

'No other holiday resort like it'

How Bratton became an early 20th century health and pleasure destination.

At the conclusion of the 19th century Bratton's population had shrunk by half in a hundred years and now numbered 560. The last of the four mills, that once drew power from the Stradbrook, had closed. The village had no gas or electricity supply, no mains water, no street lighting, telephone or railway links. And yet, within the first decade of the 20th century, Bratton would become a pleasure and health destination, described in the *Warminster and Westbury Journal* as *"A fine place to spend a holiday at"*.

A short walk away, Edington's Monastery Gardens had been reported by the *Wiltshire Times and Trowbridge Advertiser* to be a *"famous and ever-popular"* destination during the *"Outing Season"* for over 20 years. It held two attractions, the first being its boating lake where *"Many a boy and girl has experienced the delight of being afloat for the first time on the old monk's fish pond"*. It was suggested that the *"Old lake has echoed to the merry laughter of thousands of holiday makers"*. There were also the tea gardens *"Where tea and home-made bread and butter, each slice of which was half a yard long, were served"*.



While the Edington and Bratton railway station opening in 1900 had made the destination more accessible, in 1906 the Potter family chose to close the Monastery Gardens to visitors. At that point Bratton became the nearest public resort for all those day-trippers. Local newspapers informed those unfamiliar with this *"secluded and charming"* location that *"Bratton is a lovely village. It has been dropped down anywhere in the most unsuitable places and people have built on the sides of the hill or down in the dips of the valley quite carelessly and indiscriminately. But the situation is a bracing and healthy one, and the sort of ordered disorder of the houses makes it all the more charming. This is being 'discovered' more every day, and is becoming quite a fashionable holiday place, more especially since the closing of the Monastery Gardens at Edington"*.

At this time Wednesday was early closing day for shops, and it was reported that visitors from Warminster, Heytesbury, Frome, Beckington, Southwick, Trowbridge, Bradford on Avon, Box, Melksham and Devizes took full advantage of Bratton being within easy reach by road or rail to spend their afternoons in and around the village. The *Warminster and Westbury Journal* revealed that, once reached, Bratton was found to be *"charmingly isolated"*, being somehow *"in Wiltshire, and..... not of it"*.

The landscape was enthusiastically described in *The Wiltshire Times* as “*Beauty unsurpassed*”, “*One of the most lovely spots in Wiltshire*” and “*A pleasanter place than the village of Bratton to make the objective of a ramble or cycle ride on a fine Summer evening can hardly be imagined*”. Attention was drawn to the fine prospects afforded by Picket Hill and Luccombe's vast circular basin amphitheatre. Writers enthusiastically announced that “*The hills and downs are at this season of the year simply delightful, with a variety of formation and colour*”. It was reported that hundreds of visitors of all ages were to be seen on the surrounding hills, with many picnicking on the downs, while the roads were dotted with every kind of innumerable conveyances.

Some came for an afternoon. Some came for a day trip. Some came to stay overnight. Some were tempted to find the time to linger longer. Many chose to camp on the hills, spending a “*novel and healthy holiday under canvas*”. One camper recalled how “*Several of us sat outside our tents watching the moon rise, later to flood the valley beneath us with such brilliant light that we could see the rabbits enter and leave their warrens in the hillside*”. Then each morning “*We used to throw open the flaps of our tent and see the mist rising over the valley, and hear the Moorhens calling in the reeds by the brook*”.

