"Ghost, kelpie, wraith"

by Ronald S. Pickersgill

"THERE can be few people interested in ghosts or psychical research who have not heard of Borley rectory, 'the most haunted house in England'—or anywhere else come to that." So writes Harry Price in his mammoth book *Poltergeist over England,* published in 1945. His books on Borley are really classics, particularly *The Most Haunted House in England* (1940) and later *The End of Borley Rectory*. Some praise Price for his work, others debunk much of his findings. Anyhow, Borley deserves its reputation (it is probably the best documented and best authenticated case in the annals of psychical research, and the haunting has persisted for almost a century), but it must not be thought that Essex is a "one-ghost county."

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The case of Anne Boleyn is very interesting. She haunts the Tower of London, where she was executed in May 1556, and the church in the Tower where she lies officially. There is a tradition though that her body was secretly removed to Salle and laid under a black marble slab without any inscription. (The Salle slab was lifted, but no bones were found underneath it.) A similar slab at Horndon-on-the-Hill is also pointed out as her grave, and her ghost has supposedly been seen there.

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Sir Ernest Bennett in his *Apparitions and Haunted Houses* (1939) deals with over 100 cases of ghostly happenings. There is one of particular interest. On the evening of Monday, December 5, 1938, a Mrs. X, living near Great Dunmow, first shot her husband and then committed suicide by shooting herself. The exact time when she did so is uncertain, but it was clearly established at the inquest, which was held on Friday, December 9, that it was round about 9 p.m. About 7.45 the following morning the daily help, on going to the house, found a note in Mrs. X's handwriting: "Don't go in, send for the police." Mrs. X's body was found lying in the garden. The police were called in and sent for a surgeon at about 8.40 a.m.

A Mr. and Mrs. Dawson lived a mile or two away from the scene of the tragedy. Mr. Dawson related how he and his wife were motoring to London on December 6. Having left their house at 9.15 a.m., some five minutes later they passed Mr. and Mrs. X's house. Walking towards them along the country by-road outside the house was Mrs. X, hatless. They both bowed "good morning" to her and she acknowledged their greetings. At about 9 o'clock that night they were told that Mrs. X had shot Mr. X and herself at about 9.30 on the night of December 5, some twelve hours before they saw Mrs. X. They were naturally somewhat surprised at this, but reassured themselves that they had seen Mrs. X at 9.30 on December 6.

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In 1665 the Rev. Joseph Glanvill, a member of a society for psychical research, famous divine, philosopher, and somewhat of a sceptic, heard of an interesting case from a prebendary of Westminster. The house concerned was at Bow, near Plaistow—in Glanvill's time a rural village.

An Essex gentleman, riding to London, had occasion to call at the house of Paul Fox, a weaver. He was told of some extraordinary happenings that were taking place. In particular a young girl had been "plucked by the thigh by a cold hand" as she lay in her bed and had died shortly afterwards. Some weeks later, on his return home, he again called at the house and heard of more disturbances since his last visit. Bedding, chairs, stools and candlesticks were scattered about, and two bed-staffs rose from the floor of their own volition. At the time Glanvill received his report, witches and witchcraft were much in men's minds. So the Bow family roasted a bed-staff in order, according to one of the popular tests then current, to discover the person who was overlooking them. Sure enough an old woman, a suspected witch, came to the house shortly afterwards. She was promptly arrested, but, says Glanvill, "escaped the law." Anyway the disturbances increased and troubles

The derelict outhouses at Borley. Photograph by J. Elsden Tuffs.





The Nun's Walk, Borley. Photograph by J. Elsden Tuffs.

spread into every room in the house. This drove the family out of the place, which stood empty for a long time afterwards.

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The village of Great Leighs was the scene of the Scrapfaggot Green poltergeist disturbances early in October 1944. Scrapfaggot is a corruption of the Suffolk word scratch-faggot, a term for an old hag or witch.) Some of the most extraordinary things happened all over the village, the focal point of the alleged phenomena being the church of St. Mary the Virgin. The tenor bell in the church tower tolled in the early hours of the morning and the bell ropes played reversed chimes on Sundays; the church clock struck midnight at 2.30 a.m. and lost an hour each day; corn stooks were found in adjoining meadows; a farmer's haystacks were pushed over in the night; cows in calf gave birth prematurely; the hens stopped laying; sheep strayed through unbroken hedges; three geese belonging to Mr. A. J. Sykes, landlord of the St. Anne's Castle inn (said to be the oldest in England, dating back to 1170), disappeared from his garden, though there was no break in the enclosure; a builder complained that a pile of scaffold poles had been scattered about his yard like matchsticks; a dozen paint pots, many brushes and other paraphernalia, neatly stacked overnight, had been found by a decorator under the beds of a cottage where his men had been working, and so on. Nearly every person in the village had some story to relate of strange happenings or displacement of objects.

When Harry Price spent a day at Great Leighs, Mr. William Reynolds, the licensee of the Dog and Gun, showed him a large boulder weighing some 200 pounds that had been deposited outside his front door—just where one was likely to fall over it. It was of irregular shape, much worn, with no signs of moss or moisture on it. No one had lost such a stone, and its origin has never been traced. What interested Price most was a certain bedroom in the St. Anne's Castle inn which cannot be slept in peacefully. The contents of the room always appear to have been shaken out of a pepper pot; nothing will stay put. No other part of the house is affected. (It was from this inn that the B.B.C. broadcast a haunted house programme in April 1939.)

The villagers declared that their misfortunes dated from the day when American bulldozers widened the road at Scrapfaggot Green, the centre of the village, thus displacing a two-ton stone that marked the remains of a seventeenth-century witch who had been buried, with a stake through her chest, at the crossroads there. Price told them the logical thing to do was to restore the tombstone to its original site. This they did ceremonially at midnight on October 11, placing the stone east and west in the traditional manner. The phenomena ceased. Price came to the conclusion that the Scrapfaggot manifestations were partly genuine, partly the work of a practical joker and partly due to mass-hysteria. The photograph of Great Leighs, taken on October 6, 1944, during the manifestations, which appears in Price's book *Poltergeist Over England* gives the effect of high summer rather than autumn. How can we explain the lush growth shown?

And again, it is a curious fact that both of the two most famous poltergeist rectories have been destroyed by fire, Epworth in 1709 and Borley in 1939—both in the month of February.

. . . and Borley

by J. Elsden Tuffs, A.R.Hist.S.

PERHAPS no other place in Essex has captured the imagination more than Borley and its haunted rectory. It has been the subject both of books and talks, and its remains have been visited by many scores of people.

It was with some anticipation that a visit was undertaken by road, starting from the south-west corner of the county and travelling via Dunmow, Thaxted and Steeple Bumpstead.

Turning south just before reaching Sudbury, the railway was crossed and then, for the first time, the small knoll with its few buildings and its trees came into distant view.

We pulled up in front of the locked doors of Borley church, where mysterious singing had been heard at various times. Everything seemed very quiet and peaceful in the wintry afternoon sunshine.

Across the road behind a hedge stood the rough, grass-covered foundations of the rectory, and I stood for a moment at the gateposts where the nun had appeared on several occasions to Mr. Bull.

A young lady, who came hardly up to my waist, then appeared and took me to the Nun's Walk, where burnt timber from the rectory was being stacked against a tree.

I next wandered across the foundations and saw several covered-in wells and the wheel of the hand-pump which used to echo so strangely through the vanished building.

Part of the rectory buildings are still left—the coach house, etc.—and are occupied as a private residence. They face both the church and its neighbour, Old Borley Hall.

The sun was fading as the journey home commenced via Sudbury, Halstead, Braintree, Chelmsford and so west down the Essex Great Road.

But memories of Borley have remained ever since, and it would be an unwise person who is prepared to discard the haunting of it too easily. There is more to Borley than the mere written word!

A WITCH HUNTER IN MODERN ESSEX

Considerable interest was aroused by the broadcast by Mr. Eric Maple on Essex witches, and in this article he describes his experiences in getting information on the subject.

by Eric Maple

ESSEX is particularly rich in witch lore, for the belief in witchcraft survived here until well into the last century. The marshlands of the Rochford and Dengie hundreds were the last strongholds of the old traditions, and it is still possible to hear tales about witches within five miles of modern Southend or Burnham-on-Crouch.

