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

Jean Robin

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Elmdon

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# Elmdon

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J E A N R O B I N

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
A U D R E Y R I C H A R D S

C A M B R I D G E U N I V E R S I T Y P R E S S

C A M B R I D G E

L O N D O N    N E W Y O R K    N E W R O C H E L L E

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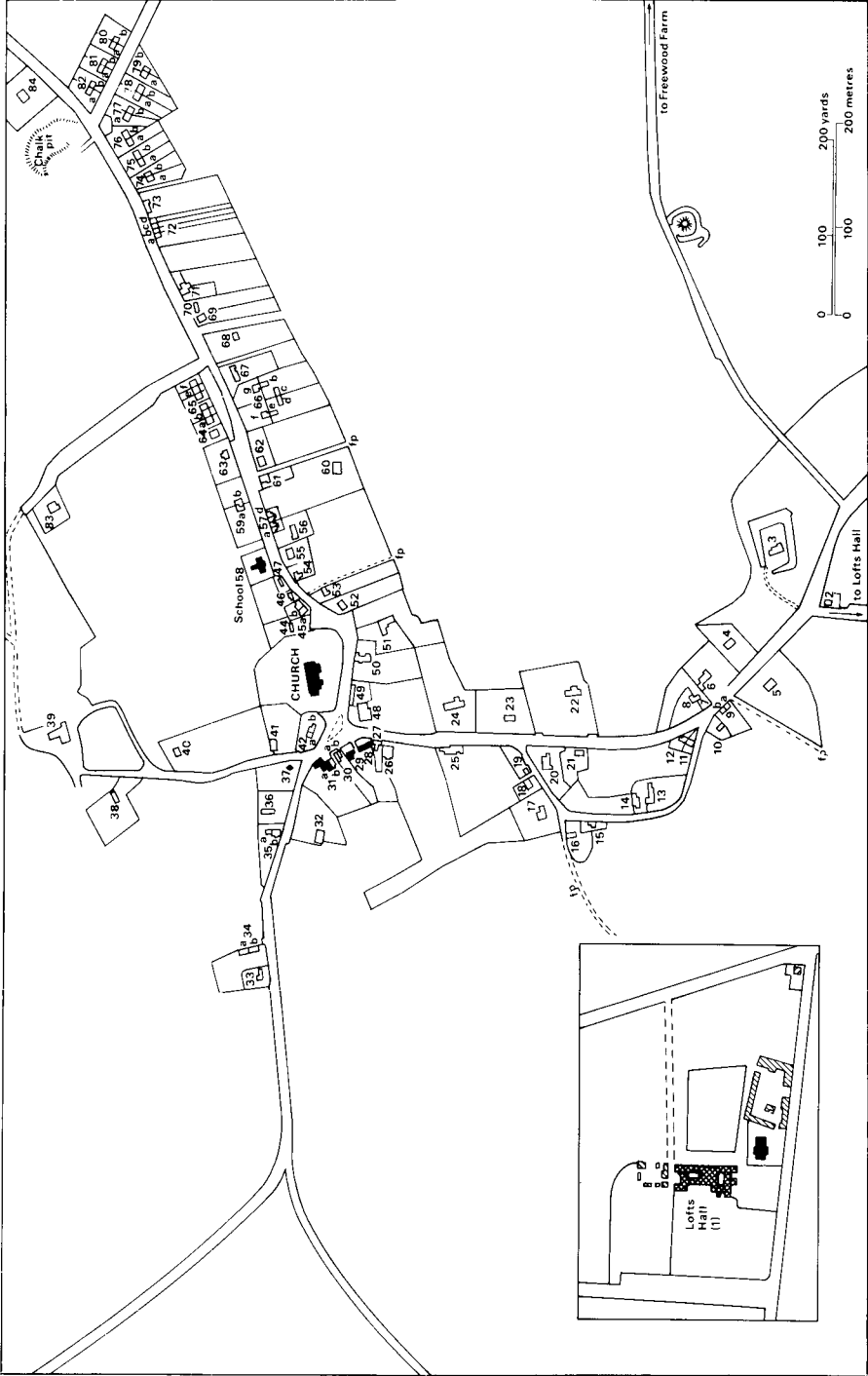
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Map 1 Elmdon village in the 1960s

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## Elmdon Village in the 1960s

<b>Key</b>			
1	Lofts Hall	(a) The King's Head	57 (a) to (d) School Row
2	Lofts Hall Lodge	(b) King's Head Cottage	School
3	Pigots	Elmdon Lodge Farm (formerly Baker's Farm)	58 (a) Mount View
4	Pigots Lodge		59 (b) Dalorin
5	Serenity	Frondirion	60 Bridleway
6	Wilkes Barn (formerly the Wilkes Arms)	(b) Whitehall	61 Baker's Stores (formerly George Hopwood's pork butcher's shop)
7	and 8 Rose Cottage (two dwellings)	34 (a), 35 (a) and (b), 36 Cottages in Heydon Road	62 Wheelwrights (formerly Isaac Rollings' premises)
9	(a) and (b) Unnamed cottages		63 Bury Garden Cottage
10	Elm Cottage	Caravan	64 Police House
11	Vine Cottage	Bury Lane Cottage	65 (a) - (f) Bury Cottages (council bungalows)
12	Pilgrim's Cottage	Elmdon Bury	66 (a) - (f) The Glebe (council houses)
13, 14, 15, 17, 18	Cottages in King's Lane	Bury Lodge	67 Mulberry Cottage
16	Shepherd's Hay	The New Vicarage	68 Unnamed cottage
19	Humphrey's Green	(a) Crawley House } (formerly the (b) Crawley Cottage } grammar school)	69 The Firs
21	The Forge (formerly belonging to the Brands)	Church of St. Nicholas	70 Unnamed cottage
22	Hill Farm	Church Cottage	71 The Limes (butcher's shop)
23	Laburnum View	(a) Rose Cottage	72 (a) - (d) Manor Row
24	The Bangles (four dwellings)	(b) School House Cottage	73 The Hoops
25	The Old Stores (formerly the Crisps' shop)	South View	74 (a) - 76 (b) Ickleton Road Council Houses
26	T-Meadow (formerly the Brands' shop)	Unamed cottage	77 (a) - 79 (b) Hollow Road Council Houses
27	Dormer Thatch (formerly the Gamgee/Greenhill bakery)	The Old Vicarage	80 (a) and (b) and 82 (a) and (b) Unnamed houses
28	The Carrier	Farthing Green (formerly The Colony)	81 (a) Glenroy
29	Village Hall (formerly the Reading Room)	Church Farm	83 Little Elmdon Bury
30	(a) and (b) Cross Hill cottages (formerly butcher's shop)	Ilgars	84 Alfreshot
		Violet Cottage	
		Pump Cottage	
		Gayfield	
		Post Office Cottage	