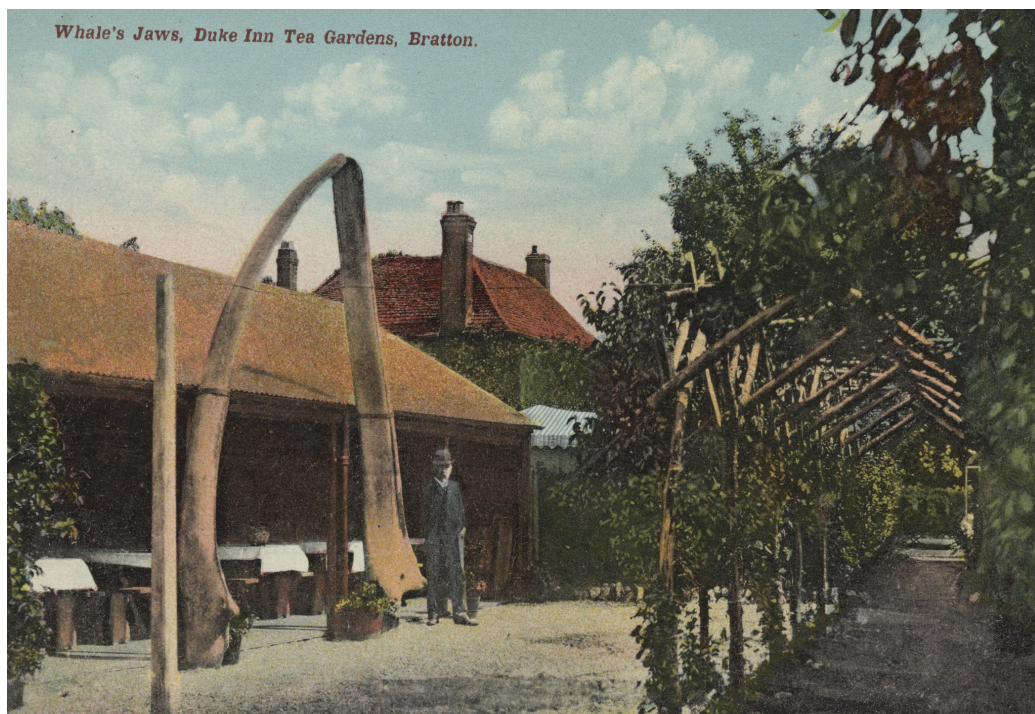
The Warminster and Westbury Journal suggested that “*Although a day spent in the village and the surrounding country cannot but repay the seeker after real pleasure, a stay of a week or two is necessary for the enjoyment of all the beauty spots which abound in the locality*”. Visitors were enchanted by the village church, described by writer Arthur Mee as one of the most charming in the country, and could not resist counting the ancient shallow steps required to reach it. They explored the delights of a village “*intersected by pleasant paths, or 'drungs' as they are sometimes called*”, and were captivated by the grand houses and cosy cottages with their gardens “*which are such a dream of beauty when you are in them*”. Large numbers also gathered at Stradbrook to witness the great occasions of the annual sheep washing.

Pleasure-seekers would visit the famous White Horse and historic Bratton Camp, with its tales of Celts, Romans, Saxons and Danes. Their trek up Castle Road was helped by the R & J Reeves iron foundry of the village having installed a series of, conveniently placed, roomy iron benches at intervals, permitting the weary to rest a while and savour “*the prospect and the refreshing breeze from the great plain above*”. *The Wiltshire Times* announced that “*On a Summer day the view over the sun-bathed Avon Vale is magnificent, and the air which comes wild and free across the land is as exhilarating as the finest champagne, and much more beneficial. Its effect is to give the average person the appetite of a giant*”. Mr George Cleverley, of New Farm, took the opportunity of the annual Wiltshire Friendly Society dinner to announce that Bratton was considered “*one of the healthiest places in England*” by some of the medical faculty. A newspaper report in 1906 described Bratton as an “*inland pleasure and health resort*”, ranking it as a “*serious rival to other better known places*”. Furthermore, as one reporter put it, “*Holiday makers want more than historical associations. There are a few wants which even the most ascetic wish catered for, and this is where the village of Bratton is conspicuous above all the villages in Wiltshire*”.



