

Willow Cottage

Curtis Mill Green

A Short History (March 1990)

The Manor of Stapleford Abbots was held by the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds before the Norman Conquest. It was recorded in the Abbey's registers that one night in 1013 the Lord of the Manor of Stapleford was miraculously cured of a lingering illness by the presence of the body of St Edmund on its way back to Bury Abbey from London, and that in return to his recovery he granted the Manor to the Abbey forever. Records suggest that the Abbey owned the Manor in 1066, at which time it was worth 45 shillings! The Manor and Parish were then known as Stapleford Abbots. The main Stapleford probably derives from the logs or "stepples" which were placed to afford the river Roding. The bridge, known as Pont de Pissingford in 1297, is on early maps as Pissingford Bridge, and the Green is variously Curtins Mill, Kirtons Mill, Curling Mill or Curtmill. The Mill was reputed to have been owned by Geoffrey Curtis in the 13th century. Several of the watermills in the district no longer exist, the exception being Twynehams at Passingford Bridge, still a working mill today. There were boundaries from earliest times over which the villagers dare not stray. They were the forest borders in the days when the forest of Essex was a cohesive whole, and the actual extent of that part of it are called Waltham Forest had to be particularly delineated because it reserved to the King for his hunting and his recreation. Two old marker stones called the Richard Stone and the Navestock Stone were laid in the 18th century and showed the line between King and commoner in the woods at Curtis Mill Green. The Navestock Stone was found by H. Burdon, who wrote in 1905: "We found the stone deep in a ditch embankment at the rear of a row of quaint cottages on the outskirts of Curtis Mill Woods. From this point we followed the pretty broken piece of woodland down an open glade in which we found the Richard Stone lying prostrate." You can still see these stones today.

For those of you who drove up, it is on record in 1583 that the roads "may always have been poor in this part of the parish, where the woods of Curtis Mill Green form a barrier", and there was also a report that the road from Brentwood through Navestock to Epping was blocked by Curtins Mill Gate which was the only defence for cattle commoning on that part of the forest. The old London Road ran through this area -- traces are still obvious -- and down it trundled the haywains on their way to the big city. In the days of Henry VIII all the men and boys of each parish was supposed to set aside one day in the year for repair of the roads. As far as we know this law was not enforced. Twenty years ago that the road to Lodge Farm was laid by Peter Balcombe and continued by the Williams with help from friends. Hundreds of tons of rubble were used, including the old Passingford Bridge. The coaching inn at the bottom of the Green, the Talbot, was used by travellers from Chipping Ongar to Aldgate. It's now a private house, but the bar is still in the sitting room!

In January 1617, James I demised the Manor, with all its lands, rents and profits to Sir Francis Bacon for a term of 99 years, and in 1650 Charles II mortgaged Stapleford Abbots for £4000. By 1654 Sir Robert Abdy was created first baronet of Albyns in the Manor of Stapleford Abbots and here the history of the Green begins to involve Willow cottage, for a later Sir Robert Abdy's name is on the insurance policy for 1925! We know that some timber framed cottages were built on the Albyns Estate in 1660 or thereabouts, and the cottage may have been one of these. Last year in March it was inspected and dated circa 1660/66. The beams and whole framework is original, and the way the cross beams are set gives a fairly accurate indication of the date. In those days, some cottages, like boats, were built with green oak, and had to be finished by a given date, so the framework was put up and the building locked firmly together as it dried out. Willow Cottage

was probably built for two families, and the staircase divided halfway up into two sections. The large beam between the two bedrooms had at some time been cut to form a doorway and resulted in that part of the building leaning outwards. In a reference book this charming description could apply today: "The labouring part of the population lives in pleasant cottages generally at a considerable distance from each other and there is everywhere an appearance of health and cheerfulness." The surprisingly large gardens surrounding old cottages may have been the result of planting two hedges, cutting down the inner one after a few years, and planting a second hedge outside the existing one!

