

A short history of Kilsby village

It's easy just to accept life in a village as "a place to eat and sleep, in pleasant surroundings, and in easy reach of countryside". But really, it's more than that – villages are quite different places from towns and cities. In towns and cities you are relatively anonymous, one among countless thousands, and it is all too easy to live right alongside people of whom you know nothing and to whom you are a total stranger.

Villages are quite different, because the community is much smaller, and as an individual you are more noticeable – and your neighbours are more noticeable too, and you soon begin to make their acquaintance as you meet them passing by. There are gathering places in the village, where you regularly see them – at one of the pubs, in church or chapel, outside the school meeting their children, in the recreation ground, at the tennis courts, in one of the village's organised groups or societies, or just taking a stroll.

In order to get the most out of life in a village, it helps enormously if you also put something of yourself into it – and by doing so, you become a part of a community, with friends and neighbours who know you and appreciate you. It's a good feeling, and one that town and city folk can never know ...

In order to appreciate the village to the full, it also helps to know how it came into being, and how it has grown slowly through the centuries. Every village is different, every village has its own character that has been formed through hundreds of years of slow growth and change.

The following sections will introduce you to Kilsby village and tell how its unique character has developed – from its first roots some 1100 years ago, through those slow centuries of growth, to the village as it is today.

The landscape in the prehistoric and Roman periods

Recent intensive archaeological work in and around the DIRFT logistics parks and the motorway networks has revealed a pattern of relatively dense occupation during the Iron Age, with a landscape in the area roughly bounded by Hillmorton/Kilsby/Crick featuring several communities arranged around a communal shallow central plain used for stock-rearing, with drove routes to outlying supplementary pastures. This arrangement gave way during the Roman period to a spread of small farms with characteristic rectangular field-patterns, though there is evidence that old drove-ways were preserved that respected lines of earlier pit alignments.



In the area to the south-east of Kilsby, a similar initial pattern of distributed farmsteads became further developed during the latter 3rd century to incorporate a number of villa-based estates (mainly on Boulder Clay uplands) with an emphasis on sheep-pasturing – however, to date no prominent villa based or similar high-status sites have been identified in the Kilsby-Crick area (although at least one site of a potential Roman period status dwelling immediately to the west of Crick is earmarked for future investigation by a leading group of local amateur archaeologists).

After the Romans – the significance of the Danelaw

Very little trace has yet been found of settlement activity in this area between the collapse of the Roman Empire and the Danish incursions of the late 800s.

During the early part of the 9th century, the Danes made increasing attacks on the English coastline, though they always returned to their own country in the winter. However, in 851 AD a party of Danish invaders wintered for the first time in England, choosing the Isle of Thanet in the Thames estuary for their encampment.

This was an important beachhead for the inevitable invasion force that followed, and by 873 the Danish forces had penetrated so far north and westward through the country as to have overrun the entire Mercia region. (Meanwhile, the Danes and other Scandinavian Northmen pressed southward into France, where they also settled and named Normandy.)

In the Warwickshire/Northamptonshire region of Mercia, there is no record of specific events until the Peace of Wedmore. This treaty, agreed in 878AD, established the boundary between the English territory and that of the Danes – the so-called Danelagh, or Danelaw.

The Danelaw boundary followed the course of the Thames, then the River Lea as far as Bedford; and from there it ran along the line of the Watling Street, coming dangerously close to the little existing Saxon villages of Crick, Watford, Welton and Barby. The Danish newcomers quickly set up fortified ‘burhs’ to act as bases for their armies – and place-names such as Peterborough, Wellingborough, Irthlingborough etc tell us quite clearly where these fortified boroughs were located. Each ‘burh’ was maintained by its own region, and the Lord of each area took allegiance from ‘socmen’ (free-men under his protection and jurisdiction) within his ‘soc’ or area of jurisdiction. Sometimes, the area of jurisdiction itself became known as a Soc – hence, for instance, the Soc (or Soke) of Peterborough, a regional title which has endured up to the present day.

With the establishment of the Danelaw boundary along the line of the Watling Street, the Crick/Barby area abruptly found itself in the borderlands.

