

6. CHURCH, SCHOOL AND MEADOW

The area near the church is one of the most interesting. Dickinson in his guide to the church says it must always have been quite isolated and suggests it may stand in a pagan Saxon site, using as evidence the look of the place and a lost Domesday name, Thunreslau (Thunderlow), meaning Thunor's Hill. Thunor was a Saxon god. Thunreslau was the name of a Domesday half hundred which comprised the manors of Ballingdon, Binesley (in Bulmer) and Belchamp Walter. He may be right about this, but we think he may be wrong about the isolation. There have been dwellings near it for some centuries and it seems certain that the early parsonage was here near the church.

Recent vicars and curates have lived elsewhere but the map of 1808 shows a barn and other buildings in 'Vicarage Yards'. There are also three large fishponds which were only filled in recently. Some cottages near the church were known as "1,2 & 3 the Vicarage" in the 19th Century and the 1871 census gives thirty one people as living near the church. In 1840 a wheelwright and a carpenter had their premises to the east of the church and a building there is marked on the tithe map as Rectory Barn Homestead. A number of cottages and the old school have been pulled down in the last twenty years. In 1806 the Tithe Barn and a cottage called The Parsonage stood here.

One Vicar strewed...

The early parsons were Rectors. Some of them were Fitz Ralphs, a family which held manors and land locally, including the scattered Punts and Bonnetts manor. Then in 1425 the living at Bulmer was 'appropriated' when some of the tithe was diverted to the monastery of Bruisyard in Suffolk. At that time the Vicar to be appointed was given the small tithes, some grain each year from the large tithes and use of most of the parsonage buildings. His vicarage consisted of "one hall with two chambers annex'd, a bake house, kitchen and larder house, one chamber for his servant, a stable and a hay sollar with one competent garden". Those interested in mediaeval houses will find this an interesting description. The rent of Parsonage Wood on the Hedingham Road seems to have been allocated by the Abbess of Bruisyard so that her tenant could pay the cost of the lights in the chancel. This is an old wood with lime trees in it, good indicators of antiquity. The vicar had to pay for his vestments to be washed and for the church to be strewed (with straw or rushes).