Although The Duke Inn had been owned by the Westbury brewer Edward Smallcombe since 1887, it was the arrival in those years of new licensee William Staniford from Reading, bringing with him no previous experience of public catering, that helped transform the establishment to become “*at once the ideal of the old village inn and the home of the modern caterer*”. Several tea pavilions that could accommodate 200 people were erected in the grounds, along with stabling for 20 horses. Their advertisements in local newspapers promised “*Dinners, teas, luncheons. High-class catering at moderate prices. Large pavilion for Workmen's outings and school treats. Delightful old garden and lawns, with numerous Rustic Arbours and Japanese tea pavilion for smaller parties. Strawberry gardens. Two fine orchards with swings for Sunday School parties*”.

A major additional attraction of magnificent, majestic, mysterious and monstrous 16 feet high jaw bones, taken from what The Wiltshire Times announced was “*the largest mammal in existence*”, arrived in May 1906. This unfortunate 80 foot long, 150 ton, Greenland whale had become beached on the north coast of Newfoundland 20 years earlier, and its partial remains were eventually purchased by Mr Smallcombe in 1891, and were finally found a home, as a central archway to a tea pavilion. The towering bones proved to be “*The object of much curiosity*”, offering visitors the unique experience of “*taking tea between the jaws of a whale*”. That year there were reports of The Duke Inn catering for up to 300 guests on some days.



Across the road, at 17 Melbourne Street, Frank Marsh had moved from Seend in 1872 and had now established a steam bakery. His newspaper advertisements at the time announced *"I manufacture my own goods, can guarantee them to be of the best quality and value. I also make a speciality of providing tea on the White Horse Hill by arrangement"*. In 1906, in readiness for the next holiday season, Mr Marsh completed work on building a new house and business premises a few doors along Melbourne Street. Also, between his premises and the original, smaller, Jubilee Hall, he established extensive tea gardens capable of accommodating 70 visitors. They were attractively laid out with two pavilions, decorated with palms, flags, *"a mass of splendid bloom"* and offered *"extensive views of Picket Hill"*.

His advertisements now announced *"Teas and refreshments supplied in the best and most up-to-date style. New and commodious premises. All bread, cakes and pastry made on the most hygienic principles"*. The *Warminster and Westbury Journal* advised readers that *"Mr Marsh supplies all he can that cheers, but nothing that inebriates"*, adding that *"no village bake house and few town bake houses are so well equipped"*.



Bratton's reputation was becoming better known to those living at greater distances with news of pleasure-seekers desiring a holiday *"far from the madding crowd"* arriving from the Midlands, the Metropolis and Scotland. The *Warminster and Westbury Journal* reported that *"So many visitors arrived at the beginning of the Summer that all the usual available accommodation was called into requisition"*. However, it was explained that *"Bratton is the chief village in Wiltshire where the inhabitants lay themselves out to care for the wants of visitors"*, and so *"Intending visitors may now rely upon getting apartments, as practically all the residents have laid themselves out to accommodate and serve their Summer guests"*.

The 560 residents of Bratton were actually considered to be among the village's attractions and virtues. The *Warminster and Westbury Journal* revealed that *"No Bratton resident is ever known to swear. If strong language is heard in the village, the atmosphere is being polluted by some stranger. No Bratton residents are ever the worse for liqueur. There has been no conviction for this offence for over 20 years. Bratton is the most moral village in Wiltshire"*.

In preparation for what *The Warminster and Westbury Journal* now called "*The Bratton Season*" of 1907, The Duke Inn contracted Mr John Merritt, who would build the Church Institute 3 years later, to construct a timber holiday retreat chalet on the hillside overlooking the church. With a large furnished living room, veranda, kitchen and large first floor bedroom with 6 bunks, it could accommodate, by the week or month, holiday parties "*who wish to enjoy a life in the open without the discomforts of camping*". The Warminster and Westbury Journal suggested that "*The bungalow is unique. The walk to it from the village is unique. The view from it when you get there is unique. It is situated just on the verge of the downs. Beneath it is the ancient church, with a churchyard garlanded by beeches. On the right is the bold outline of Picket Hill; above and behind is the great expanse of Salisbury Plain; on the left is the White Horse; and right in front of it is a view so expansive that the tram lights can be seen with the naked eye as they ascend and descend Coombe Hill, Bath. Steeple Ashton Church is in plain view, and the steeples of Bradford churches are seen on a clear day, as is the smoke of Radstock, in the next county. The air is rarefied and pure, and that diminishes distances*". This health-giving hillside haven became an immediate success and could have been fully booked many times over for months ahead.