**Note:** Poplars Farm and Elmdon Lee farm both lie some two-and-a-half miles from the centre of Elmdon village, to the north-east and south-east respectively.



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## Foreword

### The character of Elmdon village

Elmdon is one of a small group of villages set on the chalky uplands of north Essex. These rolling hill-tops are mostly covered with boulder clay which becomes thicker on the lower slopes, a soil suited to the arable farming typical of East Anglia. Road works or cuttings in the area reveal the thick layer of chalk beneath the clay and show how near to the surface it is.

This chain of villages, Strethall, Elmdon, Chrishall, Heydon and the two Chishills, stands on top of a ridge which is about 400 feet above sea level, with another line of villages, Melbourn, Fowlmere, Thriplow and Whittlesford, below. The ridge villages have remained curiously isolated, though this part of Essex is quite densely settled and there are, for instance, twenty-four villages within a five-mile radius of Elmdon itself. Even during the Roman occupation of Essex the main thoroughfares passed elsewhere. The Icknield Way, for instance, ran through Strethall and Littlebury Green to the south and east of Elmdon but not through the village itself. Map 3 (p.31) shows that somewhat the same kind of semi-isolation was found in nineteenth-century Elmdon (see chapter 2) and still exists. Elmdon lies in the middle of a cluster of villages linked by second-class roads and lanes, but the main motor-roads from Royston, Bishop's Stortford and Saffron Walden miss it. The village is not on the direct route to anywhere.

Elmdon is very much a border village. Some of the inhabitants will tell you that the boundaries of Essex, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire intersect at its highest point, the hill-top on which the old manor-house of Elmdon Bury stood and where the farmhouse which replaced it stands today. The map does not quite confirm this view, although the point of intersection of the boundaries is very near. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Elmdon definitely consider themselves to be 'Essex people'. Their links are

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with Saffron Walden, some six-and-a-half miles to the east, which is their market town and administrative centre, and not with Cambridge, their largest nearby city, which lies fourteen miles to the north. It is difficult to know what makes for a feeling of county loyalty among people who are largely uninterested in local administration and who do not differ markedly in dialect or ways of living from the people of neighbouring counties, but the feeling is certainly there. I have heard an Elmdon mother, distressed at the thought of her daughter marrying a man living as far away as Chelmsford, console herself with the thought that ‘anyhow he is an Essex man’. County loyalties are certainly intermittent. They flare up and die down in situations of competition, such as sport, or of cooperation, such as the need to remove snow from a road running over the border between Essex and Cambridge, but on such occasions Elmdon stands firmly, and even aggressively, on the Essex side.

Elmdon has always been an agricultural community, though in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries its inhabitants were evidently deeply involved in the textile industry centred in Saffron Walden, which specialised in the production of fustian cloth and of fine yarn for the Norfolk worsteds.<sup>1</sup> Spinning was widespread in the villages near Saffron Walden and the inhabitants of Elmdon were described in 1770 as being ‘supported by husbandry and spinning’.<sup>2</sup> The village is also listed among twelve villages including Littlebury, Clavering and Newport, which were engaged in wool-combing and in weaving worsteds and fustians.<sup>3</sup> There are one or two seventeenth or eighteenth-century houses in the village which do not seem to be farms and which might well be textile merchants’ houses. But the industry had collapsed by the beginning of the nineteenth century, owing to a mechanisation of the textile processes in the north. Jean Robin’s account of village life in the middle and end of the nineteenth century shows how few openings outside agriculture there were for the inhabitants at that time (chapter 6).

Arable farming seems always to have predominated; the crops were mainly wheat and barley with some oats, peas and beans, whilst a family of twentieth-century farmers introduced beet. But here as elsewhere in East Anglia the economy has been mixed. The Domesday register listed 26 swine and 288 sheep on the lord’s demesne and 250 swine in the valley forest land to which all had access. Sheep have been kept from time to time. Seven shepherds

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were listed in Elmdon in the 1861 census (see p.6) though only one farmer was keeping sheep in 1964 when work on this book was begun. Beef cattle, pigs and poultry appear in the records and are still kept. A few dairy cattle have supplied the village, especially during the two world wars, but in the main East Anglian conditions do not suit dairy farming. The largest farmer in Elmdon has, however, built up a pedigree herd of Jerseys since the late forties and has become the Secretary of the Quality Milk Production Society. The establishment of this herd has been a notable development in Elmdon of recent years.

