



## Joseph Pitts

BY Rida Ahmed

I belong to Pitts House. Our House commemorates the legendary explorer Joseph Pitts, who was born in Exeter in 1663. When he was only fifteen years old, he went to sea on a ship called the Speedwell, which was going on a trading voyage to Newfoundland. All went well until, after visiting the Canary Islands on the way home, the ship was attacked by Algerian pirates and all her crew were taken to Algiers and sold into slavery.

Joseph was unlucky - he was bought by a cruel master. After a few months he was sent to Tunis as a present for his master's brother. In Tunis he was helped by the British Consul, who tried to raise enough money to buy the young man's freedom so that he could return to Exeter. The Consul collected 300 dollars from British merchants in Tunis, but Joseph's master then asked for 500 dollars. The extra money could not be found, so Joseph was returned to his old master in Algiers. It is said he cried when he heard his hopes of freedom were dashed and that he was to go back to such a cruel man.

When he reached Algiers his master determined that he would force his slave, a good Christian boy, to become a Muslim. He believed that if he could offer the young man to Allah, his own evil deeds would be forgiven. When Joseph refused to give up his Christian faith he was beaten and tortured until he said the necessary words, "There is but one God and Mohammad is the prophet of God." The torture was stopped but Joseph could not stand up for several days. His life as a slave was hard, for he was often beaten. His meagre food consisted only of barley bread and sour milk.

In spite of himself he became interested in the religion of Islam even though he was never a Muslim at heart. He learnt Arabic and Turkish and by writing down the prayers and sermons he heard in the mosque, he learnt to understand the teachings of the Qur'an. About this time, Joseph's master plotted with others to rebel against the ruler of Algiers. The plot failed and the leaders were executed. Joseph was again sold as a slave, but this time he was luckier.

His new master was a kind old man who treated his new servant, who was now about eighteen years old, well. It was soon decided that Joseph should accompany his master when he made his pilgrimage to Makkah. This was a journey the old man had planned all his life and it was very important to him. He promised Joseph that he should have his freedom once the pilgrimage was over.

They soon set off but the old man was taken ill in Egypt and, thinking he was going to die, gave Joseph a purse full of gold and a letter to say he was free. When the old man recovered, his servant gave the gold back and refused his freedom until the journey to Makkah was complete.

In Makkah they performed all the rites that pilgrims do today. Joseph wrote down detailed descriptions of all the ceremonies and was the first Englishman to do so. He also wrote about the city of Makkah and its buildings.

When all the rituals had been completed, Joseph and his master joined other pilgrims to make the journey home. They slept through the day to avoid the sun's heat and travelled during the night. Joseph wrote about everything he saw as they travelled on to Madina where he described the Prophet's tomb. This is what he said about the desert "In all this way there is scarce any green thing to be met with, nor beast nor fowl to be seen or heard; nothing but sand and stones."

At last he and his master reached Alexandria and there Joseph met with some English sailors, one of whom turned out to be an old school friend. He longed to return to England with them but he could not yet leave his master. Even after he was given his freedom he caught the plague and was one of the few to recover from it.

At last when he was well, he found a French ship, which took him to Italy so that he could travel through Germany and Holland to reach home. He had kissed the deck of the ship that took him away from his slavery, yet to his horror he was seized by the Press Gang on his first night back in England. When he struggled with his captors and tried to tell them how long he had been away and how much he had suffered they took no notice and he was sent to the warship HMS Dreadnought to fight the French.

It was not until he was thirty-one years old that he won his release from the Navy and went back to Exeter. You can imagine how pleased his family and friends were to see him and to hear of the strange lands he had visited. Many of the things he described are still as they were then and as you see them now.

When we read Joseph Pitts' writings today we feel we know and like him. He was a good young man, faithful to his friends and honest in his dealings with everyone. He had suffered many hardships and disappointments but he does not seem to have borne any grudges. He was always interested in everything he saw and found something to learn in every experience. Because of such qualities we are proud to be associated with Pitts House!