

John Bunyan 1628-1688



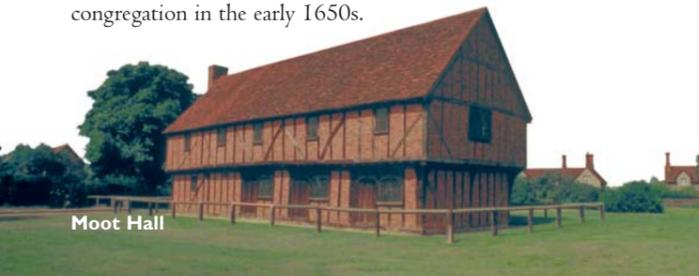
John Bunyan rose from humble origins to become one of the world's most widely read Christian writers. He lived most of his life in and around the town of Bedford. Although a prolific writer in his later years, he is best known for his spiritual allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which was an immediate success on

publication in 1678 and has since become a world classic, having been translated into over 200 languages.

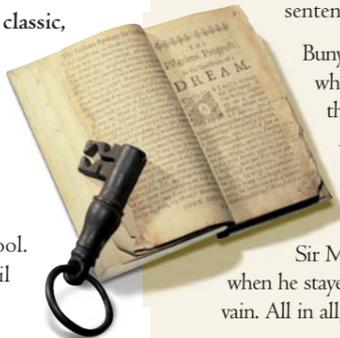
Bunyan was born in 1628, in the parish of Elstow, which lies a mile to the south of Bedford. He was the son of a tinker and as a child he travelled the district helping his father and learning the trade. He had a happy childhood, playing tip-cat on the village green and learning to read and write at the local school. His youth, however, was not so trouble free. The Civil War broke out and Bunyan, still in his teens, joined the Parliamentary forces against King Charles I.

On returning to Elstow some two years later, Bunyan resumed his work as a tinker. He married a local woman who bore him four children, one of them a blind girl. Her disability was probably one of the factors that caused Bunyan to reflect seriously upon his life for the first time and to question the value of his favourite pastimes of bell-ringing, dancing and playing tip-cat. Bunyan had few equals in 'cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God', and by his own account he now became aware of a need to find a deeper purpose.

Bunyan found the answer he was looking for in a small, newly formed dissenting congregation that met at St John's Church, to the south of the river in Bedford. He became friendly with the pastor, John Gifford, and joined the congregation in the early 1650s.



Moot Hall



In 1660, a year after the death of Bunyan's wife, Cromwell's Protectorate came to an end and the monarchy was restored. In the belief that national unity could only be achieved through religious uniformity, the state attempted to restrain the developing Independent Congregations by forbidding their preaching. Bunyan, by now a respected speaker, refused to be silenced and was arrested in the hamlet of Samsell. He was held at nearby Harlington Manor overnight and then appeared before the local justices in Bedford, where he was sentenced to remain in prison until he could conform.

Bunyan was 32 when he was taken to the County Gaol, which then stood on the corner of Silver Street and the High Street, less than five minutes from his home.

At first it was thought the sentence would last a few weeks. However, months went by and no release was forthcoming. His second wife Elizabeth tried to get his case reopened by pleading with Sir Matthew Hale, the Lord Chief Justice of England, when he stayed at the Swan Chambers in Bedford, but it was in vain. All in all, Bunyan spent the next 12 years in prison.

Most of his time was spent writing. He completed several books, including his autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, but more importantly, it was while he was in gaol that he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*.



The Abbey Church of St Helena and St Mary

In 1672, King Charles II issued the Declaration of Religious Indulgence and Bunyan, along with other Church offenders, was set at liberty. He was immediately appointed pastor of the Independent Congregation, which later bought a barn and orchard in Mill Street as their place of meeting. Bunyan quickly re-established himself as a preacher and was fully occupied as leader of the church. However, his freedom was short lived.