It is difficult to estimate the population of Elmdon from the census since the figures for Elmdon and Duddenhoe End, which are both in the same parish, are given jointly. However, our survey made in 1964 showed that the population was 321 persons all told. Elmdon therefore falls into the bottom end of the medium-sized parishes in this part of Essex, with nearby Littlebury and Barley numbering 511 and 515 respectively in 1961; Ickleton, Fowlmere and Great Chesterford reaching the 600s, and Thriplow 836. Villages with some industrial development, such as Whittlesford, Duxford, Newport and Melbourn had populations between one and two thousand. Elmdon must be reckoned a small to medium-sized village for this part of the country and it is likely to remain so since it is not in the town-planners' phraseology, a 'development area'. For those interested in comparing its size with other recently-studied East Anglian villages, the population of 'Akenfield' was a little smaller, 298 in 1961; Blaxhall was larger in 1966 'about 400'; and Foxton a good deal larger, 680 in 1961.<sup>4</sup>

This has been an area of large landowners since the sixteenth century, when successive Tudor magnates united some rather numerous local manors by purchase. Elmdon village lies between two hills, each of which formerly had its own manor-house, home-farm, church and a pond which provided the water supply. On the southern hill was the manor-house of Wenden Lofts bought by Sir Thomas Meade in 1567. He built, or rebuilt, the house, which was subsequently called Lofts Hall, finishing it in 1579. He also bought Pigots manor, lying a quarter of a mile away, which soon ceased to exist as a separate manor. The Meade family also purchased the second important manor, Elmdon Bury, lying three-quarters of a mile away on the northernmost hill, and from then on both these two manors, Wenden Lofts and Elmdon Bury had one owner, with Wenden Lofts generally acting as the owner's 'seat'. The property

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remained in the Meade family from 1554 to 1717 when it was sold to a merchant to George I, Robert Chamberlain, who in turn sold it to another London business man, Nathaniel Wilkes. This transaction included part of Elmdon village as we now know it, and much of Duddenhoe End. The growth of the Wilkes estate from 1739 to 1927 by purchase and additions after the Enclosure Act of 1824 is the main theme of this book. By 1927 when the Lofts Hall estate was finally sold, there were practically no small-holders left, as Jean Robin explains. Thirty-five years later when our study began, the land in and around Elmdon village was held by five farmers owning 705, 300, 300, 200, and 70 acres respectively. Elmdon can therefore be classified as a district of capitalist farming. There are no small-scale farms, allotment schemes or farmers' cooperatives.

Industrial development in the surrounding district has been rapid of recent years. In 1905 the Ciba-Geigy company set up works at Duxford, five miles away from Elmdon, and Spicers paper factory was started at Sawston in 1914. Both firms were actively recruiting labour in the late fifties and Spicers provided a bus service to bring in workers from the village. But Elmdon seems to have turned more slowly to industrial work than some neighbouring villages, though here we have to rely on impressions only. School-leavers were attracted by the high wages and easier work at Duxford and Sawston, but some of the older men had almost a sense of guilt or disloyalty at leaving the land and there were still as many as 40 per cent Elmdon men engaged in agriculture or related employment in 1964. Elmdon seemed to me still to have the air of an agricultural community when I first went there in 1957, and indeed this continued for many years afterwards. Tractors rattled through the village and lined up outside the council houses for the lunch break. Village events such as fêtes were arranged to fit in with the different harvests – wheat, beans or beet – and children worked on the farms in the school holidays. Industrial work is now the norm rather than the exception for Elmdon villagers, yet in the early sixties the change of an older man from farm to factory was still the subject of comment and criticism. As late as 1966, a farm worker spoke with concern of his mate who had gone to work at Spicers a week previously, saying 'I daresay he is all right so far but he is bound to suffer, cooped up inside all day'.

It is difficult to classify the composition of the population of

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Elmdon, or of any other English village for that matter. Our present typologies are still very rough and ready. There is a general and increasing interest in the study of rural communities as soaring house prices in urban areas drive so many families from town to country. Popular papers and magazines publish articles on 'commuter villages', 'squire's villages' or 'traditional communities'. With so little comparative knowledge available it is difficult to put Elmdon into one of these loosely-defined categories, and such rapid changes were taking place in the village during our study that what seemed an accurate description at one time appeared quite misleading two or three years later.

In 1964 Elmdon could certainly not have been called a commuter village – 41 per cent of the inhabitants had been born in the village (44 per cent males and 37.5 per cent females). There were of course a few outsiders who had bought holiday cottages in the years between the wars and there may have been more immigrants who came and went and are not all remembered. In the late fifties a small group of outsiders settled permanently in the village because they had local jobs. This group included the director of a local industry, a land agent, two Cambridge University lecturers, and a Christian Science practitioner and writer. There was also another small group of people who had retired to Elmdon in order to enjoy a peaceful life. It included a sculptor, two bank employees, two teachers, two nurses and three people with private means. In 1964 there were four retired couples and nine women, single or widowed, living alone. But the commuting group proper had only reached 11 per cent of the working population in 1964. It included stockbrokers, insurance agents, journalists, art designers, secretaries and teachers. Nine years later the figure had risen to 25 per cent. The period before 1964 is sometimes described as the time 'before the commuters came'.

The social organisation of the village changed in 1957, the year I arrived in Elmdon as a week-end and vacation resident. This turned out to be the last year of a squire-type organisation, even though the attitudes appropriate to this kind of situation lingered on for a number of years. The late Mr Jack Wilkes, the seventh Wilkes to succeed to the ownership of the Lofts Hall estate, was still alive. Admittedly, he had sold the estate in 1927 and had left Elmdon temporarily, but he had returned to the village in 1932, bought back Elmdon Bury, one of the two old manor-houses and lived there for a further twenty-six years, though no longer farming.

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After acting as a squire for the years from 1887 to 1927 and working the Elmdon Bury and Freewood farms, it is not surprising that he continued to act as Elmdon's squire and that this situation was accepted by most of the villagers. He died in September 1958 but in that time I was able to see how closely his behaviour followed the pattern of his predecessor but one, the Reverend Robert Fiske Wilkes (1818–1879), as described in such interesting detail in this book.

