

In the Pilgrims' Footsteps, Through England and the Netherlands



Andrew Testa for The New York Times

The flat farms of Gainsborough, which was a Puritan stronghold in Lincolnshire. [More Photos »](#)

By CHARLES McGRATH

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LAST [Thanksgiving](#) my wife was trying to explain to our granddaughter, Lizzie, 5 at the time, that some of her ancestors had been participants at the original 1621 feast in Plymouth. “I know,” said Lizzie, who apparently had been learning about Thanksgiving in school. “We’re Indians!”



[Tracing the History of the Pilgrims](#)

Actually, Lizzie's forebears were Pilgrims. (My wife, like several million Americans at this point, is a Mayflower descendant.) Nowadays Pilgrims, with their funny, steeple-crowned hats and buckle shoes and their gloomy, pious ways (no games on Sunday, no celebrating even of Christmas!), have gone out of fashion. It's true that upon arriving in the New World they were so hapless that they would surely have perished during their first winter without the help of the American Indians.

But the Pilgrims were nevertheless heroic in their way. There were a great many Puritans in England at the beginning of the 17th century who wanted to purge Christianity of what they considered the laxity and corruption introduced by Rome and by the insufficiently rigorous Church of England. But only a few hundred of them felt strongly enough to become separatists and emigrate to another land.

What they objected to in the established church may seem fussy and trivial today: the wearing of surplices, the exchange of wedding rings, making the sign of the cross at baptism. But at the heart of their convictions was also a radical political thought: that the state had no business in the running of religion, and that congregations had the right to elect their own leaders.

The 102 passengers who sailed on the Mayflower in September 1620 came from all over England (and not all of them were religiously motivated), but the leaders of the separatist movement came from just a handful of farming villages in Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and southern Yorkshire, most within walking distance of one another. This is not the touristy, thatched-cottage part of England, but it is beautiful nonetheless, and last spring my wife and I visited to see what we could learn about her ancestors, who in so many ways are forefathers to us all.

We made the underappreciated cathedral town of Lincoln our base, and stayed at the White Hart Hotel in a charming upstairs room that overlooked the cathedral close. John Ruskin, the great English art critic, called the town's cathedral "out and out the most precious piece of architecture in the British Isles," which did not prevent the dean and chapter from renting it out as a location for the film "The Da Vinci Code." It really is a towering wonder, visible from miles around. Clearly I would not have made a good Puritan, for of all the churches we visited, this is the one, with its cassock-wearing choristers, flickering candles and rumbling organ, that I liked the best.

Lincoln also has some interesting Roman ruins and a couple of good restaurants. At the bottom of the aptly named Steep Hill, there is one exceptional restaurant with a name that would probably summon forth pickets in the United States. It's called the Jews House, which is what it was in the 13th century, when Lincoln was home to one of the largest Jewish populations in England. Far from being an ethnic restaurant, the Jews

House these days serves a lot of food that observant Jews are not allowed to eat: dishes like pork belly with miso glaze and pan-fried tiger prawns with melon sorbet.

To visit the villages of the Pilgrim leaders, all you really need is a map and a car. We had the additional benefit of Nick Bunker, author of “Making Haste From Babylon: The Mayflower Pilgrims and the New World” (Knopf, 2010), who, after working as a stockbroker in London, now lives in an old, partly Norman house in Lincoln, where he writes full time. He was wearing riding breeches, stout boots and thick knee socks — not strictly necessary but a nice, squire-like touch. He took us first not to one of the Pilgrim sites but to the Church of St. Lawrence, in the all-but-abandoned village of Snarford. The tiny stone building gives no suggestion of the extravagant alabaster statues within — funeral monuments of the St. Paul family, local grandees who became staunch Puritans. Sir George, the last and wealthiest of the clan, and his wife, Frances Wray, are propped up on their right elbows, as if watching television on the couch. He’s wearing armor and she has on a starched white ruff.

The almost lurid colors of the statues take a little getting used to if you have grown up on notions of Puritan somberness, and the general splendor of the little church is an important clue to the Pilgrims. Unlike so many radical religious movements, theirs did not take hold among the poor and downtrodden but, rather, among small landowners and yeoman farmers. Many of them could read, a fairly unusual accomplishment then but a useful one for a group that believed wisdom derived from personal study of the Scriptures.

The most important of the Pilgrim villages, and probably the epicenter of the whole separatist movement, is Scrooby, in Nottinghamshire, where William Brewster, the local postmaster and later a Pilgrim leader, lived and held clandestine religious services in a large manor house. Scrooby today is a bit of a backwater and most of the house (which is now in private hands) was demolished in 1636.