In 1673, the King was forced to withdraw his Declaration, and on an ecclesiastic technicality Bunyan returned to prison. It seems certain that he went back to the County Gaol, although it has been traditionally held that Bunyan served his second, shorter sentence in the Town Gaol on Town Bridge. He was eventually released from prison in June 1677, and on 18th February 1678 he published *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Bunyan lived for a further ten years. In that time he wrote *The Life and Death of Mr Badman* and *The Holy War* alongside a further 40 books. He travelled throughout Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Surrey and London teaching and preaching his gospel.

Bunyan died in August 1688 after contracting pneumonia while on a visit to London. He is buried in a vault in Bunhill Fields, City Road, London.

Stevington

The medieval cross in Stevington, five miles north of Bedford, is believed to have inspired the sequence in *The Pilgrim's Progress* where Christian came to 'a place somewhat ascending' and on seeing 'the Cross his burden (of sin), loosed from off his shoulders and began to tumble, and so continued to do so, until it fell within the mouth of the sepulchre'. Now, in Stevington, the road from the Cross drops quite steeply down towards the Church beneath which the Holy Well is to be found, hewn out of the rock on which the church itself was built. It appears even to this day, like a dark sepulchral image and it is easy to imagine the symbolism of Christ's death on the Cross and burial in the tomb as coming together in this one village. Christian then drinks from the Spring at the bottom of the hill and is refreshed, highly symbolic of the Water of Life about which he wrote at length. The Holy Well at Stevington is a spring of water which has never been to known to dry up and is pure crystal water, even today. Cross, sepulchre and spring; here are three images within one village.



John Bunyan: his life in Elstow

A Bunyan's Birthplace

Bunyan was born in a cottage at the far end of Elstow parish, close to the hamlet of Harrowden, in 1628. The cottage no longer stands, but its site is marked by a stone, erected in 1951, Festival of Britain year. Prior to John's birth, the Bunyan family had lived in the area for over 400 years.

B Elstow Abbey

The Abbey Church of St Helena and St Mary, restored in 1880, is the truncated remnant of a once larger monastic church founded in 1078. Overlooking Elstow Green and Moot Hall, the church has two stain-glass windows connected with Bunyan, one of them depicts scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the other *The Holy War*. It contains the Communion Table used when Bunyan attended the church, and the font where he was christened on 30 November 1628. The door and wicket gate which figure in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, formerly at the church's northern entrance, can also be seen. Bunyan's mother, father and sister are buried in the graveyard.

C Elstow Green

The stump of a cross, damaged during the Reformation, marks the site on Elstow Green where the Annual May Fair used to be held. It was also on the green that Bunyan danced and joined in games of tip-cat; a form of rounders played with a stick rather than a ball.

D Moot Hall

Elstow Moot Hall (or Green House as it was formerly known) was built in the late 15th century as a market-house in connection with the village fairs. It was used for storing the stalls and other equipment and as a place for hearing disputes arising from the fairs. In the 19th century the upper room was used both as a school and a place of worship. Restored by Bedfordshire County Council, Moot Hall is now a museum illustrating 17th century English life and tradition.

It is open April-September. There is a nominal admission charge. For further details or party bookings please contact (01234) 266889.

E Elstow Cottages

A row of Tudor cottages has been restored to look as it did in Bunyan's time. The cottages were restored by Bedfordshire County Council.

For further information

Tourist Information Centre

St Paul's Square, Bedford MK40 1SL

Tel : 01234 215226

Fax : 01234 217932

Email : touristinfo@bedford.gov.uk

Website : www.bedford.gov.uk/tourism

Cecil Higgins Art Gallery

Castle Lane, Bedford MK40 3RP

Tel : 01234 211222

Fax : 01234 327149

Email : chag@bedford.gov.uk

Bedford Museum

Castle Lane, Bedford MK40 3XD

Tel : 01234 353323

Fax : 01234 273401

Email : bmuseum@bedford.gov.uk

Website : www.bedfordmuseum.org

John Bunyan Museum

The Church Office

Bunyan Meeting Free Church

Mill Street, Bedford MK40 3EU

Email : bmeeting@dialstart.net

Website : www.bunyanmeeting.com

Tel/Fax : 01234 213722

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BEDFORD

John Bunyan



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Trace the footsteps of one of the world's most widely read spiritual writers



John Bunyan : his life in Bedford

1 St John's Rectory

St John's Rectory in St John's Street is 300 yards south of the river. The Rectory appears in *The Pilgrim's Progress* as the House of the Interpreter where Christian stopped for guidance. "Then Christian went on till he came at the House of the Interpreter... 'Sir' said Christian, 'I was told that if I called here you would show me excellent things, such as be a help to me on my journey'".