Elmdon is a Church village, without a non-conformist chapel, and Jack Wilkes was a great supporter of the Church, playing an active part on the parochial council. The village also had a Church school, which he regularly visited, taking an interest in the children's progress. He furthered the village sports clubs by financial contributions and advice. He lent his garden for Conservative party rallies and presided over fêtes. During the war he had helped in the organisation of the Home Guard. Like his predecessor he headed the list of subscriptions to village activities (see chapter 8) and urged others to subscribe. He entertained newcomers to the village if he thought them worthy of inclusion in the upper ranks of the small Elmdon society. Agricultural labourers still touched their caps to him and repeated his comments and views. Those who had voted for the Labour Party in elections were anxious that Jack Wilkes should not be told for fear he might disapprove. After his death in 1958 the paternalistic organisation of village activities continued for some years. His widow lived until 1976 and continued to exercise the duties of a squire's wife. She entertained and took part in fêtes and bazaars, distributed 'meals-on-wheels' and washed up for school dinners right into her old age. She joined the Evergreen Society outings open to all over 60 years, not because she enjoyed them but because she thought it was her duty.

The vicar, farmers and others who had also taken part in this paternal organisation of activities continued their roles for many years after the death of the Squire and were certainly functioning in much the same way in 1964 and after. Of the seven farmers listed, two were on the parochial council and three on the parish council in 1964. One ran a boy-scout troop prior to 1957. Farmers' wives were also active, particularly, it seems, during the war, when the making of jam and preserving of fruit was organised. They were joined by some of the women who had retired to Elmdon and bought small cottages there and also by some of the

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newer house-owners who had arrived in Elmdon in the late fifties, one of whom started the Evergreen Society.

All these facts justify us, I think, in classifying Elmdon as a traditionally-organised village when we started our work in 1964, even though it was to change so rapidly in the next ten to fifteen years.

### Elmdon in 1964

Elmdon is generally described as a pretty village. Indeed I do not remember ever hearing a visitor using another adjective for it. This is perhaps because it has a number of beautiful and interesting old buildings such as the guildhall (42a and b on map 1, p.viii) which was bought and given to the village as a grammar school in 1559, but must have been built considerably earlier. It has also three farmhouses of age and distinction, 'Pigots' (3), a seventeenth-century building erected on the site of an old manor-house which is finely timbered and moated all round; Hill Farm (22), reckoned as the oldest building in Elmdon with a fifteenth-century wing and two ancient barns on the slope of the hill below; and Church Farm (51), another building of interest, dated 1626. These three houses are still used as farms. Elmdon Bury, the old manor of Elmdon, is also used as a farm but its house has been greatly restored. Another large and beautiful Tudor house is 'Bangles' (24), which was possibly the home of a wealthy merchant. It was divided into four tenements in 1964, all fast falling into decay. Above it is an imposing vicarage (48), early Victorian, and probably one of the first Elmdon houses to be built in brick.

This is not an unusual number of ancient buildings to survive in an Essex village. In fact, according to the report of a Royal Commission on Historical Monuments published in 1908,<sup>5</sup> Elmdon, with twenty-four recorded 'monuments', reached about the average figure for the area. The number is now probably less, since the attempt to list and preserve old buildings of merit dates only from the passing of the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947.

But, of course, a reputation as a 'pretty' village depends greatly on the siting of the 'monuments'. Elmdon is a linear village with its buildings along its three main roads. Even the farms, usually built outside the village in England, and approached by small access



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roads, are here almost all standing just a few hundred yards back from the street, so that the old Tudor buildings can thus be clearly seen.

But a 'pretty' village may merely mean one with many old cottages, since the white and pink colour washes common in East Anglian villages, together with the greys and browns of thatch and old slate roofs, make an artist's scene. A sales catalogue of 1927 states that Elmdon was 'well-known for the number of its Tudor cottages' and this was in the days before British architects had begun to specialise in the 'conversion' of old cottages, and, later, barns, to modern standards of comfort. The survival of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cottages to the twentieth century is a matter of the care taken to preserve them. This is particularly the case in Essex where there is little or no building-stone, and brick does not seem to have been used till the nineteenth century. There is nothing so derelict-looking as a Tudor cottage built of timber, lathe and plaster, which has fallen into disrepair. Cottages are said to have been better looked-after when the landlord was resident, and Elmdon was fortunate in this respect since the Wilkes family was resident in the village from 1739 onwards and did a good deal of building of houses as well as repairing. There were in Elmdon in 1964: 14 per cent seventeenth-century and earlier houses; 23 per cent of eighteenth century; 14 per cent of nineteenth century; and 49 per cent of twentieth-century dwellings, but the count was difficult to make as many houses contain additions from two or even three centuries.

Again, it is the placing of the old houses which is the important thing from the aesthetic point of view. Is a picturesque old cottage standing next to a particularly ugly garage or a derelict house? Do the cottages which have such charm for the commuter stand side by side or scattered between modern bungalows? This is a matter of sociological as well as aesthetic importance. Even in a village as small as Elmdon, neighbourhood groups develop quickly and people are referred to, whether in anecdotes of the past or in present-day gossip, as, for instance, the 'Kings Lane lot', 'the Pilgrim hill people', or 'the council houses people'. In 1964 house-purchasers' money was chasing after old houses rather than new, and therefore a group of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cottages tended to give rise to a commuter's neighbourhood, very much recognised by the village as such.

