

# A Brief History of Ilminster

## Pre-history



183 million year ago the land where Ilminster now stands was under the sea. It was a shallow water nursery area containing fish, dragonflies, damselflies, scorpion flies and many other insects. Many specimen fossils have been found in the Saurian (fish and insect) layer nearby. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup>C local man Charles Moore wrote 30 scientific papers having been inspired by his accidental childhood find in Ilminster of a fossilised fish skeleton in a nodule. His extensive fossil collection now forms the Geological Museum of the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution.

## First Millennium

Chronicles from 725AD and possibly earlier confirm a community here and many names have their roots in Anglo-Saxon times. The town's name was Ileminstre meaning 'The church on the River Isle' from the Old English *ysle* and *mynster*. Ditton Street comes from a Saxon word meaning 'settlement by the dyke'. There was a thriving public house here called The Swan across the precinct from the busy twice weekly cattle market. Presumably there were swans here, hence the name Swan Precinct.

Before William the Conqueror brought French rule to England, the town belonged to Muchelney Abbey. In 995AD Ilminster was granted its Town Charter by King Ethelred with the right to hold a regular weekly market which continues to this day.

## 1000 AD to 1400 AD

By this period Ilminster was a flourishing community. It is mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086) Alongside the market house there was a wooden 'shambles' running nearly 30 metres towards East Street, with a mixture of market stalls. Traditionally meat and poultry were butchered as you bought it. The grain and vegetable market would usually have been held elsewhere, possibly at a barley courtyard where items would have been weighed and sold. This was possibly in Court Barton as *Barton* is Saxon for Barley Town. And of course, during this period the church owned or taxed everything and Court Barton is beside the church.

## 1400 AD to 1600 AD



Somewhere around 1400 Merrifield, Ilton, just outside Ilminster, was acquired by Sir John II Wadham. Sir John III Wadham left for a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands in 1473, never to return. In 1531 Nicholas Wadham was born, probably in Merrifield, and in 1555 he married Dorothy, the eldest daughter of Henry VIII's Principle Secretary, William Petre. Nicolas went on posthumously to co-found Wadham College, Oxford with his wife Dorothy.

Nicolas and Dorothy and later members of their family are buried in the Wadham tombs in north transept of the Minster.



In 1491 Ilminster suffered the first of its two great fires when most of the wooden structures with their thatched roofs were destroyed. The town was rebuilt, including The Swan and over the years this new building has held a court house, hotel and posthouse. It is now a shop and to the rear is an ancient door which goes unrecognised by many.



Another new building around this time was The Dolphin public house, built in 1528 to house the masons repairing and extending the Minster Church. Later this also became a post house where you could buy stamps.



Soon after Queen Elizabeth I gained the throne in 1558 William Rosewell became Solicitor General from 1559 until his death in 1566. His surviving children, William and Philippa married into local families and William Jnr who became the owner of Ford Abbey, died in Ilminster. His sister married Sir George Speke of Whitelackington. The families owned large swathes of Somerset from Dunster to Dorset and from coastal Devon towards Bristol and down towards Wincanton.



Local landowners Henry Greenfylde and Humphry Waldron were appointed administrators of the new church-funded Ilminster Grammar School in 1549 whose original boarding and class rooms are behind The Minster.

**1600 AD to  
1700 AD**

The Minster was completed by the mid-15thC and while the tower now has 8 bells the oldest dates from 1611. Two other bells were cast by the Bilbie family: one by Thomas in 1732 and another by William in 1790. The Bilbie family dynasty had started in 1666. Casting bells was skilled work and this family kept their trade a secret, living in the woods. They were said to work only under a full moon and provided many church bells throughout Somerset and Devon. It is interesting to note that when a bell swings to ring, its force has almost three times its own weight.



In 1661 another great fire, believed to have started in the blacksmiths, swept through Ilminster. It was so devastating that 'Poor notices' were read in churches up and down the whole country asking for donations to relieve the homeless of the town. But it was an important and resilient town and by 1668 it had recovered and offered 39 beds for travellers with stabling for 122 horses. The Minster also became a Royal Peculiar, meaning the local Bishop had little jurisdiction, and the local court held in town was answerable directly to the Crown and was able to grant licences for marriage or deal with probate. The charges for 'letters of administration' or fines was collected by Charles Speke who was the 'filacer'.

Although things were better by 1685, it was the time of the Monmouth Rebellion, said to be the last battle on English soil. This was between the troops of the rebel

James Scott, 1st Duke of Monmouth who was attempting to seize the English throne from his uncle James II of England. James II became the last Catholic king of England and he had succeeded to the throne on the death of his brother, Charles II on 2 February 1685; James Scott was Charles' illegitimate son.

Support for the Protestant cause was strong in the West Country and after Monmouth landed from the Netherlands at Lyme Regis in Dorset, there had been a series of marches and skirmishes throughout Dorset and Somerset. Ilminster sent 54 men to join the rebellion, but eventually Monmouth's poorly equipped army was pushed back to the Somerset Levels and was defeated at Westonzoyland. This led to the Bloody Assizes in Taunton where Judge Jeffreys, who became known as "the hanging judge", tried and sentenced over 500 people in 2 days. Thirteen Ilminster locals, including Charles Speke, were executed and some were hung in the Market Square.