There were reports of holidaymakers in excess of 1,000 over Easter. Organised groups, large and small, making up this "*great influx of visitors*", included Sunday Schools, Friendly Societies, Temperance Societies, Bands of Hope, Christian Endeavour, Mothers Meetings, Workman's outings, School treats, and even parties of touring cyclists from London. It was reported that in a single day Mr Marsh accommodated a Band of Hope of about 60 from Holt, a Bible Class numbering 57 from Melksham and several private parties up to 160, "*All expressing themselves highly delighted with the happy hours spent in the garden*". On another afternoon 150 members of the Trowbridge Church Girls Friendly Society arrived in horse-drawn brakes. They were said to have enjoyed an excellent tea while the Bratton Brass Band was engaged to play a varied selection of music. It was reported that one party taking tea at The Duke Inn had brought along a gramophone and their music could be heard at a distance of a mile.



That year a pocket sized '*Beauties of Bratton*' guidebook could be purchased for tuppence. There were advertisements for The Duke Inn and Marsh's Tea Garden, along with Fredrick Masten, Baker and Confectioner in Stradbroke, E & F Flooks, Baker and Grocers in Lower Road, and Mary Cross, Grocer and Provision Dealer at the Post Office. The guide was written in verse by Mary Reeves with declarations such as

*"There's a first class restaurant just across the road,
where you dine off Wedgewood, Delft and Spode.
You can get anything you wish,
Mock Turtle soup or fish".*

As this was the year that telephones and street lighting arrived in the village, she also added

*"But I'm sure it would not be right,
if I didn't tell you our streets are lit with gas at night".*

The Wiltshire Times began a weekly series of full-page articles celebrating "*Picturesque Wiltshire*", while the *Warminster and Westbury Journal* commenced their own "*Wiltshire Beauty Spots*" collection, with Bratton as their first port of call. They tantalised their readers with descriptions of "*A spot which is blessed by Providence above most in the way of air and scenery. There is no doubt about it. Even in Wiltshire, where pretty villages and picturesque villages are common, Bratton stands, like Saul, head and shoulders above the multitude*". They assured readers that "*You can get out of the world and into Bratton very easily, but you lose none of the world's conveniences. In a word, Bratton is unique*". And how could readers resist the allure and appeal of "*A village with a few hundred inhabitants planted in one of the loveliest spots nature ever arranged for the habitation of man*"?

The numbers of holiday makers and pleasure-seekers continued to surpass each previous year's record. On Whit Monday 1908, 400 people were catered for at The Duke Inn. On the August Bank Holiday Monday it was estimated that the hills were visited by 2,000 people (almost 4 times the population of the village). At that year's Pig Insurance Society supper, chairman George Cleverley rose to his feet again and declared that "*Mr and Mrs Staniford had made themselves most popular, and had helped to make the village better known and popular in the few years they had been there, and all hoped they would be there for many more years to come*". In reply, Mr Staniford told the meeting that he had never found people more amenable to reason than the people of Bratton were and "*hoped they would continue in the future to set an example to surrounding villages*".

