

Lexden History Group



The lake at Lexden Park

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Memories of VE Day 8th May 1945

Bernard Polley

If it had not been for the Coronavirus outbreak we would have celebrated the 75th Anniversary of the end of the war in Europe on Friday 8th May. Prime Minister Churchill had declared that this day, to be known as VE Day, would be a public holiday. I well remember 1945 for that year, as a 16 year old, I was at the Grammar School busily studying for the forthcoming School Certificate examinations in the following July, so 8th May was a very welcome day off. At that time I was staying with grandparents at their home in Layer Road. Grandpa Willsher had Union Jack flags stored away from the 1937 Coronation, so these were dugout and dusted down to be flown over the front of the bungalow.

After breakfast that VE Day morning I cycled into the town to see crowds of people in High Street waiting for the mayor, Alderman Arthur Piper, to speak from the balcony of the Town Hall, and then together with a school friend, Tony Child, we moved on to the Abbey Field where the army laid on several sideshows, some sporting events such as tug-of-war contests and egg-and-spoon races. Later in the day there was dancing on the field with music provided by Mr Castagnoff's loud speakers relaying the music for party dances such as *The Lambeth Walk* and *Hands, knees and bumps-a-daisy*.

It was a happy time of celebration but next day it was back to school to revise mathematical equations and Malvolio's soliloquy in *Twelfth Night* - happy days ahead!

Sonia Lewis

I was at boarding school in Malvern as my brother was evacuated with Holmwood House and there were five schools at the base of the hills in a village called Colwall, including The Downs. Other Lexden residents to my knowledge at Malvern were Roy Collier and David Holt - not many people know that! When the news came of Victory, we were called into the sitting room to listen to the radio. We were then taken on to the front lawn and danced round the trees. As there were pine needles under foot, our dancing steps became unusual and we had to remove our shoes when entering the room again. Later on we were taken up the road to watch a torch light parade along the path ways of the Malvern Hills, a single line of flares swaying along the entire length from Worcester Beacon to British Camp. The evening ended with lighting beacons on the hills and every one singing *Land of Hope and Glory*. I could not understand why some of the ladies cried - I can now.

Dick Barton

As an eleven year old in 1945 I was a pupil in Year 6 and looking forward to starting at secondary school. When VE Day was announced by the BBC and in the newspapers, residents began to discuss what they might do to celebrate. I lived on Balkerne Hill which teamed up with Balkerne Lane to organise a street party. A number of residents were not at home because they were engaged on military service. My father was serving in India as a conscripted engineer in the Royal Air Force, who sent him to the Rolls Royce factory for training. A handful of neighbours organised the collection of donations, and borrowed tables and chairs from St Mary's Church Hall. A team of residents made sandwiches, cakes, blancmanges, jellies and orange squash.

I was aware that adults were going to gather in High Street during the evening, so I asked my mother if I could go to have a look. It was a short journey through Balkerne Passage, past Jumbo to reach the High Street and it was crowded. I don't know where the music came from, but I joined the dancing and a long queue doing the conga along High Street near the Town Hall. It was quite dark because street lights had not been repaired for switching on but it was a tremendously exciting evening and I enjoyed it very much. I will never forget it!

Coping with Coronavirus Lockdown.

Sonia Lewis - I have read 10 Danielle Steel Books, and a heavy book on stress, which I just picked up and flicked through, picking out strap lines and paragraphs. It is honestly informative - and time consuming. Keith is reading a book on Hitler and completing word searches. We are both working on the exercise bike and as we have joined a wine club we are learning the finer points of different wines - very time consuming but we will keep trying. The Home is polished, the garden tidy and the freezer full of cakes. Each morning we take the newspapers, toast and coffee to bed, getting up at 10am.

MORE FROM PHILLIP CARDY 1906-1996

Accounts of the people he knew in Lexden

Phillip Cardy was born on 21st July 1906 and lived in Lexden all his life. He recorded his memories but gave strict instructions that they should not be published until after his death which is understandable as he talked frankly about the people he knew from an early age! (Editor's additions in italics/brackets. I have found that some of Phillip Cardy's memories are inaccurate - we all suffer from this - so I have added some corrections.)

We start this story at the Cedar of Lebanon tree which stands in the centre of Vint Crescent. The legend of it is that a couple of hundred years ago, due to slow travel, the king's doctors had to live within 50 miles of London. One of the doctors hated London and all to do with it. So they measured 50 miles from the Guildhall and there they planted that tree. The doctor's house was built between that and Park Road - it was, you could say, within the law, but only just. Incidentally this tree was hit by the first bomb dropped on Colchester during World War Two. It struck a bough, broke it off, exploded and a little girl looking out of the window was badly injured.

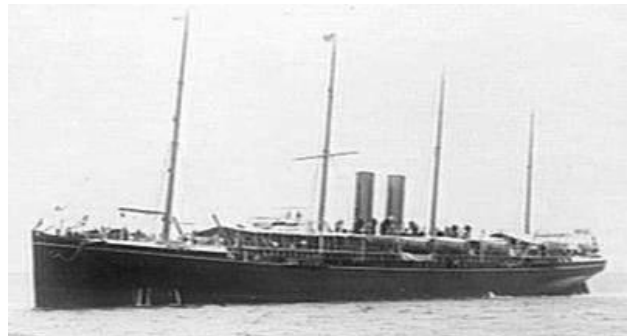


The other side of Park Road, where the Maternity Home is (*now Sovereign Crescent*), lived the Leaning family. There was quite of large family of them. (*The house was built in about 1880 and was called The Chantry*). They owned a large clothing factory up the Mersea Road (*left*). This was destroyed when the Germans set the whole of St Botolph's alight. Next to them were the Marshalls who founded the solicitor's office of that name (*Vernon Evelyn Marshall 1879-1962*). I never knew who lived in the next two houses, but what was last of that row, Stanmore (*now No 38*), was owned by Mr Locke (*Walter M Locke born 1866*) who kept a furniture shop in Long Wyre Street and they would completely furnish a four room cottage, complete with

carpets and curtains, for £50. (And next door the bridegroom could get a navy blue suit for 50 shillings.)