At this period no settlement yet existed at Kilsby, and the lands that now comprise Barby parish (including Barby Nortoft) and Kilsby parish were all part of a much larger original Saxon parish of Barby that stretched up to the Watling Street. This had perhaps originally been territory controlled from a prominent Iron Age hilltop settlement at Barby Hill; but the existence of a Norman motte in the modern village of Barby suggests that the Iron Age focus on Barby Hill had relocated to the present site of Barby village by the Saxon period, in order to administer this large triangular wedge of land from a more central point, and that it had had time to grow and prosper well before the end of the Saxon period.

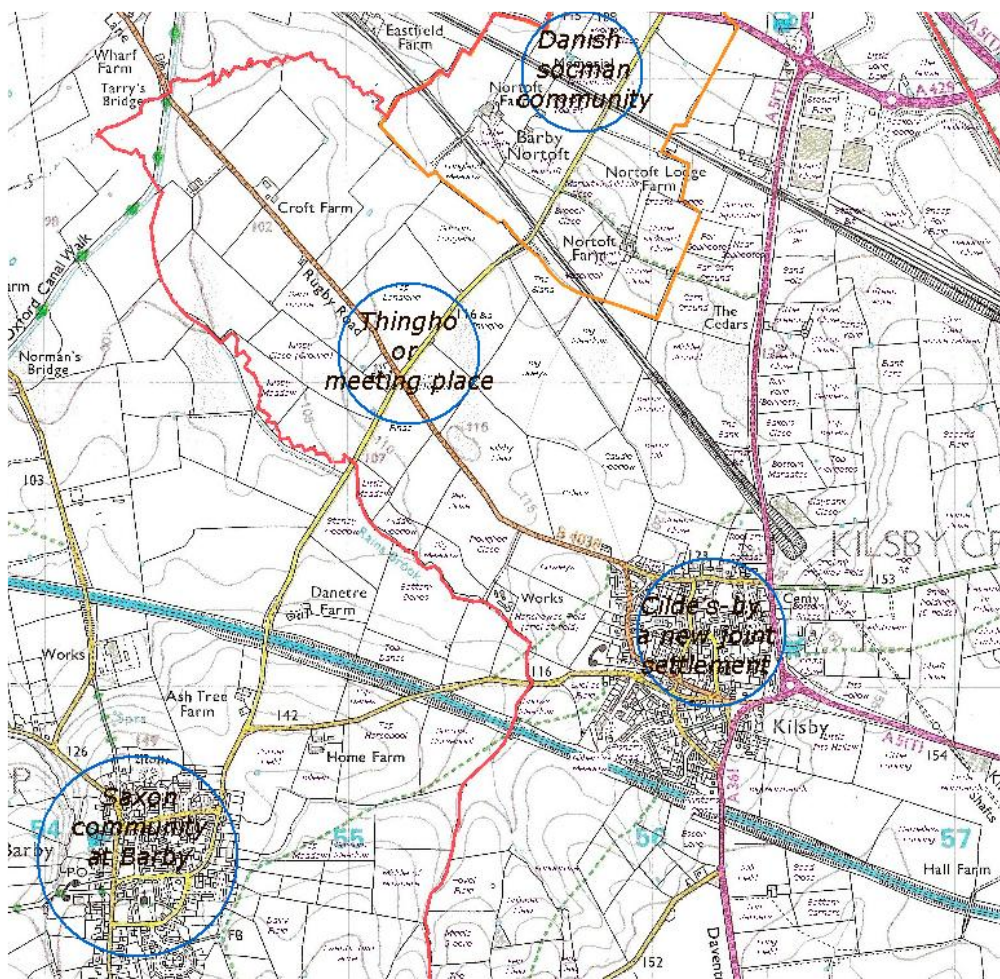
Cildesby – the earliest community at Kilsby: topographic and place-name evidence

By the early 900s, the Saxon community at Barby would have been coming to terms with their new Danish neighbours. There would have been attempts to build relationships across the new border – and Barby appears to have been the focus of one such attempt.

The name ‘Barby Nortoft’ literally translates as ‘the Danish settlement in the north of Barby parish’. Place-name and topographic evidence suggests that a Danish socman (freeman) approached the Saxon chief at Barby in the late 800s or early 900s and offered to occupy and cultivate that outlying land and render tribute to Barby for it – a gesture with mutual benefit to both parties.

