

KILSBY

The first settlement in Kilsby parish was probably a Roman farm — retired soldiers often occupied settled land close to the main Roman roads, and traces of such settlements were found within Kilsby parish during recent excavations, along with fragments of Roman pottery in the fields.

Kilsby village itself was probably founded around 890-920AD, in a clearing on a wooded hillside where a stream meandered down — perhaps to mark a strategic marriage between the Son (Saxon: "childe") of the lord of Barby and a daughter of the Danish Socmon-settlement at Barby Nortoft; for there "by"-ending of "Kilsby" (originally "Childesby") indicates that there were both Saxon and Danish elements in the name. Moreover, Kilsby village is located equidistant from the two earlier settlements, and also from the meeting field "Thing-ho" that lies roughly midway between all three locations.

Roman influence was still evident even in the 10th century, for Watling Street was used as the border between Danelaw and Saxon England. The entire Kilsby Stretch of the original Watling Street is still a public right of way, and marks the border between Kilsby and Crick parishes.

Medieval Kilsby can still be found, with excellent examples of ridge-and-furrow, windmill mounds, and of course the church at the village Centre.

Historically, Kilsby has two main claims to fame. The first skirmish of the Civil War took place here on the 9th of August 1642, when Sir John Smith rode in at dawn with a party of royalist troopers to subdue "unruly" puritans and was fired on by armed villagers and attacked with a pitchfork by Old Thomas Winkles (who was shot dead along with Henry Barfoote).

In 1833 the railway came to Kilsby. Robert Stephenson elected to build a tunnel under Kilsby hill, but it was a difficult and expensive affair, complicated by quicksand that had to be drained by massive pumping engines. These worked for up to 18 months, pumping at a rate of 1800 gallons per minute to drain the glacial water from beneath the hill.

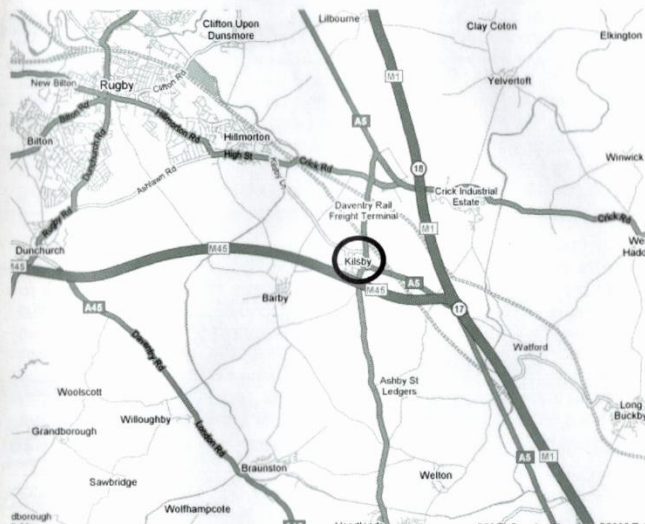
Kilsby tunnel opened in 1838, and became a main link in England's railway network, so that during WWII it was a target for German bombing; however, the bombs missed target and the most serious loss, according to records in the village school, was "damage to one cabbage patch"!

Modern times brought motorways — and it was inevitable that the M1 should pass close to Kilsby, for it was channelled through the same Watford Gap that was chosen by the railway and canal engineers... and also by the Roman legions 2000 years ago.

Village Shop

A wide range of products is available from the Community Owned Village Shop located in the car park of the Red Lion. The shop is open 8.00am to 17.00pm Monday to Saturday and 8.00am to 12.00pm on a Sunday.

Refreshment and accomodation options are available in the Village. Please enquire at the Village shop.



This leaflet was researched and prepared by Gren Hatton, on behalf of Kilsby Parish Council and Kilsby Local History Association. Logo design of Kilsby railway tunnel from an original concept by Brain Morris.