You can still see traces of the moat and fishponds that once surrounded this grand establishment, and in the nearby market town of Gainsborough, another Puritan stronghold, there is an enormous half-timbered Elizabethan manor that gives an idea of what Scrooby Manor must have been like. In Gainsborough, especially, the Puritans were not rubes but bustling men of business.

Not far from Scrooby is the modest Yorkshire village of Austerfield, where William Bradford, the second governor of the Plymouth Colony, grew up; orphaned, he found solace in the radical preaching that could be heard in the area. In the other direction is Babworth, a pretty little hamlet where Richard Clifton, an important separatist thinker, was rector of the local church.

Then there is Sturton le Steeple, where these days at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Fisher-Price toys, for child-minding, are parked next to a sarcophagus. Sturton, a large and still prosperous-looking village, was the birthplace of both John Robinson, the charismatic spiritual leader of the Pilgrims, and John Smyth, who led a large separatist congregation but eventually became even more important in the Baptist movement.

More than anything else it was probably the critical mass of such men — eloquent, passionate, many of them educated at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge — that accounts for why this area became such a hotbed of separatism. It also did not hurt that the main religious authority was the Archbishop of York, who, being more worried about Roman Catholics, took a fairly relaxed attitude toward the Puritans.

But could the landscape itself have been a factor? This is farming country, so flat that a modest little mound in the Nottinghamshire village of Gringley-on-the-Hill is a local landmark. Nick Bunker took us up there one morning, and though the view has changed a lot since the 17th century — much of the land has been drained, and there is a big power station to the north — you can still get a sense of what it must have been like. The sky is endless, the horizon flat, the light soft and Hopperish. There are marshes, woods, heaths, pasturelands and fields of red clay. Though far from the sea, it is a countryside, Mr. Bunker suggested, that in some ways resembles what the Pilgrims found in New England. It's also the kind of landscape that urges you to spread out and — far from bishops and bureaucrats down south — think daring, independent thoughts.

So why did they leave? For one thing, the king and a new Archbishop of York had begun cracking down on them. The Scrooby congregation also interpreted a devastating flood that surged up the Bristol Channel in January 1607 as a sign of divine disapproval. Later that year a large group tried to flee the country, booking passage from the Lincolnshire port of Boston. They were betrayed by the ship's captain, however, and the leaders, including Brewster, were imprisoned in the town's medieval guild hall. (Once a port second in importance only to London, Boston is now down at the heels a little, though still worth a visit thanks to the local church, St. Botolph's, and the guild hall, now a museum.)

A year later the separatists tried again, and a handful of them made it to Amsterdam, where they were followed by a steady trickle of others from the Scrooby area. "They all got over at length," Bradford wrote, "some at one time and some at another, and some in one place and some in another, and met again according to their desires, with no small rejoicing."

After a year or so, the flock, now numbering 100 or so, moved south to the town of Leiden. My wife and I came to like this university town even more than Amsterdam,

though the bike riders are apt to run over the unwary. One afternoon I saw a woman pedaling her young child on the crossbars while also texting.

Many of the canals in Leiden are wider and leafier than those in Amsterdam, and there are extensive public gardens belonging to the university. But in the 17th century Leiden was also an industrial town, noisome and crowded. The English immigrants, like most people, worked in the textile business, weaving cloth on looms in the home, and they sorely missed rural life. William Bradford lived on a canal, not far from Haarlemmerstraat, the city's main shopping thoroughfare, that was so foul it eventually had to be filled in. The entrance to the alley where he lived is today across from an H & M store. William Brewster lived on an alley appropriately known as Stincksteeg. There is a plaque marking the spot and, in a window where his house once was, a poster of Marilyn Monroe. Like most of the English Pilgrims at Leiden, Brewster lived near the Pieterskerk, the city's grandest church, still imposing though much of the ornament was stripped out during the Reformation.

The only remaining Pilgrim house is also in this neighborhood, on the corner of the Pieterskerkhof and the Kloksteeg, but it has been so modernized that you would never take it for a 17th-century dwelling. To get a better idea of how the Pilgrims lived you need to visit the American Pilgrim Museum, a brick house near the Hooglandse Kerk presided over by the genial and drily ironic Jeremy Bangs, author of the immense and immensely knowledgeable book "Strangers and Pilgrims, Travellers and Sojourners: Leiden and the Foundations of Plymouth Plantation" (General Society of Mayflower Descendants, 2009).

It is the oldest house in Leiden, dating back to the 14th century, and typical of a Pilgrim dwelling: a single 8-by-14-foot room with a stone floor, small leaded windows, a big medieval fireplace. The parents would have slept sitting up in a box bed (because lying flat was thought to cause disease) and the children on the floor. Somewhere in there a loom would have been crammed.

