
A S H O R T H I S T O R Y O F E L S E N H A M

Reading through the Parish Records is like trying to find your way out of a maze. The earliest records that we have show us that the Domesday Survey noted that Takeley and Elsenham formed part of the most densely wooded district in Essex for "they feed between them 3500 swine". In Elsenham, the destruction of woodland was gradually progressive and between 1066 and 1086 the number of swine fell from 1300 to 1000.

Elsenham has also been called Alsenham, Elsingham and Elsynham and was probably owned at some time by someone called Alsa or Elsing.

In Edward the Confessor's time a freewoman named Mereuna and a man called Lestan owned the land, which was made up of 4 hides (a hide was a measure of land which would support 1 free family and their dependants with 2 ploughs, 8 villeins (tenants) and 5 serfs. There were 12 acres of meadow and 1 mill, 220 sheep, 8 cows, 60 swine, 1 rouncey and 1 colt. It was worth £6 then, and £8 at the time of the survey when John, the nephew of Waleran, and Robert Gernon owned the land. John's share included the corn mill.

It is at this time that we find the earliest records of Elsenham Church, when in 1070 John, nephew of Waleran, gave it as an endowment to the Abbey of St Stephen at Caen in Normandy. This gift was confirmed by Henry I in 1100, by Henry II in 1154 and by Richard I in 1189.

It was during Richard I's reign that the church, now with a chancel and nave, was given to the Benedictine Priory of Walden by Beatrice, Lady Say. It is not known exactly when the present church was built but we do know that it was built on the site of an earlier Saxon church.

Soon after the conquest, the Lordship of Elsenham belonged to the noble family of de Abrincis or d'Auranche, Baron of Folkestone in Kent. It remained in the family until 1230, when it passed to a Son-in-law, Hamo de Crevequer. He died in 1262, leaving the estate to his daughter Isabel and her husband, Henry de Gant.

In 1248 Guy de Rochford held a licence for free warren in his manors of Elsenham and Berden. He held in this parish, owned now by Lord William de Say, 1 messuage (dwelling house and outbuildings), 330 acres of arable land, 6 acres of meadow, 20 acres of pasture and 20 of wood. Guy de Rochford died in 1274.

The manor was then held by the ancient family of Walden and during this time 'Wetherhall' or 'Newhall' was built. It was so named to distinguish it from the earlier manor, the identity of which seems to have been lost. When John Walden died in 1419, we find that the records noted that 'Newhall' was made up of 1 toft (homestead) and 200 acres of arable land.

From the Walden family the manor passed to the family of John Barley, from Barley in Hertfordshire. His grandson William later forfeited the estate for supporting Perkin Warbeck in his rebellion, but it was afterwards given back by Henry VII and William was pardoned in 1500. He died on 17 March 1520 and was buried in the chancel of the church together with his wife, Elizabeth. In 1607, their descendant, Thomas Barley was declared a lunatic. His brother-in-law Henry Wiseman was appointed guardian and lived in the manor

with his wife Mary who was the sister of Thomas. She was buried in the church in 1635.

From the Barley family the manor passed to the Adams family (one of whom, Thomas, was buried in the floor of the chancel in 1670) and then to Bayley Heath of Stansted.

It is not known from the church records what the population of Elsenham was at this time, but a later summary of baptisms tells us that between 1732 and 1756 there were 184 children baptised in Elsenham. The most popular girl's name was Mary and the most popular boy's name was John.

From "A History of Essex", published in 1770 by 'A Gentleman', we learn that 'Elsenham was divided from Stansted Mountfitchet by a small stream that turned an overshot corn mill. ' The mansion adjoining the church was called Netherhall or Newhall, being the property of William Heath of Stansted Hall. The Rectory which had been built in Richard I's reign was now a manor which with advowson, about the time of the Restoration had been purchased by William Canning Esq. His son, George, and then later in 1757, his grandson John, succeeded him.

In 1756, John Rayner (presumably a son of Thomas Rayner who had been vicar since 1731) left £30 to be applied to schooling poor children, but no interest was paid after 1809 and the original sum was supposed to have been lost. It was also noted that John Wells Had left three cottages and an orchard, the rents of which were to provide clothing for the poorest. Rental of the cottages was then £9.

Elsenham landowners in 1768 included Thomas Dimsdale, John Gurson, Clement Barker, John Howlet, Samuel Scott, Charles Hancock, John Chapman and William Crigson.

From the records of the church, we know that the chancel and nave were built early in the 12th century. The chancel arch is about 850 years old and it was originally spanned by a rood screen which separate the nave from the chancel. The screen was surmounted by a rood loft or gallery, access to which was by the stone staircase in the north wall of the chancel. Mortice holes on the underside of the arch and adjacent tie-beam can still be seen. Some 300 years later the tower was built with a small spire. It was also in the 15th century that the nave roof was renewed and several of the windows were enlarged. The south porch was added about 1500 and in the 19th century, a small north porch, now used as a vestry, was added.