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Historic Village Trail



1 Kilsby Rail Tunnel

Kilsby tunnel — 2400yds long, 25ft wide, 28ft high, and lined with about 30 million bricks — was engineered by Robert Stephenson, son of George Stephenson 'father of the steam locomotive'. Stephenson's Kilsby work-force involved 1250 men and 200 horses. The project was almost cancelled when the tunnel broke into quicksands under Kilsby hill. Powerful pumping engines were brought in, and continued to pump water from the quicksand for up to 18 months. Eventually, after four years of work, the last brick was placed on 21st June 1838; the first goods train passed through on 24th June, and the line opened to passenger traffic on 17th Sept.

2 Tunnel Tigers' path

This alley between modern houses is the start of a path once used by local men who carried out maintenance work in Kilsby tunnel; they were known in the village as 'Tunnel Tigers'. One of them was killed when he stepped out of a safety niche in the tunnel wall without checking, straight in front of the Up Local to Welton! At least four Kilsby men (Atkinson, Stapleton, Kingston and Turner) lost their lives in the tunnel during the 1900s.

3 Medieval ridge and furrow

The humps in this field are the traces left by the earliest inhabitants of Kilsby, who ploughed these fields between about 930AD and about 1550AD. As far as we know, this field has remained as pasture since at least 1600AD, so that the old medieval ridge and furrow marks are very well preserved. Such remains were once common over much of England, but this fine example of medieval tillage is now quite rare.

4 The source of Rainsbrook

This stream-bed is scarcely visible today except where it marks the ends of old ridge-and-furrow. It was this water-source that caused Kilsby to be founded here around 910-930AD. Culverted now, it flowed from the hills south-east of the village, ran parallel to Manor Road, down Essen Lane, and crossed Main Road beside the Red Lion, before meandering north-west through the fields. It then bends back to flow west of Barby, where it is known as Rainsbrook (originally 'Range Brook', since it forms the Warwickshire/Northamptonshire boundary in Barby parish). Villagers drew their water from the stream and various wells, until pollution from fertilisers in Victorian times gradually contaminated the water, and piped water was installed in the 1920s.

5 Washpit and Brick Kiln

The stream was used to fill the village washpit, which for obvious reasons was downstream of the village. The washpit was strategically located near the junction of two old drove roads (Main Rd leading from Weedon, and Rugby Rd leading from Crick via the bridle path); it was used for washing and dipping sheep, perhaps as far back as the 1500s. In the mid-1800s, when the railway came through Kilsby, a small brick-kiln was built in the field beside the washpit — you can still see the hollow in the ground where clay was dug for brick-making.

6 Holly Tree House, North Street

Before Enclosure of Kilsby's fields in 1778, there was a farmhouse here with all its outbuildings, owned by prospering yeoman farmer Abraham Lee. An earlier farmhouse (perhaps dating from the 1500s) was converted to outhouses when the present early Georgian house was added in the 1750s — a two-hearthed thatched house of dressed local stone, with a later extension in brick with slate roof (perhaps replacing an 18th-century cob extension) when the railway came in the mid-1830s. An inventory of 1784 lists the contents of each room, giving a good idea of the house's structure and usage at that time.

7 Fairview, North Street

This house was originally a barn belonging to a neighbouring farmhouse (demolished in the 1950s); after Enclosure of the open fields in 1778, the barn was no longer in an appropriate location, so was converted to a house and rented out. High on the north wall you can see the outline of a loading-bay door into the upper part of the former barn — and the curious-looking ledges on the wall were dove-holes, providing extra protein from doves' eggs and an occasional bird for the pot. The front wall of the cottage is interesting — the wall beneath is of cob, and a single-brick skin was added around 1790 to protect the mud wall.

8 Laurelcroft and Frank Whittle

This imposing Victorian residence was built in the late 1800s, using the most modern materials of the time. Its spacious rooms, wide entrance hall, grand staircase and open upper landing all belong to a period of genteel elegance far removed from the farmhouses of the 1700s. Of particular note, Sir Frank Whittle (inventor of the jet engine) lived here briefly; the house deeds record the sale in 1948 to Air Commodore Sir Frank Whittle KBE, CB, FRS, and Lady Dorothy.