Specific details in the landscape provide strong supportive evidence:

- Nortoft Lane, from Barby to Barby Nortoft, has no other reason for its existence than to link the two settlements – and it was already many centuries old in 1778AD, at Parliamentary Enclosure, for the Kilsby and Barby Enclosure Awards both refer to ‘the ancient lane to Nortoft’.
- Three fields at the crossroad of Kilsby Lane and Nortoft Lane are named ‘Thingho’, ‘Little Thingho’ and ‘Fingo’. In both old Scandinavian and old Germanic languages, this translates as ‘the assembly place’. The name ‘Thingho’ indicates that this low hill, at a point almost exactly midway between Barby and Nortoft, was established in the early 900s as a spot where matters of common interest to the two communities would be debated.
- With time the Danes at Nortoft became an accepted part of the wider community – and Nortoft evidently prospered, for place-name evidence implies that a strategic marriage eventually took place. At Domesday, when Kilsby is first mentioned in any document, its spelling ‘Chidesbi’ is probably a Norman scribe’s corruption of ‘Cildesby’ – which, in Old Saxon, means ‘the settlement of the Saxon lord’s son (cilde), who married a Danish girl’ (hence the Danish ‘-by’ ending rather than the Saxon ‘-ton’ or ‘-don’). The village was still spelled ‘Kildesby’ until the mid-1700s.
- Barby, Kilsby and Barby Nortoft all lie roughly equidistant from ‘Thingho’.
- Finally, there is further topographic and place-name evidence to suggest that this pattern of penetration of the Danelaw by Danish socmen was a feature of the development of the entire area between Rugby and Towcester during the early 900s; a whole series of such ‘Saxon-socman’ adjacent paired communities has been discovered by careful place-name analysis.



11th century: Leofric’s new monastery, and the diverted village tithes

A royal charter by Edward the Confessor (now known to be a forgery, but the facts recorded in it are not in doubt), states that in 1043 Leofric and Godgifu founded a Benedictine monastery at Coventry for twenty-four monks. (This eventually became Coventry Cathedral.)

To provide income to support this monastery, Leofric commissioned a set of forged charters illegally claiming that he owned the lordships of over twenty villages (including Kilsby), in order to divert the tithes of these villages to Coventry. The deception was uncovered around 1105AD, when the lordship of Kilsby was transferred back to the diocese of Lincoln, where it continued until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the late 1530s, at which point the

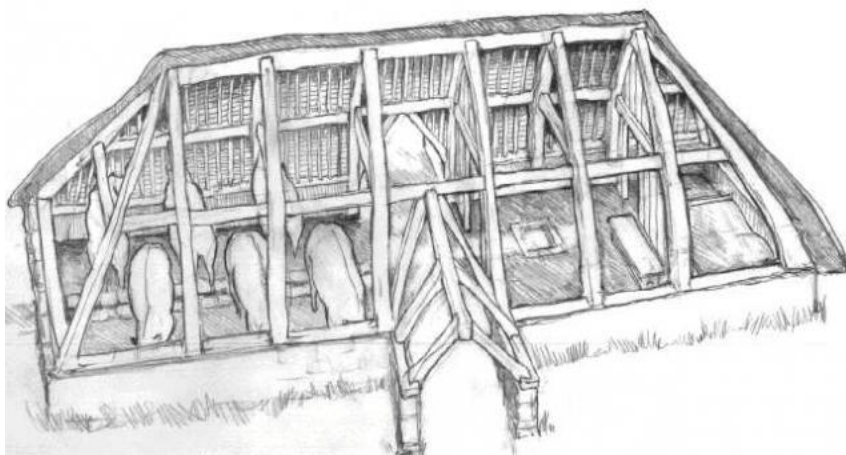
new diocese of Peterborough was carved out of the former see of Lincoln. (After 1105 the lordship of Kilsby manor was held by the bishop of Lincoln until the Dissolution, and afterwards passed to the Crown; it was leased to tenants by the Crown during the latter 1500s, and was eventually sold on the open market in the early 1600s to raise funds for James I's empty coffers.)

