

The coming of the railway in 1856 changed the isolated parish forever. Not only would Witham residents be able to travel to nearby Bruton and Frome but there was an influx of new people and jobs working on the line and at the station. The station closed in 1966, when it became a victim of the Beeching axe.



Witham Friary railway station c. 1920

Farming and forestry have always been the main industries but evidence exists that an iron industry flourished here from the Middle Ages. The manufacture of silk took place in cottages near The Yard and bricks were made at Upper Holt. Dairy farming has been, and still is, the main industry in this peaceful village. The weekly agricultural wage was only eight shillings a week by the middle of the nineteenth century. Life for the villagers was hard but probably not as hard as it was for people living in towns and cities.

An important part of village life was the village Friendly Society which still exists today, one of very few to survive in Somerset. In Victorian times villagers paid in 1s 3d (7p) per month and received sick pay of 7s per week for three months and 3s 6d for a further three months. £3 was paid out on the death of a member. The club is thought to be over 300 years old.

Many of the residents of Witham were affected by the decision of the Duke of Somerset to sell off his estate owing to death duties. The auctions took place in three separate lots in 1951, 1954 and 1955 when in addition to the Seymour Arms, most of the village cottages and many of the farms were sold off.

In the twenty-first century the village continues to thrive with many organisations hosting village events making it a popular destination for young families, with the church, the pub and the village hall all contributing to community life.

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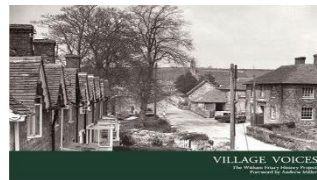
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*Village Voices* 2015 Witham Books

### 'Village Voices'



Arms or email [withamhistory@gmail.com](mailto:withamhistory@gmail.com)

To purchase a copy of *Village Voices*, a book of reminiscences by residents, please visit the Seymour

### Written and published by the Witham Friary History Society

For more information and to view our programme of events, visit [www.withamfriaryhistory.com](http://www.withamfriaryhistory.com)

## Witham Friary A short history of the village



Witham Friary postcard c. 1914

The name Witham Friary probably came from the Anglo-Saxon, meaning homestead of Witta and a corruption of the French word Frerie meaning brotherhood, referring to the Carthusian lay brothers who served the monastery. The village is mentioned in the Domesday Book as supporting twenty-three people. An archaeological dig in 1985 discovered a Neolithic axe and a Roman road. In 2010, a metal detectorist, Dave Crisp, unearthed a large pottery vessel containing 52,503 Roman coins. It was one of the biggest Roman coin hoards ever found in Britain.

In the time of Henry II (1133-1189), the first Carthusian Priory was established here in an attempt by Henry to appease the church for the murder of Thomas Becket. There were nine such monasteries or charterhouses in England, and one of the earliest priors at Witham was Hugh, later to become Saint Hugh and arguably one of the greatest figures of his time. Sadly, the priory buildings did not survive the dissolution of the monasteries but the church, originally the laybrothers' chapel, continues as the parish church. The thirteenth

century dovecote, opposite the church, is also associated with the priory. This building was once used as a village reading room and the village lock up. In 1903 the original use became apparent after the Duke of Somerset commissioned a restoration of the building and more than 1000 pigeonholes were discovered.



*St Hugh is often depicted with his loyal pet swan.*

The church is grade one listed and dates back to the time of the monastery and possibly before. It was altered in a transitional style in 1828, and then rebuilt and extended in 1875 by William White. It is the only Carthusian building to be in regular public use today.

After the dissolution of Witham Priory in 1539, the lands and privileges were granted to Ralph Hopton, a servant of Thomas Cromwell. He later became Henry VIII's knight marshal. Witham was a 'peculiar' over which the bishop had no authority, allowing Hopton to appoint and dismiss curates and even to prove the wills of parishioners at a local court. Witham passed down through the family, eventually to another Ralph Hopton who was an experienced soldier and Member of Parliament, firstly for Shaftesbury and later Bath and then Wells. He became a trusted adviser to Charles I and was

a leading Royalist general during the Civil War, commanding the King's Army in the West. Following a brutal campaign, he was appointed Lieutenant Governor of Bristol but after the defeat of the Royalist forces in 1646 he followed the future King Charles II into exile. He died in Bruges, Belgium, in 1652. After the Restoration in 1660 he was buried in Witham Friary parish church. Unfortunately, the exact position is not known.

The next owners, the Wyndhams turned the property into a stately mansion in the Palladian style. The property was bought in 1762 by Alderman William Beckford, the Lord Mayor of London whose wealth largely came from his 13 slave plantations in Jamaica. Beckford had a new house designed but he died before it was completed. It was left to his son, another William Beckford whose properties included Fonthill Manor and Beckford's Tower. William couldn't afford to complete it resulting in the building being dismantled and the materials sold.

Heading north up the hill out of the village, look out into the field on the left opposite Witham House, the old Vicarage. With a sprouting mop from a short but huge stubby trunk this is probably Witham's oldest living tree, a veteran oak c. 600-700 years old. In its final years it is gracefully declining, not helped, over the years, by youngsters having fires in its hollow interior! Closer to the road is a younger one c. 500-600 years old in full majesty, although difficult to age due to the huge burr growths on the trunk. These are some of the oldest remnants of the original Selwood Forest.

One of the most interesting eighteenth century buildings was the Red Lion Inn which stood near the Church and Village Hall. Forming three sides of a square it contained the village prison, the club house, a dairy and taproom together with a courtyard paved with flagstones where the villagers used to dance. The old Inn was partly demolished in 1867 when the building of the Seymour Arms was completed to provide railway travellers with food and accommodation. It is flourishing today run by the descendants of William Salvidge who took over the Seymour Arms in 1889. Now grade 2 listed, its interior has remained largely unchanged and is recognised in CAMRA's "Britain's Best Real Heritage Pubs".

The village school was built in 1838 by the Duke of Somerset. Previously a little education was provided in conjunction with the Sunday school but in 1861 the parish agreed to levy an educational rate and to provide a school master or mistress who would also play the organ in the church. The school closed in 1965 but the building still plays an important part in village life as the village hall.



*Witham Friary School, 1964.*