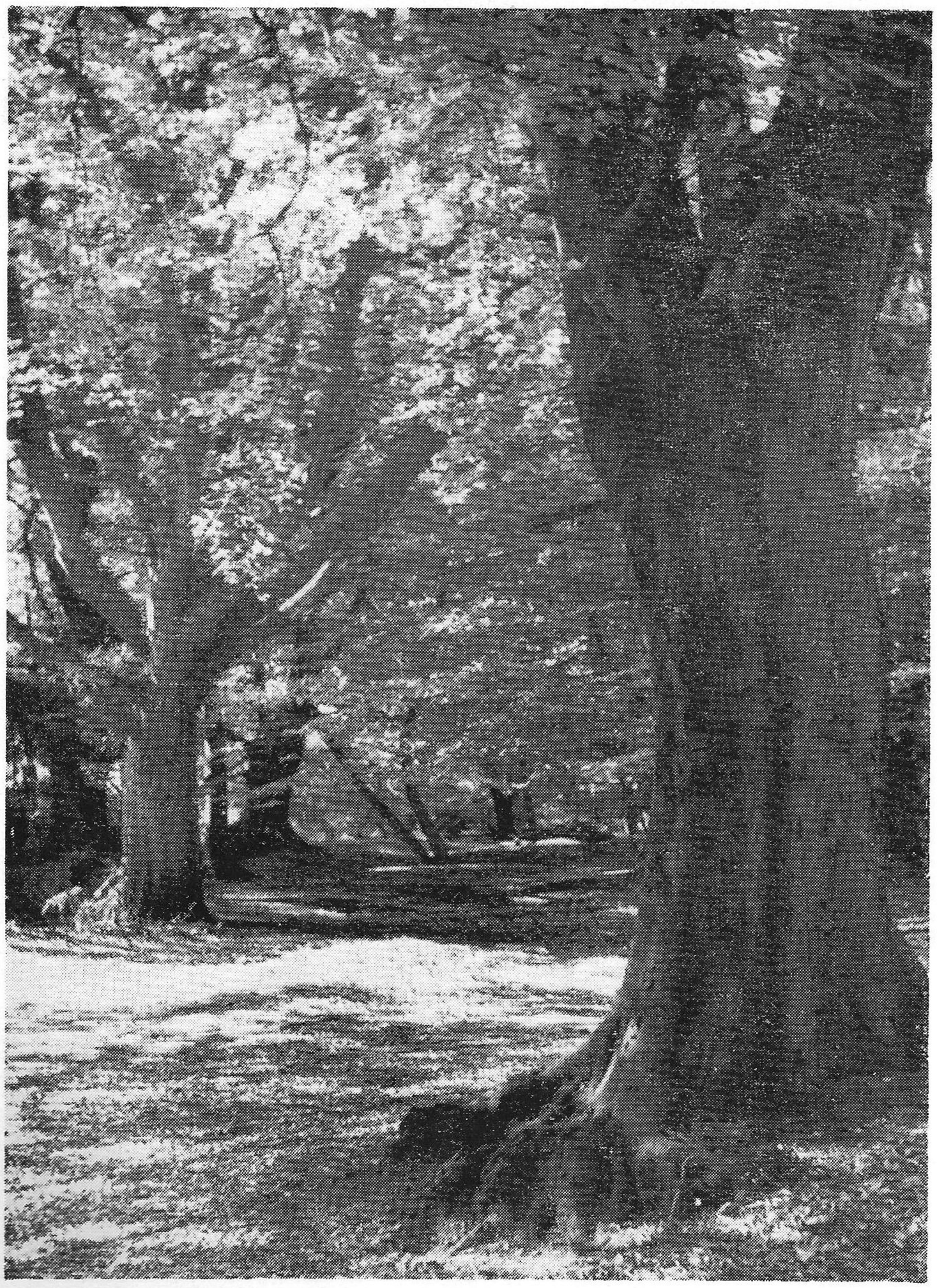
As a collector of Essex folklore, I was curious to discover more about the well-known Hadleigh wizard Cunning Murrell. It seemed obvious to me that if a man was able to make a living out of destroying the power of witches as recently as 1850 the belief in witchcraft must have been very strong at that time. Was it possible, I wondered, that any legends of the witches had still survived in the Hadleigh district ? I decided to go down to Hadleigh to find out for myself.

There was far more material than I had ever dreamed of. Old people were ready to tell me ancient tales handed down by their parents and grandparents. Some were about Cunning Murrell and others about the witches whom he combated. Cunning Murrell's book of astrology is still in existence in local hands, and so too, until recently, were the rest of his magical papers. I have in my possession the ancient chest in which he kept them.

It was common belief in nineteenth-century Essex that witches could cast spells upon farm animals and blight crops. Because of this it was not uncommon for some old woman to be cast in the horse pond, a survival of the old idea that if she were a witch she would float. An old man of Sible Hedingham was subjected to this ordeal in 1863 and died as the result.

The witch of Hadleigh was Mrs. Eves, and Murrell made many a half-crown out of those who sincerely believed that she was responsible for their misfortunes. This was his charge for breaking the power of a witch.

He did this by means of "witch bottles," iron bottles in which he heated the hair and nail clippings from a so-called victim of a spell. If the bottle burst it was supposed to kill the witch, but more often than not it would blow down a cottage wall.



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Hockley, Rayleigh and other Essex villages had their witches, but the great centre of the tradition was Canewdon. Seventy years ago there were said to be six witches and a wizard in residence there. The witches were under the command of the wizard, and when he whistled they must perforce dance in the churchyard for him. The wizard was George Pickingale, who is still remembered in Canewdon today. This amazing man, who only died in 1909, was said to be able to order his imps to do his day's work for him. There are people still living who will swear that he could summon the wild animals of the field to him merely by waving his stick. Pickingale was never short of a hare for the pot.

On the far side of the River Crouch is the Dengie hundred, where the witch tradition was equally strong. Old women with curious names such as Diddy Horn and Fanny Bird held the village folk in a state of terror. They

A glade at High Beech. An entry from Mr. A. Puck in our competition for photographs of trees in Essex.

It was a common belief in the last century that witches could cast spells

were accused of bewitching the wheels of wagons and possessing imps, charges which would have led them to the gallows 200 years earlier.

Of course, one recognizes that these women were merely the victims of popular superstition, but it is a tribute to the tenacity with which these beliefs were held that as recently as 1900 an old woman had her cottage windows broken because it was thought that she had bewitched some farm machinery.