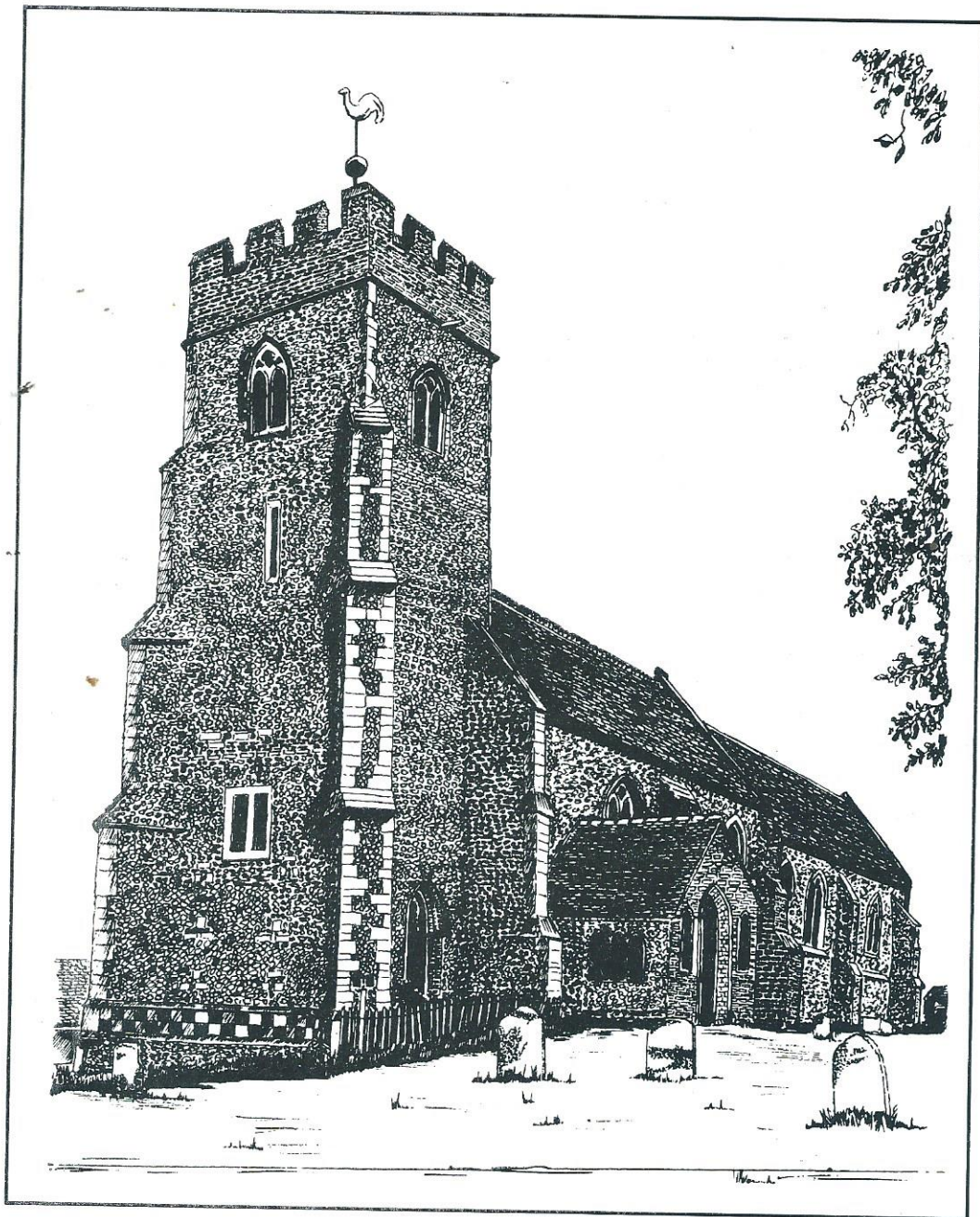
...and others strayed

At and after the Dissolution by Henry VIII, the living must have deteriorated still further. The Daniels of Grandon Hall, who owned and presented to the living at first, lost the right of patronage because they were Roman Catholics. Afterwards there followed, according to the Puritan historians, a number of "ignorant, non preaching vicars of scandalous life". The Otten parson used to go to Hedingham to get drunk but we are not told what the Bulmer ones did.

By 1637 the Vicarage had left to it but two acres of ground and part of that was in ponds (see above) and orchards beside the churchyard and about 21 acres of Glebe belonging to the Parsonage. Because the living was poor, it had to be augmented during the time of the Puritan priests appointed by Parliament.

Thomas Bernard seems to have had a long, Vicar of Bray-like, run, right from 1646 through to 1708. On the rood stairway is a wall scratching which could show him in the Puritan collar, breeches and gaiters of the day. The Puritan priests wore no surplice so there was no problem about who paid for the washing at this time.

The Raymond family dominated the clerical scene from 1784 until 1889 and the curates were living at Tye House so the old parsonage house seems to have gone before the early 19th Century. The land on the north side of the church was known locally as Vicars Orchard and by some as Wicked Orchard. The new group of houses built there was given the former title. The skeleton of a young woman in her twenties and buried



just outside the church wall more than 100 years ago was found when the houses were being built. Was she too wicked to be buried inside the wall and was therefore put in unconsecrated ground to the north?

The old school and cottages which have been pulled down in our century have given way to the new houses pleasantly grouped to the East and North of the church. Over the ten years since they were built they have grown into a little community which has been very active in the village as a whole.