9 Hunt's House

Parts date from the mid-1500s, though most of the stonework is 17th century. Its name comes from the fact that the estate was entailed in the early 1700s to protect it from being split up by the heirs. The entail was broken in 1768, in a London court case, involving a fictional 'man of straw', who was referred to (by the legal custom of those times) as 'Hugh Hunt' in the court records. So the house was subsequently called in jest 'Hugh Hunt's House' — the name has nothing to do with hunting, despite the stables (which were only added in the 1840s)!

10 Essen Lane

One of the most picturesque parts of Kilsby, with its snug little thatched cottages and gravelled drives, this lane is named after the family of Joseph Essen, a Kilsby farmer who lived here in the early 1800s. The Essens are listed in the census returns from 1841 to 1881, in occupations varying from farming to running an early post office, to working as blacksmiths and butchers, but never living far from the lane that now bears their name.

11 Old Farmstead, Essen Lane

The first two old buildings on the left of Essen Lane are the elements of another farmstead of the 1600s. The small brick house was probably an old barn, converted to living space in the late 1700s (though the conversion left little trace of any former structure); the brickwork dates from around 1790. The neighbouring stone house, with an outbuilding on the road now used as a garage, was probably the farm cottage — its outbuilding is thought to have served as a 'dame school' in the early 1800s, where local children were taught a few basics for pennies.

12 The Haven, Essen Lane

The stone part of the Haven bears a 1773 dateplate; the remainder is of cob (mud and straw) and probably 100-200 years older. Old photographs show that the house was formerly split into two (possibly three) dwellings. During recent renovations, a sheet of paper was found in the internal plaster-work — a page from a boy's copybook (handwriting practice) dated 1819, showing that the Gibbins family lived there then. Later inhabitants included some Essens — they used the cob building at the end as a butcher's shop, where a butcher's wheel (for handling carcasses) can still be seen on the upper floor.

13 Old stone wall at Stoneleigh

From the Haven, follow the brick garden wall to the top of Essen Lane whereupon it butts up to a section built of stone — the remains of a former cottage that burned down in 1931 (from Middle St you can make out its filled-in doorway and window). The cottage was occupied by a shoemaker in the late 1800s; earlier, it was home to Shadrack Beach in about 1800 — a poor framework knitter who fell on hard times (with many other Kilsby folk) when the village weaving industry collapsed in the 1790s due to Industrial Revolution and Napoleonic Wars.

14 The Post Office

Number 11 Independent Street served as a shop and post office (see disused E11R letter box) until 2016. This building was originally part of another old farmstead — it also served in the 1800s as a bakery, with a baking oven in the outhouses. After WW1 the bootmaker 'Dick' Maloney set up his workshop there and his wife opened a small grocery shop in the front parlour. There were at least two earlier post offices in Kilsby before this: one in Middle Street in the brick cottage opposite The Elms and a later one (now demolished) on Main Road adjacent to the telephone box.

15 Independent Street and Chapel

Independent Street takes its name from the Chapel where Main Road meets Barby Road — one of Northamptonshire's earliest Independent chapels. By the time Oliver Cromwell died in 1658, the Church of England had been run by Puritans for about 80 years. Monarchy was restored in 1660, and Charles II's parliament ejected Puritans from the Church of England in 1662. Nonconformists then had to worship in secret, and the Independent movement formed; only in 1689 was an act passed allowing freedom of worship. Kilsby's Independents continued to meet in private houses until they raised money and acquired land to build a small timbered chapel in 1738. This became too small for the growing congregations, and the stone chapel was erected in 1760.