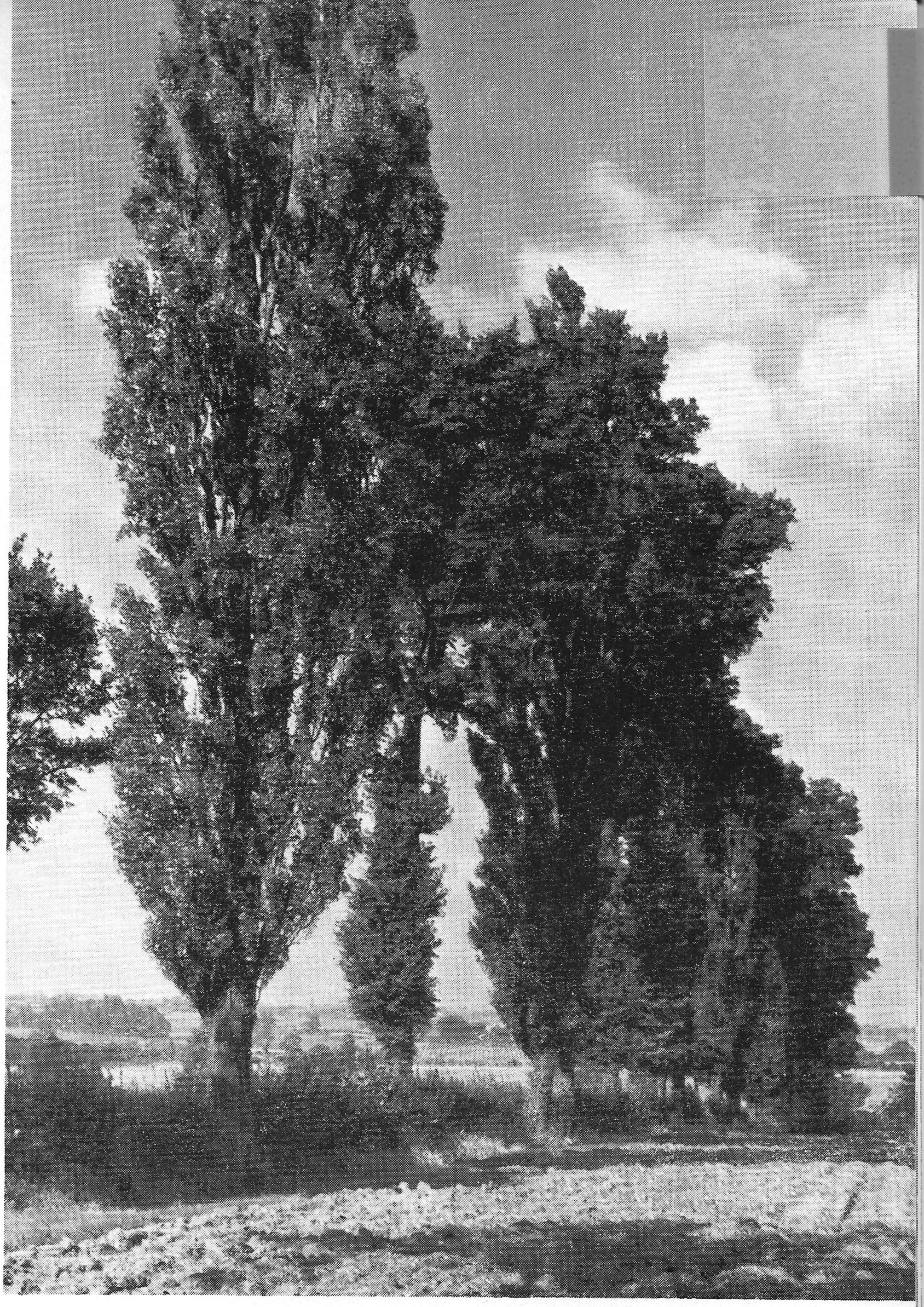
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Collecting the tales is not easy. The old-time countryman is very conservative and most sensitive to ridicule. It has to be a very gentle business. I try to put the old people completely at their ease by persuading them to talk about their childhood and then of the quaint customs of those far-off days. From country medicine we move to country magic and, if one is lucky, to some dimly remembered tale about witches.

Collecting witch legends is a fascinating hobby. Only two years ago this great treasure of folklore was almost unknown. What other secrets remain hidden in the Essex countryside ?

Guide to Rainham parish church

THE modern development of Rainham, Essex, little suggests its Saxon origin, but its roots in the past are still visible, for in the still surviving village centre stands the parish church, an almost complete and spacious Norman edifice consisting of nave, chancel, tower and aisles, an elaboration that is unusual for a village church of that period. The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments described this building as of "considerable architectural interest." The several minor additions and alterations since its erection in A.D. 1170 and the possession of many features of historical or antique value make this remarkable and still active church well worth study. At the request of the vicar, Mr. F. Lewis, a local subscriber to THE ESSEX COUNTRYSIDE, has prepared a history and guide of 30 pages and several illustrations. This can be obtained from him at "St. Giles," Berwick Road, Rainham, Essex, for 1/2 post free.



Poplars, elms and alders on a farm between Wakes Colne and Pebmarsh. It is unusual sight to see many trees in farm hedges nowadays—save by the roadsides. This lovely line of trees must have been planted many years ago by an owner with a keen sense of beauty. An entry from Mr. Douglas Went, of Brightlingsea, in our competition for photographs of trees in Essex.

LAST LEGENDS OF THE ESSEX WITCHES

Tales are still told of "Cunning Murrell"

by Eric Maple

I HAVE collected many legends about Cunning Murrell, the wizard of Hadleigh, who is still remembered there although he died 100 years ago. Three generations of Hadleigh villagers have treasured tales handed down to them from their great-grandparents—tales of magic and mystery.

These stories reveal the dark world in which the average Essex farm labourer lived until comparatively modern times. In fact, until the coming of popular education in the seventies of the last century his ideas were very little different from those of his ancestors of the eighteenth century, and superstitions that had died out everywhere else still lingered on in the countryside.

One story told about Murrell concerns his battle with a gipsy witch and illustrates the gruesome character of the old witchcraft belief. This was told to me by an old lady whose great-grandparents had lived next door to the wizard, whom they feared and respected.

One day a Hadleigh girl went into a barn at harvest time to collect some beer for the farmworkers. She discovered that an old gipsy woman had got at the beer first and she ordered her out of the barn. As she left the gipsy shouted out : " You'll be sorry for this, my girl "—and so she was. Hardly had she got back to the fields with the beer than she was " took comical " as they used to say in Essex. She started screaming like a cat and barking like a dog and ran on all fours. Hysteria like this was completely beyond the comprehension of nineteenth-century rustics, and it was assumed that she had been bewitched.

They decided to call in Cunning Murrell, the local witch doctor. Murrell took one look at the girl and said that it was indeed witchcraft and that the fee for unwitching her would be sixpence.

The bargain was struck, and that night Murrell prepared a grim concoction of urine, herbs, nail clippings and hair snippings and heated it up in a bottle over the kitchen fire, the idea being that as it boiled up it would burn the witch wherever she might be. It was hoped that by torturing her he would compel her to remove the spell. This was a seventeenth-century technique known as a witch bottle.

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The watchers sat in silence and presently there came the sound of footsteps up the path, and there followed the cry of a woman in pain. A voice called out " Stop, stop. You're killing me." Suddenly the contents of the bottle boiled up and the bottle itself exploded. The woman's crying stopped dead. There was silence. A few minutes later the girl recovered from her hysteria, but on the following day the half-burned body of an old gipsy woman was found lying in the road in the next village.

Frightened

Country people of the past still had the strange notion that an evilly disposed person could influence the weather, harm crops and cause storms. Such a one was old Mrs. Eves, who in Murrell's time lived in a little cottage near the Wagon and Horses in Hadleigh.

People were so frightened of her that when she died nobody wanted to enter her cottage to lay out her body, which was the neighbourly thing to do in old Essex. At last a woman agreed to help, and this was the tale told by her great-granddaughter, whom I met two years ago.

After the body had been prepared for burial, the woman was about to leave when a man came into the room and told her that he was the witch's son, and his old mother's ghost had come to him as he was working in the fields and told him of her death.

The terrified woman wanted to go at once, but he would not let her. He said : " My mother had a power and that power comes to me, but I don't want it so we shall destroy it." He told her to make up a big fire, and when the stove was hot he took a little box from the sideboard drawer, a box

A TRAVELLER IN ESSEX

ONE of the great joys of writing contributions for a county magazine is the interesting correspondence received and the enjoyable " pen friendships " gained. One such friendship I have made is with Mr. Christopher Reed, of London, W.10, who is a regular visitor to Essex as well as to other English counties.

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Mr. Reed is very interested in Runwell village. He writes : " The village is supposed to have got its name from a local spring which has never been known to dry up. It is not far from a beautiful old farmhouse known as ' Flemmings '—the house is mentioned in many books on Essex. The village has one public-house, the Quart Pot ; this is shown on many early maps of the county.

