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978-0-521-08110 8 - Elmdon: Continuity and Change in a North-West Essex Village, 1861-1964

Jean Robin

Excerpt

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I

Elmdon in 1861

If an observer in 1964 standing on the sloping green at Cross Hill in the centre of Elmdon, had had the power to take himself back a hundred years or so to 1861, he would have noticed remarkably little change in his immediate surroundings. The roads of course would look different, for they would be unmetalled. The High Street running down the hill towards Wenden Lofts, and the roads eastward to Ickleton and westward to Chrishall would be dry and dusty if it were summer, rutted and muddy in winter. But the church would look much the same, its square tower standing out against a background of trees; the King's Head and the Carrier, rival public houses in 1964, were both selling beer in 1861; the Old Vicarage would be instantly recognisable on the corner of Ickleton Road; and down the curve of the High Street the outside of the houses would look relatively unchanged. If the outward appearance of much of Elmdon seemed little different, however, the same cannot be said of the society it contained. What kind of a place was it to live in, in 1861, and who were the people who made their homes there?

The Squire

There were 520 people living in Elmdon in 1861,¹ but it must be said straightaway that the man with the most power and influence over the village was not among them. He was the Reverend Robert Fiske Wilkes, and as owner of the Lofts Hall estate, he lived in the neighbouring parish of Wenden Lofts, though the Hall itself lay only half a mile from Cross Hill.

Robert Wilkes had not always expected to come into the ownership of the estate. He was born Robert Fiske, son of a clergyman who was both Rector of Wenden Lofts and Vicar of Elmdon. His relationship to the previous Squire, John Wilkes, was somewhat

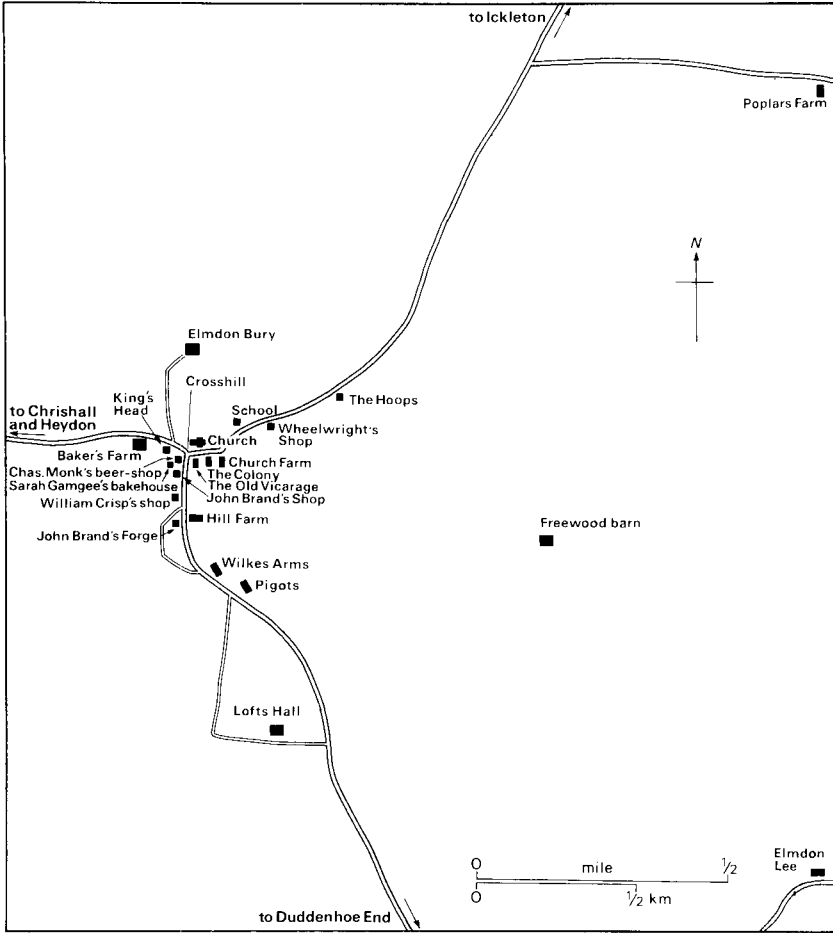
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Map 2 Elmdon village in 1861

