim Country

WITH ITS sleepy market towns, ancient villages and attractive but unassuming landscape, northern Nottinghamshire seems worlds away from the glitz of Washington DC, with the White House, the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial.

Incredibly, however, the district of Bassetlaw could be said to be the improbable birthplace of the United States of America and modern constitutional democracy.

It was in the evocative valleys of the Idle and Trent rivers 400 years ago that a handful of people claimed the right to remain true to their consciences in matters of religious belief. The Pilgrim Fathers were passionate, Bible-based Christians who were unafraid to voice their faith in God, and who dared to defy government demands for uniformity of worship.

At the start of the 1600s these 'Separatists' were part of a wider Puritan movement that wanted to reform the Anglican Church. In 1604 King James I approved a new list of rules to which all clergy were obliged to conform.



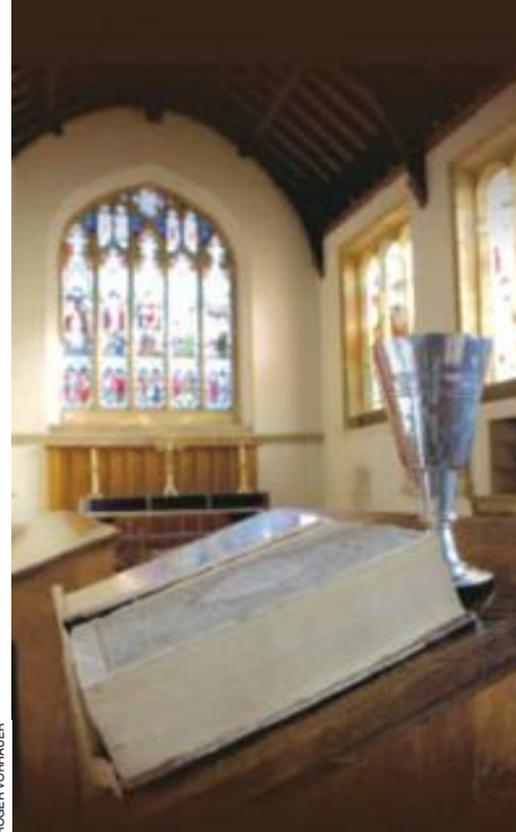
Above: All Saints' Church, Babworth

Around 100 Anglican clergy refused, however, and were stripped of their positions in the established Church of England.

The Separatists who became the leaders of the Pilgrim Fathers were born and worshipped in the area in the years before 1607. They sailed on the Mayflower in 1620 to found the New World colony of Plymouth (Plimoth).

Main: Pilgrim Country, from Gringley-on-the Hill

ROGER VORHAUER



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Before landing in America, the Mayflower passengers developed the first written declaration of self-government – the Mayflower Compact – a precursor of the constitution of the United States.

Three of the first four signatories to the Compact came from Bassetlaw and the neighbouring county of South Yorkshire. The document is considered the earliest example of democracy in the United States and the forerunner of the Declaration of Independence.

Now, the contribution of this area to the development of the USA is celebrated in the Mayflower Trail, which links the homes and places of worship of some of those pioneers.

From the villages of Austerfield and Bawtry in Yorkshire, to Scrooby and Babworth in Nottinghamshire and eastwards to Gainsborough in Lincolnshire, the Pilgrims' steps can be traced mile by mile.

Almost four centuries years on, it was highly evocative to stand in the church at Babworth and imagine the incendiary preaching of the radically reformist clergyman Richard Clyfton reverberating through the nave.

Our guide was Sue Allan, a passionate Pilgrim Fathers chronicler, author and authority on the Separatist movement. Knowledgeable and enthusiastic, the novelist and historian sometimes dons Pilgrim garb on her tailor-made guided tours that bring the era vividly to life.

The Separatists preferred to use the vernacular Geneva (or 'Breeches') Bible because they felt it could

speak to them more directly. Copies had to be smuggled in from the Continent, and a 1606 edition of the Geneva Bible is one of Babworth Church's treasures.

All Saints' other great treasure is an Elizabethan silver chalice and paten (plate) almost certainly used by Clyfton and other leading Separatists. Discovered in 1950, it was probably hidden during the Civil War to stop it being looted.

