

The **ESSEX** *Countryside*



THE COUNTY

MAGAZINE

Vol. 2 No. 6

WINTER 1953-54

PRICE 1s. 3d.



Autumn morning near Terling. Photograph by John Tarlton.

THE ESSEX COUNTRYSIDE

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Printed and published by Letchworth Printers Ltd., Norton Way North, Letchworth. Telephone : Letchworth 1000, 1001 & 1011
Subscription : Two years 10/-, one year 5/- (abroad extra). Published quarterly (first Friday of February, May, August and November)

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The Editor welcomes articles and photographs of county interest, together with letters and photographs for the "Readers' Forum." The latter should be marked "Readers' Forum." He will also welcome comments on this magazine and suggestions from readers. Typed MSS. should be double spaced, please.



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Canewdon Church, in the centre of "the witch country." From an engraving dated 1815 from a painting by G. Arnald, A.R.A., by courtesy of the Essex Record Office.

Canewdon

AND ITS WITCHES

by Harold Adshead

A LITTLE off the beaten track, Canewdon lies some four miles north of Rochford. It was once a small market town with its five manors and its Guild of St. Anne, which used to maintain a light in the seventy-five-foot tower of the fifteenth-century parish church of St. Nicholas to serve as a beacon to seamen and fishing folk along the nearby Essex coast and in the Thames estuary.

Many explanations have been advanced as to the etymology of Canewdon.

Perhaps the most romantic is the suggestion that it is a corruption of Canute's Dune (or Hill), as it is generally accepted that Canute encamped here the night before his last great fight with his pursuing adversary, Edmund Ironside, on October 18, 1016, which was fought in the valley between Ashingdon and the hill on which Canewdon stands.

IN medieval times, when witchcraft was prevalent, Essex seemed to have more than its share of witches, and the district around Canewdon was widely known as "the witch country."

Many legends have been woven around

witches, but in point of fact they were often mental invalids, subject to hysterical delusions, and when on trial would often voluntarily confess to almost any crime.

They would admit responsibility for the deaths of neighbours by casting spells, having unholy communion with the Devil, and changing into animal shape.

The witches' meetings were called sabbaths and seemed to consist of revels, eating and drinking, dancing and licentiousness. They were usually held at a distance from the village, and many witches claimed to fly on broomsticks to attend.

Modern analysis of statements made during trials reveals that many went on foot but were in such a state of nervous stress bordering on somnambulism as to produce the delusion of flying.

AN authentic account of a trial of a Canewdon witch may be found in the proceedings of the Essex Summer Sessions and general jail delivery held at Canewdon on July 25, 1580, which records:

"Rose Pye of Canneydon, spinster, on 30th June at Canneydon bewitched Joan Snow aged 1 year, daughter of Richard

The district around Canewdon was known as "the witch country" in medieval times. A strong belief in witches persisted in south-east Essex as late as the last century, and there was a "witch-finder" at Hadleigh until his death just over ninety years ago.

Snow of Canneydon, who languished until 20th August following, when she died at Canneydon."

In local folk-lore there is a saying that as long as Canewdon church steeple lasts there will always be six witches in Canewdon, three in silk and three in cotton, one being the parson's wife and one the butcher's wife. It was also believed that when a witch died a stone fell out of the church wall, and the witch was immediately replaced by another.

A story was told of a Canewdon girl who went to keep house for her uncle at Woodham Ferrers, but, she being one of the witches, the uncle knew no peace during her stay, as nothing in the house would keep still.

AS late as the nineteenth century, a strong belief in witches persisted in this locality and in south-east Essex generally, and many stories are told of a local "witch-finder" who became a famous, if somewhat terrifying, figure in these parts.

His name was James Murrell, but throughout Essex he was known as "Cunning" Murrell. He was born at Rayleigh, but lived and died at Hadleigh.

By profession a shoemaker, he augmented his income by fortune-telling, locating stolen property, discovering thieves, and detecting witches. He was supposed to be able to call out the Canewdon witches at will.

Practising as a herbalist, he used to administer drugs and potions extensively, and many people travelled far to consult him, though there was a great dread of his reputed occult powers.

If patients complained that they were making no progress, he used to say:

"Oh! but she is a strong one [meaning the witch], but I can get the better of her for another half-a-crown."

Murrell used much ingenuity in devising weird apparatus to practise his spells and to make witch-bottles to trap witches.

Despite his intensive incursions into necromancy, Murrell appeared to have been a man of strong religious convictions.

He had a habit of using forms of prayer before beginning a charm, and on his death-bed at Hadleigh in 1860 he emphatically denied that he had ever deceived, but had a convinced belief in his own special powers.

After his death, prodigious correspondence revealed farmers wanting relief from damage to crops, women jealous of their spouses and young girls seeking husbands.