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remote, since he was the latter's mother's great nephew. But John Wilkes died, childless, in 1848, and when his widow also died ten years later, Robert Fiske succeeded to the property, changed his name to Wilkes, left the vicarage in Elmdon village, where, like his father before him, he had been carrying out his parish duties, and moved into Lofts Hall. On the day the 1861 census was taken, he was living there with his wife, one son and five daughters. His elder son was away from home, probably at school. The family was supported by a butler, a cook-housekeeper, a trio of carefully graded housemaids – upper, ordinary and lower – a kitchenmaid, a nursemaid, and a governess, all living in. His coachman occupied one of the lodges, and his head gardener had rentfree quarters in Pigots homestead near the lodge gates.

There was no problem in finding room in the Hall for this large group of people. Built on the site of an older house by Sir Thomas Meade in 1579, Lofts Hall had been through the usual series of alterations and improvements common to large country houses of any antiquity. It was to undergo further changes after 1861 before it was finally burned down in 1934² (some say as a result of a fire lighted to destroy jackdaws' nests in the billiard room chimney, others less romantically blaming a faulty electric light switch). For example, Sir James Bailey, who leased the Hall during the early part of the twentieth century, built on an extra wing. The exact size of the Hall in 1861 is therefore not known, but when it was put up for auction in 1927, it was described as containing twenty principal and secondary bed and dressing rooms, as well as five servants' bedrooms; a drawing-room, 30 feet by 19 feet panelled in old oak with a gilded frieze; a dining-room of similar size with windows running the length of the apartment; a library, a morning-room, a smoke room, an outer hall measuring 45 feet by 17 feet, and a billiard room some 36 feet by 26 feet.³ This last room was probably the 'ballroom' described in 1964 by an elderly lady in Elmdon who occasionally worked at the Hall in her youth. She recalled 'a lovely room – huge – with a glass roof and white walls with pheasants all over them'. Even without Sir James Bailey's new wing, it is clear that in 1861 the Rev. Robert Wilkes was living in some style. The panelling indeed was so fine that after the 1927 sale it was stripped from the walls and sold in London, ending up in the Hearst collection in the United States.

It was not simply his ownership of Lofts Hall that made Robert Wilkes such an important figure in Elmdon. With the Hall went

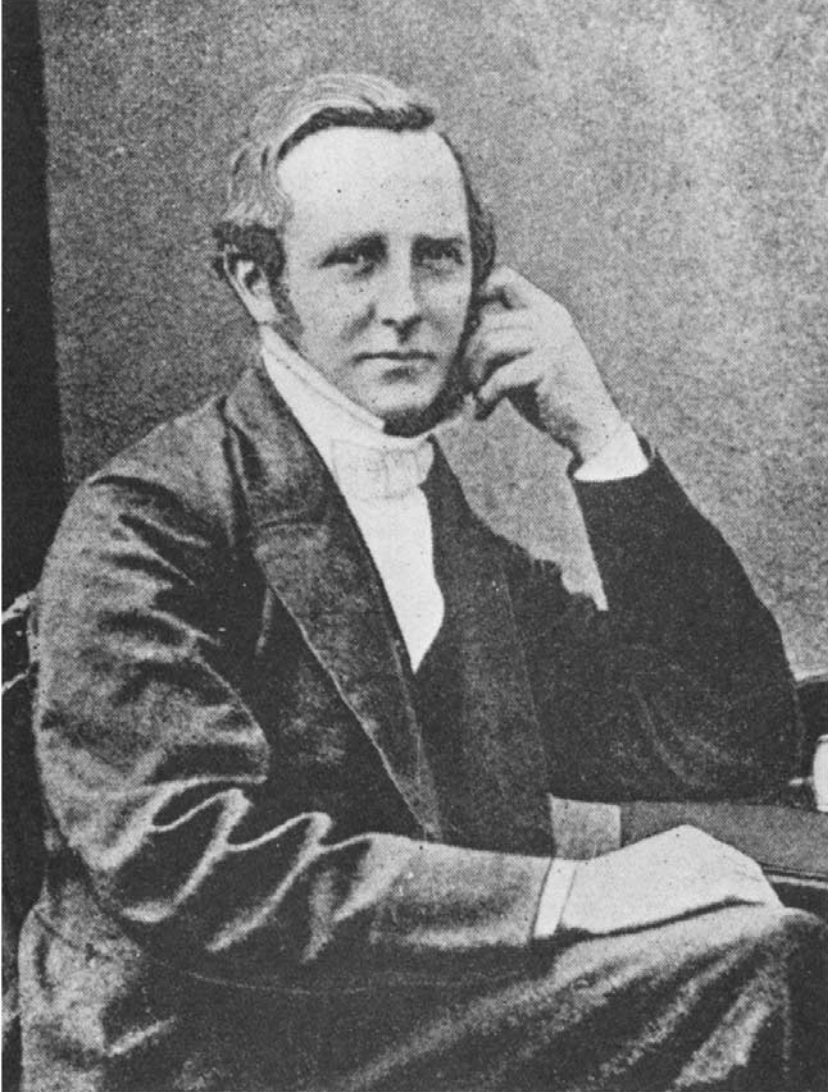
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Rev. Robert Fiske Wilkes