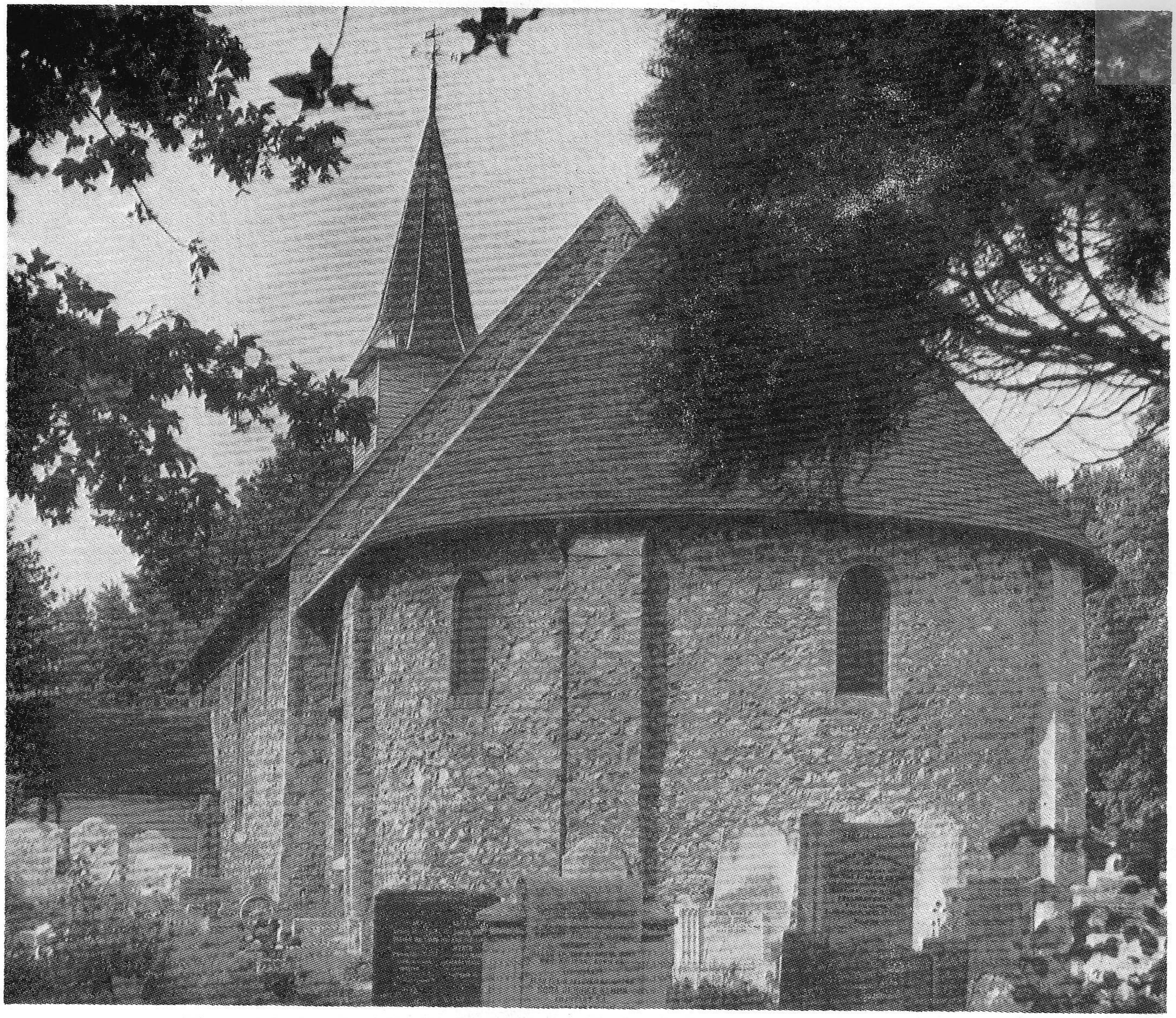
" In my school days the only employment for men and boys was agriculture. Owing to the type of soil in this part of the county some of the finest corn in England was grown, especially wheat. After the harvest had been gathered in, everyone in the village, including the children, went gleaning in the cornfields.

" After the gleaning of wheat had finished the wheat would be beaten by a man with a flail, then it would be put through a winnow to blow away chaff, then it was put into sacks for the miller to grind into flour. A carrier would then take it to Stock windmill.

" The miller would grind it and later the carrier would call and bring back the flour to all who sent the corn. This was all done for a few shillings. The flour was used by most people for bread making, and fine bread it was. Barley and oats gleaned would be used for feeding the chickens.

" My family had lived in Runwell for several years before water was laid on to the front gate of every cottage and farmhouse in the village. Before this, drinking water had to be carried from the village pump situated in Wickford, a quarter of a mile away. The village now is fast becoming a built-up area. Gone are many of its old habits—even the old weatherboarded cottages going to make room for the modern houses."

RONALD S. PICKERSGILL.



The parish church of St. James the Less at Hadleigh. It is a small Norman church with a fine Norman apse. A hundred years ago there was a strong belief in witchcraft in Hadleigh. Photograph by R. E. Batten.

which had something alive inside. He thrust it into the flames and at once there arose the most dreadful screams, in a human voice, which slowly died away as the box burned to ashes.

As the shocked woman fled from the house she heard the man say : " The power is dead. At last I'm free." This grim legend is probably very old. It has all the signs of having been handed down from the seventeenth century, when such tales were common. Yet it was told in Hadleigh, Essex, only three generations ago.

The old-time countryman lived in a world in which legends like this were believed by all who heard them—that is if they were brought up in the belief that witches really did exist.

" You'll be sorry "

Another witch with whom Murrell was often in conflict was Nelly Button, who lived near Ashingdon school. This is the very first of all the witch legends which I collected in that part of the world.

Old Nelly Button was a tailoress, and when one of her customers, a girl, told her that she proposed to transfer her custom elsewhere old Nelly said to her : " If you do, you'll be sorry."

At this the girl laughed, but Nelly Button had the last laugh. From that day onwards the girl developed a slow paralysis which crept upwards from her feet until she could only move her head. Then one day old Nelly Button called a. the girl's house and walked quietly into her room. She asked her if she had changed her mind. The girl, who could only manage to move her lips, said " Yes," and within twenty-four hours she could walk again.

Whatever we may think of tales like these, it should be borne in mind that they were genuinely believed all over Essex 100 years ago. And in the very heart of this world of witchcraft was the old witch doctor, Cunning Murrell of Hadleigh, spinning the web that would bring the witches into his power.

WHEN THE DEVIL CAME TO ESSEX

HIS FIRST RECORDED VISITATION WAS TO DANBURY NEAR CHELMSFORD

by Roger Frith

"TALK of the Devil, and he's sure to appear!" the old saying goes. But in our everyday language we use this phrase only to signify that someone of whom we have just been talking has just come through the door. Yet once upon a time it had its literal implications.

Imagine it. How would we, today, expect him to appear: with horns, goat's beard, cloven hooves, and barbed tail? Long ago he came in all shapes and sizes.

His first recorded visitation in Essex, it appears, was in 1402, when "On Corpus Christi daie at evensong time, the devill (as was thought) appeared in a towne in Essex called Danburie, entring the church in the likenesse of a greie frier behaving himselfe verie outrageouslie, plaieng his parts like a divell indeed so that the parishioners were put in a marvellous great fright. At the same instant, there chanced such a tempest of wind, thunder and lightning, that the highest part of the roofe of that church was blown down, and the chancell was all to shaken, rent, and torne in pieces."

The Devil's hatred of church bells—particularly of that one which was rung for the passing soul in order to drive away the powers of darkness and procure the prayers of Christian folk—is also exhibited in the Danbury tradition, which affirms his special animosity against the fifth bell of the peal, and for long no Danbury man would ever ring it. It seems that this took the place of a bell which the Devil stole from the tower; but, as often happens, he had to drop what he was carrying, and the place where it fell is called Bell Hill Wood, and there it is believed to be hidden to this very day.

Another story of church bells comes from East Bergholt. The church tower there is particularly stunted, being no more than fourteen feet high. This is accounted for in the village by a story of the Devil's interference, which prevented its completion, and the truth of the tale is confirmed by the patent fact that the bells have had to be suspended in a wooden cage, which may be seen in a corner of the churchyard.