So what was England like in 1660?... Charles II was on the throne, and after years of austerity came the restoration of the nobles and gentry to their hereditary place as leaders of local and national life. The plague, which had reached England from the Far East three centuries earlier and was known as the Black Death, had remained in the soil and broke out occasionally mainly in ports and riversides and where the flea-bearing rats multiplied. The outbreak in 1665 was the last, but not the worst that London had known. East Anglia suffered very severely in this last outbreak. The Great Fire the following year raged for five days, and destroyed the whole city between the Tower and the Temple. So, the new buildings began to be of brick, and the wooden houses and cottages, whose straw and cloth hangings harboured infected fleas and rats, were replaced by more sophisticated carpets and panelling.

In the course of the next two centuries, very little changed on the Green, the residents had their common rights to graze animals and cut wood, these rights being passed on from father to son. One would have seen at this time grazing cattle and pigs, which ate the undergrowth, and kept the forest glades open. These common rights which most of the residents still possess, had to be registered in 1966, and the long complex procedure began. This involved many interviews with older residents, much reading up of pamphlets, many, many letters flying between Chelmsford and Curtis Mill Green until it was all made legal in 1979.

Our rights now include raising of cattle, horses, cutting down the trees of certain thickness and the gathering of dead wood. Any commoners

whose rights were not registered at this time have lost them, as the registers are now closed. Most of the residents in the early part of this century were farm workers on the Albyns estate, or Suttons. There were allotments on the site of 40 Acre Farm, and produce was taken to Romford Market by horse and cart. Mr. Shead from Glade End Cottage took eggs and vegetables into Romford this way until the 1950s. Carters would bring groceries from Abridge, eggs were thirteen for a shilling, and a supply of little iced biscuits was kept to give to the children. In winter, barrels of beer were brought up by sledge to the Harrow, a tiny beerhouse at the top of the Green. Some of these were half barrels, the front half with the tap contained beer, but in the back were poached rabbits and pheasant. A friendly policeman would turn a blind eye, saying to the poacher, "Tell the landlord my helmet's on the back window ledge and a pint of beer would be poured in!

After the First World War, people would come out from London at the weekend to set up their tents on Curtis Mill Green. White, green, blue and red, the whole area was covered as far as you could see with tents, like an army encampment. Gear was left in a shed rented from one of the cottagers for sixpence a week. The visitors spent the weekend swimming in the river, hiking, cooking on Primus stoves, singing far into the night, playing gramophones and piano accordions. Buses ran from Victoria to Abridge, and Hillman's coaches, based where the aerodrome now is, ran special services from Abridge to Passingford Bridge. Johnny Triggs and his wife Bertha came down on their tandem with a sidecar full of sweets, Soapy Reynolds had a tea and cake stall, paraffin was delivered to the visitors and residents and the children picked up all the empties to collect ha'pennies. This idyllic weekending came to a stop in 1934, when the residents noticed that their tea tasted of soap, and realise that the visitors were washing in the world which supplied them with water! The notice prohibiting camping went up at the bottom of the Green and the Council took over the lower end as Lords of the Manor, while here at the Willow Cottage end, our Lord of the Manor is Sir John Spencer-Smith.

In 1938, the News Chronicle published an article headed "Off the Map parish has no road to it..." "This most inaccessible parish is only 20 miles from London, the cab driver who took me

there had never heard of it, but the postmistress at Stapleford drew a map for us. Now we are in a field off a lane, and Curtis Mill Green is reputed to be in the "Great Beyond". Off across the fields and dried-up stream to a cottage, and the drought means we can walk. No road leads to this place, and no car can drive there. In winter it is inaccessible except in slud-boots... mud is often up to your knees. There are no mod cons; water is fetched from a mile away, except for the houses with wells. Fresh green grass on both sides of the path, young budding trees, a thousand including the cuckoo, audacious rabbits, foxes in the undergrowth, and the coppice floor strewn with violets and primroses. The vicar, the Rev GH Bishop, was very spry, jumping swampy ditches and blithely hopping stiles and fences. He said, "This, I think, must have been part of the Great Forest of Waltham, marked by the Richard Stones. At one funeral they had to prepare a track across the swampy with sticks, and then we carried the coffin to the hearse".