Today about two-thirds of tourists to the church are from the United States – as its visitors' book testifies – in search of their heritage, but Sue said it wasn't until the 1840s that the area really came to be associated with the Pilgrim Fathers.

Sue's latest non-fiction book, *In Search of Scrooby Manor*, is being published in late May and challenges some of the earlier theories about the layout of Scrooby Manor and the interpretation of the buildings there. According to Sue, the Pilgrims

Top left: The silver chalice and Geneva Bible that are among the treasures of Babworth Church

Sue Allan (right) and Sandra Withington on the path of the old Great North Road at Babworth. The track is still the same width as decreed by King John, with its trees cut back to deter highwaymen



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aboard the Mayflower had just six square feet of space per family during the voyage.

■ For more information about Sue's tours, tel: 01673 878398, e-mail: (info@mayflowermaid.com).

On the trail of the Mayflower

Pilgrim Country covers some 50 square miles at the crossroads of four counties – Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and Derbyshire.

The circular Mayflower Trail, tracing the inspiring story of the leading Pilgrim forefathers, starts at 13th century All Saints' Church in the village of Babworth. In 1586, sympathisers from the surrounding district came to listen to Richard Clyfton preach his simple but sincere message.

The church lies in a picturesque glade about 400 yards from the main road. Babworth is on the route of the Old London Road, the original Great North Road to Scotland.

A plaque in the porch marks the visit by more than 150 Mayflower Descendants in 1955. They also donated one of the peal of six bells which is dedicated to Richard Clyfton.

On the north wall is a picture of Separatists walking to the church painted in the Sixties by an inmate of nearby Ranby prison; by the organ stands a scale model of the Mayflower made from 14,000 matchsticks by another prisoner. The north wall also features a memorial window dedicated to the Rev Edmund Jessop, Rector from 1950 to 1984, who did much to revive the American connection.

Next stop on the trail is the village of Scrooby, where Separatist pioneer William Brewster was brought up. The proprietors of the Pilgrim Fathers Inn on the A638 keep a supply of literature about the village and its early history.

Brewster was fined for non-attendance at St Wilfrid's Church, most of which dates to the late 14th



Above: The ancient brickwork of the remaining wing of medieval Scrooby Manor, now a private house

Bottom right: The steeple of St Wilfrid's Church, Scrooby

Below: The scale model of the Mayflower made by a local prisoner from 14,000 matchsticks

century, in the centre of Scrooby. On his father's death he inherited the post of bailiff to the Archbishop of York's estates and lived in the Manor House, where, on the invitation of Brewster, Clyfton took refuge when he was deprived of his living. He became pastor of the Scrooby Congregation and it was in Scrooby Manor House that "those who desired to worship according to the dictates of their own conscience" began to meet.

The site originally covered more than six acres, surrounded by a moat. Most of the house was demolished on the orders of Charles I but part of one wing survived and is now privately owned.

Three miles is away is the village of Austerfield, just inside the Yorkshire boundary, where William Bradford was born and was baptised in the 11th century St Helena's Church. As a young man, he became increasingly fascinated by the Scriptures and was inspired by the teaching of Clyfton. In 1606 he joined the Scrooby congregation and rose to become one of the leading Pilgrim Fathers and principal figures in 17th century New England, as governor of Plymouth



Colony. It is thanks to his writing that we have details of the lives of the Separatists in England, Holland and New England.

Under the leadership of Bradford and Brewster, and John Carver of Doncaster, the colony was the first settlement in New England and paved the way for the First Amendment to the US constitution which is concerned with religious freedom. Brewster, as religious elder, held the first Thanksgiving in 1621.

Between Austerfield and Scrooby, Bawtry was originally an ancient port on the River Idle and later an important staging post on the Great North Road, known as the Gateway to Yorkshire. Indeed, we spotted a house on its outskirts whose address was simply 'No 1, Yorkshire'!

Nearby is Bawtry Hall, a Georgian manor house built in 1779 as a family home.

The village of Blyth, four miles from Bawtry, was another important stopping place on the old road. At the northern end of the village is the Church of St Mary and St Martin, the earliest parts of which date from the late 11th century. Several former coaching inns still stand today, and outside the village is Hodsock Priory, which was featured in the February issue of *Choice*.