A strange account of Murrell's death was told by a local man who boasted that he "did" for the witch-finder. He related how he believed that Murrell had be-devilled his donkey, and caused its death. So he got a bottle and placed some of the donkey's hair inside it together with some of his own nail-parings. He then threw the bottle into the fire, and when it burst a loud banging was heard at the door. He ignored it, and the next day "Cunning" Murrell was found dead.

A novel described as a romance of rural Essex in the early nineteenth century was published in 1900 under the title *Cunning Murrell*, the author being Arthur Morrison (1863-1945), famous for *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894) and *Child of the Jago* (1896).

Legend and folk-lore die hard, for even today in Essex one can hear the saying that there will be witches in Leigh for a hundred years, three in Hadleigh for ever and nine in Canewdon, and we may conclude by following the Canewdon witches in poetic fancy:

THE WITCHES OF CANEWDON

*When the moon is high on a winter's night,
And the storm-clouds hang o'er
Canewdon Hill,*

*Six witches, they say, can be seen there
still,*

*Riding the wind with the gale at its height :
Then folk fast asleep awake with a fright,
As their blood is seized with a sudden
chill,*

*By curious sounds uncanny and shrill,
While over the moon loom shadows in
flight.*

*They are bound for their secret rendezvous,
Beside the lower reaches of the Crouch ;
Where steaming cauldrons seethe with
magic brew,*

*To swell the fortune in their toad-skin
pouch,
And when the commerce of the night is
through,*

*They circle homeward to their hillside
couch.*

*Stock Church from the south-east,
showing the portion of wall rebuilt
after the bomb fell in the church-
yard in 1940. Photograph by N.
D. Whibley.*

STOCK CHURCH

by G. M. Whibley

THE small village of Stock, about four miles from Billericay, hides itself cooly in a cluster of trees, reluctant to reveal itself until the very last minute. Unheralded by even the large sails of its disused wind-mill or the grey tower of its church, there is nothing to indicate its presence to the traveller, until, unsuspecting, he suddenly stumbles on it round the corner.

It may be a shaft of sunlight glinting on the ancient dragon weather-vane, or a glimpse of grey through the trees, that will be the first announcement of the church; then it is there, a solid wooden tower standing back from the road on the brow of a hill. Still shy, the body of the church takes refuge behind the bulk of the tower, only emerging reluctantly as the traveller ascends the triangular-shaped grassy slope leading up to the churchyard.

Staring incongruously from flint-covered walls, some of which were probably built at the time of the Norman Conquest, a large area of cement greets the eye, a grim reminder of the last war. For this is the result of damage caused by a bomb which fell in the churchyard on December 13, 1940. Besides making a large crater with consequent damage to tombstones, this bomb severely shook the church, taking off the roof, shattering all the windows and damaging the tracery on the south and east walls. Although a large sum of money has been spent on repairing the damage, it has not yet been possible to cover this bald area of cement with flints to match the rest of the church.

LARGE-SCALE restoration has been carried out both before and since the bombing. The porch has been restored both times but the woodwork is still the original, being about 400 years old. The chancel and the roof of the nave have also been restored, but the roof of the north aisle remains as a splendid example of the work of the fifteenth century. The altar rails, too, originally given nearly two hundred years ago by William Unwin, rector at that time, have been subject to reconstruction and a new gate has been made.

During the restoration work it was dis-

covered that the boards and joists of the nave were unsound and the whole of the church was refloored. At the same time new pews were introduced, allowing the whole of the pillars to be seen instead of being hidden behind the pews as formerly. A piece of the old flooring engraved with the carpenter's name is preserved among other relics in the belfry.

The gallery now occupied by the organ is also a recent restoration. Prior to this the organ occupied what is now the Lady chapel, which was built as recently as 1904 as an organ chamber. It was then that a little doorway, probably the oldest in the church, was discovered. There are no traces remaining of the rood-loft to which it originally led.

The restoration work brought to light many interesting things, among them an old church clock. This was brought down to its present position on the floor of the tower from a small room in the belfry, where it had probably been standing for about a hundred years. Although it has no hands it is interesting to watch its ancient mechanism laboriously and ponderously ticking away the minutes and striking the hours on a tenor bell.

The tower itself is constructed entirely of wood, as is to be expected in a county once thickly wooded but starved of stone. The huge beams forming its supporting arches are naturally curved and give the structure a massive solidity. Steep steps, again wooden, in one corner lead up to the belfry. The three bells to be found here were struck in 1577, 1799 and 1847, and still, despite the bomb's efforts to dislodge them, they ring out their Sunday call to prayer as they have done through the centuries.