Earlier this year we went to see Mrs Bridge, whose father kept the Alma Arms in the 1930s. From her we heard the origin of the nickname the Flying Grindstone, given to the Harrow, used by wayfarers on their journey from Romford to Epping to look for work. This was on the then main London Road. A duck pond in front, ginger beer in stone bottles for the children, and a lovely lady, known as Aunt Emma, was in charge. One night, a few young men got drunk and caused a commotion, during which the grindstone was picked up and went flying into the duck pond! Thereafter the beerhouse was known as the Flying Grindstone. Mrs Bridge's father, who loved the land he worked on, turned up a Stone Age axe head one day, and another time a thousand-year-old fossil, both of which can be seen in Chelmsford Museum. The axe head, declared to be the best specimen they'd seen, was used by Hilda Grayling, as she then was, to fill out the toes of her black stockings as she darned them! A relative, Chrisler Grayling a carpenter, was the local coffin maker.

Names of local characters read like the characters from a Dickens' novel. Safety Pin Liz, who if you took out all her safety pins would stand there naked; Dewdrop Crane, Bunch'em Joe, who lived at Willow Cottage, sold bunches of wood, and choked to death on a bacon sandwich at the Flying Grindstone. Spider Crocker who ran like the wind, beating the local

children to the gates which he opened for the huntsmen for a penny a time. Dickie Waltham who rode a horse till he was 90, and would pay you a shilling if you could find a dock or a thistle on his immaculate farm. Cockney Charlie, a highly educated man who lived in a railway carriage and read by the light of a candle stuck in a swinging lantern. Cockbird Surrige, whose nickname reflected his hobby of keeping canaries, Snowy Root, uncle to Jack Root had only one arm, but could hedge and ditch better than most. Blind Billy whose guide was a goat, putting a little cart. Old Mrs Miller who when asked by a bowler-hatted city gent what she got for picking up stones, replied, "Bloody sore fingers!" PC Gutteridge, who stopped a farm worker one night to ask where he got the sack of potatoes he was carrying: "They're part of my wages" he said. "We'll go and ask the farmer -- pick up the sack and I'll come with you". "Oh no, if you want to ask him, you carry the sack!" They returned the two miles to the farm, where the farmer confirmed the story. "All right then," said Gutteridge, "you can take them home". "Oh no, I'd got them as far as the bridge, you can take them back there". And so he did! PC Gutteridge made headlines in the 1930s when he was killed at Passingford Bridge, his eyes shot out in case they reflected the face of his murderer.

In 1950, while the Williams family was out picking blackberries, the children discovered a cottage in the woods inhabited by a writer, Mr. Kelly, when they ran through the forest to rediscover it the following summer, lo and behold it was empty! Mr. Kelly had gone, so Dick and Freda made enquiries at the estate agents and moved in the following weekend! The price of the cottage was £585 (in 1955 £12 2s 1d was paid to the Redemption Commission, over a period of a year, to purchase outright the tithes on the cottage). There was no garden, only four acres of brambles and thistles, and the derelict building was surrounded by barbed wire and netting, sagging and rusting from large and posts, a legacy from the owners who kept kennels. No electricity of course, water from the dip hole and a mere track through the trees for access -- no wonder all their friends thought they were mad! The first job was cleaning the house, the walls were covered in cardboard egg boxes, and the inglenook fireplace was concealed by an iron range. The major job in the garden was the digging out of the iron posts, the first one took two hours, but by the end of the first week they took 10 minutes each. Rubbish was dealt with