**1700 AD to  
1800 AD**



In the 18thC, Ilminster was a prosperous town growing rich on farming, cloth, rope and glove making. In 1756 Lord North owned 12 Silver Street, now the hardware shop, and he would have stayed here while preparing for his marriage to the young Anne Speke of Whitelackington in May. He went on to become George III's longest serving prime minister from 1770 — 1782 and managed to hold many offices: Paymaster of the Forces, Home Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Leader of the Commons and Prime Minister, but tax disputes during 1776 and the American Civil War, led to the loss of the British colonies in the Americas which resulted in the formation of the USA.

But not all the population was wealthy. By 1777 a store house had been given from the Summerlands Estate to provide the Ilminster 'poor house', which was supported by charitable donations from the local churches and doctors. The 90 inmates had a diet of bread, cheese, soup, gruel and potatoes, but Ilminster Poor House was mentioned in two Parliamentary reports before 1807 when, meanly, no bread was being issued.



In the late 1780's the area around the junction of West Street and what is now Station Road was the main trading area of the town and remained so for over 100 years. The old "Round House", the town lock up, was on the south side of the Triangle. There was an annual horse market when horses were tethered to rings in the stone wall along the High Street under Strawberry Bank, with the dealers running their stock along the other side of the road, showing them off to prospective purchasers. There were many small 'cottage industries' working from homes along Strawberry Bank: grooms, tailors, a cobbler, roper, carpenter, corn dealer, a tanner, a boot and shoe maker and linen draper.



However the shambles market in East Street was still in operation and the Market House you see in the centre of town today was described as new in 1795.

**1800 AD to  
1900 AD**

In 1800 the fire service was housed near Court Barton from where they would have had a bird's eye view of the town and be able to make a fast response. A horse and cart pulled large water containers which fed a hand operated pump to extinguish fires. There is a cobbled courtyard where they housed the pump.



The Master Blacksmith, Thomas Kingman (1745 - 1832), worked in this area. Horses were very important to the economy and travel, and by 1814 travel both around the country and the world had become much easier.



The source of the Nile was a preoccupation of Victorian Britain. In 1856 Richard Burton and Ilminster man Captain John Hanning Speke left East Africa to look for the fabled Great Lakes and the source of the Nile.

The journey was extremely hazardous and both men fell ill from a variety of tropical diseases but in February 1858 they became the first Europeans to reach Lake Tanganyika (aka Lake Nyasa). Burton was too ill to travel any further but the partially-blinded Speke pushed on north to discover Lake Victoria and he claimed it as the source of the Nile, which was later proved true.



(John) Edward Taylor, the son of the minister of the Unitarian church, now the Ilminster Arts Centre, was born in Ilminster and as a young man witnessed the Peterloo Riots in Manchester. He wrote an article reporting on events which was published in The Times. Taylor later founded the Manchester Guardian (which became the Guardian newspaper we know today) using it to publish his political views, and later with others, to lobby government for reform to many laws.



In 1839 another son of Ilminster, 26 year old John Baker left the town to settle in Adelaide, Australia. He became a pastoralist in the new state of South Australia by importing sheep, beef and horses. Soon, he became Chairman of the Adelaide Auction Company, a local director of the Bank of Australia, Director of the Adelaide Mining Company and founder of the Chamber of Commerce, and he opened up the vast new country and encouraged settlement by sinking wells and providing sheep and leases for freemen (many ex-convicts) to manage their own lives. He became South Australia's second Premier in 1857 and passed a bill protecting landowners' rights.



By the middle of the century, railways were connecting the country and Ilminster was connected to the main line in 1866. With this it became apparent that using local time calculated from the sun was no longer appropriate because solar noon in Ilminster is nearly 12 minutes after noon in London and railways ran to London time. There is a clock above a shop doorway in East Street which showed Railway Time. Eventually Greenwich Mean Time was formally adopted throughout the country in 1880.

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In 1849 the doctor's practice of Charles Hawkes Mules in Silver Street, was facing changes too. No national health service meant people paid a regular subscription as insurance to 'sickness clubs' against later charges for health care. The doctor's practice along with local churches would pay out to parish funds. But by now new Poor Laws meant the Ilminster poor house was closed and the people had been moved to the Chard 'Union House' (aka The Workhouse) during 1835 - 39.

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Charles Mules, a relation of the doctor, departed from St Catherine's Dock, London for New Zealand in 1867. The aim was 'to further establish the colony with 120 persons' at Nelson on the south island. Charles worked tirelessly in the community and later, as the Right Rev Charles Oliver Mules MA DD, he was made Bishop of Nelson NZ between 1892 and 1912 when he retired.

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Another new public service was the Police service and in 1857 The Grapes Inn in East Street was sold for £1020 by Robert Tapscott the publican. The building, now a solicitor's office, was converted to a Police Station with a Magistrate's Court and three prison cells to the rear. It was manned by a Superintendent, 2 Sergeants and 12 Constables. Walking the beat was often the only way to get around as few police officers had the luxury of their own horse. Felons were often sent to the prison at Ilchester or Shepton Mallet.

**1900 AD to  
Current**

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During the early 20thC great wars changed our population greatly. People went to the cinema to watch the news and see morale building entertainment. But by 1957 fashions had changed again and the Plaza cinema in Ilminster closed as more and more people were struggling with a reduced economy and rationing after the war effort. Very few people could afford to have a television at home and many people made their own entertainment through neighbourhood organisations and groups.

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The Ilminster Entertainment Society was formed in 1947 and in 1987 it moved into an old fruit and vegetable warehouse in Brewery Lane. It is now one of the best equipped amateur theatres in Somerset.

The building has had a chequered history: it was previously a brewery – you can still see the old well in the bar area – and before that the Ilminster Workhouse. It is a perfect example of how the town has evolved over the centuries, adapting and changing to reflect current needs.