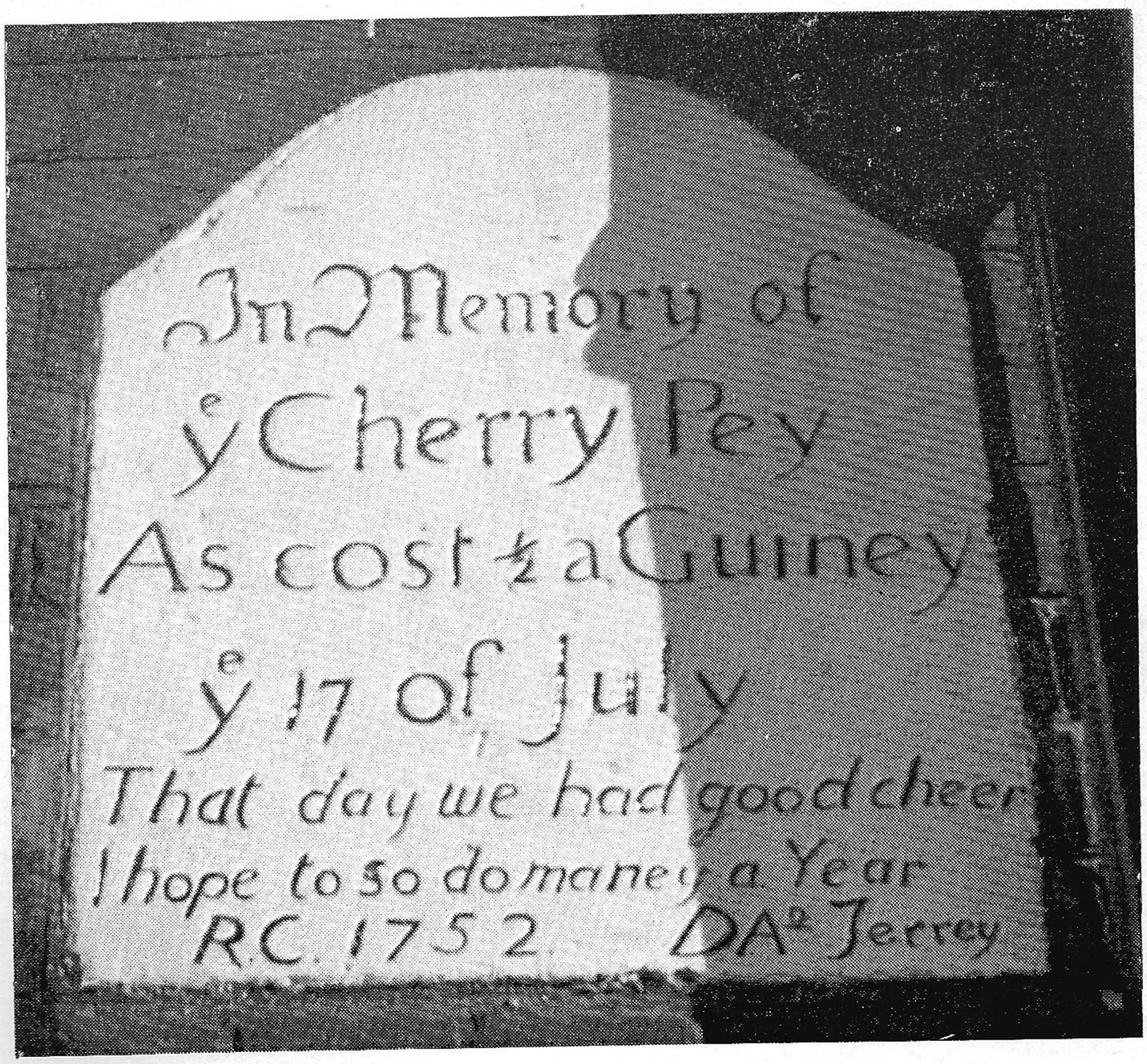
Dr. Plume, the famous diarist of Maldon, recorded an interesting tale of the Devil. According to him, "The Devil appeared to John White of Dorchester at Lambeth in the form of a hog. White upbraided him with what he had been, and what he was, and he never disturbed him more."

His fight with a knight

In the parish of Tolleshunt Knights there is still shown in the middle of a field an enclosed uncultivated spot. On the top of a hill at a little distance stands an ancient manor house known as Barn Hall. The legend relates that it was originally intended to erect this house on the enclosed space, but that the Devil came by night and destroyed the work of the day. A knight, attended by two dogs, was set to watch for the intruder and a tussle ensued; and the prince of darkness, snatching up a beam, hurled it at the site of the present house, exclaiming as he did so: "Wheresoe'er this beam shall fall, there shall stand Barn Hall!" The original beam was believed to remain in the cellar of the present house, and no one, it was said, could enter it without wounding himself. The Devil, enraged at the knight's interference, vowed that he would have him after death, whether he were buried in the church or out of it. Now this doom was ingeniously averted by burying him half in and half out of the church.

"A proper gentleman"

The Devil has been called "the god of the witches." At the big witch trials held at Chelmsford in 1645, several of the accused deposed how they had first become acquainted with their master. Elizabeth Clarke confessed that about seven years before she had surrendered herself to the Devil, who came to her in the form of "a proper gentleman with a laced band," going on to say that he stopped and slept with her. Rebecca West said that she "began to have familiaritie with the Devil by the instigation of her mother, Anne West, who hath



In memory of a cherry pie—a plaque outside the George Hotel, Wanstead. An entry from Miss M. A. Priestman, of Wanstead, in our competition for photographs of Essex oddities.

He appeared to young women as a handsome young man

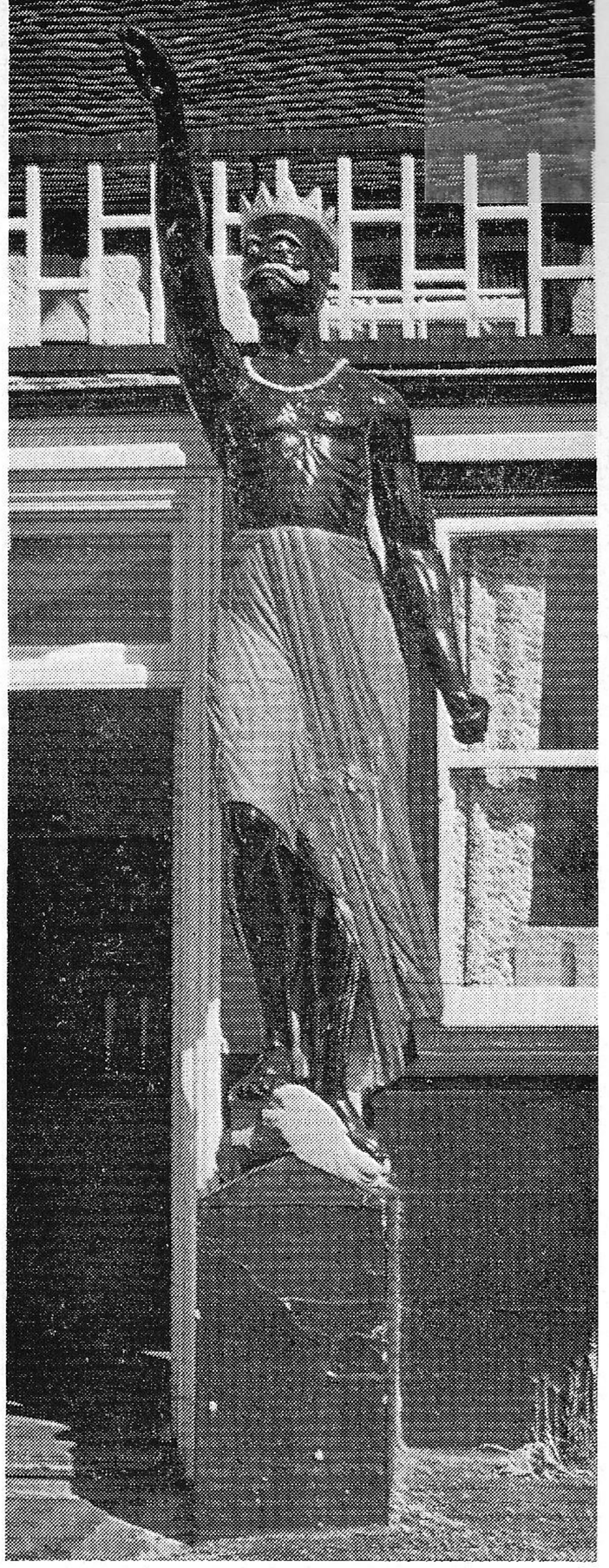
appeared unto the said Rebecca at several times in divers shapes ; at one time in the likeness of a proper young man, who desired of her that he might have the same familiaritie with her that others that appeared unto her before had had. Promising that if she would, he would then doe for the said Rebecca what she desired, and avenge her on her enemies ; but required further, that she would deny God, and relie upon him. This she did, and not long afterwards he avenged her on Thomas Hart of Lawford by killing his son, whereupon Rebecca told this informant that she conceived he could do as God. In one instance, the Devil appeared to her in the shape of a white dog, and ate a mess of milk pottage ; in another his business form was that of a rat ; in another of a grey kite."