by burning or burying, and within a fortnight the garden was cleared and digging had started. Meanwhile the cottage also was being cleaned and furnished, ceilings put up, floors made good, and windows and doors replaced. The cottage was nameless, but from the giant cricket bat willows which lined the pond, and could be seen from the Ongar Road, it was named Willow -- unsurprisingly the deeds revealed that this was already its name. The hurricane in 1987 brought down three of the four remaining willows, and the last came down in March this year but many other species have been planted to carry on the name. The vegetable garden was soon producing its first crops for a hungry family, and fruit trees were heavy with plums and greengages. It was quite usual to pick forty pounds of fruit at a time, and of course there were plenty of blackberries! First of all, seeds of foxgloves, willow herb and other wildflowers made the beginnings of the flower beds. The really hard work of digging, improving the soil and continuous planting went on for five or six years, remembering that it wasn't possible to take the car up to the cottage in bad weather, so everything had to be carried from the lane! The restoration of the cottage began too, the children by now able to help in all sorts of ways, and acquire the skills which have been such an advantage to them all in adult life. During the next few years little bay extension was finished in the sitting room, a dormer window in the front bedroom was re-roofed and the small bedroom built downstairs. Many more windows gave light to all the rooms. Later the front porch was moved to the central position, and the back door in the sitting room made into a bay with a window seat. The original beams are still as good as ever, the only beams that have been renewed are in the roof where they had sagged and curved into the bedrooms. The roof timbers are new, also the staircase, made especially from Willow Cottage oak. Twelve years after the move into the cottage, discussion started on the laying on of piped water to six of the cottage is at the top end of the Green, and in autumn 1972 large trench was driven down from Murthing Lane, which runs down from Navestock Heath. Branch trenches came down to Willow Cottage and Lodge Farm, and when the water was first turned on in the kitchen, the force bounced from the sink to the ceiling. The same year the kitchen floor was re-laid, using the original bricks and filling gaps with enormous pieces of slate, used for a production of Peer Gynt in Manchester. These combined with a marble sink

from Greece (price 30 shillings) made an unusual and distinctive kitchen. A bathroom extension was added in the same year.

The garden was of course developing and extending also. When the flower beds had been designed and planted a garden book was started to record plants and trees as they were bought, along with plans to show where they'd been planted. Up-to-date books can be seen and relevant plants looked up when memory fails! Thirty-nine years is quite a long time in gardening terms, and the tall cypresses were seeds collected by the family on holidays in Spain and Italy. Mature roses, eucalyptus, viburnum, salix and many trees and shrubs make a framework for plants which stretch and climb through them. Plants which like wet ground grow happily in the swamp area, the most spectacular, the gunnera, is large enough to cover the waterfall. The cottage itself is wrapped about with plants, clematis, wisteria, japonica, ivy and eccremocarpus, while on the roof sit houseleeks of various sizes, an amazing sight when flowering in the autumn. The two greenhouses accommodate daturas, lemons, fuchsias from Darjeeling, cercis from China, and of course seedlings by the dozen. Nowadays visitors arrive most weekends and several groups use the area for research. In 1955 the Nature Conservancy designated the Green an Area of Special Scientific Interest -- a wild area of damp woods and marshes of a type now rare in Essex and since then the Friends of Epping Forest, various historical societies, Ramblers Associations, cyclists, butterfly enthusiasts, dragonfly observers and gardeners visit us regularly. We've even had a Baptist wedding in the pond! In 1976 the cottage was included in a list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest.

This year, after reading old diaries referring to the well, we dug down about three feet, took up a tree, and uncovered the lid of the well, which was buried in 1955 when tests on the water declared it to be "unfit for drinking... neutral in reaction, hard in character, containing traces of manganese, and inferior in quality for a well". When the lid was removed in January 1990 -- thirty-five years later, our expectations were of a dark, slimy and murky hole in the ground. To our amazement the bricks looked new and clean, the water clear and sparkling. Our nearest neighbours, the Root family, use their well every day, and they think this was built eighty or ninety

years ago. The frame used to build the well was probably made by Chrisler Grayling, the maker of coffins mentioned earlier. The well is at least 21 feet deep.