The central point of Elmdon is Cross Hill with its small triangular



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Cross Hill, 1979

green, just large enough to hold the inevitable brick and wood bus shelter, the war memorial cross and a signpost. Small as the green is, it is the stopping place for buses; the shelter is the courting place for the young; and boys whirl around it in motor-cycle displays on Sundays. Here the British Legion, in ever decreasing numbers, meet on Armistice Day and blow their Last Post; the Thaxted Morris dancers assemble from time to time; and the revellers on New Year's eve used to stream out of the two pubs and sing 'Auld Lang Syne' round the cross, while one of the oldest inhabitants used to imitate a cock's crow and try to wake the village cocks, as I once heard him do.

The little green is on a sharp slope. North of it is the guildhall and the church, while to the south is the old vicarage, the Carrier (28), the village hall (29) presented to the community in 1905, two Victorian brick cottages (30a and b), and the King's Head (31).

Three roads meet at the Cross Hill signpost. The road to the west is labelled Chrishall and Heydon; the High Street, running south, goes to Wenden Lofts, Audley End and Saffron Walden; and the road to the east is the Ickleton Road. Each had its own distinctive character in 1964.

The road to Heydon was dominated by a late Victorian, red-brick farmhouse, Elmdon Lodge (32). Opposite stood a cluster of

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cottages, some of which were tied and housed the Elmdon Lodge labour force. In 1964, this was in no sense a commuter centre.

The central road leading south from Cross Hill, the High Street, is lined with old houses and cottages. In 1957 seven of these cottages were occupied by Elmdon people, forming a neighbourhood group of eleven local families with the addition of the four tenants of 'the Bangles', but by 1977 the number of indigenous inhabitants had dropped to two. The other dwellings had been bought by outsiders and by 1970 they had been 'converted' with loving care by their mainly commuter owners, and had acquired new bow windows, additional rooms, garages, car ports, cedar doors and outside hanging lamps. Tied cottages which might well have been condemned as unfit for habitation had blossomed forth into an elegance which would have surprised their Tudor builders. No wonder this part of Elmdon is known as the 'posh' or 'toffs' end of the village.

A turning off the High Street leads into Kings Lane, perhaps one of the most romantic sites in Elmdon, and one over which bitter controversy raged when speculative builders twice attempted to 'spoil Kings Lane' by putting up bungalows there. The lane runs steeply uphill, its surface scored by rain gutters, with cottages on either side, both white and pink. Two of these must be the smallest dwellings in Elmdon of the 'two up and two down' type, in one of which a labourer is said to have brought up a family of ten. Kings Lane must have been a busy place in earlier days. There was a forge and a beer-shop at its junction with High Street. The forge was dismantled in 1944 when the attached house became a private dwelling. Opposite was a cottage said to have been the village bakehouse, while Sarah Freeman, formerly a children's nurse in high society, inherited a laundry at the top of the lane from her aunt, and ran it for many years with village labour. But Kings Lane today is a quiet place. In the silence that falls on the village at mid-day it has an almost dreamlike quality. Only two Elmdon families lived in it in 1964, an old couple who rented a cottage set back from the road from an owner who lived in America, and a mother and unmarried son who were tenants of an immigrant couple who owned another cottage in the village as a holiday home. The other cottages were inhabited by three single women and two couples, all retired from occupations pursued elsewhere.

The Ickleton Road, the third road to leave the Cross Hill junction, runs east. On this route out of Elmdon there is a lively

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King's Lane, 1979

mixture of house-styles and all the social services – the police station, the post office, the school and the shop. Eleven of the Ickleton Road houses would be called ‘old’, that is to say built before the nineteenth century, and some of the larger of these houses were in the past occupied by craftsmen, such as the wheelwright, or beer-sellers. There were also some Victorian buildings, mostly made of brick, and two small blocks of terraced houses, Manor Row (72 a-d) and School Row (57a-d), which are of interest as they were never tied cottages but rentable accommodation. In the early twentieth century the Squire built no fewer than seven houses for his senior employees and one for a relative. They were apparently constructed of a mixture of chalk and cement by Wilkes’ own workmen in 1904. They were much derided at the time, and were called the houses ‘that Jack built’. But they have acquired a certain dignity with age and now seem to ‘fit’ in the street. Houses were also put up by individual purchasers in the earlier twenties, some on the sites of decrepit cottages. There was a bungalow built by a farmer in the late fifties, on the site of some tied cottages of great age, which were dark and damp, sunk

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below the level of the street, and known as the Wurzel Clamp because of their shape. There were also a few newer houses put up by individual purchasers in the sixties. The days of the speculative builder did not come till much later when Elmdon was attached to the main-drainage system in 1975.

The council houses, built in blocks at intervals of some years and in a great variety of styles, are also situated on the Ickleton Road. The Glebe (66a-f) was the first to be built (1922). It is constructed round three sides of a square which is open to the road and filled with tenants' vegetable patches. The Glebe has now a comfortable, lived-in appearance and an air of quite venerable age. It also has a central position near the shop. Further down Ickleton Road are the main council blocks (74a-79b) which are built in the grimmer style of council architecture of 1948, together with six houses similar in style, which either belong to a farmer or are individually-owned. In this group of twenty new houses, mostly council built, Elmdon people who left tied cottages were housed. As in other English villages, these two housing blocks are on the edge of Elmdon as there was nowhere else to build. This geographical isolation, slight as it is, accounts for the use of the term 'the council people' to describe the inhabitants, and perhaps explains the resentment some of them feel at being, as they say, 'cooped up in the council houses' without the means to buy themselves a house at the present exorbitant rates elsewhere in the village.<sup>6</sup>

The more recent council housing does not have this defect. The six Bury cottages (65a-f), known originally as the 'old people's bungalows' are built on a ridge on the north side of the road next to what was then the school. These bungalows fulfilled such an obvious need that two more were built in 1967. The bungalows have a fine view, not only over the hillside opposite, but over the shop (61) which was certainly the centre of village life in 1964 and is even more so of recent years since the store has taken over the post-office. The shop is the place for gossip and information and is the most useful meeting place in the village. The school, next door to the old people's housing, was also a centre of social life in 1964 before it was closed and the school transferred to Chrishall. It was the place where meetings, wedding receptions, whist drives and jumble sales were held, as the present village hall had not been enlarged sufficiently to fulfil these functions by 1964.