16 The Manse

Like Fairview in North Street, the Manse is a former barn, converted to a simple cottage (after Enclosure of the open fields in 1778). Here, as at Fairview, you can see the trace of a former loading-door high on the west end wall. This cottage stood on the plot purchased in the 1730s for the Independent Chapel, and was enlarged to serve as a manse (ie preacher's home); the imposing doorway is a conversion of an earlier window; the west section of the house was originally thatched, but was raised in height when the east end was added during the conversion to a manse.

17 The White House, Chapel Street

The White House was converted from a former house and smaller cottage in the late 1800s; early photographs show the thatched cottage as a separate dwelling. During the early 1900s, when the cavalry was stationed at Weedon, the White House was home to Major Forwood, who operated a 'remount depot' from the premises, buying untamed horses from Ireland and elsewhere, employing grooms to break them in, then selling the horses to Weedon Barracks. This trade petered out after WWI with the arrival of motorised transport, and Major Forwood adapted his business, supplying mounts to many local gentlemen who played polo at Rugby.

18 Malt Mill Cottage, Main Road

Dating from about 1650-1700, it is built of cob — a mixture of clay, straw and marl — a good example of the construction employed for many Kilsby houses during the period 1500-1800, with central hearth and doorway, and internal rooms separated by lightweight lath-and-plaster frames. The roof (formerly thatched) is carried on massive A-frame joists, and examination shows that these are reclaimed timbers from former Elizabethan timber-framed houses, suggesting that this house was built using timbers released from a neighbouring house being upgraded from timber-framed to stone construction, such as nearby Danetree House for example.

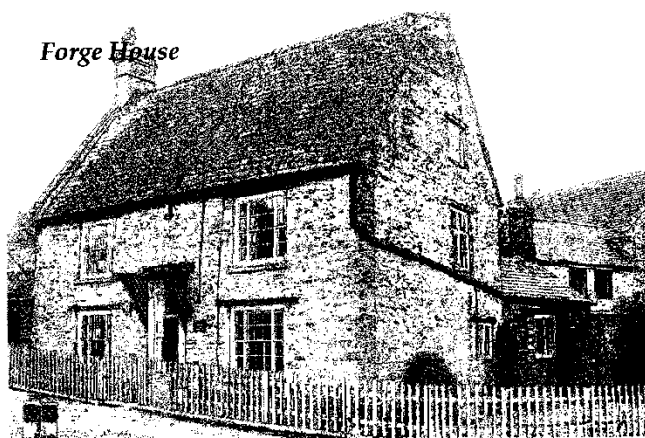
19 Malt Mill Green

Most medieval villages had a malt mill, provided by the lord — all the villagers used it to crush their barley, which they then fermented to make ale (everyone drank ale in those days, its weak alcohol killed harmful bacteria in the water). A horse, walking in a circle, turned the upper millstone via a shaft to which it was harnessed. A maltster is recorded in Kilsby as late as the census of 1841, but there is no record of the malt mill's location — it is not shown on the earliest detailed map of the village in 1847.

20 Moat Farm House, Daventry Road

Like many old Kilsby houses, it was originally a working farmstead — its barn is still in place (though recently converted to dwelling space) plus a range of Victorian brick outbuildings. The house was originally part cob and part stone-built, perhaps of cross-passage construction. The central sections of the present building date from the 1600s, though there are traces of earlier cruck-beams. The original house was probably a single dwelling of 3 two-story bays. By the mid-1800s, this house formed part of the estate of neighbouring Ashby St Ledgers.

Forge House



21 Forge House

Kilsby's last blacksmith was Albert Haddon. Haddon's smithy was a busy place — in addition to passing trade, he shod polo ponies for a landowner in Ashby and for the polo teams of the Count Jean de Madre. The count was a Frenchman who played polo in the 1900 Olympics and who stabled his horses at the Hunt House in the early 1900s. No doubt Haddon also shod horses broken in at Kilsby's two remount depots, White House and Kilsby House. There was a pond outside the forge, on the edge of Malt Mill Green — it must have been a pretty corner of the village.