In 1975 the cottage was used by Locations Unlimited for an advertisement with Little Red Riding Hood. This was the first of many lettings. The crew arrives very early in the morning and sets up ready for the producer. Then follows the rest of the crew. The days spent talking, setting up shots; waiting for the sun to come out, go in, the rain to stop or start, the planes to fly over, the birds to stop singing... In "Holocaust 2000" Kirk Douglas brought his girlfriend up to the cottage to get away from it all. A baby deer trotted round the garden, and backing away from the cameramen fell into the pond. Two years later a baby elephant, Victoria, came from Devon where she was appearing in the circus, for an apricots juice advertisement. It was a hot day, the young boy had been flown from Spain to ride her was tired and fractious, and Victoria went into the field for a cool bath in the pond. She tested every step into the pond with her bent forefoot and then when she reached the bottom rolled over in ecstasy. When filming came to an end for the day, no usable film had been shot, so Victoria was to be left on the Green for the night. A large dairy was found at Green Farm, where Mrs Cook was delighted to put Victoria up. She swung on the rafters and flattened her drinking bucket by sitting on it. Next day, while waiting for her turn to film, Victoria was tethered to a tree in the forest. It didn't take long for word to get around, and soon children from miles around were arriving to see the elephant. The only people to be disturbed by the sight were those on their way home from the Alma Arms.

Jane Seymour and her entourage arrived to make an advertisement for pot pourri. Vans full of flowers, small trees, a tower to look down on the garden, and a lot of fencing followed. The shots were set up; filming continued until seven in the evening, everyone was thrilled. When the advertisement was shown, 90% was cut.

The other memorable animal was a beautiful vixen, supposedly owned by the hunter who lived in the cottage and enjoyed a chocolate bar when he arrived home with a couple of rabbits slung over a shoulder. The vixen sat contentedly in his lap in front of an enormous fire. We had a delicious rabbit pie, as none of the film crew

wished to know about rabbits with their fur on. Another time John Fortune advertised a new gravy mix. He strode around the stage composing "Daffodils", watched by a solemn goat, and then came in to a transformed cottage for his meal, with the gravy of course. Plastic daffodils by the thousand toss their heads around the garden, the real ones having gone over the week before. These are usually one-day bookings, and great care is taken that nothing is damaged or misplaced. Even pencils are sharpened into paper bags and no litter is ever left.

One feature of summer is the annual meeting of the Essex Beekeepers. Right from the beginning when Jim Carley helped with the swarms which seemed reluctant to stay in the hives, the garden has been used for an annual lecture. Usually this has some connection with beekeeping, but occasionally the talk is of more general interest. I remember a glorious hot day, when a dowser taught everyone how to divine water, and the startling sight of seventy people wandering hypnotically round the garden holding two pieces of plastic joined at the end. Not only did the dowser find pipes and water sources, she could tell if the water was clean or dirty! Another year an entomologist from May and Baker research Department talked on insect stings. He brought a large selection of bags and boxes. Spiders, locusts, caterpillars and beetles were passed round and exclaimed over, and as a grand finale, he unzipped an airline bag and produced a couple of yards of snake! Ken Hoy from the Suntrap spoke on Epping Forest, Joyce Windham on camellias, and one year a baker from Chingford kept our fish fed for several weeks with his free samples. This year Mike Stone, an archaeologist is to tell about life in the 17th century.