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This then is the Ickleton Road, a mixture of Tudor, Victorian, and twentieth-century buildings, early and late; a set of houses built by landowners, private individuals, council authorities and, recently, speculative builders that is probably typical of Essex villages and perhaps of those of other counties as well. It has certainly not got the beauty of harmony but it is a street full of activity where all the inhabitants of Elmdon go to and fro.

As to its amenities Elmdon probably reaches the level of other small villages in this part of the world. It has no street-lighting and this is felt to be a grievance because old people still remember the time when the streets were lit with gas lamps, one on Cross Hill, one at the church corner, one at the entrance to Kings Lane and one opposite the Old Forge which was once the post office. Some inhabitants were still drawing water in buckets from the pump in the High Street in 1966 and these were carried on a wooden yoke as Swiss milkmaids used to carry buckets of milk. There was another pump in the Ickleton Road near the house now called 'Pump Cottage'. Elmdon was not attached to the main-drainage system till 1975 — households used Elsan sanitation or had septic tanks. Seventeen households had no interior sanitation in 1970.

Elmdon may build and rebuild its houses, add a bit here and take away a bit there, 'spoil' its ancient appearance or 'improve' it, but its site will remain. Medieval English villages tend to have been built on the slopes of fortified hills where these existed and this gives them their variety and charm. Elmdon between two such hills is a fine example. Its most beautiful view is seen from the site of a medieval castle on top of Elmdon Bury hill — 'Castle hill' on the Ordnance map. Here a rectangular moat survives intact and there is a sweeping view over rolling fields as far as Ely in one direction and over the hills behind Ickleton and Gt Chesterford in the other. Below Castle hill the land falls abruptly to Elmdon Bury Farm and then to the road junction, Cross Hill. The Saffron Walden road then plunges down-hill into the valley of the High Street, before rising steeply up the opposite hill, Wenden Lofts. It is surely the switch-back roads of many English hill villages which gives them their distinctive beauty, and Elmdon on top of its chalk ridge is typical in this respect.

### Origins of this book

This book was never planned as a conventional social survey. It

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grew out of a teaching experiment. In 1962 Edmund Leach and I, both then members of the Department of Social Anthropology of Cambridge University, decided to provide some practical fieldwork training for some of our students. Many of them were going to work in what would be to them very unfamiliar environments, in, for instance, Africa, Asia, South America or Oceania, and they would have to face difficult and exacting tasks in their fieldwork. We felt they should have some first-hand experience of a few of the basic techniques of anthropological research, such as interviewing and the taking and keeping of notes. We decided that the collection of genealogies and family histories, usually considered an essential part of anthropological fieldwork could well be undertaken in an English village within the short span available in student vacations. We chose Elmdon for this experiment because I had acquired a house there some two years earlier, and because we were impressed by the number of householders with the same surname who appeared in the current electoral rolls. Some of these names were also to be seen on tombstones in the churchyard, dating in some cases to the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> This seemed to indicate a continuity in at least part of the village population and these were the families which we thought it would be profitable to study. I had one neighbour who belonged to one of these old Elmdon families and another who had been a teacher in the village school for forty-four years. Both were interested in the project and willing to help us.

The students were asked to collect the genealogies of some families which were chosen because of their long association with Elmdon, namely the Clarks, Gangees, Greenhills, Hammonds, Hayes, Hoys, Laws and Reeves -- all names which appear in the present book. We also asked the students to get as much information as possible about the life-histories of living members of the selected families. We hoped they would get data on three generations of a family by interview and would be able to trace lines back as far as the fourth and fifth or even the sixth generation with the help of the parish registers and other documents.

It soon became clear that we were handling a very large group of people. This was specially the case when an ancestor had had a number of children who had all survived the hard conditions of the nineteenth century and had remained resident in Elmdon. Robert Hammond, for instance, who had a child baptised in Elmdon in 1816 according to the register, had a son, a second



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Robert (1824–72) who had six sons and three daughters who all remained in Elmdon, married there and produced children. Therefore the descendants of the first Robert Hammond form a large group in Elmdon today. A student calculated there were as many as fifty living adults, out of a population of 321, who had relationships by blood or marriage to the Hammonds. We were dealing, in fact, with six or seven large groups, much intermarried as it turned out, and this is one of the reasons why our family case-history method proved so useful, not only in providing experience for students, but as a means of reconstructing the history of an English village, its changes in occupation, emigration and immigration patterns and lifestyle.

Four student parties worked in the village during the next few years. Four second-year students of anthropology were in Elmdon for a week to ten days in August 1962,<sup>8</sup> five for a period of two weeks in December 1963,<sup>9</sup> two for a fortnight in July 1965,<sup>10</sup> and another two for a fortnight in August 1967.<sup>11</sup> I was able to provide some continuity by making week-end and vacation visits to Elmdon until I became a permanent resident in 1964. I made notes, for instance, on village events such as weddings, funerals, Christmas celebrations, and meetings, whether of the parish council or the village hall committee. Edmund Leach was obliged to leave the work in 1967 when he became Provost of King's College, Cambridge, but he left us valuable notes on the history of Elmdon and many ideas.

The student visits were of course extremely short but a surprising amount of fascinating material was collected, owing both to the enthusiasm of the students and also to the fact that our informants seemed to enjoy the informal and quite unstructured interviews, and particularly liked to describe their childhood and youth in the Elmdon of 'old days', actually the early twenties.