22 Saddler's Cottage, Manor Road

Strategically located directly opposite the forge, at the corner of Main Road and Manor Road, the little brick cottage was formerly the home of Kilsby's saddler. Note the early bricks of which it is built, some of them with specially rounded corners — it is thought that these may have come from a brickyard down towards Banbury, for they pre-date the brickyards that were opened in Kilsby and Crick at the time when the canals and the railways were being built.

23 Manor Road, and the Moveable Manor

Kilsby village was church-owned in medieval times (gifted to help found Coventry priory by Earl Leofric around 1085AD, it was reassigned to Lincoln diocese around 1105AD). Therefore there was no resident Lord of the Manor in medieval times, and consequently no Manor House. At the Dissolution (1530s), many church properties passed into Crown hands, including Kilsby's. After renting them out for several decades, the Crown sold Kilsby's manorial rights in 1610 and thereafter the 'lordship' of Kilsby was bought and sold as a commercial venture. If the current owner happened to live in Kilsby, his house was called the 'Manor House' as a mere courtesy, and several houses in the village have had this title at various dates.

24 The Hollis house (1648), Manor Road

The stone house opposite the school, visible through an archway, bears a 1648 dateplate with the initials J.H.; it was probably the farmstead of the puritan Hollis family. John Hollis the elder was constable of Kilsby at the outbreak of Civil War in August 1642 — and it was probably on this very spot that a skirmish occurred in the early light of 9th August. A troop of Royalist cavalry under Captain John Smith rode out from Rugby to subdue Kilsby's villagers, who were staunch puritans; shots were fired, several Kilsby men were injured, and two men were killed. This hostile exchange was among the very first in the Civil War.

25 Kilsby Hall and the 1650 Prebend

Bordering Manor Road and Church Walk, Kilsby Hall is another fine old stone house. The present building is 18th century Georgian, but a document of 1650 compiled by Cromwell's surveyors describes the previous house that stood there. From the 1650 description, it was almost certainly the prebend house (prebend: a benefice, usually the income from a cathedral estate) erected in 1390 on the instructions of the Bishop of Lincoln, when he granted the income of Kilsby to one of his prebendaries (a cathedral official) to supplement his income.

26 Tricasa, former workmen's cottages

During construction of Kilsby tunnel in the 1830s, every barn and outhouse was occupied by navvies — the unlucky ones had to build makeshift turf shanties in the fields. In some houses up to sixteen navvies slept in each room, four beds per room with two navvies constantly in each, the two squads of eight men alternately changing places, in their beds as in their work. Tricasa, opposite the bottom of Church Walk, was converted from three former brick-built cottages (hence its name), probably constructed to accommodate foremen and other senior workmen.

27 Church Walk: pump, pound and pond

A pump stood at the bottom of Church Walk until the mid-1900s, fed from one of the many underground springs that seep out from Kilsby hill. At the top of Church Walk (where a substation is now located) there was formerly a large shallow pond, serving the village pound (where stray beasts were kept) and the large area of pasture adjacent to it (which was probably an overnight fold for sheep and cattle in transit along the drove roads). The pond and pound were lost, with much of the pasture, when Smart's Estate was built in the early 1930s.

28 St Faith's Church

We know there was a chapel here in 1106 and until about 1220 it was probably dedicated to St Denis. From then until about 1560 the church was re-dedicated to Saint Andrew; and until 1540 it was the centre of a style of worship including all the splendour, colour, light and pageantry of medieval Catholicism. It was probably soon after this period that the dedication of Kilsby's church was changed yet again, to St Faith — and this was done very specifically, due to the association between St Faith (Sainte Foi) and religious nonconformism, for by 1580 Kilsby village was strongly Puritan, and continued so until after the death of Oliver Cromwell in 1658.

St Faith's Church



29 George Row

This row of houses, just visible from the lane leading from the churchyard, is another heritage of the time when the railway came through Kilsby, creating a pressing need for accommodation for the hundreds of navvies and foremen. The bricks of which the houses are built were all made locally — and the original water supply was derived from rain-water tanks and wells, with the pure cool water bubbling up from the same springs that had led to the village being founded on this spot back in the early 900s.