1962 saw the family clearing brambles in the forest outside the cottage, where they discovered pits, mostly full of rubbish, where generations ago, marl had been dug to fertilise the land. Marl, a blueish kind of clay was also used to make little bricks from which some of the cottages were built. The resulting pits filled with water, in which fish soon bred -- behind the theatre several such pits fill up with mud and water which drains from the forest. The "Theatre" was cleared, two rows of seats dug, and in June 1962 the first performance, Twelfth Night, (production costs £25) was ready for the public. Reg Adler and his quartet provided the

music. Alas! The rain descended in torrents after Act I, many of the audience crowded into the cottage, while the dripping actors waited at the shed for the second act which never took place! The next day three feet of water filled the auditorium, something which doesn't happen these days, as there is good drainage. In those days a shuttle service of vans and cars fetched the audience from Abridge and Theydon Bois, all actors displayed Willow Cottage handbills in their cars, and were hailed for lifts as they drove through the village. When they reach the bottom of the Green they would stop and fill all the available utensils with water from the same spring polluted all those years ago by earlier merrymakers. When water was laid on, Willow Cottage truly became paradise with all mod cons and gradually the surroundings and shows became more sophisticated, but some of the camaraderie of those early shows has been lost. Some memories -- Oberon's spotlight desperately searching for our marvellous black Oberon, who blended into the darkness of the stage, Queen Elizabeth riding up from Lodge Farm on enormous white horse, escorted by her entourage, to watch *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in one of the hottest summers ever -- the audience sitting firmly on the banks in heavy rain waiting for the performance of *The Merchant of Venice* to begin -- the *Insect Play*, the only time we tried three performances on one day, each departing audience meeting the one coming up, the last performance starting at 10:30 PM. The *Bluebird of Happiness* transported to China, complete with dragon masks and fantastic costumes -- the rain fell all afternoon, Dick's hat, which started as a straight board gradually became saturated and formed a semicircle which covered his face. The evening performance was cancelled but Nancy Kuo, Chinese artist and dancer had already arrived, so she danced in the shed with a plastic sheet as a backdrop, in her brilliant satin costumes she looked like an exotic butterfly imprisoned in a glass bubble.

The *Winter's Tale*, where the noise of the rain on the umbrellas in the audience completely drowned the voices of the actors. Lock up *Your Daughters*, a lovely hot day, and the audience strolling round the garden enjoying the sunshine before they settled down to watch the play,

Dick and Christine Williams
Willow Cottage, March 1990

police arrived with a irate farmer, into whose fields a maroon flare had just dropped while being tested for the evening performance. The police confiscated the remaining flares and departed just before the afternoon performance started. Last year the hottest and driest for many years, the Lansbury Players had a magnificent production of *Robin Hood*... outlaws swung down from the trees to capture Maid Marian, a working moat and a castle on stage left... and an eager audience watched the first half hour. Torrential rain stopped play, and all the subsequent performances had to take place on the marquee... not quite the same. New acting areas have evolved since the number of shows increased -- a little stage outside the shed, where the Willow Warblers take us to the end of the pier each year, and, at the end of the field a fallen willow makes the backdrop for small-scale readings and anthologies Christina Jarvis remembers: "those crowd scenes that really had a crowd in them -- streams of peasants, and children and dogs that even Shakespeare would have been proud of... those rare times at the cottage and even the aeroplanes has gone to bed... the moon hung full and golden, and the nights were warm and velvety black... those bonfires that nearly burnt the forest down every year -- and the fireworks -- and Alan Spackman's magical music that hung in the air long after we had all gone home... these memories of the cottage are locked away in our hearts forever".

Let the last word rest with Jack Root: "Well Mr. Williams, I never thought I'd see little old fairies dancing on Curtis Mill Green".

Many of the families on the Green have lived here for generations, and the names Balcombe, Root and Surridge would have been familiar two hundred years ago. For many of the fascinating stories, and much of the information recorded here, we are indebted to Jack Root, Tom Surridge and Mrs Bridge (née Grayling) and Peter Balcombe. Other sources are the County History of Essex, and the Essex Records Office.

Tailpiece... the question is often asked: "Was this a labourer's cottage?"... To which Dick replies: "Yes, and it still is!" Amen to that, says Christine.