the estate, which at that time consisted of 3,782 acres of land in the parishes of Wenden Lofts, Elmdon and Chrishall, along with a smaller estate of 851 acres at Chishill, a mile or two west of Chrishall.⁴ However, while he owned most of the property in the southern half of Elmdon parish, centred on Duddenhoe End, Robert Wilkes had acquired only half the farm land and cottages in and around Elmdon village itself. The history of the estate up

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to its dispersal in the late 1920s will be outlined in chapter 3, but in 1861, its future seemed secure.

As landowner, Robert Wilkes had considerable power over his tenant farmers, for he could terminate or renew their leases when these fell in after their seven-year term. He also had direct influence on the lives of the 240 inhabitants of Elmdon, nearly half the population, who in 1861 were living in houses or cottages owned by him. All Elmdoners were his parishioners, for in 1861 he remained Vicar of Elmdon, as well as Rector of Wenden Lofts, though he had a curate living in Elmdon to help him. Even the children came into contact with him, since he had a close association with the village school which had been rebuilt on land presented by his predecessor at Lofts Hall, John Wilkes, in 1843.⁵ And finally he held the sonorous titles of Lord of the Manor of Mountneys and Dagsworth, otherwise Elmdon Bury, Lord of the Manor, or reputed Manor, of Duddenhoe, Lord of the Manor of Rockells, Wiggpitts and Coggleshalls, and Lord of the Manor of Flanders with Chiswick, although to the villagers he was simply 'the Squire'. Even in 1861, incidentally, his titles were not entirely empty, since the Manor Courts were still sitting, largely over land transactions and inheritance matters, and indeed the Elmdon Bury Court continued until 1899.⁶

Other property owners

Although Robert Wilkes owned nearly half the land and houses in Elmdon in 1861, the rest of the property in and around the village was distributed among a miscellany of owners.

The three farms not included in the Lofts Hall estate covered some 1,140 acres. Two of them, Poplars Farm and The Lee, both on the eastern borders of the parish, were the property of absentee landlords who seem to have played no part in village affairs. The third, Baker's Farm, was bought in 1858 by James Hayden.⁷ He and his father before him had been tenants at the homestead, and with its purchase he became the first recorded owner-occupier of a farm in Elmdon.