It was for the sake of the children, Bradford later wrote, that the Pilgrims decided to move on to the New World. In Leiden they had to work from an early age and many of them were learning Dutch and adopting Dutch customs. But the cramped, slumlike conditions, so far from the open Scrooby landscape, also had something to do with the decision.

Not all of them went. Some were fearful. Some, like John Robinson, stayed behind to tend the Leiden flock. Had he gone to New England, history — especially the relations between the Pilgrims and the Indians — might have been different. In Mr. Bangs's account, Robinson emerges as a man of singular intelligence and liberality who decided,

for example, that St. Paul was wrong and that women should feel free to speak up in church.

Another Leidenite, Thomas Blossom, was a passenger on the Speedwell, the Mayflower's companion vessel, which sprang a leak and had to turn back. He eventually made the journey in 1629, joining the colony at Plymouth, where he became first deacon of the church. This might be of interest to those concerned about President Obama's Americanness, for Blossom is one of his ancestors.

My wife happened to bring this up a few weeks later when we were completing our Pilgrim journey by making a visit to Plimouth Plantation, a replica of the original colony in Plymouth, Mass., where historical re-enactors take the part of the historical Pilgrims. She got into a conversation with a woman in a bonnet and voluminous skirt cooking over a fire. "You know, a descendant of one of your brethren eventually became president," my wife said.

The woman looked at her and said, "President of what, Miss?"

LINCOLN, [ENGLAND](#)

There are direct flights from New York to the East Midlands airport in Nottingham, about an hour away, or you can drive or take the train from [London](#), which will take three to four hours. To get around the Pilgrim landscape, you will need a car, some good maps, and GPS wouldn't hurt, though even that may not help when it comes to navigating Lincoln's many and confusing one-way streets. Luckily, the police seem tolerant of bewildered Yanks. The cathedral and the Stump, the great church in [Boston](#), are open daily, but the various parish churches have more limited schedules and some are open only by appointment. It is best to write or call ahead to the parish secretary.

The White Hart Hotel (www.whitehart-lincoln.co.uk) is charming, ideally situated at 87 Ballgate, across from the cathedral close, and — a valuable perk — comes with parking. Double rooms, with breakfast, start at about £99 (about \$156, at \$1.57 to the pound). The food at the White Hart is more than acceptable, but it would be a mistake not to try the **Jews House**, the city's best [restaurant](#), housed in its oldest and most picturesque building (jewshouserestaurant.co.uk). Less ambitious and more traditionally English is the nearby **Wig and Mitre**, a Victorian pub-style [restaurant](#) that features things like braised beef and roast wood pigeon (wigandmitre.com).

LEIDEN, THE [NETHERLANDS](#)

Car rentals are much more expensive in the Netherlands than in England, and because the country is so small and the Dutch train system so good, a car here is really more a

hindrance than a help. Trains from [Amsterdam](#) to Leiden run every 15 minutes or so; the trip takes a little over half an hour and costs 14 euros (about \$19, at \$1.35 to the euro).

Leiden is itself easily and pleasantly walkable. A good way to preview the city and get your bearings is to take a boat tour through Leiden's many canals. Several companies offer these trips, almost all with narration in English available, and there is usually a boat of one sort or another leaving every few minutes from the Beestenmarkt. Fares are mostly under 10 euros for a ride of roughly one hour.

Though outstanding in just about every other way, Leiden is not a city of great hotels. The **Nieuw Minerva** occupies what used to be six 16th-century houses facing one of the city's many canals and is best appreciated from the outside. The [rooms](#) are serviceable, not very expensive by European standards (starting at \$78 for a double) and the location is ideal: a short walk from the Central Station and just around the corner from the Haarlemmerstraat, one of the city's two main drags.

The two essential Pilgrim sites in Leiden are the great Pieterskerk, or Peter's Church, which became the Puritan John Robinson's adoptive home, and the [Leiden American Pilgrim Museum](#), easily found by heading for the hard to-miss belltower of the Hooglandse Kerk, or Highland Church. (That it could be called such suggests that the flatland-dwelling Dutch have very different ideas of altitude from ours.) The museum is open Wednesday through Saturday, 1 to 5 p.m.; admission 3 euros.

In Leiden, as elsewhere in the Netherlands, it is surprisingly difficult to find authentic Dutch food. A good all-purpose [bistro](#), lively and reasonably priced, is the **City Hall Restaurant** (restaurantcityhall.nl), as the name suggests, behind Leiden's 17th-century city hall, a building whose grandness suggests how seriously the town fathers took the notion of civic government.

Elsewhere in town are lots of bars serving authentic jenever, not to be confused with gin and a drink the Pilgrims were probably advised to stay away from. Not for nothing is a shot of jenever, tossed down after a beer, known as a kopstoot, or a head butt.