The teaching experiment was, I think, successful but it certainly took a long time, as the dates of the students' visits show. This is not the place to discuss the history of the project with its achievements and failures, though our experience will certainly be of interest to the numerous students of anthropology and sociology now embarking on village surveys. More material will be given in the more directly anthropological volume on Elmdon, *Kinship at the core* by Marilyn Strathern. Suffice it to say here that we soon found it necessary to extend our study of the old Elmdon families and to take a census of the village as a whole. This was completed

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in 1964, mainly by Ann Whitehead. We thus had the genealogies and histories of six selected families, and data on the birth, the residential and occupational history, marriage and offspring of all the adult inhabitants of the village. It is for this reason that 1964 was selected as the terminal date of the present study. But the changes in the composition of the population were rapid after 1964 and we made further checks in 1971, 1974 and 1977. This material appears in a chapter on recent changes in Elmdon society contributed by Frances Oxford to Marilyn Strathern's book.

As the years went on, it became clear that in spite of our original modest intentions we had enough material to produce a book. We therefore had to systematise the work. In 1969 Julian Laite and Paul Atkinson did a preliminary housing survey and completed the village map and in 1971, Hilda Kabushenga, a student from Uganda, checked our figures for a month. In 1972 we were able to appoint our first whole-time investigators, D. Woodhill, a sociologist, and R. Taylor, a historian, who both worked almost entirely on documentary material and produced preliminary studies of the Lofts Hall estate and of the farming families of Elmdon, together with histories of some of the other families no longer represented in Elmdon, and a history of the school.

At the same time Jean Robin, a geographer, agreed to put order into our genealogical material and to make sense of the scattered bits of information contained in field-notes, the preliminary analyses of parish registers, and the other documents. She and I decided as an interim measure to prepare a small book for the people of Elmdon containing the history of six of our selected families – the Gamgees, Greenhills, Hayes, Hammonds, Hoys and Reeves – all still represented in the village. This little book under both our names was published privately in 1975 with the title of *Some Elmdon Families*.

By then Jean Robin had become an expert in the nineteenth-century history of Elmdon and had worked and re-worked the census material to produce an unexpected amount of information on the social and economic history of Elmdon as a whole, its population changes, its emigration and immigration rates, the transformation of Elmdon occupations during the past hundred years, and the education and employment of women in the late nineteenth century, together with detailed material on the history of the Lofts Hall estate and of the changes in farming ownership and farming organisation. It went far beyond the scope of *Some*



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*Elmdon Families*. After a short period of work with the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, she started to write a history of a hundred years of change in the economic and social life of Elmdon as a whole. The study has been based on two sets of data. Firstly the documentary material, mainly the official records and the surveys of the Lofts Hall estate, 1927 and 1860. Secondly, the verbal information provided by the inhabitants of the village, together with their views and comments. This combination of written and oral information may well be the first experiment of its kind yet made. One of its advantages became obvious once the work for the book about the six families had begun. It was clear that the oral information enlarged the historical span of the selected kinship groups both in time-depth and geographical distribution.

The national census provided a wealth of information on family size, household composition, occupation and, by deduction, on population changes, emigration and immigration, as Jean Robin's statistics show so clearly, but the last census available to scholars is that taken in 1871. Parish registers, of course, continued to be kept after that date and give us details on the birth, marriage and death of all Elmdon inhabitants who were baptised, married or buried in the village. But the genealogies produced by interview were completed in most cases up to 1972 because our informants insisted that we put in the names of children recently born, as the family trees in *Some Elmdon Families* show. This gives a very long time-depth in the history of village kinship groups. The documentary plus the verbal information gives a longer historical span than most anthropologists have been able to use. It also enabled Jean Robin to provide information on the whereabouts of family members who had left Elmdon and had therefore ceased to appear in the census, together with their occupations, marriages and children. Had the emigrants raised their economic position and social status or lowered it as judged by their occupations, most of them in urban areas? Had the girls who went into domestic service in London, married policemen or milkmen on the round, or returned home to marry childhood sweethearts? Both occurred, as the interviews showed.

The field notes also enabled us to study the persistence of the sense of kinship identity under modern village conditions. How far are those who left Elmdon remembered and for how long? *Kinship at the core* gives interesting data from the parish registers

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on the return of Elmdon men and women to have their children baptised in St Nicholas Church, or to bury their relatives there. I was able to note the number of absentee relatives who came back to Elmdon for holiday visits, weddings and funerals. Students of migratory labour in South Africa and Zambia have often wanted such information but the official records are not adequate for the purpose. In an English village, by contrast, it would be possible to make some estimation of the persistence of kinship links over one or two, or even three generations both in the case of absentees in nearby villages as well as those who have gone further afield.

This whole question of the persistence of the sense of kinship identity of course depends on people's memories and the means they take to preserve them. The accuracy of the Elmdon people's power of recall of genealogical facts as compared to the records in the parish register is a fundamental piece of knowledge for anthropologists, and one still to be worked out.

Another interesting result of our work was a continual and useful kind of cross-fertilisation between the records and the material obtained by interview. This was stimulating. Take, for instance, the question of marriage. Living people told us that they remembered inter-village fights, one resulting in a death, and that these were mainly 'about women'. Some also gave an impression that wives were difficult to get and that it was a friendly act to produce a bride for a mate. Brother and sister exchange marriage went on in Elmdon over several generations and such marriages often indicate a shortage of either men or women in other societies, a shortage which leads families to claim rights over suitable spouses for their sons or daughters. Did something of the kind exist in Elmdon or did the isolation of the community lead to large numbers of intra-village unions, of which brother and sister marriages were one form? What was the sex ratio in Elmdon at different periods of its history? Was there a shortage of marriageable girls in fact as well as imagination, and if so was it due to the emigration of girls to London and elsewhere to take posts in domestic service? How many girls from London found husbands in Elmdon? Anecdotes sometimes pose questions to the records and the records sometimes send the fieldworker back to ask questions of the living.