STILL, too, the church stands, a symbol of faith, on a site where it is possible that a church has stood for a thousand years. It may not be one of the most historic churches in Essex, it may not be one of the most grandiose, but it is certainly one of the best examples of rural peace and courageous simplicity. It may glide thankfully and swiftly out of the sight of the departing traveller, but it will not be forgotten.



similar stones to communicate with him. He received so many replies that in his second edition he printed a number of them at the end of the book. One contains an account, dated 1856, which Lord Braybrooke had sent to a publication called *Notes and Queries* and reads as follows:

"Some years ago there was still to be seen in a meadow belonging to me, situate near the north-western boundary of the Parish of Littlebury, in Essex, a large stone, the name of which and the traditions attached to it are identical with those recorded by your correspondents, treating of Hangman Stones. This stone was subsequently removed by the late Mr.

pond, as well as erecting a combined summer-house and museum with a mock fortress facade. But the above note in Oliver Wendell Holmes's book is the only hint that I have seen of the addition of the Hangman's Stone to the garden.

It appears that in at least six different places in this country there are such stones, and in each case the same story is told, to the effect that a sheep stealer (in one instance it is a deer stealer) one night seized a sheep, tied its legs together, passed the rope over his head and started for home. Passing a stone of a convenient height for the purpose, he backed against it and rested his burden on the stone for a while. Un-

THE ROMANY IN ESSEX

EPPING Forest, formerly known as The Forest of Essex, has been called "The Romance of London." Not a small part of the romance of the forest is its association with the Romany folk, or gipsies.

George Borrow, the great student of gipsy lore, tells us in "Romano Lavo Lil" ("Word Book of the Gipsy Language") that there was no place in the world for gipsies like Epping Forest. A gipsy queen once told him: "Them that wants to see Romany chals [gipsy lads] should go to the Forest, especially to the Bald-faced Hind on the hill above Fairlop, on the day of Fairlop Fair. It is their trysting-place, as you would say, and there they musters from all parts of England, and there they whoops, dances, and plays, keeping some order nevertheless, because the Rye of all the Romans is in the house, seated behind the door."

Borrow also tells in "Romano Lavo Lil" of a young gipsy woman, whose identity was unknown, who used to attend Fairlop Fair. She was very beautiful, but, he says, "she was always quite alone among the gipsies. She was always to be found near the Bald-faced Hind on the first Friday in July, dressed in a red cloak and a large beaver. She told fortunes behind the trees. Her language was of the most horrible kind. She used to go to Goodwood, where she could be seen standing by the carriage of a countess, telling her fortune with the voice of a pythoness. She then was dressed in a beautiful riding dress, her hair fantastically plaited and adorned with pearls." Sometimes she was dressed in black silk. She had a deep, musical voice. Borrow did his best to find out who she was, but never succeeded.

The Wanstead Flats was also a great place for gipsies, some of the well-known Gipsy Lees and Gipsy Smiths (including the world-famous evangelist) living there.

HAINAULT Forest, Chigwell Row, was also the camping ground of many gipsies until the London County Council took over the forest. The gipsies were then turned off, and went to settle at Eastwood, near Southend-on-Sea, where they bought a large piece of land which still contains a gipsy camp.

When they were at Hainault they were great thieves. They used to waylay children going to school in the mornings and steal their dinners.

In one Essex village there lived a gipsy of the Lee family who was held in great repute. Her curse was feared and her blessing respected. At one house where she used to call the good wife was always very careful never to offend her, and always offered her a cup of tea. All the same, she never wished her to step over the threshold, so, when she saw her coming, she would call to her little boy to run quickly and put the scissors or a table knife under the doormat, for it was thought that a gipsy would never step over steel.

At another house in the same village Gipsy Lee was refused a cup of tea one day. "Ah, right," said the gipsy, "then all your sons will wear the red coat." All three sons became soldiers, and not one prospered.

Many are the strange tales in Essex of the cunning and roguery of the Romanies, or "Didacoyes" as they are called in the county and round about. Nevertheless there is something romantic and fascinating about them, in evidence of which attraction one of the most romantic holidays we can think of is a caravan trip—in imitation of the Romany folk.

[Condensed from "Essex, Its Forest, Folk and Folklore," by C. C. Mason.]



The Walden Hangman's Stone built into the side of a summer-house in the garden of Walden Grove. Photograph by David Campbell.

Jabez Gibson to Saffron Walden and still remains in his garden in that place. I have a strong impression that other "Hangman's Stones" are to be met with elsewhere, but I am unable to point out the exact localities."

Now it was Jabez Gibson who, in 1828, built Elm Grove (now known as Walden Grove) and he devoted a great deal of attention to the spacious garden, introducing a number of unusual trees and a fish

fortunately for him, the struggles of the kicking animal caused it to slip over the opposite side of the stone, strangling him with the rope with which it was tied. When morning came there they were discovered hanging—one at either side of the stone. An indentation runs across the top of the stone and, of course, this indentation was made by the friction of the rope caused by the struggles of the dying man and the sheep!