After Stanmore there were two small fields. One was farmed by Nobby Hillyard who lived, when he was at home, at 1 Straight Road (*possibly Arthur born 1861 a market gardener or one of his many sons*). The other was used by two men by the name of Farran. They had no glasshouses or farms, just a shed where they kept their tools and their plants which cost four pence per dozen. Looking back I often wonder how they made a living. I can vividly remember going there with Mother and coming away with a large parcel of plants. (*This area is now Norman Way*)

There were no more houses till you come to 72 (*now divided 72/74*), the one behind the water trough where lived Colonel and Mrs Rooke. They were a lively household. They kept some hunters and had a pair of coal black carriage horses. On the front of the pole when the carriage went out was a solid silver ring. This was unscrewed and taken into the house when the carriage was not in use. On 2nd March 1912 (*actually the 15th*) the Rooke daughter and son-in-Law, Rev J C Leishman, and their little girl sailed in the *Oceania* (*right*) for America and, sad to say, they did not come back. Life seemed to die in the house after that. (*more information on these families in LHG Newsletters Dec 2011 and March 2012*)



The next house, Woodlands, (*now Residential Home for Ladies*) was owned by Mr Beard who kept an ironmonger's shop where Blomfield's finished up. I never knew much about them. (*left: Reginald Benjamin Beard JP 1862-1950. Benjamin Beard and Son were "general and furnishing ironmongers, bellhangers, gas fitters and stove and range makers, iron and steel, tar, oil and colour merchants in 2 St John's Street" a company of three generations inherited from Reginald's father Edwin and grandfather Benjamin, and they lived above the shop. Reginald later moved to 3 Cambridge Road. He was the nephew of Ernest Stanley Beard 1867-1918 "auctioneer, valuer, house & estate agent & surveyor, Headgate" who originally lived at Woodlands*)

There were three houses on the left in Fitzwalter Road. One (*No 6*) was lived in by the Lazells who kept two grocery shops in the town - one in Head Street (*No 20*) and one in High Street (*No 59*). The former became Forsdike and Bonners. (*Harrington Lazell 1858-1944 was living with his family above the shop in High Street in 1901 and in the 1939 Register was recorded as a retired grocer living in Fitzwalter Road. William Forsdike took over both shops in 1937 when Edward Bonner retired and in 1939 was living with his family above the High Street shop.*) There were no more houses that side of the road till you got to St Clare Road. There, up the steps, were two - Fawley Lodge and Lexden Rise. I do not know who lived in them.

So now we had better go back to where we started with St Mary's School (*right*). I never remember it as anything else, but mother told me it was built by a Captain and Mrs Swan and they were quite famous for the beautiful horses they kept. (*'Casina' as the original house was known, was built before 1827 and George Henry Errington - later of Lexden Park - lived there, but there is no record of who actually built it.*) Next to them were two old type houses. I do not know who lived in them and they are still there. I do not know how it got about, but we children were told they were haunted so we were always careful to go by on the other side of the road. After them was a ploughed field (it is a road now - *Lockhart Avenue*) where Buntings used to grow trial plants.



Then we come to Holly Lodge. This has gone now - Sanders Drive stands in the garden. This house was owned by Mrs Luard who lived with her four daughters and a very old lady who had worked for the widow when she had her first baby (*Frank 1865?*) and she stayed and looked after the rest. I did not know her name, everybody called her Nanny. She died at a good old age and was laid to rest in Lexden churchyard. The rest of Mrs Luard's staff consisted of three Gardeners (whose names were Christmas, Winter and Frost), three Maids (House Maid, Parlour Maid and Between Maid) and my sister who was Cook. None of the daughters married though I do not know much about them after my sister left. (*There were several Luards in the area and it is difficult to confirm who lived at Holly Lodge although the Birch rector, Rev Bixby Luard and his wife, Clara, had four unmarried daughters and his widowed daughter-in-law, Mrs Eloine/Elonie Luard lived for several years just down the road at No 187 from about 1925. In 1916 Christobel Chauney Luard, a Red Cross VAD, was living at Holly Lodge but her connection with the family was quite remote. Rev Bixby died in 1919 but Clara died earlier in 1907, so it is still unclear which Luards were at Holly Lodge!*)

Next to Holly Lodge, between that and the Grange, was a small meadow. This had been turned into a four court tennis court - beautifully done and as level as a billiard table. But all the years I knew it I never saw it played on. The Grange was built by a Mr Bland, a Bookmaker, who later sold it to Mr (*William*) Coats-Hutton. The latter had it enlarged, lived in it for six weeks, had a stroke and died (*19th April 1926*). A bad day for Lexden.