It is because Jean Robin has been able to use these different sources of information so fruitfully that I believe this book will

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make a valuable contribution to the increasing number of studies  
of English village life.

Audrey Richards

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## Preface

A newcomer to Elmdon would quickly find his way round the village, for it is not a large community. In 1964, the year in which this study ends, it contained 114 households, one less than it had done just over a hundred years earlier at the beginning of the period under consideration. In 1861, as now, agriculture was the only industry of any importance not only in the village itself but in the parish in which it lay. Even the rate of population turnover was almost unchanged, being marginally greater in the mid-nineteenth century than it was in the 1950s. The question must be asked whether a study of continuity and change in such a small and apparently stable community can have any relevance outside the confines of the immediate area.

This book does not set out to assess how typical an English village Elmdon may be. Yet its recent history does throw light on matters of interest to rural societies in general. For all its dependence on agriculture and its lack of physical growth since 1861, Elmdon lies not in some remote border area but within fifty miles of London, with a mainline station less than five miles away which was already in operation in 1861 and which provided then, as now, a service to the heart of the City. While it made little personal difference to the men working on the land in Elmdon in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whether the capital was fifty or five hundred miles off, London and its environs offered opportunities to those who had to seek employment elsewhere; and soon after the First World War the village began to be drawn into the commuter belt. The maintenance of Elmdon's stability as late as 1964, while it was so open to influence by the largest conurbation in the country, is a matter for remark.

Because Elmdon's population has been a comparatively small one throughout the period of this study, it has been possible to follow the lives of individuals and families in a degree of detail

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which can illuminate many areas not always thoroughly explored. For example, the annual registers of electors available from the end of the nineteenth century onwards provide a tool by which overall population turnover can be assessed; but because the numbers of individuals concerned are few, it has also been possible to discover what kind of people entered the village, how long they stayed, and what influence events such as the two World Wars had on the old-established Elmdon families. Again, analysis of marriage data can reveal not only the proportion of intra-village marriages, but also the degree to which the different occupational groups 'kept themselves to themselves', and kinship links can be traced and their influence assessed in a way that would be inhibited by a considerably larger sample.

Finally, for the first sixty-six years of the period covered, Elmdon's history provides an opportunity to consider the effect on a village of a squire who owned only half its farms and cottages. In Elmdon, the other half of the land and houses belonged to a number of different owners, many of whom let their properties, so that whatever the social influence of the Squire throughout Elmdon, in economic terms the villagers had an alternative to employment and housing on his estate. Some of the advantages and disadvantages of being inside or outside the squirearchical system can therefore be seen by comparing the fortunes of the Squire's tenants on the one hand, and those living outside the estate on the other. The sale of the Squire's property to a number of new owners between 1927 and 1930 provides an opportunity to observe how far changes in land and property ownership affected Elmdon's agricultural population, and to what extent the Squire's paternalism towards his farm-labouring tenants, most of whom he had known all his life, was replaced by paternalism of a rather different kind exercised at one remove by the local authority through their housing programme, and from even further away by the national government through its rent acts.

This book attempts to look at all sections of Elmdon's population, and to assess the effect on their daily lives of external events, whether personal, local or national. In so doing, it provides a framework of basic information for use by Marilyn Strathern in her companion volume *Kinship at the core*, which considers the nature of community in Elmdon from an anthropologist's viewpoint. The two approaches are necessarily different, and in some cases result in different interpretations of terminology. For

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example, to say in this book that an incomer marrying an Elmdoner, and taking up permanent residence in the village as a result, has become 'established' in Elmdon implies no more than the inescapable fact that he or she is physically present there. The question as to whether, or to what extent, such an incomer is accepted as part of the community is one of the matters explored by Marilyn Strathern.

In writing this book I have been greatly indebted to Audrey Richards who not only supervised the study of Elmdon village, undertaken by students of the University of Cambridge Department of Social Anthropology, from its inception in 1962, but also gave ungrudgingly of her time and knowledge while the book was in preparation. I am also grateful to Edmund Leach who, with Audrey Richards, directed the survey in its early years and whose notebooks, like hers, have proved so valuable, and to the students themselves. Without their interviews with long-established Elmdon residents, it would have been impossible to piece together in any detail the history of Elmdon from the sale of the Squire's property in 1927 onwards, and these same interviews gave many leads back into the more distant past. My thanks go to David Woodhill for his very useful work on the history of the Lofts Hall estate, and to Rosaleen Taylor for her study of the Wilkes family. Marilyn Strathern has been unfailingly helpful in her comments on the manuscript.

I would also like to thank the late Mrs Wilkes, and her nephew Major Rippingall, for access to family papers; the Rev. Francis Dufton, who bore so patiently with repeated requests for inspection of the parish registers and who provided much information on local affairs; Mr and Mrs Walter Brand of Chrishall for showing me their collection of family documents and allowing the reproduction of a page from Robert Brand's arithmetic book on page 175; Mr Jack Cross for his help on the agricultural history of Elmdon; Mr Weeden for his recollections of the early days of the bus services; and all those who so kindly made available the title-deeds of their properties and provided photographs. I am particularly grateful to the people of Elmdon, too numerous to mention individually, who have given so much of their time to helping the project through their knowledge of the past.

My thanks go to Mr Peter Laslett, Miss Elaine Lingham, Dr Alan Macfarlane, Dr Mary Prior and Dr Edith Whetham for their helpful suggestions and comments on the manuscript; to Mr Michael