One item of interest in the church registers is an entry dated February 1795, when John Brand, aged 69, was buried. It was noted that he was 'ignorantly reputed to be a wizard.'

Between 1801 and 1848, the population of Elsenham rose from 349 to 491. The Northern & Eastern railway was opened between 1840 and 1845, extending from Stratford to Ely and it ran in close company with the Newmarket Turnpike. In 1847, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert rode through the village in the train on their way from Tottenham to Cambridge. Elsenham station was then at Fullers End but it was removed to its present site soon after it was built because the gradient from Fullers End was too steep for the engines to start off on their journey to Cambridge.

In 1848, George Rush, Lord of the Manor, who lived at the Hall, owned most of the 1825 acres. The Hall at that time was described as a 'large brick mansion with embattled walls and tasteful gardens'. Thomas Canning was then vicar.

Between 1851 and 1891, the population of Elsenham decreased from 517 to 423. Excavation work carried out in the late 19th century showed that Elsenham Hall is on the site of the ancient manor hall, but it is not known exactly when the present hall was built.

In 1876, on the death of Mrs Rush, grandmother of George Rush (the great-grandson of the former George Rush) the property was let on lease to Walter Gilbey, who later made improvements to the Hall.

The school had been built in 1863/5, financed by Miss Rush and later the first Elsenham Post Office was opened in the school room. When John Bourne retired as schoolmaster, he moved into the house next to the village pump, taking the Post Office with him. The Post Office later moved to Bert Caton's, next to the Crown and stayed there for four or five years before transferring to the crossroads.

While Walter Gilbey lived at the Hall, the Prince of Wales was a frequent visitor and on December 11th 1889, he also brought with him Sir Randolph Churchill and several other dignitaries. In 1892, Walter was made a baronet because of his famous achievements as a breeder of the shire horse.

In 1891 he had founded what is now known locally as the 'Jam Factory' At that time, fruits grown in the orchards of Elsenham Hall were made into preserves in the kitchens there. Lavender was also grown and used in the making of Lavender Water. Sir Walter was also a partner with his brother Arthur in the wine and spirits industry and they founded the company now known as Gilbey Vintners and based in Harlow. Sir Walter was responsible for the building of several houses in the village, including the village policeman's house in Park Road where Mr & Mrs Blows now live, and in 1881 the Community Centre.

He had the village pump built around the turn of the century in memory of his wife who died in 1896. During the First World War, the gold leafed dome of the pump had to be covered by a tarpaulin.

At the turn of the century, the churchyard was closed by Act of Parliament and people in the village who died had to be buried elsewhere. The cemetery was first used in December 1901, the land having been given by Sir Walter Gilbey.

Park Road, next to the pump, was originally made to be a private road for Sir Walter to get to the railway station without having to cross the lines with the horse drawn carriage, but he died in November 1914, before it was completed. He was buried in Bishops Stortford cemetery in the family grave. The gold leafed gates in Park Road were sold for scrap during the Second World War.

Sir Walter was succeeded by one of the ten children, Henry Walter Gilbey. He did not spend much time at the Hall and in 1922 the estate was split up and sold.

In 1934, the dome of the pump was again painted gold, but during the Second War it had to be camouflaged. During that war, a plane dropped six bombs in Elsenham. One landed beyond the sandpits, another in the swimming pool at Elsenham place, a third in the meadow alongside, the fourth in the cemetery, the fifth in Miss Waterman's garden in Station Road, and the last in Alsa Woods. None exploded and it was believed that the Polish people who had to make the bombs had filled them with sand and sawdust instead of explosive!

More recently in March 1965, Broom Farm in Station Road was burnt down. This had been an Elizabethan beamed house originally known as Broom Manor and had been mentioned in the Domesday Book. The last person to live there was a Mr George Gane.

Since that time the village of Elsenham has changed considerably with orchards, fields, meadows and allotments Giving way to new housing estates.

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Notes on this Document.

1. Original document produced by Kathleen M Ellis circa 1982-83. (In 2010 Mrs Ellis was living at Grailings, Park Road, Elsenham.)
2. Page 3 Paragraph 2, Line 5: "Bert Caton's, next to the Crown". The village stores at Elsenham Cross. Premises leased to Bertram Harold Caton, known as Bert in the mid 1930s until he retired in 1954.

This information taken from A History of Elsenham the First 1,000 Years, contribution from Gordon W Barker in 1997

3. Page 3 Paragraph 4 Line 9 "the village policeman's house in Park Road where Mr & Mrs Blows now live" – said to be "Curmes Rest" the first property on the Eastern side of Park Road when entering from the High Street.

Naturally times have moved on and when this document was reproduced in 2010, 'Curmes Rest' was the home of Mr and Mrs Terry.

4. Page 3 Paragraph 8 Line 5/6 ".the fifth in Miss Waterman's garden in Station Road,.." exact location needs to be researched.