Savage Campers

Church Meadow itself was formerly known as Camping Close. Camp was a game much played in Essex and Suffolk until the early 18th Century. Moor (1823) told us how to play it: "An indifferent spectator agreed on by both teams throws up a ball, of the size of a common cricket ball, midway between the confronted players and makes his escape". You could throw but not be caught in possession. A goal was a "snotch". "Kicking" camp was played with a bigger ball and "savage" camp with shoes on! Tusser (1573) said it improved meadows if you let campers play on them. Two men were killed camping it up in Suffolk in 1789. This then was obviously the village's recreation ground. In one of the Auberies Estate books, Col. Burke has crossed out "Church Meadow" and substituted "Camping Close". From 1830 the field was used for a hundred odd years by children as their playground when the church started its first day school.

At the Bulmer Village Festival of 1988 the game of Camp was played during an 18th Century frolic.

Learnin' on 'Em

Education for ordinary children started in Bulmer (as in most villages) with Sunday School: In 1814 it had 26 pupils and by 1918 there were 78 We know that in 1830 there was also a day school. By 1833 there were 40 pupils and 45 additional pupils came on Sunday. These early schools were supported by subscriptions and used a cottage near the church. The mistress received a salary and was paid one penny fee per pupil "as an inducement to obtain as many as possible". The church wanted to improve the behaviour and moral tone of the poor. Parsons and their wealthier parishioners gave money, buildings and their time to help with this.

Mr. Alexander of the Auberies built a new school in 1840 and paid for its upkeep. 47 children were in attendance in 1846. The master and mistress received £25 per annum between them and two monitors were paid. There were also two small Dame Schools at this time.

By the 1870s it was possible to elect school boards and build and maintain schools on the rates. Bulmer Church rejoiced that it could avoid this when J. St. George Burke rode out of the Auberies to combat the dragon of secularism and built a new school at his own expense. This was a large new room on the back of the 1840 school and the two rooms were used until 1965.

School Closed for Whitewashing

Extracts from the school log book tell the story from 1874. In that year, a new mistress arrived and new desks, the latter from the National Society's depository. Soon after the re-opening, classes were held on the meadow while the building was whitewashed. Just before the end of term at the beginning of August many children were away gleaning or taking their fathers' meals to distant fields. When the school re-opened in September many were still away gleaning.

Eleven Year Old Farm Labourers

In 1875 the mistress notes that Parliament had passed an Act to prevent children under eight years of age working on the land. The 1871 census gives one hundred and

seventeen children at school between the ages of four and fourteen. 64 between the ages of 11 and 17 were at work including 35 under-eighteens who were given as neither at work nor school. Girls as young as seven years were employed at straw plaiting. In April 1875 the mistress complained that lessons were not well done because children had to help their parents set potatoes. The same thing happened when beans were being "dropped"

Hard Times

In October 1875 the log book reads: "Several children left because their fathers had been offered employment in Lancashire" In December, the Misses Burke, who taught needlework and music regularly, bought slippers for the children to wear on wet days in school while their boots dried. One little chap's boots cracked and split in front of the stove. This was specially recorded because boots were precious things and only afforded when father earned extra harvest money or the whole family saved money by gleanings. The parson's wife and daughters and several farmers' wives were also regular visitors as well as the Burke family. It seems to have been a popular way of doing good.

Early in 1876 there were two treats: Mr. Burke used a Magic Lanthorn at the prize presentation and on the meadow the boys "were drilled by a corporal of the 5th Fusiliers, a native of the place".

In 1877, 80 out of 100 children were away picking up acorns to sell as pig feed. In the 1880s the school was often closed because of measles and scarlet fever. Deaths from consumption, croup and bronchitis are frequently recorded. The new apprentice, or pupil, teachers replacing the old orderlies or monitors were themselves often ill. The mistress was frequently attempting to teach one hundred children with only one monitor aged thirteen and two aged eleven to help her.