For the following season the *Oxfordshire Weekly News* conjured impressions in readers' imaginations, attempting to entice them to sample the delights of Bratton. "*Two sounds break day by day the stillness of the village, the low tinkling of sheep-bells and the rhythmic beat of a steam-hammer, and between them lies the history of Bratton. The sound of the sheep-bell falls from the upland pastures of the Downs, the tap-tap-tap of the hammer rises from the red roofed building below that marks the presence of a factory..... Both sounds are curiously typical; one of nomadic life, the other of an enclosed and ordered existence*". The article continued, "*When the mists fill the valley with soft, muffling clouds, still from the vanished hill-side, the little bells sound on with sweet assurance, uplifting and serene..... It*

seems only in the eternal fitness of things that a firm which makes agricultural implements should have its foundry and workshops in an agricultural village..... A building of this sort in a village loses somehow all the ugliness it has when cramped up with hundreds of similar ones in a city, all belching out smoke to poison the atmosphere and disfigure the landscape. In the centre of the quiet village street it seems like the beating heart of the place; It supplies work to the households, marks the passing of time, and keeps a courageous outlook on life".

Readers were enthusiastically informed that "Its beauty spots are as they were when, in neolithic times, our ancestors wandered over them. Bratton has in most respects no rival. There is no other holiday resort like it..... It is made of green places, large silences, sunrises and sunsets seen across the sweeping Downs, cornfields ripening to a golden glory, distances far away and mysterious.... It is old, very old, all this atmosphere of peace".

While the train station at Edington allowed the village to become better known to strangers at a distance, it was now being suggested that if the village were served by its own station stop the numbers of visitors would no doubt be greatly increased. Consequently, Great Western Railway were petitioned to add a halt on the line at Bratton Bridge.

Such was the anticipated continued momentum of growth in demand that in 1911 additional accommodation was created at The Duke Inn along with extensive improvements made to the pleasure grounds. On the May Bank Holiday that year it was reported that there had been a record 800 visitors in one day for luncheons, teas and drinks. The same year it was announced that Mr Marsh, having purchased the Edington Monastery Gardens, orchard, and boat house, had altered and improved them "*beyond the recollection of old-time habituées*", and they had now been re-opened for light refreshments, teas, luncheons and suppers, with first and second-class accommodation provided, along with fishing, boating, swings, croquet, dance music on the lawns in the evenings, and sufficient stabling for 50 horses. When it re-opened on Easter Monday, close to 700 visitors arrived. Mr Marsh's ideal was to add a tennis court, a bowling green, and host concerts and balls for what *The Bath Chronicle* described as "*all respectable classes*".

MONASTERY GARDENS.
EDINGTON, WILTS.

1ST CLASS PAVILION

THE FISH POND

LUNCHEONS, TEAS

AND REFRESHMENTS

EDINGTON CHURCH

THE HISTORICAL & POPULAR PLEASURE RESORT OF THE COUNTY.

WALK TO FISHPOND.