We do not know the ownership of each of the remaining houses and cottages but some were owner-occupied by craftsmen or tradesmen, like the blacksmith John Brand and the tailor James Walters; some were owned by the tenant farmers, like Miss Perry at Poplars, who held a life interest in one of the houses in the High

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Table 1
Elmdon village occupations, 1861

	<i>male</i>	<i>female</i>
Clergymen	2	—
Farmers, and working sons	5 3	1 —
Blacksmiths/wheelwrights	8	—
Thatchers	3	—
Builders/bricklayers	9	1
Bricklayers' apprentices	2	—
Bricklayers' labourers	3	—
Painters	—	1
Carpenters	5	—
Tailors	3	—
Shoemakers	2	—
Dressmakers	—	4
Straw-bonnet makers	—	2
Victuallers, beer-sellers	2	2
Bakers	1	1
Bakers' working sons	2	—
Butchers	1	—
Butchers' boys	1	—
General shopkeepers	1	—
Drapers, upholsterers	1	—
Shop assistants	—	2
Postmaster	1	—
Carriers	2	—
Schoolmistress	—	1
Farm bailiffs	2	—
Farm labourers - 15 years and over	80	—
14 years and under	24	—
Shepherds - 15 years and over	5	—
14 years and under	2	—
Cowmen	1	—
Female field workers	—	12
Gentlemen's servants	1	—
Gardeners	1	—
Gardeners' labourers	2	—
Grooms	2	—
Companions	—	1
Domestic servants, living-in	—	10
Domestic servants, living-out	—	5
Domestic servants home on holiday	—	2
Nurses/nursemaids	—	2
Laundresses	—	1
Totals	177⁽ⁱ⁾	48

(i) This figure includes 3 cases of dual occupation, i.e. baker and beer-seller, farmer and shopkeeper, shopkeeper and postmaster. The total number of individual men is therefore 174.

Source: 1861 census

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Street, which she let to a village shopkeeper;⁸ and some belonged to small-scale property investors such as James Ward who was listed as owning six cottages in Elmdon at the time of the Enclosure Award in 1829.⁹ Very few cottages were owned by farm labourers, who made up a large part of the population, and no individual property-holder stood out as a rival to the Squire in power and influence.

The clergy

The work of the community, however, had to go on whether or not an individual owned his house, rented it or occupied a tied cottage. Surprisingly enough, there were no well-do-do upper- or middle-class families in Elmdon itself living entirely from investments without any kind of paid employment, and only two household heads could be described as professional people, as table 1 shows. Both these men were clerics. The curate of Elmdon lived in what is now the Old Vicarage at Cross Hill. Today it is in private hands, having been replaced by a smaller and more convenient vicarage behind the church, but then it housed the curate, his 11-year old nephew who had been born in India, and a solitary living-in servant. Next door lived the Rector of Strethall, a small parish two miles away. The rector's stipend was only £155 per annum,¹⁰ but his family had private means, for his widowed mother and two sisters, who were living with him, were all described in the census as holding investments in government funds, and the household ran to two living-in domestic servants. Strethall had its own perfectly adequate rectory, and its incumbent probably came to live in Elmdon through friendship with the Squire, who charged him no rent for his house. When this house, now called 'Farthing Green', was put up for sale in 1927 with the rest of the Lofts Hall estate, it was described as 'The Colony', a name which was the result of a particularly atrocious Victorian pun. The rector in question was the Rev. Joseph Collin, and it was from his name that 'The Colony' was derived. The little boy from India may well have had a rather depressing time while he was with his uncle, for, apart from the domestic servants, no one else in the two neighbouring clerical households was under 41 years of age and, apart from Mr Collin's widowed mother of 72, all were unmarried.

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Croquet at The Colony, c. 1870

The farmers

Next to the rector and curate in the village hierarchy came the farmers. They may have been below the clergy in the social scale, but they had considerably more economic power, since in 1861 they directly employed six out of every ten men working in the village. Their holdings were big, four out of the six being of 300 acres or more. Then as now, the farms were largely arable, and therefore labour intensive in the days before the widespread use of machinery.¹¹ The size of each farm and the number of men and boys employed are shown in table 2.

Farmers such as John Rolfe, with his 705 acres, were clearly comparatively wealthy men. Rolfe was paying an annual rent of £1,040 for the use of Elmdon Bury in 1860, as well as his share of £130 for shooting rights over 1,160 acres, which he held jointly with his cousin, James Rolfe, an estate tenant in Wenden Lofts.¹² Elmdon Bury farmhouse was a fine building, containing a parlour, hall, keeping room, dairy, kitchen, scullery, pantry, cellar, laundry and six bedrooms, and there were two living-in house servants to help Mrs Rolfe with her domestic duties.