The Rectory has one room relating to the times of Bunyan open to the public. Visit by arrangement via Bedfordshire St. John's Ambulance (01234) 216200.

2 Baptism Pool

Shortly after his conversion and prior to his first imprisonment, Bunyan was baptised by John Gifford in a little backwater that runs off the River Great Ouse. Bunyan was not a strong denominationalist, preferring the title "Christian" above all other, and it is known that while Minister of the congregation he resisted those who wanted to take a rigid line on the question.

The actual site is on the south bank of the river between Duck Mill Lane car park and the weir bridge.

3 Town Gaol

It used to be thought that Bunyan's second and shorter imprisonment in 1676 was served in the Town Gaol, which was then a part of the main structure over the river. There is a plaque to that effect on the present bridge built in 1813. Evidence, however, supports the view that Bunyan served both of his sentences in the County Gaol.

Bunyan must have often stood by the Town Bridge looking across the river towards St John's Church; there is clear reference to this scene in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. "They went on their way to a pleasant river... on either side of the river was a meadow, curiously beautified with lilies, and it was green all the way along."

A model of the Town Gaol can be seen in the Bunyan Museum in Mill Street.

4 Swan Hotel

In the 17th century, the Swan Hotel had chambers set aside for judges for when the County Assizes were being held in the town. In August 1661, Bunyan's second wife, Elizabeth, succeeded in getting access to the Swan Chambers to plead for her husband, whose original prison sentence of three months had already extended to six months.

The presiding judge, Matthew Hale, Lord Chief Justice of England, was sympathetic to Elizabeth's request that Bunyan should be called to state his own case; however, the other judges, Chester and Twisden, were hostile and rude, and finally overruled Hale.

The staircase now in use in the Swan Hotel originally came from Houghton House* in Ampthill, reputedly the inspiration for 'House Beautiful' in *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

5 Bunyan's Statue

The bronze statue of Bunyan that stands on St Peter's Green at the northern end of the High Street was presented to the Town in 1874 by Hastings, Duke of Bedford. The nine feet tall figure, weighing over three tonnes, was sculptured by Sir J E Boehm. Around the pedestal are three bronze panels illustrating different scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

An extract from *The Pilgrim's Progress* was read by the Rev. Anthony Burnham at the Queen Mother's funeral service in April 2002, "As I see myself now at the end of my journey..."

*Houghton House an English Heritage site about 7 miles south of Bedford near Ampthill on the B530 is thought by many to have been Bunyan's inspiration for 'House Beautiful' in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the hill approaching it 'Hill Difficultly'.

6 Chapel of Herne

In January 1661, seven or eight weeks after his arrest for preaching in Samsell, Bunyan was brought before the Magistrates at the Bedford Quarter Sessions, which were then held in an old building known as the Chapel of Herne. The Town Hall office block stands on the site of the old Chapel. The charge against him was that he had "devilishly and perniciously abstained from attending Church service". Bunyan retorted "if I were out of prison today, I would preach the gospel again tomorrow, by the help of God".

8 Bunyan's Home

A plaque on Number 17, St Cuthbert's Street marks the site of the cottage Bunyan and his family moved to in 1655. John Gifford, the Rector of St John's Church died in the same year and Bunyan, now a member of the congregation and a gifted speaker, was called upon to preach more often.