12th–13th century: the village boundary ditch and longhouses – a possible withy croft?

In 2016 a new housing development commenced on land alongside the A361 on the south side of Kilsby – and this work included a detailed archaeological excavation, which discovered a small group of rare 13th century buildings and a curious pattern of deep ditches.

The archaeological excavation established that by the 12th–13th centuries Kilsby had grown to a significant size. A deep defensive town boundary ditch in the northern part of the excavation site appears to have formed part of the southern limit of the community – it lies fully 400m south of the village church, the site of which also dates from the 12th–13th century.

The survival of the two groups of early buildings at this location was in part due to the low-lying and somewhat marshy nature of this patch of land, which made it unsuitable for subsequent cultivation. It is noticeable that 1940s overhead vertical photographs clearly show that the medieval ridge and furrow did not extend down the hillside into this area, but terminated at a headland on the far east side of the excavated area.



The buildings were typical of a medieval style known as 'longhouses' – single-storey buildings with stone foundations and mud-walls below a crude thatched roof. Built on a slight slope, it had a single room for the family at the upper end of the slope, and a lower room for cattle and pigs, all housed under a common roof with a wide passageway, open at both ends, dividing the two areas.

The excavated area also features a shallow stream that seeps northward across the land, running roughly parallel to the A361. Also, the north side of the excavated area is criss-crossed by a curious set of relatively deep drainage ditches, which appear to be arranged so as to drain into this stream.

Since at least the 1700s, this area has been known as 'Withycroft' and the shallow stream has been referred to as the Withybrook. The fact that medieval ridge and furrow cultivation did not extend into this area, coupled with the place-name evidence, suggests that one possibility is that this area may have functioned during the 12th–13th centuries for the cultivation of willow withies, to support manufacture of hurdles and baskets – and this may perhaps offer one explanation for at least a part of the function of the group of longhouse-style buildings recorded in the excavation report.

The longhouse sites appear, from the evidence of potsherds and other finds, to have gone out of use by the 1400s. This may perhaps have been in part a consequence of the spread of plague (the 'Black Death') from 1348 onward and its regular recurrence every few years.

Early 14th century: William de Kildesby; links with Lincoln and London

Born in Kilsby of peasant stock around 1295–1300, William de Kildesby was to rise to greatness, as close companion to king Edward III and bearer of both the Privy Seal and the Great Seal of England for a time.

William's initial rise was due entirely to a fortunate coincidence – the priests of Kilsby in the period 1200–1220 were related directly to the bishop of Lincoln during that period, John Dalderby. Bishop Dalderby was known as a strong promoter of education among deserving peasant boys – and the records show that due to his family ties, the bishop regularly spent as much time as possible in Kilsby during his itineraries in this area.

It is likely that this led to William (and his brother Robert) coming to the bishop's notice and being selected to receive education at Daventry Priory. It is a matter of record that by the mid-1320s William de Kildesby was working as a clerk at Lincoln to bishop Dalderby's successor bishop Henry Burghersh – and when Burghersh was promoted as chancellor to the young Edward III in 1327, William de Kildesby was chosen to accompany the bishop to London, where in due course he became a King's Clerk.

William soon made himself indispensable to Edward – and by a series of increasing preferments to church benefices within the Crown's gift, Edward set about providing William with the necessary funds to allow him to undertake royal business both at home and abroad. Edward used William as a fundraiser to support his wars in Scotland and France, and William was regularly involved in negotiating foreign loans for this purpose.

William's powers grew throughout the latter 1330s – he was routinely given authority to hold inquisitions upon state ministers and senior lords (which doubtless made him enemies in high places), to investigate and punish thefts and embezzlements of the king's property, to raise taxes throughout the kingdom and so on; he seemed to be everywhere – one minute in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the next in the Welsh marches, back in London, then off to Norwich to sail for Antwerp, at a continuing breakneck pace. By now he had his own extensive staff of clerks and body servants, in addition to bailiffs and local servants looking after his many possessions around the kingdom.