Then we go on to what is now the Examination Centre (*now demolished with several houses built on the site*). That was called the Lindens and was occupied by Mr Irwin and his wife and daughters and one son. Mr Irwin was a very wealthy man. He was a Ship Broker and he did a great deal for charity. The two daughters were very nice, one was my Sunday School teacher. But the son (*Basil born 1860*) was an absolute rake. Drink, betting, women, pay off girls he had got into trouble - it all came into it. They kept four servants and a Coachman, Mr Beecham (*Ernest born 1870?*). He was the finest man on the reins I have ever seen. He would come along Lexden Road with that pair of bays at full stretch and turn them into the drive gate without checking them an inch. But that soon altered. The son was making a poor man of his father and you could see the place going down. Then the old couple died, I think of broken hearts, and still it continued. The horses went, the staff went, Mr Beecham went and the Miss Irwins were not dressed to come up to the working women of the village. Then the son had to go into St Mary's (not known as a hospital then, it was the workhouse). In the second year of the war his two sisters followed him and, like him, died there. He had in the end brought them from a well liked family to utter destitution. They had got hardly enough to bury them when they passed on. (*Basil Hastings Irwin was born in Ireland in 1816. Details are not clear but records state that Mr Irwin had died in 1868 and his widow, Frances, lived for some time at the Lindens with her adult children. She died in 1901 leaving nearly £20,000. The 1939 Register records Madelaine, Beatrice and Basil living at 139 Lexden Road - the Lindens - and their deaths are recorded as Beatrice in 1944, Basil 1945, both of The Lindens, and Madelaine of St Mary's Hospital 1946. Beatrice left just over £2,000, as did Basil and Madelaine £4,400. These amounts would*

certainly have been sufficient to bury them. Local gossip is very interesting! Madelaine was a successful portrait painter but copyright laws prevent reproduction of her pictures. Links: www.jamesalder.co.uk/madelaine-irwin/ and <https://cambridgefineart.co.uk/product/first-ball-madelaine-irwin/>

There were no more houses between Irwins and West Acre (now No 149 also previously known as Upper Hill House and Westwood). The Meadow that was there was the sports field for the girls at Endsleigh School (then at The Lindens); part of it is now used by the Croquet Club. West Acre was built by a Mr Baker. He owned the top ladies fashion shop in the town; when he left the town he sold the shop and it became Fifth Avenue. The garden of the house went right down to Elianore Road, but of course it has been sold off since then.

If you take a walk along what is now Elianore Road (but which we children called the top path) you will come to a little coppice of sweet chestnut trees. Every year when I lived nearby, from about 1920 to 1925 or 26, a little old lady used to arrive there with her pram, dog and cat and she used to come about the end of April and stay to the end of October if the weather was warm enough. She never interfered with anything and never begged for anything. But there was a mystery. Around the first of the month one of the first Rolls Royces with a uniformed driver, used to come down to the gates and a nicely dressed lady would get out and go along the path to see the old lady, taking a fairly large parcel with her. She would spend an hour or so, then go off. Nobody knew where she came from or where she went. There were all sorts of tales put out about them, but nobody knew if they were true or not. The old lady spent her summers there for five or six years and then we never saw her or the Rolls any more.

When I was born in the Glen House (right - demolished and replaced with new build in 2015) that was the only one there till the Parsonage was built in 1909 (No 1 Glen Avenue - Lexden builder Robert



Beaumont). By then I was three and I spent the first 18 years of my life there. I used to play in the field, fish and bathe in the river and, as I got older, catch anything Mother could cook. In the Summer I used to sit in the orchard where I could look right across the valley and see the trains going in and out of North Station. Of course at that distance they looked like toys. I was sitting there on the Saturday of August 13th about three in



the afternoon when I saw the Cromer express crash (left - it was actually 12th July 1913). I went running in to Mother and said, "Mother, come and look, a train has fell over." She said, "I wonder what on earth you will think of next, boy." I managed to persuade her to come and when she saw the carriages with their end in the air and people the size of dolls running around she had to

agree I had seen it. If it is of interest to any one, the man driving the light engine was Driver French (*Fisher*); the express was driven by Driver Barnet (*Barnard*) and Signalman Kerry (*Fireman Keeble*) was in the station box. Driver Barnet and his Fireman (*Guard Burdett*) were both killed. This accident happened right in front of what is now Woods factory (now a housing estate).