" Big goggle eyes "

Rebecca Jones, of St. Osyth, said that some twenty-five years before, when she was a buxom servant-maid to one John Bishop, of Great Clacton, there came to her door " a very handsome young man, as she then thought him, but now she thinks it was the Devil. He asked her how she did and desired to see her left wrist. He then took a pin from the examinant's own sleeve, and pricked her wrist twice, and there came a drop of blood which he took off with the tip of his finger, and so departed."

At Coggeshall in 1699, the widow Comon, in her confession to the Rev. James Boys, said that she " knew the Devil. He had big goggle eyes and very rough hands, and had gone away because he knew the Minister was coming."

It seems that when the Devil last appeared in Essex he posed the 64,000 dollar question of whether he belonged to fact or fiction. You can judge for yourselves by reading of this strange but amusing incident of which a correspondent writes from Harwich on April 8, 1800, to the *Essex Chronicle* : "A singular circumstance has occurred here relative to a Danish sailor, who belongs to one of His Majesty's gun vessels at this place. This man pretends that three years ago, when in a Spanish prison, he sold himself to the Devil, in order to procure his release, through whom it was accomplished, and he was suddenly transported, in a way that he was not sensible of, to a great distance from his place of confinement, and supplied with a bag of money, by his new master ; that he got a respite from him for three years ; and a few days back, the time being expired, his new master came for him, on board the vessel at 10 o'clock at night, but being unwilling to leave this world at present, he, by intreaties, had a further respite of eight days, when the Devil was to come to him again. In the meantime these circumstances were made known, and his officer ordered him on shore to such quarters, and as soon as it was made public, great numbers of people went to see the man, and many were credulous enough to believe his story. On yesterday the first of April, being the expiration of 8 days, at ten o'clock at night, 3 or 400 people assembled round the house, and many were admitted with two Dissenting Ministers, whose united prayers proved so great an obsticle to the Devil's appearance to take away the poor sailor, that the concourse returned to their houses much disappointed, after waiting about two hours to behold the infernal god. The man now says, the reason his master did not come, agreeably to the appointment, is owing to his being very much engaged with the Corn Factors and Millers at and about London." For whom, he might have nautically added, " There is the Devil to pay ! "



This figure outside the Albert public-house at Witham has given the inn the name of " The black boy." An entry from Mr. C. V. Dawson, of Hatfield Peverel, in our competition for photographs of Essex oddities.



Two heads over a doorway in Sydney Street, Brightlingsea. An Essex oddity photographed by Mr. D. Went, of Brightlingsea.

LAST LEGENDS OF ESSEX WITCHES

Witch lore of Canewdon

By Eric Maple

(Part 2)

CANEWDON, on the River Crouch, is perhaps the only village of modern time to have had an investigation into its witches. As a collector of folk-lore I spent over a year gathering the Canewdon witch tales, which combine horror and humour in about equal proportions.

It is well known that there will be six witches in Canewdon just as long as the church tower stands, and that every time a stone falls from the tower one witch will die and another will take her place. This means that by some mysterious process power is passed on from one witch to her successor—but how ? This was the mystery I set out to solve. It involved the collection and evaluation of many ancient legends, but at last I discovered a legend that provided me with the clue.

☆ ☆ ☆

It is well known that long ago witches were accused of possessing imps, usually small animals, and for this many were hanged. These imps were the means of a witch passing on her powers, as the following curious story reveals.

The old smith of Ballards Gore, on the outskirts of Canewdon, was believed to have sold his soul to the Devil, which was probably the reason why he always looked over his shoulder wherever he went. Naturally he had few friends, and these were not over-pleased when they were asked to visit him as he lay dying. They entered his room and saw that he was near the end, but his eyes were very much alive, for they travelled round and round the room as if following something that only he could see.

Suddenly a great circular scorch mark spread slowly over the bed, then a small white mouse ran into the centre of the circle. It sat there looking at the smith, who said : " I can't die while the imp is there." Then, to the horror of the watchers, he begged his wife to take it, but she said : " No, no, I don't want the power."

He then begged his daughter to take it, telling her that until she did so he could not die. Weeping, she took the animal from him and crept into another room. As she left the bedside the smith fell back dead and the watchers knew that his daughter was now a witch.

What it meant to live in a village where witchcraft was an active belief was described to me by an old man in his seventies who remembered the stories told to him by his grandfather. People from other villages shunned Canewdon like the plague, and most Canewdon residents regarded each other as witches or potential witches. Because of this, scissors and knives were regularly placed under doormats in the belief that no witch would dare to step over iron or steel.

One old lady who turned back from a doorway at the last minute, having forgotten something, was for ever afterwards branded as a witch, but not in her hearing, of course.

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The Master of Witches was George Pickingill, who kept not only the witches but the villagers as well in a state of sheer terror. Mr. Whitwell, whose family has lived in Canewdon for centuries, remembered the fear which this man inspired. When George Pickingill wanted water drawn for him from the pump he did not have to ask twice, for the penalty for disobedience was a curse. The victim was often taken seriously ill as a result, and would remain in that condition until Pickingill lifted the spell.



The Master of Witches at Canewdon.

Old Picky, as he was called, died in 1909 at the age of ninety-three. His last and greatest act of magic was performed at his own funeral. As he lay dying he had declared that he would demonstrate his powers in a way that Canewdon would never forget.

On the day of his funeral the hearse drew up to the churchyard and suddenly the horse stepped out of the shafts and trotted off down the road, to the great alarm of the mourners. Old Picky was having the last word, as usual.

☆ ☆ ☆

These are the modern legends of the Canewdon witches, but each generation has made its contributions to the great store of Canewdon witch lore. Back in the 1840s the parson's wife was said to be a witch, and her sister, old Lady Lodwick, once bewitched a housemaid who disobeyed her. Earlier still the parson himself was chased from his pulpit by the Devil, but, because of his greater guile, he got away. In the sixteenth century Ruth Poysey was charged with witchcraft and acquitted. If she had been found guilty and executed it might have provided an explanation of the witch ghost of Canewdon who flys over fields and rivers at night in silken gown minus her head. Local people today still tremble at the memory of meeting her on lonely roads in the old days.

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It might be well to conclude with a story told by an actual victim of a witch's spell. The late Mr. Cottis told me that on his first day at work some eighty years ago he was asked by an old woman for whom he usually collected shopping if he would do so again. " Too busy," he said, and ran off to work.

The old lady shouted at him : " You'll be busy enough before you've finished today's work " and went back angrily into her cottage.

Sure enough, when young Cottis tried to lift his scythe he found it as heavy as lead, and although he toiled all day he could not finish his work. The next day he met the old woman, who said mockingly : " How did you like your day's work, boy ? Now will you get my shopping ? "

" I didn't argue " said Mr. Cottis, " and after that everything was all right again."

And thinking about it, I would not have argued either if I had lived in a village where six witches and a wizard all worked in secret in the shadow of the old church tower.

LAST LEGENDS OF THE ESSEX WITCHES

The Demon of Devil's House

by Eric Maple

ONE of the most terrifying places in old Essex was the farm called Devil's House on Wallasea Island, by the River Crouch. This island is divided among several parishes, but the place where Devil's House (officially called the Tile Barn) stood was within Canewdon parish. It was haunted by a melancholy headless ghost which wandered at nights along the river wall, and it was also the home of a notorious witch, Mother Redcap. This fearsome old woman is perhaps best remembered for her flights on a hurdle, which was the method of transport employed by the local witches, although whether she rode it like a bicycle or sat on it like a magic carpet history has failed to record.