Centred around a Buttercross dating back to 1777, Tickhill, a few miles from Bawtry, has a fine church dating from the 15th century and the remains of a Norman castle overlooking the picturesque mill dam.

Retford is one of the oldest chartered boroughs in England, with many elegant examples of Georgian architecture, including its excellent museum, around a traditional market square.

A Russian cannon captured at Sebastopol in 1855 during the Crimean War stands at the centre of Cannon Square.

About ten miles from Doncaster, the North Lincolnshire town of Epworth is the birthplace of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who was born at the Old Rectory in 1703. The rectory is now a museum of Wesley memorabilia.

Gainsborough Old Hall is a large timber-framed medieval manor house, one of the most complete to survive in England. It was the home from 1596 to 1720 of the Hickman family, who had Separatist sympathies.

The trail can be extended from Gainsborough to Lincoln and to Boston. In 1607 the Pilgrim Fathers



A mural dedicated to Mayflower Pilgrim William Butten on a new housing development in Austerfield

Below: One of the 'Brewster benches' in Scrooby Church

had attempted to leave Boston for Holland but were betrayed and briefly imprisoned before finally reaching Holland from the Humber estuary in spring 1608. The cells in which the Pilgrims were reportedly held are located in the Guild Hall. In Boston's church, known as "The Stump", are monuments to John Cotton, who founded Boston, Massachusetts.

On the coast at nearby Fishtoft, a memorial stands close to the spot where the Pilgrim Fathers are said to have attempted to set sail for Holland. There, they eventually settled in Leiden until they sailed back to England in the *Speedwell* in 1620 before their departure for America.

The trail is completed at Sturton-le-Steeple, birthplace of John Robinson, another of the leaders of the Separatist movement





Olde Bell rings the changes

The four-star Ye Olde Bell Hotel near Retford is a classic coaching inn from the era of post-horses and highwaymen.

Restored by locally based owners Paul and Hilary Levack, it's one of the best preserved inns in England, with original oak panelling and beams, leaded windows, antiques and original fireplaces.

Four-posters feature in some of the 57 individually styled bedrooms. Some of the old stabling has been converted into further bedrooms, a hair and beauty treatment salon and fitness studio.

Famous guests have included Charlie Chaplin, Oliver Reed, Joan Crawford, and Sir Harold and Lady Wilson.

Sue Wilson, the hotel's sales and marketing officer, showed us how its restoration has combined atmospheric features with more modish fittings.

Sue said: "It dates back about four centuries and was originally a farm, which evolved over the years. It would have been one of the great posting houses and had stabling for 120 horses.

"After being owned by various hotel groups, it is now privately owned and the current owners have invested millions of pounds in its restoration, respecting the past but with contemporary touches."

By the 19th century it was already a "famous baiting place for the stages that passed between London and York". Landlord George Clarke was an avid horse breeder and farmer, and the inn had stabling for 120 horses and beds for 60 post boys.

The future Queen Victoria stayed with her mother, the Duchess of Kent, in what is now the Victoria Suite while journeying along the Great North Road from London to York in 1835.

The Pilgrims' window at St Helena's in Austerfield, depicting William Bradford and the story of the Mayflower voyage and Compact

Below: A centuries-old mounting block at Scrooby Manor

schoolroom and archeology gallery, featuring finds from prehistoric, Roman and medieval times.

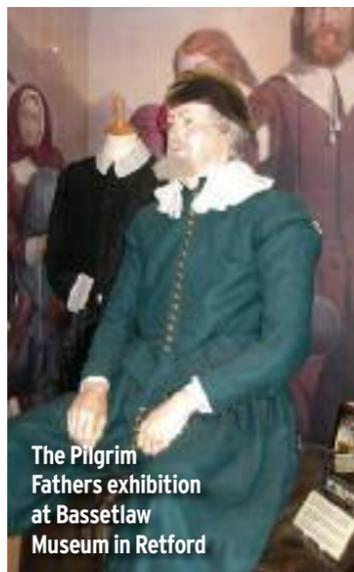
An art gallery was built in 1994, partly financed by the Percy Laws Memorial Fund of the Rotary Club of Retford.

The elegant two-storey house was built in Flemish bond brickwork and features Adam-style ceilings, white Carrara marble fireplaces, painted wall panels and beautifully carved Honduran mahogany.