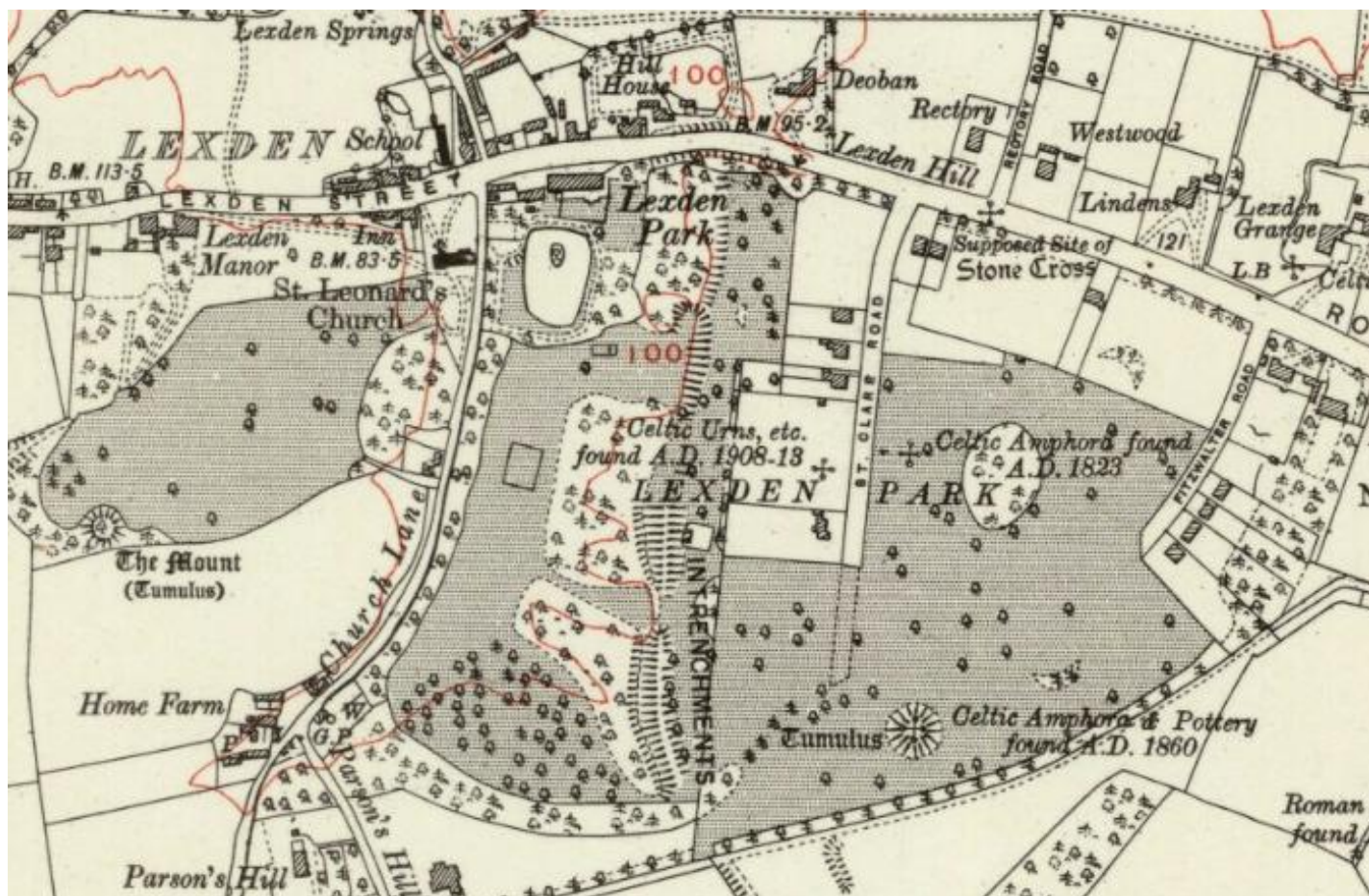
There were only two houses in St Clare Road, lived in by Mrs Richard and Mrs Merriman, both Colonels' widows. (Mrs Richard in 1913 was living at the house called Park Corner and was still there in 1924. Mrs Emily Merriman 1851-1923 moved to The Cottage, St Clare Road, in 1917 after the death of her husband, William.) At the time I am writing about, before the First World War, the only traffic you would see on a Sunday would be the cab from Siggars's Stables in the town drawn by a black horse which came to take Mrs Richard to Stanway church every Sunday. It brought her back and went home itself. (*Ernest Siggers, Carriage Makers, 15 Sir Isaac's Walk*)

The Essex Agricultural Show was held about once in five years on Lexden Park. The machinery went in by Fitzwalter Road, the animals by St Clare Road and the people went in a small gate opposite Glen Avenue, right against that stone which says there was a cross at one time or another. (Recorded by Philip Morant in his 1748 *History of Essex - small marker outside No 100 Lexden Road*). The last show held there was in 1913. My

parents at that time kept a lot of hens on the Park (I don't know why). Every day my sister and I had to go and feed them and bring the eggs home. This, of course, was an excellent arrangement for us kids. We arrived at the St Clare gate to be met by Mr Clark, the Policeman. He very carefully examined our bag to make sure there was nothing dangerous there and let us go. We fed the hens and went to see the Show. The next day he just gave us a nod when we went through, then we went to the Show and made the most of it as that was the last night (it was only a two day show then). Anyway, we came up to the gate; Mr Clark stood looking at us from his imposing height and then he said, "That took they old hens some little time to eat that little corn, didn't it?"

To be continued

Below - OS map 1924 showing extent of Lexden Park



THE AVENUE, COLCHESTER

Dr Fabrizio Casale

Henry Winnock Hayward (HWH) (1825-1893) was a local architect and builder. He was the son of Henry Hammond Hayward himself a builder responsible for erecting the Workhouse (St Mary's Hospital), the Royal Grammar School and St Mary's Terrace East and West on Lexden Road. After working with his father, HWH worked in London where he designed and rebuilt Harrow School and a series of grand houses in Phillimore Place and Kensington. Sadly his glittering career came crashing down with his aspiration to build and sell a group of similarly grand houses in Colchester - The Avenue.

Historically much of the land around Colchester had been bequeathed to various religious institutions which Henry VIII sold off to rich citizens or it was devolved to the borough to be used as "half-yearly land" (burghers could graze their animals *gratis* from Lammas on 1st August to Candlemas on 2nd February). However, from 1807 the impecunious borough started to sell this land. A plot of "6 acres, 2 rods and 20 perches", in what was still called St Botolph's land on the south side of the turnpike road to London (Lexden Road), was sold to Alexander Fordyce Miller (1768-1838), a local clothing merchant, whence to William Blackbone of Hoo Hall, Rivenhall whose descendants sold it at auction at the Cups Hotel on 12th June 1847 to John Taylor (the younger) of West Lodge and George H. Errington, banker. The plot was defined as bordering on the north to the turnpike road, on the south to widow Gonner's land across the pathway that ran from Maldon Rd to Lexden (which still exists in parts), on the east to West Lodge land, and on the west to Isaac Bunting's land (nursery).

In 1850 Taylor divided the plot into twenty lots: 130x50 feet with a road (avenue) 50 feet wide which separated the lots, into ten on each side. All lots were connected to the newly established sewers. They were numbered:



lot 1 on the west side of the avenue - West House was built in 1882 and is now No 26 Lexden Road (*left* - now Lexden Lodge Kindergarten) and lot 20, on the east side - Eastwell House (*below right*) built 1863 and now No 24 Lexden Road. Since both of these two lots fronted on the Lexden Road, they are not considered part of The Avenue.