There is a tradition that her real name was Granny Smith, but little else is remembered about her, for the generation that knew and feared her has long since passed on. However, this story concerns not so much Mother Redcap, but her familiar, a fearsome demon which continued in occupation of Devil's House long after Mother Redcap had given up the tenancy.

There is a woman still living in Essex who lived as a girl at Devil's House, where her father was the farmer. At harvest time the farmer and his family lived in one part of the building while the farm workers lived in the other.

One day the girl was given a room to play in. It had a very high ceiling, otherwise there was nothing very remarkable about it. She had been playing in the room for a little while when the air began to grow noticeably cold, which was remarkable, for it was a very warm day. And then she heard it—the sound of wings beating high up in the room. Terrified she ran to her mother, but by then the sound had ceased.

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On the following day she was playing in the room when she felt a chill creeping over her and again heard the strange sound. It was the movement of great wings beating slowly at first and then increasing in pace so that they actually caused a current of ice-cold air. Once again she called her mother, and this time she was believed. There was a consultation with her father, after which the play-room was changed and the haunted room locked up.

Nothing further occurred until long afterwards when a married sister and her baby came to stay. It was harvest time and there was only one spare room, *the room*, and there she slept—but not for long.

She fled from it in terror and told the familiar horrifying story. She had felt the slow advance of a deathly cold until the room became unbearable, followed by the sound of great wings beating high up near the ceiling. But, what was worse, she sensed something unutterably evil.

She slept for the rest of her stay on the sofa and next day the farmer began an investigation. He removed the bricks from the chimney, but there was nothing there, nor was there any hidden chamber in the walls. In fact there appeared to be nothing out of the way unless it was the dreadful coldness which began to creep over him and a growing sense of fear which made him only too ready to get out of the room. The room was securely locked after that with the firm intention that it should never be used again.

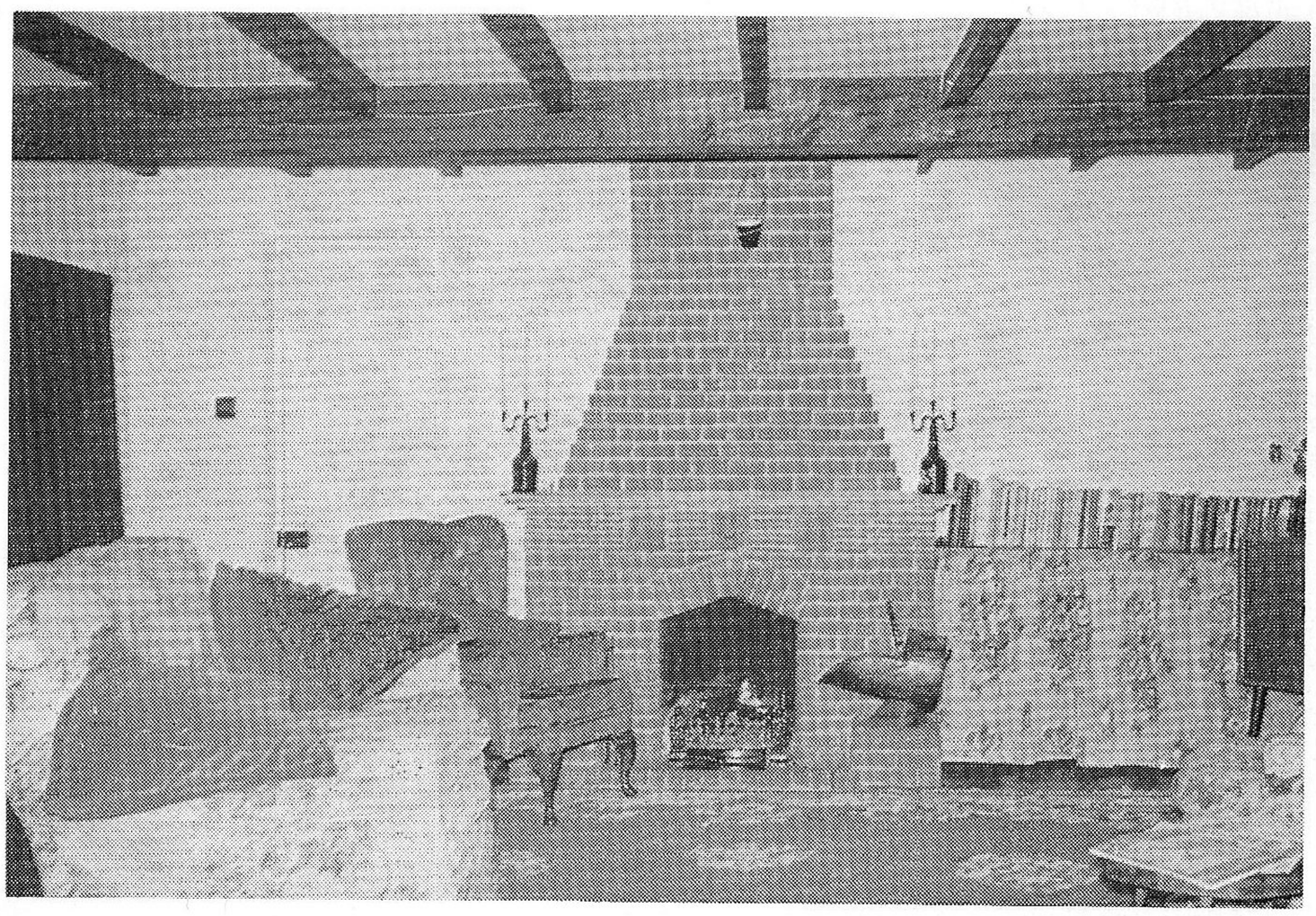
★ ★ ★

Then in World War I the soldiers came to help with the harvest. The men slept in a barn, but the sergeant demanded to sleep in the house. There was only one spare room and it was hinted to him without telling him very much that a night there would be ill-advised. However, he refused to be put off. He had been fighting on the western front and no haunted room was going to frighten him. However, in the morning he was found sleeping on the floor outside, muttering something about not being used to soft beds. He was rather pale and did not eat his breakfast.

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For a whole generation similar tales about Devil's House were circulated in the district and there were whispers that the Devil himself, horns and all, had been seen looking out of the window of the haunted room, although cynics suggested that it was most likely a bullock. Then one harvest time a farm worker was passing by the barn when he heard his name being called. He looked inside and saw nobody. Then a strange chill came over him and suddenly he felt an irresistible urge to kill himself. Like a man in a trance, he tied a piece of rope about his neck and threw it over the beam, then he became aware of a voice whispering in his ear, " Do it. Do it. Do it." He turned his head and saw, clinging to the beam, a

The interior of Langton's Forge, South Weald (see article " Cottage was once a blacksmith's forge " on the opposite page