In 1886 we read that "the children have generously decided to give a weekly dinner to thirteen of their school fellows whose fathers are unemployed". Farming was depressed and there was hunger and unemployment. Emigration was encouraged. In 1894 the headmistress obtained 30 copies of "The Visit of Tenant Farmer Delegates to Canada in 1890" for use as unseen readers.

The first college-trained mistress brought in new fangled subjects like "geoggerfy" and in 1886 said her greatest difficulty was teaching "Grammar to these rural children as there is little opportunity of their learning to speak correctly by ear, while at the same time their chances of speaking incorrectly abound". One wonders if anyone said "She fare to wholly carry on about that but then foreigners mostly ollus dew".

Strict Governess

Miss M. A. May came to the school as Mistress in 1888 (and resigned in 1927). In 1891 she records that from this date the children will come free of charge and at the same time she thoughtfully started a Penny Bank instead. Sid Rowe (born in 1884) said of her: "Miss May? Strict? God - yes! - but she was a good governess. If a child could be taught, she'd do it. We wasn't allowed to leave that medder". In 1894 she severely punished five boys for leaving that school meadow and walking to Sudbury to see the procession of Sanger's circus. Yet by 1907 the children were given a half holiday to visit the same circus. Was the Edwardian era seeing a relaxation of attitudes or was this an example of joining them when you don't want to beat them?

Phil Rowe (born 1900) said: "Miss May was a very good governess. She was very strict and children were pushed". An Inspector, too, thought that she taught with special care, intelligence and accuracy. He also said that "the gallery (tiered benches) on which the babies sit should be fitted with backs". Both rooms had galleries. In the larger room some coat pegs were left very high on the wall near the ceiling when the galleries were removed. This made later generations ask if giants had once used the school.

The boys at this time left at eleven if they have learned enough to get a "Labour Certificate". Both the Rowes mentioned above did this. Sid started work at eleven years

on the Burke Estate "all alone in a field pulling out a yeller weed". He did 59 hours a week and was paid three shillings.

In 1898 poor attendances were still being complained of because of gleaning and other land work. By 1917 the population had dropped considerably and less than sixty children were on the books. In 1918 the crop to be picked was blackberries. Bulmer School children picked 699½ lbs to help feed the nation. Accuracy was important. 699½ you will notice. No sloppiness by calling it 700.

School treats at the Auberies' grounds were a great event for many years. So were the treat gifts even if they were as suggested by one receipt "bought in bulk at Gammidges". In 1924 because it was a wet day for the Treat, the children were allowed into the big house itself and were able to listen to "the Wireless and an Electric Piano".

Senior children were transferred to Sudbury in 1938 and the numbers on roll fell to fifty even including six from Borley whose school had been closed. Electric light and piped water came in the 1950s.

In 1954 Essex County Council accepted control from the Church. Gestingthorpe children came in 1963 when that school closed and Middleton and Henny in 1966.

In 1965 the children stopped playing under the oak tree on Church Meadow, said farewell to the bucket lavatories and entered an attractive new octagonal building. Bob Wellings interviewed them for T.V. there. One boy said he thought it was probably better than Eton and another said that he found it "a very ingenious bit of work architecturally speaking".