In 1853 John Taylor put the 20 lots on the market with certain restrictions ie, the dwellings should cost more than £300 to

build, be set back 20 feet from the road with a drive, a palisade in front and a 7 foot wall at the rear. He also retained the rights to any minerals and antique artifacts found.



HWH bought lot 11 where he built a cottage (*left* - now 3 Queens Road) and proceeded over the next few years to build and acquire more lots until by 1859 he had bought all the lots, as well as the Avenue from Taylor for circa £2,500. On 1st January 1859 he mortgaged most to the Bawtree bank for a £5,000 loan and on 13th January he granted the right of way, through the not-mortgaged lot 11 (hence the dog-leg in the road) to Errington who had acquired the widow Gonner's land across the pathway. At about that time HWH seemed to have lost the support of the ruling conservative party.

HWH built in grandiose style. The houses had gault brick exteriors, (except the two "gothic" houses in red brick), hipped slate roofs; large double sash windows with glazing bars; a main and secondary staircase; WC; spacious living rooms with marble fireplaces; cellars; a "knife house" and a gent's toilet at the rear.



On the west side of the avenue, on lots 2 to 10, he built three-storeyed dwellings: a pair of semi-detached now Nos 1 and 3 (*left*); a terrace of 7 semis (*right*) - temporarily giving the road the name of West Terrace Road); a set of 3 semis (*left now Nos 19, 21 and 23*), a pair of "gothic" semis now Nos 10 and 12 and a "gothic" house on lot 10, now No 25 The Avenue (*right*).



On the east side, on lots 19 to 11, he built double-storeyed semis or "villas" (*below left* - Nos 2 and 4).



On lot 11 he had also built a pair of semis (*right*) now No 18 - with corner stone: C. Panton, 28 October 1858) and No 20, both are smaller than the other "villas" have a skylight (like the earlier house at 19 Lexden Road) and both have a separate stable/coach house.



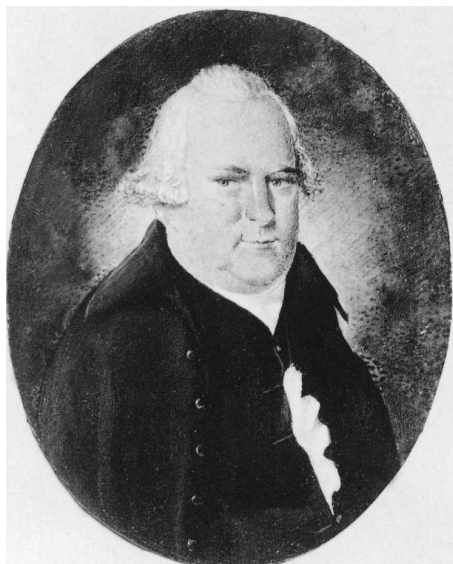
Although some properties had been sold and the others let, HWH was in dire financial straits. He owed Bawtree (Liberal) bank the sum of £7,395 11s 3d and in February 1867 it served a formal notice of default. A year later the bank demanded immediate repayment making HWH bankrupt, but the properties were also secured to his London backers for £14,000. On 4th December 1868 “fifteen first class freehold family residences and semi-detached villas of the West Terrace Rd” were put up for auction at the Cups hotel but only three sold.

In December 1870 John Fredrick Robinson, a solicitor of Hadleigh, undertook to pay the bank £8,463 10s 7d (but still owing £14,000 to the London group) for “five pairs of semis, the whole of the terrace and Eastwell House”. However he also got into financial difficulties still owing the Bawtree bank which in 1879 settled for 6s 8d in the £1 under manager Bright Wool, who eventually by 1891 managed to sell the remaining properties piecemeal by which time the bank had to fold, rescued by the Round Bank.

Who was to blame for the debacle? The Army is often blamed for not buying these houses for its officers, but it had to build barracks for the soldiers, messes for officers and NCOs, and thus tended to billet out the officers, many of whom did indeed move to The Avenue, paying rent but not buying. One can also blame the local wealthy merchants for not buying. His falling out with his former Conservative friends certainly did not help!

Henry Winnock Hayward was a visionary architect and builder who created the most outstanding road in Colchester: The Avenue, whose residents still raise a glass to his memory every year!

COLCHESTER’S ‘HONEST’ LAWYER - FRANCIS SMYTHIES



The Smythies family was large and well-known for generations in the Colchester area as clergymen, lawyers, politicians and surgeons. William Smythies, Rector of St Michael’s Mile End from 1687, was succeeded in 1720 by his son, Palmer, born in 1691 and in 1728 Palmer was admitted to the Freedom of Colchester. Palmer’s son, John, brother of Francis, then succeeded his father in 1773 and in 1776 Francis inherited the patronage of Alpheton in Suffolk which his grandfather, Thomas Smythies, had bought in 1743.

Francis Smythies (*left*) was born in Colchester on 21st August 1742, the sixth child and second son of Rev Palmer Smythies and the first child of his second wife, Elizabeth (née Brazier). At the age of 18 Francis was apprenticed to Samuel Ennew, a local attorney, (today GoodyBurrett) for the colossal sum in those days of £160 instead of the usual £20, possibly with an agreement that he would become a Partner. He must have learnt his subject quickly for he was appointed Town Clerk in September 1767 when Samuel Ennew was elected Mayor. Francis soon became known disparagingly as Colchester’s ‘honest’ lawyer, but was a fascinating if a rather unscrupulous character.