When the cottage was demolished in 1838, Bunyan's Deed of Gift was discovered concealed behind a brick in the chimney corner. Fearing further persecution and the possible seizure of his possessions, following the accession of James II, Bunyan had drawn up the Deed of Gift in 1685, and left his entire estate, which amounted to very little, to his wife Elizabeth.

In actual fact Bunyan was not arrested again, therefore the Deed was not needed. The document is now on display in the John Bunyan Museum.

9 Bedford Central Library

A modern mural sculpture depicting scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress* can be seen in the foyer of the library. In the Local Studies Department there are an extensive number of books relating to Bunyan, including the Frank Mott Harrison and George Offer Collections.

10 Bedford Museum

In Castle Lane, the Museum houses displays of specimens relating to the history and natural history of the Bedford area.

It is open from 11am to 5pm Tuesdays to Saturdays, and from 2pm to 5pm on Sundays and Bank Holidays. Admission charge and concessions apply, and special arrangements can be made for parties. Telephone (01234) 353323.

11 The Cecil Higgins Art Gallery

The gallery in Castle Lane has a needle panel entitled "Bunyan's Dream" on permanent display. The panel was designed by Edward Bawden CBE RA (1903-1989) in 1977, to celebrate the Tercentenary of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Members of the Bedfordshire Music and Arts Club embroidered the panel in 1978-9 and it consists of 80 panels.

The Gallery is open from 11am to 5pm Tuesdays to Saturdays and from 2pm to 5pm on Sundays and Bank Holidays (Last admissions 4.45pm). Conducted tours for groups can be arranged by appointment. Catering for parties can be booked in advance. Admission is £2.10, concessions and children free. Telephone (01234) 211222.

12 Bunyan Meeting Free Church and John Bunyan Museum

One of Bunyan's first duties, on being elected Pastor of the Independent Congregation after his release from the County Gaol, was to find a permanent meeting place for his church. In 1672, Bunyan bought a barn and orchard in Mill Street for the sum of £50, which was subsequently converted into a place of meeting. In 1707, it was replaced by a Meeting House, and in 1850 the present church was erected.

The bronze doors at the entrance to the church, are the work of Frederick Thrupp, and were presented to Bunyan Meeting by Hastings, Duke of Bedford in 1876. The doors' ten panels depict scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and starting from the bottom left-hand corner can be read left to right. The church has fine examples of 20th & 21st century stained glass depicting scenes for the *The Pilgrim's Progress* including John Bunyan in gaol one of the most recognised pieces of stained glass in the world'.

The John Bunyan Museum was opened in 1998. Exhibits include artefacts associated with his life and a display illustrating scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Bunyan Meeting Free Church is open from 10am to 4pm Tuesdays to Saturdays. Sunday services are held at 11am and 6.30pm. Telephone (01234) 213722.

Museum is open from 11am to 4pm Tuesdays to Saturdays from March to the end of October. Telephone (01234) 213722.

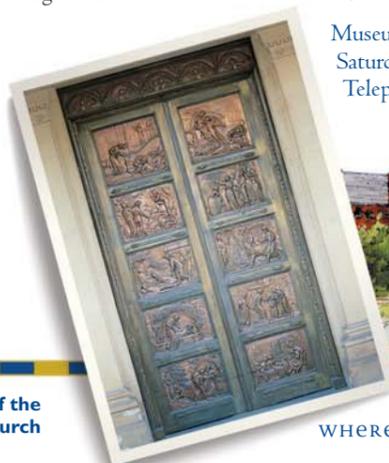


7 County Gaol

A plaque in the pavement at the junction of High Street and Silver Street marks the corner where the County Gaol stood until it was demolished in 1801. It is generally believed that Bunyan served both of his prison sentences here, from 1660 to 1672 and from 1676 to 1677. It was during the first of these that he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

The gaol was dirty and overcrowded, but some privileges were allowed. As a result Bunyan received daily visits from his daughter Mary, who brought him food and soup for his supper. The soup jug she carried, and other relics associated with the County Gaol are part of the collection that can be seen in the John Bunyan Museum in Mill Street.

The bronze doors of the Bunyan Meeting Free Church



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