The house changed hands several times before being occupied by Alfred Pegler, founder of the Northern Rubber Works in Retford. His son, Stephen, a former mayor of the town and keen naturalist, artist and innovator in colour photography, lived there until his death in 1937.

It was bought and used as offices by East Retford Council from 1937. Bassetlaw District Council continued to use the building until 1984 when the property was restored.

Access to the first floor is by stairs only but anyone wanting to discuss access should contact the museum.



The Pilgrim Fathers exhibition at Bassetlaw Museum in Retford

Local tourism chiefs agree the only thing lacking is a focal-point for the trail, though there are plans in the long-term to provide a visitor centre if premises can be found.

■ A self-guided tour of the Mayflower Trail takes around four to six hours, including lunch breaks

■ Gainsborough Old Hall is in Parnell Street, Gainsborough DN21 2NB, tel: 01522 782040, website: (www.gainsborougholdhall.com).

One of the best: Bassetlaw Museum

Bassetlaw Museum is located in Amcott House, in the centre of Retford, a handsome 18th century Grade 2* listed town house that retains many original features.

Its collections include local and military history, decorative and fine art, agriculture, photographs, costume and textiles, as well as a Victorian



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Above: Detail from the Pilgrim Fathers painting in Babworth Church

The Pilgrim Fathers UK Origins Association

The Pilgrim Fathers UK Origins Association was launched in 2006 as an initiative by Bassetlaw District Council, which also produced a leaflet on the Mayflower Trail.

Several museums have researched and brought together information and artefacts related to the original Separatists and the 102 passengers of the Mayflower, many of whom became the Pilgrim Fathers. The ship also had a crew of about 50 officers and men.

Dr Jeremy Bangs, one of the leading historians of the Pilgrim Fathers, has recently published the first chapter of an internet book providing extensive detail of the heritage of the local Separatists and their reasons for leaving England for Holland.

The association has researched the details surrounding the departure of the Mayflower on September 6, 1620.

In the US, museums in Plymouth, Massachusetts, have extensive archives and artefacts regarding the heritage of the Pilgrim Fathers from their landing at Plymouth Rock on November 9, 1620. The replica Mayflower II is moored at the Plimoth Plantation heritage attraction.

There are Mayflower Societies in all 50 United States and Canada, and members living in many other countries.

Plymouth in Devon, after which the Plimoth Colony was named, is twinned with Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Passport to Pilgrim Country

Getting there

■ By road: Pilgrim Country is well served by motorways and trunk roads, including the A1(M), A1, M1, M18, M180, M62

■ By rail: Retford station is 90 minutes from London King's Cross on the East Coast Main Line. National Rail Enquiries, tel: 08457 484950, website: (www.nationalrail.co.uk)

■ By air: The international Robin Hood Airport (Doncaster Sheffield) is served by several airline operators.

Bassetlaw Museum opening and admission

■ Monday to Saturday 10am to 4.45pm (last admission 4.30pm). Closed Sundays. Admission free.

Where to stay

■ We stayed at Clumber Park Hotel and Spa, Blyth Road (A614), near Worksop S80 3PA. The hotel in Sherwood Forest has 73 bedrooms and conference suites. The Courtyard restaurant offers an à la

carte menu using local produce while the Normanton Inn has a range of bar meals. The New Leaf Spa offers a variety of treatments and therapies, including holistic ones. The heated indoor swimming pool is a great place to relax after a spa treatment, tel: 01623 835333, website: (www.clumberparkhotel.com).

Where to eat

■ Ye Olde Bell Hotel on the A634 at Barnby Moor (see panel), tel: 01777 705121, website: (www.yeoldebells.com).

Where to eat

■ Bassetlaw Museum, Amcott House, 40 Grove Street, Retford DN22 6LD, tel: 01777 713749, website: (www.bassetlawmuseum.org.uk)

■ Pilgrim Fathers website: (www.pilgrimfathersorigins.org)

■ Retford Tourist Information Centre, tel: 01777 860780, website: (www.experience-nottinghamshire.com).

Right: Rescued from use as a water trough on a local farm, the font in which William Bradford was baptised at St Helena's Church, Austerfield



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