Very early in his career Smythies also earned the epithet ‘Will’ Smythies having tried to alter the will of Henry Ennew Bevan for his own benefit. This episode from about December 1766 is recorded in a document known as Bland’s Anecdotes which is thought to have been written in the late 1830s by Henry Daniel Bland who died in 1851 aged 79. He delighted in recording allegedly scandalous events from late 18th century Colchester. One relates to Francis Smythies who, although young was already an influential figure in the town, but was already not well respected. Bland mentions that Mr Hamilton, a local unsavoury character, was driving his stage coach through Lexden on his way to London. He passed Lexden Park, which at that time was a small house rented by Harry Bevan (master carpenter Henry Ennew Bevan) at £55 annually from John Richardson, an apothecary. Bevan’s sister, Sally, had married a deaf and dumb man, William Turner. Mr Bevan, being very unwell, had sent for Francis Smythies to write his will and as Hamilton clattered past the house, he saw Smythies opening the curtains of Bevan’s bed chamber. Hamilton then said that they were closed so quickly that it raised his suspicions and knowing Smythies’ reputation as the ‘honest Lawyer’ he raced to London in record time and to Turner’s house. Fortunately he was in and on being urged to return to Lexden immediately, drove in a coach and four arriving in time to find that Smythies had written himself in as the principal legatee. Not only that but another will, signed and witnessed, had been made in his wife’s favour and through this he would have inherited the very valuable Bevan estate. Henry Bevan and his family were buried on the north side of Lexden Church before it was rebuilt in 1820 (*below*).

Such anecdotes are always interesting but being written so long after the events their accuracy can be very

questionable. Henry Bevan died in 1766. His sister, Sarah (Sally) was married to a Mr Turner, but Francis Smythies was still very young and would not necessarily have been given such an important will to write. He was also not married until 1771 so the fact that a will was written in his wife's favour in 1766 is also questionable!



From 1764 for three years Smythies lived at 55 High Street, and then moved to another shop at No 3 High Street. He kept that shop even when he moved in 1790 to All Saints at the bottom of the High Street. He always voted for the most radical candidate standing against the Tories and in August 1767 was elected a Common Councillor, then an Alderman in December 1781 and became Mayor the following year. In March 1783 he took great pride in leading the ceremony celebrating the end of the American Wars and is recorded in 1784 as the coroner of Colchester, a post he held for several years.

When Samuel Ennew passed his post as Town Clerk to his ex-apprentice in 1767 he believed it would be in safe hands, but Smythies used his new position to increase his own Tory interests in the borough. This annoyed Ennew who continued to express his unfavourable opinion for many years. His influence as town clerk was enhanced by his role as a legal adviser and he continued to self promote whilst he was Town Clerk.

There were frequent national food riots at this time. Prices had risen since the bad harvest of 1765 and in Colchester wagons of meat, grain and flour were captured by rioters and large numbers of calves bound for the London market were taken to the mayor who ordered their slaughter and sale at 3d a pound. In April 1772 Samuel Ennew, Clerk of the County, was in Bath and the Mayor, Thomas Clamtree, should have taken charge but Smythies told the Lord Lieutenant of Essex that he was part of the Corporation delegation reading the riot act to quell the trouble. However, this action was not in his remit and during the 1789 food riots he even jumped on the wagons and hit out with his whip, forcing them to drive down to the waiting ships at the Hythe!



Smythies' father, Palmer (*left*) who had died in 1776, had been master of the Free Grammar School, but was quite unreliable, and in 1779 Smythies led the Church and Tory party in a heavily contested election for a successor to his father. Palmer had left the school in such a bad state of repair that the trustees were trying to claim against his estate - not an action approved by his lawyer son. In the end the trustees themselves paid out £40 for repairs before the newly elected master, Samuel Parr, assumed responsibility. There were more disputes with the management and Parr left after 18 months enabling Smythies to lead the burgesses and the newly formed Colchester corporation in an action against the trustees saying that they were guilty of mismanagement and had failed to honour the work of Palmer. It was a difficult and confusing time with political and religious divisions evident in the ensuing unpleasant

pamphlet war. The Tories, having persuaded the freemen that their rights were threatened by nonconformists and Whigs, won the day and Smythies led a victory parade round the town, taking the opportunity on the way of harassing his defeated opponents, particularly William Seaber, leader of the opposing faction.

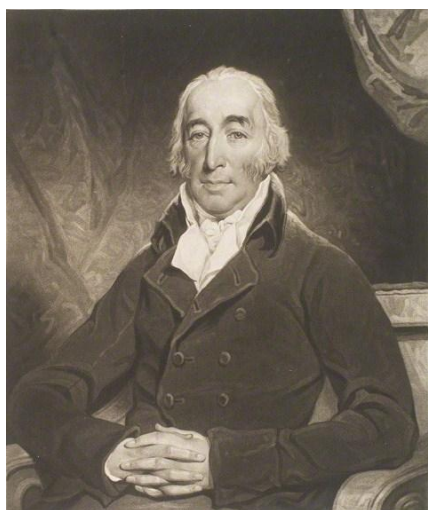
This hard fought struggle over the Free School secured Smythies recognition in the town, enabling him to gather a strong Tory faction around him, but it also confirmed to many that he was ambitious and somewhat devious in his actions, always trying to gain influence both as an attorney and a Tory politician.

Amidst earlier political shenanigans in the mid-1700s the corporation charter had fallen into abeyance leaving little control over the courts and the town and it was not until 1761 that the charter was renewed, but it did not rid the town of intense political rivalry. The new corporation in the old Moot Hall (*right - sketch by Tim Holding*) had to review and reorganise the town's management, especially its finances. The Whig charter mayor, Thomas Clamtree, had held that office six times between 1763 and 1779 but there had to be a compromise between the Tory MP Charles Gray and Whig MP Isaac Rebow. Gray eventually resigned in 1780, mainly because of disagreements involving Francis Smythies, then town clerk, who had not paid salaries or accepted responsibility for billeting soldiers unless he was paid extra. He was known for causing trouble, particularly when Recorder and for many years refused to pay the salary to William Mayhew, Deputy Recorder, even though he (Smythies) was taking a large payment himself.