However, in 1340/1 William's ambitions suffered a fatal blow. Ordered by the king to prosecute John Stratford for his failure to raise essential funds for Edward's wars in France, William fell foul of those lords whose enmity he had already aroused, and the lords sided with Stratford. On the surface the affair appeared to blow over quickly; but though William's enemies might smile upon him still, as politicians have always done, he had now aroused serious opposition. Only thirty years removed from the peasant's hovel, he can have had few true friends at court.

Worse was to come, and in the same year. William sought to protect his family's future by securing the archbishopric of York, which the king had promised him; but it was granted at the last minute by the clergy of York to ambitious William Zouch, in what was doubtless a subtle piece of political manoeuvring. Zouch lost no time in getting himself ratified as dean and archbishop-elect, and set off for Avignon to receive the pope's seal on his promotion ... and here William and Robert de Kildesby made another fatal blunder. Avoiding the war-zones of France, Zouch travelled to Avignon via the Netherlands and Switzerland – where he was kidnapped near Geneva to prevent him from reaching Avignon. William de Kildesby's hand in this was widely suspected, and though he took care to avoid any traceable connection, the mud probably stuck.

With powerful enemies such as archbishops Zouch and Stratford and the lords in general, William's fall was inevitable, even with Edward's support. It is clear that Edward still valued him, and wished to retain his services – but there was little scope now for William as a politician; he made a short pilgrimage to the Holy Land to allow tempers at home to cool, then left the church and pursued a military career for the rest of his life. He served in many campaigns in England, Scotland and France, and raised his banner as a knight banneret alongside Edward's in battle. But a warrior's life holds more tangible dangers than those of a politician, and he died in France in late 1345 in the run-up to the battle of Crecy, probably of wounds sustained in conflict.

Late 14th century: after William; the prebendary house in Kilsby, and Penn-tiled church floor

As the birthplace of William and Robert de Kildesby (and of Walter and Ralph de Kildesby, who also enjoyed some prominence in the mid-1300s), and as the former seat of priests with family connections to the bishop of Lincoln, Kilsby's status during the mid to late 1300s may have rivalled or even exceeded that of Daventry; and the reflected glow of status probably persisted until the end of the century.

Kilsby was converted into a prebendary of Lincoln Cathedral in 1380AD, to allow the bishop to add Kilsby's main tithes to the stipend of his Precentor. The first Vicar of Kilsby, William Sherman, was appointed in 1386 but had to wait to take possession of the living until 1390, when 27.5 acres of arable glebe were set aside for the vicar, plus the 'small tithes'. A vicarage house was built at the south-east of the churchyard, plus a prebendal house for the prebend's duty visits – probably in the grounds of the present Kilsby Hall alongside Church Walk. A glebe terrier of 1650 by Cromwell's Commissioners describes: *'All that Prebend howse in Kildesbye built of rough Stone and covered with Thatch, wherein is a hall, Kitchin, fowre Chambers, being five baies of building; There is a barne*

and stables nyne baies with two gardenes and grasse Yarde, and Two fold yardes.' So the prebend house built in 1390AD was still habitable in 1650AD, and this description tallies with the architectural layout typically adopted in the late fourteenth century.

Archaeological investigations in Kilsby church during the renovation of pews and floorboards in 2006 revealed remnants of a rare and prestigious Penn-tiled floor, dated to the 1390s – and this was probably provided by the prebend of Lincoln as a gift to the village whose tithes helped to pay his keep.

It seems very likely that these 'status' structures erected in Kilsby in the late 1300s were a long-term consequence of the prestige brought to the village by William de Kildesby and his relations.

16th–17th centuries: Puritanism, Kilsby's rise to prominence as a weaving centre, drove routes

The sheep-based economy that had spread across this area during the 1400s, in the wake of the depredations of plague, reached its peak in the 1500s before declining gradually again during the 1600s. The 1500s were also a time of religious fervour, with new protestant ideas arriving from the continent, and upheaval of the medieval Roman Catholic church in England brought about in essence by Henry VIII's desire for a male heir. Finally, the 1500s were a time of sudden explosive population increase, due largely to the fall in infant mortality that resulted from changes in the layout of the dwellings of ordinary folk – notably, the introduction of smoke-hoods and chimneys which radically reduced the inhalation of smoke-borne carcinogens that had been an inescapable feature of the medieval hall-house with its central hearth and no chimney to allow the smoke to escape.