30 Old School(s)

We have already seen an early 'Dame School' in Essen Lane. Walking from the churchyard to the George Hotel, you pass a tiny cottage on the left (2 Church Walk). This was Kilsby's first state school, built about 1839 as a 'National School' (the National Society for Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, formed in 1811, controlled over 17,000 National Schools by 1851, in rivalry to the British Schools started by the Quakers in 1808). A larger school was established in Kilsby after Foster's Education Act of 1870 (establishing elementary schools in areas with inadequate existing provision). These 'Board Schools' were the first local authority schools — Kilsby's was in The Old School, 7 Watling Street, on the far side of the George Hotel.

31 Daventry/Lutterworth Turnpike

The road from Daventry to Lutterworth (now the A361, A5 and A428) was created by Act of Parliament as a turnpike in the late 1700s. Before canals or railways, turnpike roads were the fastest form of transport available, and stagecoaches ran along them at regular times. Most Turnpike Acts were passed in the reigns of George II and George III, and coaching inns on a turnpike were usually named after the King — so if you see an inn called 'The George', you are on an old turnpike. Turnpikes were toll roads; there was a tollgate at the bottom of Kilsby hill, near the modern roundabout.

32 The George Hotel

The George Hotel was rebuilt around 1838, after the tunnel was finished; the new building replaced a previous stone thatched inn, and was built from the same bricks as were made for the tunnel, which came from a brickyard only about 100m away from the George, at the foot of Kilsby hill. The inn is named after King George III, in whose reign the Turnpike Act was passed which created the Daventry-Lutterworth turnpike (see above).

33 Bridle road to Crick

The bridle road to Crick probably dates back to the 1500s or even further. It is much wider than the typical bridle path, and would have been a drove route for sheep coming from Yelvertoft and Crick to market in Rugby (via Rugby Road and the washpit, see earlier). In olden times there was a gibbet in Kilsby 'on a bank overlooking the main road', and it is likely that this may have stood at the corner where the bridle road meets the A5 in the village.

34 Kilsby House

Now a nursing/residential home for the elderly, this was originally the elegant home of a wealthy member of the Cowley family (prominent in Kilsby since the 1400s, by the 1800s their wealth had extended to owning about one third of the houses in the village). It is thought that, around the end of the nineteenth century, the house also served briefly as a base for the village's second remount depot (as described for the White House earlier in this list).

35 The Hollies, Main Road

The oldest part is mid-1700s, but there would have been an earlier building. It was a farmstead, owned by the Foster family from the late 1600s until the Perkins of Welton inherited it in the late 1700s. The farm's best years were before Enclosure (1778), for afterwards it was poorly located with respect to its re-allocated land as were other village farmsteads (such as those in Essen Lane, North Street, and Hunt's House). By the 1830s the farm was struggling, and was hard to sell; it was eventually bought in 1840 by George Cowley, whose descendants rented it out before finally selling it in the 1950s.

36 Pytchley House, Main Road

This fine mid-Victorian house was originally a farmstead with ranges of the most modern outbuildings and fittings of that time. During the building of a small housing development in the early 2000s an enormous brick-built reservoir for watering livestock was uncovered. This ingenious piece of Victorian farm engineering, which still obtains ample clear water by seepage from the surrounding ground had lain unsuspected for 100 years beneath the flower beds!

37 Cedar Lodge, Main Road

Whilst planning and supervising construction of Kilsby rail tunnel, the famous engineer Robert Stephenson came to stay for a time in Kilsby. He lived in Cedar Lodge, on Main Road — in the garden may be seen a concrete model of the tunnel-mouth which he had built to guide his foremen; house and tunnel model are both Grade 2 listed. Within the house there is a rare example of an indoor well; and one room still contains twin safes, installed by Stephenson in the 1830s to hold documents, and wages for the workers.