During the late 1770s Smythies became friendly with the Rebows at Wivenhoe Park and wrote in great detail of all his domestic problems and those with the Borough. Although Isaac Rebow frequently received many complaints against him, Smythies succeeded in continuing his very active and remunerative public life.

Francis Smythies married Jane Strange Norfolk in Cambridge on 26th February 1771 and from 1773 to 1777



they lived in a house at the top of North Hill. Jane was the niece of Bridget Lidgould who, when she died in 1773, directed that Jane and Francis should provide a house 'she shall chuse' at £6 pa annum for her faithful servant, Susan Garood. In 1783 they moved to a large mansion with gardens at 3 Head Street (now Ellisons Solicitors). Smythies by this time was in charge of drawing up land assessments and used his position to ensure that this huge mansion was assessed for less than the North Hill house and for almost half any previous assessment! The house had quite a history for it had been sold by John Osborn, a wealthy client of Smythies, to Richard Twining (*left*) of the tea company for £1,075 10s - a quarter of the amount originally paid by the Osborn family. Richard was the brother-in-law of Francis's sister, Elizabeth, who was married to the Rev Thomas Twining. Smythies, however, was already living in this desirable house and in 1783 the freehold was transferred to him for same sum that Richard Twining had paid to

Osborn, so once again he managed to secure another bargain!

By the mid 1780s Francis was recognised as a very wealthy man and although not always within the law himself he could be quite vindictive as demonstrated in September 1784 when he was the Colchester Recorder. He reported before JP Thomas Boggis that Ippleford Brett of Lexden had several times within the last eight days used in the town a "certain cart with two wheels otherwise than in Husbandry" without having paid the "necessary Duty". Brett was convicted a week later and ordered to pay 50s and 5s costs, a considerable sum in those days. The law stated that "Carts used wholly in the affairs of husbandry or trade are not chargeable with this duty, if used for no other purpose than the owner or any of his servants riding thereon or therein, when laden; or when returning from or going for a load; or conveying the owner or family to divine service, on Sundays; or conveying persons to and from elections". Smythies was probably correct but quite ruthless!

Another local man used by Smythies was currier Edward Capstack. He had the tannery in St Peters parish later moving to 58 High Street. When Smythies was town clerk, Capstack was one of the seven "middling sort of tradesmen" made honorary free burgesses on 29th August 1785 and immediately promoted to aldermen to gain a Tory majority in the corporation. Other men included in this clever manipulation were Bezaliel Angier and William Argent, who a week later was made Mayor. Edward Capstick became Mayor in 1787.

There was further manipulation in 1787 when the dying recorder, William Mayhew, nominated his deputy, James Grimwood, as his successor. Smythies had his loyal followers and an open letter dated 17th November 1787 was sent from "An Independent and impartial Free Burgess to the rest of the Free Burgesses of the Borough of Colchester," advocating his (Smythies) appointment as Recorder of Colchester. Part of it reads as follows: "The vacancy of the Recordership, an event which cannot be at a very great distance, will make to you the most important crisis of any that hath taken place since your acceptance of the new Charter. The embarrassed situation of your finances and other matters are of the most serious Consideration. Three persons have been talked of as successors to Mr (*William*) Mayhew - Sir Robert Smyth, Mr Smythies, the Town Clerk, and Mr (*John*) Grimwood, Magistrate, and by far the greatest part of the Corporate body I find most warmly wish Mr Smythies to succeed to the office of Recorder".

It continues "... The greatest objection I have heard against him is that he is too sanguine in his temper, and too violent in carrying his party measures into execution; and though perhaps a character with less spirit might be more generally popular, yet would it be less adapted to our present perilous situation. In the course of the twenty years that he has exercised the office of Town Clerk whenever I have had occasion to ask his advice he has always given it to me gratis With respect to his behaviour in the Hall, whenever our rights to ... other public matters have been under consideration, you must have made your own observations, and I dare say they have been such as have done him Credit, both as a Townsman and a Brother Burgess."

Francis Smythies immediately challenged the deputy recorder John Grimwood for the post of recorder and was appointed by the Tory mayor but Grimwood brought a legal challenge against the decision and although he managed to secure the recordership, Smythies still acted as recorder until forced out in 1790. He appointed

scrivener Isaac Diss to temporarily replace him as Town Clerk and it was noticeable that Diss did not use the position to help him politically! Years later in 1814, Thomas Lowton, a King's Bench attorney, who had acted for Smythies in this challenge, died and Colchester Corporation, a notoriously bad payer, was being sued for £796 13s 8d for outstanding bills from this episode. On being forced to step down as recorder Smythies returned as the Tory supported Town Clerk for another eight years with Bezaliel Angier as his assistant.

Francis Smythies did have some admirers in the town, one of whom was fellow Tory, James Boggis, who in 1759 had taken an apprenticeship with his uncle in London as a grocer, and is recorded as becoming a free burgess in Colchester in 1765. He was later recorded as a gentleman. He died in 1787 and in his will left, with twelve others, a one guinea mourning ring to Frances Smythies. These were popular during Georgian times and were specially made by mourners to memorialise their loved ones frequently incorporating the woven hair of the person who had died and often enabled the wearer to display wealth and status.