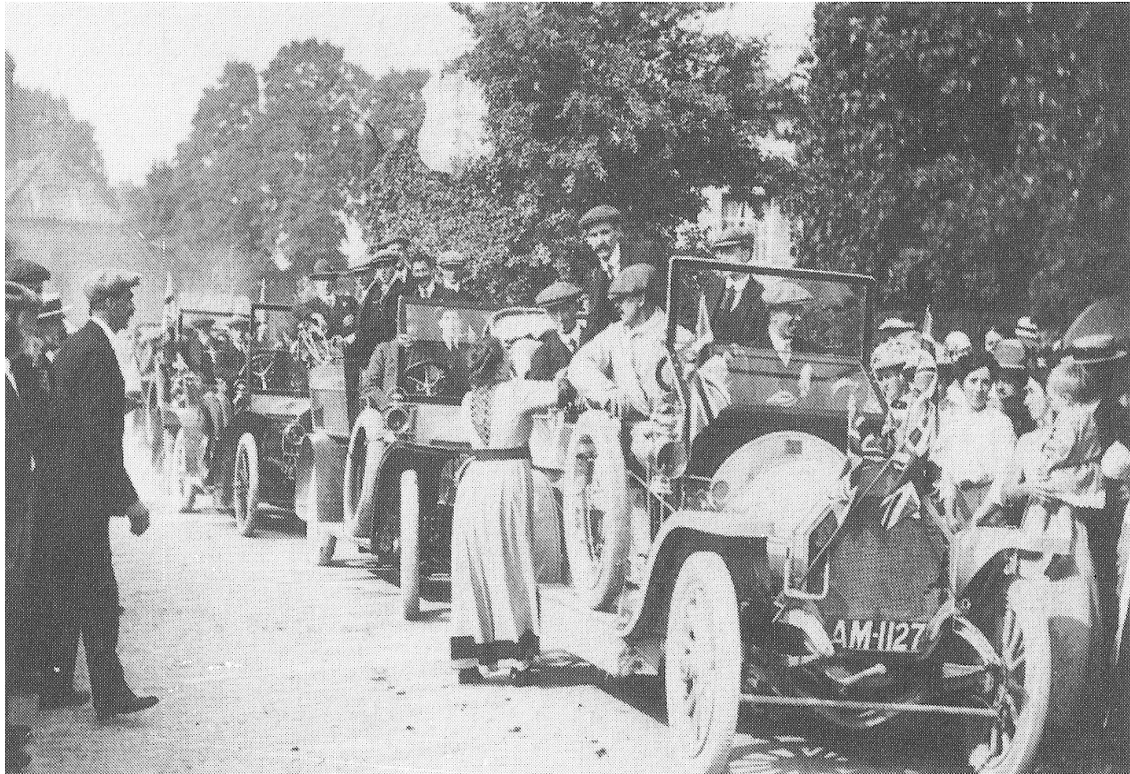
OLD MONASTERY WALL.

BURGESS & SONS, Publishers, LAMINGTON

F.S. Marsh, Proprietor

In 1913 *The Wiltshire Times* reported that “Mr Marsh has done much to popularise this part of the county, which was until a short time ago, as a closed book to all but a few discerning people who, with the cutting of the new direct line to the West of England, had discovered buoyant Bratton en-route with its breezy heights and wonderful sheltered dells, a district which is now more and more sought after by the tired and jaded brain-workers of the Metropolis”.

Then, on 28th June 1914, over 1,000 miles away, a gunshot in Sarajevo resulted in Britain going to war. A photographer captured the departure from Melbourne Street, between The Duke Inn and Marsh's Tea Garden, of many young men of the village as they set off in a motorcade to enlist at Devizes. As the procession of vehicles faded from view over the brow of The Bratton Bash, the glorious era of “The Bratton Season” seemingly departed with it.



In 1920 William Staniford died very shortly after his retirement, aged 73. He was described by *The Wiltshire Times* as “A figure familiar to and respected by large numbers of people in Wiltshire and Somerset who have visited Bratton in past years”. He had seen Bratton become ever more popular as a health and pleasure resort, and it was acknowledged that “His courtesy and geniality did much to foster it”.

The same year Frank Marsh's business was taken on by Mr Belbin, Manager of the Devizes Co-operative Society. When Mr Marsh died a decade later, aged 68, *The Wiltshire Times* and *Trowbridge Advertiser* remembered him as “One of the best known and esteemed residents of Bratton” and celebrated how “From comparatively modest beginnings his steam bakery developed into an establishment well-known throughout a wide district, and the purchase and reconstruction of the buildings, and the formation of the popular Tea Gardens, afford some evidence of his foresight and business enterprise”.

Today the 150-year-weathered whale jaw bones at The Duke Inn and a collection of surviving picture postcards, with their preserved glimpses from a time beyond the reach of living memory, remain the only evidence of “The charm which no pen can tell” of this once “Fashionable holiday place” that had offered “Pure enjoyment without monotony”.

This article is based on early 20th century newspaper reports, accessed through the British Newspaper Archive, alongside documents held at the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre.

Bob Pearce

Bob moved to Bratton in 2020, became a member of the Bratton History Association committee, and has been recording conversations for a village oral history project.