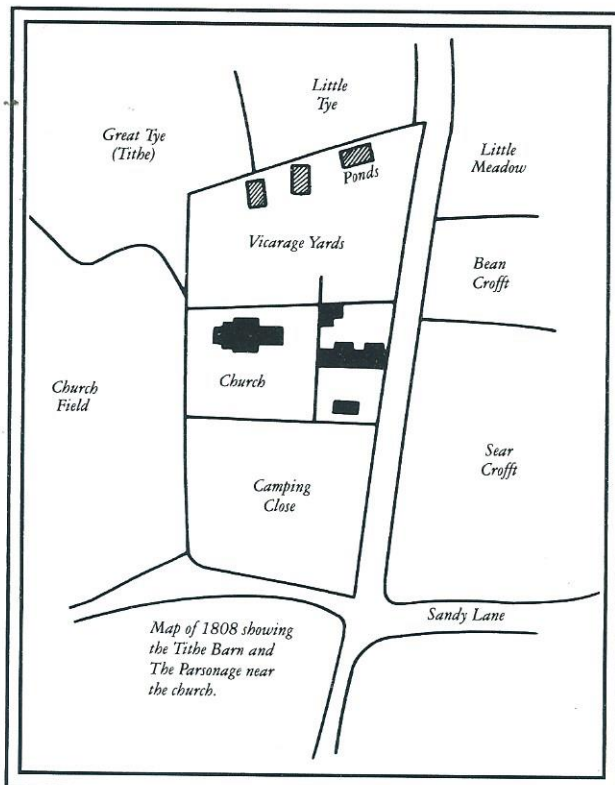
A new headmaster went into the new building with them and he finished with the thought that just as a previous head found Bulmer children to be "Very favourable specimens", so he thought that Bulmer bred and attracted some very nice children to live and go to school in it. Very few have anything to do with the land now. They glean not neither do they plait; but they work hard and they have even been "pushed" on occasions.

Back to the Meadow

Today Church Meadow belongs to the Parish Council and it is used for village fetes

and festivities. The Village Hall on the south of it went up as a result of voluntary effort in the 1920s and a great deal of voluntary effort has gone into that building since. A glimpse of life on Church Meadow for the 20s is provided by the daughter of the Police Sgt. at Bulmer:-

"We came from Chelmsford to live in one of the two houses facing the field in front of the church. We fetched water from the pump near the old school. Bread was delivered three times a week and milk fetched from a farm. Otherwise we carried everything from Sudbury. It was all right going down Sandy Lane but coming back, laden like donkeys, was quite the opposite. In time my mother learned to cycle. My father too covered his very large beat by cycling. My



sister and I stayed as pupils at Chelmsford High School, by cycling to Sudbury to the train every day. We loved cycling in the countryside around Bulmer and remember especially cowslips and autumn fields after the harvest. I remember the fund raising events for the village hall, particularly a Rummage Sale when the biggest houses turned out quantities of stuff and the helpers nearly disappeared under the onslaught of buyers. There weren't all that number of surnames in Bulmer in the 20s and we soon found that it was wise to be careful what was said as everyone seemed to be related."

Sermons from a Paper Bag

We have not tried, on this occasion, to deal with the architectural history of the church. Its chief assets are its 15th Century font, its Tudor chancel roof, a pleasant churchyard in which Col. Burke saw a Redstart on 13 May 1883, and a 15th Century tower which shows up well from the Gestingthorpe direction. In our century, the Rev. Pannell, a bachelor, is remembered with affection. Harry Winch, who lived on Church Meadow and who drove his car for some years, said he was a shy man who relied on his chauffeur to keep his eyes and ears open and find out where there was need in Bulmer households between the wars. The church accounts for the 1920s give us a picture of church life then. "Martha" items of financial expenditure, like oil, candles, brasspaste, organ blowing, grass cutting, Sunday school fires, and the Sexton's wages are balanced by "Mary" ones like money "for the Bishop's self-denial" or "a cheque for the conversion of the Jews"

The church in the country can often play a fuller role than that in the town. Rev. R. Trevor Howard, the incumbent for the last twenty years, has succeeded in inspiring a vigorous church life and is certainly not a "non-preaching minister". Indeed the present writer, a Nonconformist, counts his sermons as some of the best things in present day Bulmer life even if they are not entirely free. The church's patron, Michael Raymond, at a recent birthday banquet in the Vicar's honour, said that it was always a good sign if he climbed the pulpit steps clutching a paper bag. On one dazzling occasion it contained fireworks. Between the cradle ("romper" church) and the grave ("he gives you a really good funeral"), the parish priest still lovingly ministers (with the aid of a minibus) in a meaningful way.