Elections were fought vigorously and in 1788 on the death of the local MP Edmund Affleck there was a strongly contested by-election. The Government candidate, who was also sponsored by the corporation and especially Francis Smythies, was George Jackson (*right*), and the opposition candidate was George Tierney. The erstwhile friend of Smythies, Samuel Ennew, reported to Lord Hardwicke: "The number on both sides was exactly equal, Mr. Jackson and Mr. Tierney having polled 640 each. Had Mr. Jackson been introduced in any other manner than by Mr. Smythies, I am fully persuaded in my own mind he would have been elected by a considerable majority, but Smythies ... had rendered himself obnoxious to numbers of the burgesses, that many of them gave their votes to Mr. Tierney rather in opposition to him than to Mr. Jackson." Mayor Bezaliel Angier, the returning officer, and Smythies had manipulated the vote by opening and closing the poll and creating more new voting burgesses and Angier, not Smythies, was charged with misconduct. The seat, after much petitioning, was awarded to Tierney who held the Colchester seat for two years only to be succeeded for six years by George Jackson, who in 1791 was created 1st Baronet and in 1797 assumed by Royal Licence, the name and arms of his second wife's uncle, becoming Sir George Duckett, 1st Baronet.



That same year Bezaliel Angier became Mayor and although Angier had always supported Smythies, he was played a rather spiteful trick when he was to present an address on bended knee to King George III (*left*) at St James's Palace. Smythies had advised Angier not to show his "want of breeding by misplaced timidity" telling him how to conduct himself, how to rise and wipe his mouth with a silk handkerchief. That morning Smythies had slipped a "hull of pork fat" into Angier's pocket and on withdrawing his handkerchief as advised by Smythies, the fat landed at the foot of the throne. Fortunately for the embarrassed Angier, the Court was crowded and it was only witnessed by the accompanying members of Colchester Corporation. Did he ever know who was responsible for his mortification?

Smythies continued his machinations in Ipswich as scrutineer at the 1791 heated elections for their Bailiffs and other corporation officials. The following year Samuel Ennew and Stephen Betts resigned from Colchester Corporation because of the "unruly piracy" of the Tories, particularly Smythies.

It was regularly being demonstrated that Smythies was more adept at handling his own affairs than those of others. In his official capacity as Town Clerk in 1793 he was dealing with the prosecution of a local baymaker, Richard Patmore, who was accused of distributing seditious literature (Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*) in response to Pitt's legislation at the outbreak of war with France. A total of £1,100 in sureties had been raised by many local men but the matter was eventually quashed by the Recorder, Francis Smythies, on a technicality (what's new?) and the reason given was that the indictment only mentioned the parish of St Martin's and not Colchester. The Treasury solicitor "Was never more vexed". In another matter when Rev Robert Dingley of Beaumont-cum-Moze died in March 1793, his will and papers included a note stating that Mr F Smythies held an account against him but Dingley apparently was never told how much. Letters were found to support Smythies, but Dingley had also claimed that he had asked for years if he could settle the account.

Francis Smythies died on 27th July 1798 and is buried at Mile End, Colchester. His uncharacteristically short and straightforward will left everything to his wife, Jane, and included many properties, mostly inns, near the barracks. These were sold off as was the lease on New Quay, Hythe, but a farm at Great Bentley remained with



the family. When Jane died in 1824 the extent of his property holdings became apparent. He had acquired 3 Head Street (*left - now Headgate Court*) when his father died and then he purchased further property in Head Street as well as farms in Great Bentley, Thorrington, St Osyth, Clacton and Ardleigh as well as an estate in Wilburton, Cambridgeshire and properties in St Mary Magdalen parish, Colchester. Another house on the corner of Culver Street and Lion Walk was probably lived in by his son, Francis. He also had the enormous sum in those days of £8,000 in securities and other money.

Francis Smythies was always a controversial figure in Colchester in the second half of the eighteenth century. He had come from more modest origins but soon became a leading figure in the town's political life. Although a very able man, he was not well-liked or respected but known more as devious, unscrupulous, ambitious, cantankerous and sometimes violent although was also known to be entertaining, if frequently unpleasant. His questionable methods, fickle charm and money soon enabled him to become a dominant figure in Colchester and earn a place in the town's history.

LHG Newsletter No 57

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic the usual printing and distribution of this newsletter is not possible, so is being sent to members by e-mail. We hope to return to our normal format in September!

Jackie Bowis – Membership and Speaker Secretary

Membership Over the past three year's membership numbers have been constant. Each year a few people have not renewed their membership but new members have joined the group. To date we have 87 paid up members with on average 45 people attending each meeting. We try to keep members involved through the quarterly newsletter and during the lockdown through the e newsletter - thanks to Liz.

Speakers Unfortunately I had to postpone the following planned speakers for the monthly meetings.

April – Dr Jane Pearson – Prostitution in Colchester

May - Eve Regelous – Everything Stops for Tea

June – Peter Jones – Night Mail

July – Patrick Denney – A Portrait of Victorian Colchester

The speakers have all agreed to rearrange the dates for these talks once we are able to meet up again as a group. I also have a number of speakers to approach for next years' programme.

Your Committee

Chairman

Stan Kordys 01206 502282

s.kordys@ntlworld.com

Secretary

Liz White 01206 522713

alangwhite187444@hotmail.com

Treasurer

Melvin White 01206 575351

melvin.s.white@btinternet.com

Membership Secretary

jebowis50@gmail.com

Refreshments

Sonia Lewis 01206 579950

sonialewis@waitrose.com

Magazine Joint Editors

Liz White / Jackie Bowis

alangwhite187444@hotmail.com

Archivist

Bernard Polley 01206 572460

heath86end@aol.com

General Members

Dick Barton 01206 573999 dickbartonlex@gmail.com,

Ian Bowis 01206 561528