These factors all had their effect on Kilsby during this period:

- Sheep drove routes criss-crossed this area, and some important routes passed through Kilsby. A major sheep-logistics centre was created in the early 1600s at the nearby site of the deserted medieval settlement of Onley, to which many of the local drove-routes headed.
- During the late 1500s and early 1600s, Kilsby briefly flourished as a centre of early Puritanism – one of only three such centres in Northamptonshire. (This would later form the basis, following the death of Cromwell and collapse of the Protectorate, and the subsequent ejection of Puritans from church and public offices in 1662, for the establishment in Kilsby in 1663 of one of Northamptonshire's earliest Independent Chapels.)
- As population grew, so land gradually became scarce once again – and this led to the emergence of specialisation in the social structure. Whereas during the 1400s every common man had been a husbandman tilling a few acres, the 1500s and 1600s saw a steady emergence of niche-occupations and trades among men who, due to the increase in population and consequent reduction in size of inherited land-holdings, no longer had enough land to be able to support a family solely by farming. Part-time blacksmiths, tailors, shepherds, soap-boilers and a host of new trades made their appearance in the social structure of the village. Kilsby's location at the heart of an area specialising in sheep-pasturing led to the village becoming a centre for a domestic weaving industry, which flourished during the 1600s and 1700s – there may have been as many as 40–50 weavers active in the village during this period, working small looms in sheds and workshops built on to their houses.

18th century: decline of sheep-based affluence, followed by Enclosure/Industrial Rev./War

The sheep-pasturing industry that had flourished during the late medieval period steadily declined during the 1600s (partly due to rising population and a returning demand for arable land, partly due to the fact that medieval pasture enclosures had actually caused the quality of English wool to deteriorate significantly, as a consequence of which the export market for English wool declined steadily from the late 1500s onward), and by the early 1700s its heyday was over.

The cottage-based weaving industry in west Northamptonshire villages remained strong for a while, but it was dealt a body-blow by the innovations of the Industrial Revolution, and by the 1790s dozens of weavers in Kilsby were literally starving to death, their only source of income gone. At exactly the same time, Parliamentary

Enclosure was driving a further wedge between wealthy and poor, and Napoleonic War created high-inflation conditions and conscripted tens of thousands of labourers away from the land.

The result was inevitable – years of relative poverty for the majority, a lengthy farming depression in the early 1800s, and an increasing struggle to maintain the village as a self-reliant economic unit. There is evidence that village populations declined steadily during the late 1700s and early 1800s.

19th century: the successive effects of turnpikes, canals and railways

The successive impact of three new systems of transport – improved turnpike roads in the early 1700s, canals in the late 1700s and railways in the mid-1800s – had significant effects on the development of Kilsby. Although Kilsby was untouched by the canal network (which benefited nearby Crick and Barby), the Daventry-Lutterworth turnpike road through Kilsby (along the A361 and A5) significantly influenced the development of shops and inns along the eastern edge of the village.

But by far the most significant factor was the coming of the railway in the 1830s, and the construction of the Kilsby Railway Tunnel, which saw the village occupied by an army of 1100 construction workers and countless items of heavy steam-powered machinery for a period of several years. Lodging-houses and inns flourished, and the village once again became a hive of activity – albeit only briefly, for the railway workers eventually moved on when the tunnel was completed, and Kilsby's population then continued to decline slowly during the later 1800s.

20th century: re-growth as a commuter community thanks to rail and motorway links

Although the early 20th century saw Kilsby's population dwindle to a mere 500 (quite apart from the huge effect of two world wars, many former farm labourers were tempted away during this period to work in the new industrial factories in Rugby), the growth of affordable motor transport and construction of new road networks during the mid-1900s, together with major rail links from Rugby, has led Kilsby's population to increase steadily over the last 60 years, and it now functions essentially as a commuter community.

However, Kilsby still preserves its unique village identity – and it is still a place where you can know your neighbours and be known by them, make your own presence felt, and feel yourself to be part of a true community.

Welcome to Kilsby!