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Table 2
Elmdon village farms, 1861

<i>farmer</i>	<i>farm</i>	<i>acres</i>	<i>no. of employees</i>	
			<i>men</i>	<i>boys</i>
John Rolfe (LHE tenant)	Elmdon Bury (including Freewood)	705	28	12
Charles Mickley (non-LHE tenant)	The Lee	480	21	8
James Hayden (owner)	Baker's	360	11	5
Rebecca Perry (non-LHE tenant)	Poplars	300	10	3
Edward Hayden (LHE tenant)	Church	209	8 ⁽ⁱ⁾	-
John Brand (LHE tenant)	Hill	116	3	5
Totals		2,170	81	33

(i) This figure has been taken from the 1851 census for Church Farm, since no return of employees was made in 1861.

LHE = Lofts Hall estate

Source: 1861 census

The homesteads of Church Farm and Hill Farm, both belonging to the Lofts Hall estate, lay right in the heart of the village, only 250 yards apart across the fields which separated them. Church Farm was just over 200 acres, but the farmhouse, next to The Colony, was similar in size to that of Elmdon Bury. The tenant, Edward Hayden, must have had no difficulty in filling the six bedrooms, since he had the largest household in Elmdon, consisting of twelve people in all - himself, his wife, his son and six daughters, his widower-father, a young nephew, Robert Pigg, who was working as a labourer on the farm, and a 16-year-old domestic servant. Hill Farm was occupied by another of Edward Hayden's nephews, John Brand, a young man whose great-great-grandfather had been the common ancestor of himself and of the other Elmdon John Brand, the blacksmith living in the High Street to whom reference has already been made. The farm only covered just over 100 acres, and John, with his sister Caroline, also kept a grocer's shop as a supplement to his income.

Baker's Farm, too, was close to the village, lying just to the west of Cross Hill. Its owner, James Hayden, was a bachelor, whose unmarried sister lived with him as his housekeeper. Both were born in Henham, Essex, and no connection has been traced between them and the other Haydens in the village.

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The two remaining farms, Poplars and The Lee, lay well outside Elmdon. Poplars indeed was comparatively isolated, being nearly threequarters of a mile from another house. The farm was created after the Enclosure Award of 1829, and a farmhouse was built alongside the barns and sheds which were already on the site. The house is still there, smaller than the other Elmdon homesteads and seeming rather dark, being shadowed by the belt of trees around it. Miss Rebecca Perry, an elderly spinster, was the tenant of this 300-acre farm in 1861. She was helped by an equally elderly general servant, and supported by a companion. A farm worker and a groom also lived on the premises. The Lee farm, covering 480 acres and tenanted by Charles Mickley, was larger than Poplars, and it stood considerably closer to the hamlet of Littlebury Green than it did to Elmdon itself.

As well as being major employers, the farmers filled most of the positions on the vestry, a village organisation which preceded the parish council and which was responsible for the allocation of parish relief, as well as for the supervision of the highways and other parish matters. Minutes of vestry meetings held under the chairmanship of John Rolfe of Elmdon Bury in March 1861, listed those eligible for election to the offices of constable, overseer, surveyor, assessor and churchwarden. All but one of those named were farmers, the exception being a shopkeeper.¹³ All in all, the farmers made their presence felt.

Those employed in private households

The group of people employed in private households varied from the London-born governess at Lofts Hall, who may well have found that she was short of companionship in her off-duty hours, feeling herself above the house servants in social status, to 13-year old Eliza Challis, daughter of an Elmdon roadman, who lived with her widowed mother and worked by day as a nursemaid.

The Squire's ménage at Lofts Hall was the grandest in the immediate vicinity. Although the Hall was in Wenden Lofts, and therefore the living-in servants do not figure in table 3, they cannot be left out of any account of domestic service in Elmdon in 1861, for Wenden Lofts scarcely existed as a village, containing as it did