

The Diaries of Charlotte Grove / Diary Notes / People & Families

PILFOLD

PILFOLD - Captain John Pilfold RN, CB was Charlotte's maternal uncle. He was baptised at Horsham, Sussex, on 20th January 1769 and died at Stonehouse, Devon, on 12th July 1834. He was the son of a long-established Warnham family and uncle to the poet, Percy Bysshe SHELLEY, Charlotte's first cousin.

With a career as an officer in the Royal Navy during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, John is most noted for his command of *HMS Ajax* at the battle of Trafalgar, whilst only a Lieutenant.

John's parents were Charles Pilfold (1726–1790) and Bathia WHITE (1739-1779). Charles was described as a "yeoman" upon his marriage to Bathia in 1762. His uncle, Richard Pilfold (1677–1748), inherited Baylings Farm at Warnham, which the family had owned since the 16th century.

John's siblings were Elizabeth 1763 (m. Timothy Shelley – seven children, Percy the eldest), Charlotte 1764 (m. Thomas GROVE – thirteen children, Charlotte the eldest), Charles 1765 (died in India 1792, without issue), William 1768 (probably died in infancy), James 1771 (m. Ann STANFORD - nine children), Bathia 1773 (m. Revd. Dr Gilbert JACKSON – up to twelve children) and Ferdinando (1775-1792).

John Pilford was ten when his mother died. Two years later he joined the Royal Navy and his older brother Charles inherited the farm. Charles himself later became an acting Lieutenant in the Navy serving under Lord Nelson. Promoted to full Lieutenant, on 17th December 1791, Charles set out on his last voyage. He died in India on 28 August 1792, cause of death unknown.

John Pilfold, aged 13, joined the Royal Navy as a midshipman in *HMS Crown*, under Sir William Cornwallis. He sailed to the East Indies and, returning home in 1792, found that his father had died in 1790 and the estate, Effingham East Court Manor, had been sold. The following year, France declared war on England.

Returning to sea, Pilford served in *HMS Brunswick*, *HMS Russell* and *HMS Kingfisher*, taking some prize money from ships captured during operations off the Spanish and Portuguese coasts. In 1798 he transferred to the 74-gun *HMS Impetueux* and gained notoriety in 1800 by leading a raiding party into the Morbihan River, destroying a dozen French ships and wrecking port facilities. As a wealthy First Lieutenant, in 1803, he met and married Mary Anne Horner SOUTH. But he was soon back at sea, serving on *HMS Hindostan*, *HMS Dragon* and from there, *HMS Ajax*, commanded by Captain William Brown.

HMS Ajax had been engaged at the Battle of Finistere and when Brown was called home to give evidence at the Court Martial of Admiral Calder, he placed Pilfold in charge of *Ajax*, which joined Nelson's fleet during the blockade of Cadiz. On 21st October, *Ajax* was sixth in Nelson's line at Trafalgar and was heavily engaged with the *Intrépide* and *Argonauta*. After the battle, Pilfold returned home and was promoted to Post Captain. Like many others involved at Trafalgar, over the next few years Pilfold enjoyed further rewards, including his own coat of arms and an initiation into the Order of the Bath.

John did not return to sea. Finally, giving up any ambition of further promotion, he retired to Wales and Devon with his family. There he divided his time between farming, some shore-based naval appointments, and acting as surrogate father to his nephew, Percy Bysshe Shelly.

One is left with the impression that Charlotte was very fond of her uncle John Pilfold. But in a diary entry dated 22nd February, 1831 she reports that he is very ill, having suffered a "Parylatick stroke". John survived for another three years, although it was said the stroke left him "quite childish". His wife, Mary Anne, died in 1832 and John died in 1834, aged 66. He was buried at St George's Church, Plymouth. The churchyard was destroyed by German bombers in 1941 and is now a car park. There is no indication of who lies buried beneath it.

Other surnames associated with Pilfold – CRUCKLOWE, HALL, MITCHELL, CHATFIELD, MIDDLETON, TRECROFT, WALLER, PELLATT, TAYLOR, WOOD, MEDWIN, HAYNES, SMITH, WESTBROOK, GODWIN, TREVOR, LESLIE and BOWEN