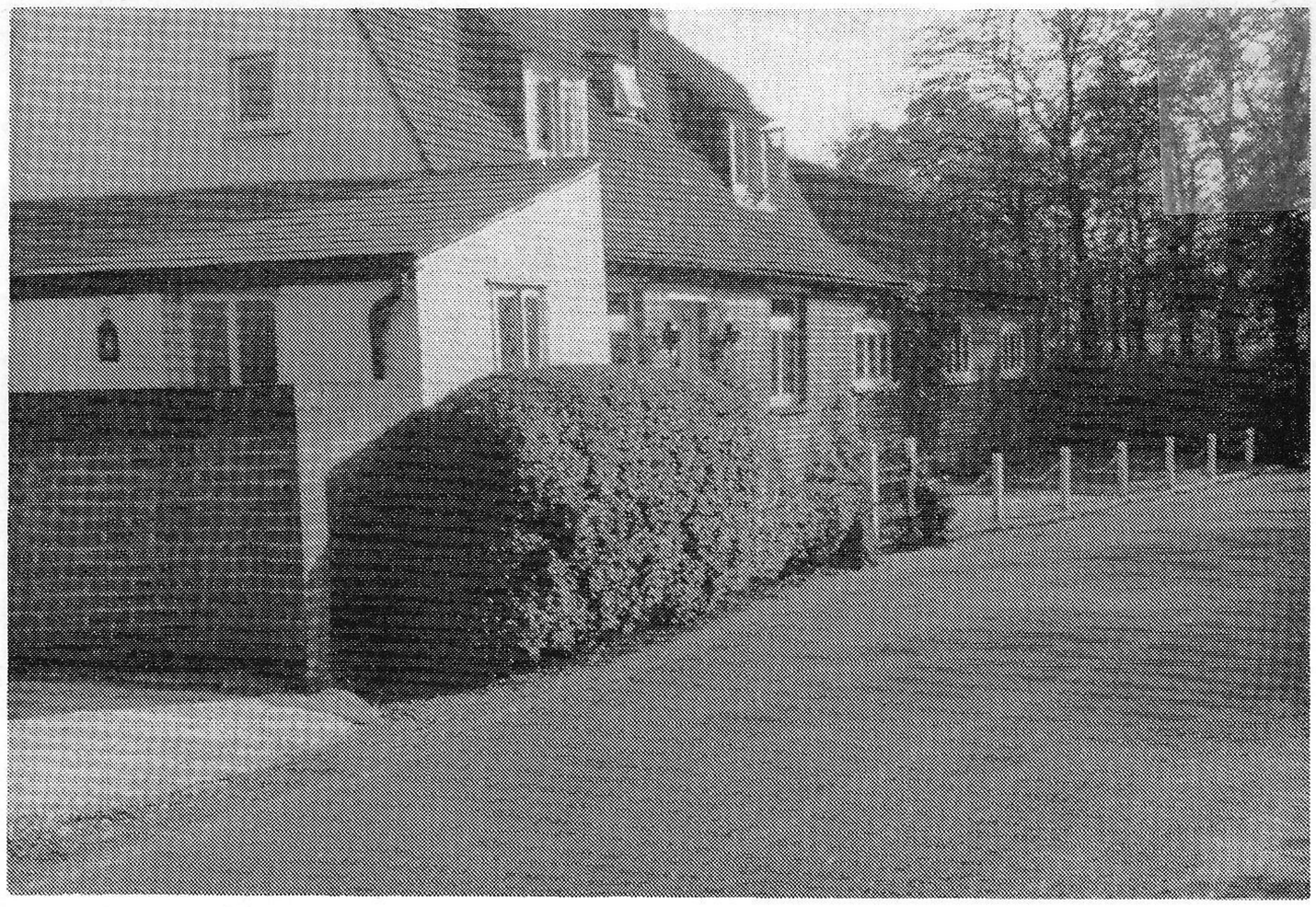


creature like an ape. It was black and had yellow eyes. He threw off the rope and fled as if the fiend was after him—as it probably was.

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Some years ago I attempted to unravel the mystery of Devil's House. I discovered that on the census rolls of 100 years ago it had still been known by that name, but earlier still it had belonged to a man named Davill and was then known as Davill's House. This seemed at the time to be the most likely explanation for the curious name and reputation of the place, but going back farther still into the history of the Rochford hundred I discovered that long ago, in the reign of Charles II, a Frenchman named Daville had owned a house somewhere on these marshes and that even then it had been called the Devil's Tenement.

Devil's House is no more. It was destroyed by a bomb in World War II and the debris was swept away by the great tide of 1953, but whether the site of Devil's House is still haunted by the terrifying familiar of Mother Redcap I do not know—nor, as far as I can discover, has anyone been over-eager to find out.



Langton's Forge, South Weald

Cottage was once a blacksmith's forge

ONE of the many attractive and interesting houses in South Weald is " Langton's Forge," which was converted in 1958 into a cottage from the village blacksmith's forge.

Sprawled along Sandpit Lane on the outskirts of the village, it faces beautiful Weald Park, which is a square mile of natural valley, lakes and woodland, now protected for people and deer alike by the metropolitan green belt.

In days gone by Langton's Lane (as Sandpit Lane used to be called) formed part of the boundary of church lands held by the abbey of Stratford Langthorne and stretched all the way from Weald through glorious countryside to what we now think of as the East End of London.

The oak-beamed dining room of " Langton's Forge " is the oldest part of the house. Four centuries ago it was the entire house, which was simply a one-roomed croft occupied, most probably, by shepherds, who would be well placed to watch over their flocks grazing on the Weald.

Then the humble shepherd's croft went up in the world ! Another downstairs room and two upstairs rooms were added, which is why the surprised owners discovered during the conversion that two adjacent brick walls divided the dining room and parlour, and why above the heavy beams in the dining room there is another ceiling of more beams running in the opposite direction beneath the bedroom floor.

Two centuries passed before the forty-foot smithy and wheelwright's shop were tacked on to the cottage. Now the forge fire burns no more, and where the hammer crashed on to the anvil and the red sparks drifted down to the dirt floor there is a gracious living room measuring twenty-five feet by eighteen feet with a parquet floor and a new oak-beamed ceiling.

A window and a pair of garden doors have been let into the dark, rough walls and give pleasant view to the garden and to the spot where two workmen cementing a path felt themselves sliding into the ground ! They scrambled clear, thinking that a disused well was opening beneath their feet, but it proved to have been a sunken brick bath which was used by the smith for plunging in white-hot iron rims, thereby cooling and shrinking them to a tight position round the cart wheels.

Beyond the forge the wheelwright's shop, with double doors to the road, housed carts that were being mended and is now a bright sun lounge measuring fifteen feet by eighteen feet. It has two new windows and double doors opening on to the south end of the garden, where the paint shop and a large grinding wheel used to stand.

The newest addition, built 100 years ago, is the lean-to kitchen at the north end and is a fitting tribute to the flourishing trade that was carried on by the blacksmith and his family.

By that time South Weald came under the benevolent squiredom of the Towers family of Weald Hall (demolished in 1950) and the forge must have hummed from dawn till dusk with activity as they shod the great cart-horses and the elegant carriage and riding horses and mended and maintained the heavy farm carts, the light two-wheeled gigs and the four-wheeled phætons.

But almost overnight the coming of motor cars and tractors destroyed what centuries of war and peace and industrial development had failed to change. Horses were no longer needed and rubber-wheeled tractors replaced the sturdy farm carts.

It is as well that the village blacksmith could not foresee the ending of the great days of horse-drawn traffic any more than the shepherds foresaw the decline of the East Anglian woollen trade.

Shortly before World War II the forge fell silent and the dust of centuries of toil lay undisturbed on the floor. In 1958 the cottage and forge were restored and made into a sizeable family home and the wild garden was brought into order.

One wonders what the first shepherd who lived there in the time of the first Elizabeth would have thought of it all now.

JOAN GREENLEES.

LEGENDS OF ESSEX WITCHES

THE STONE GOD OF PUDSEY HALL

by Eric Maple

THE marshland estuaries of south Essex have witnessed many invasions, bloody battles and strange mysteries, but perhaps the most intriguing of all is that of the stone god of Pudsey Hall. The ancient farmhouse of Pudsey lies within the parish of Canewdon and is the site of a forgotten Saxon village, while on the hill above Pudsey, the hill of Cana's people, stands another village, with a great church tower, which dominates the flat countryside like a tall grey sentinel. This is the village of Canewdon, which has become a focal point for legends and mystery all over the marshlands.

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In the year 1847, according to the local historian Philip Benton, part of a gigantic statue said to represent a heathen deity was dug up in a field called Great Hydes, near Hyde Wood, belonging to Pudsey Hall. Beneath the statue were "appearances of bones which crumbled upon exposure to the air." Nearby was discovered the head of a battle-axe thought at the time to be Norman.

The statue was taken to Pudsey Hall and left in the yard near the house. Later, according to Benton, "this interesting relic of heathen worship was broken up to repair the road and yard."

Nothing more might have transpired in this strange affair had I not discovered from an old gentleman of Rochford that many years ago a Dane had systematically explored the field where the statue had been discovered, finding only a few arrow-heads. The investigation was superficial and no actual digging was undertaken.

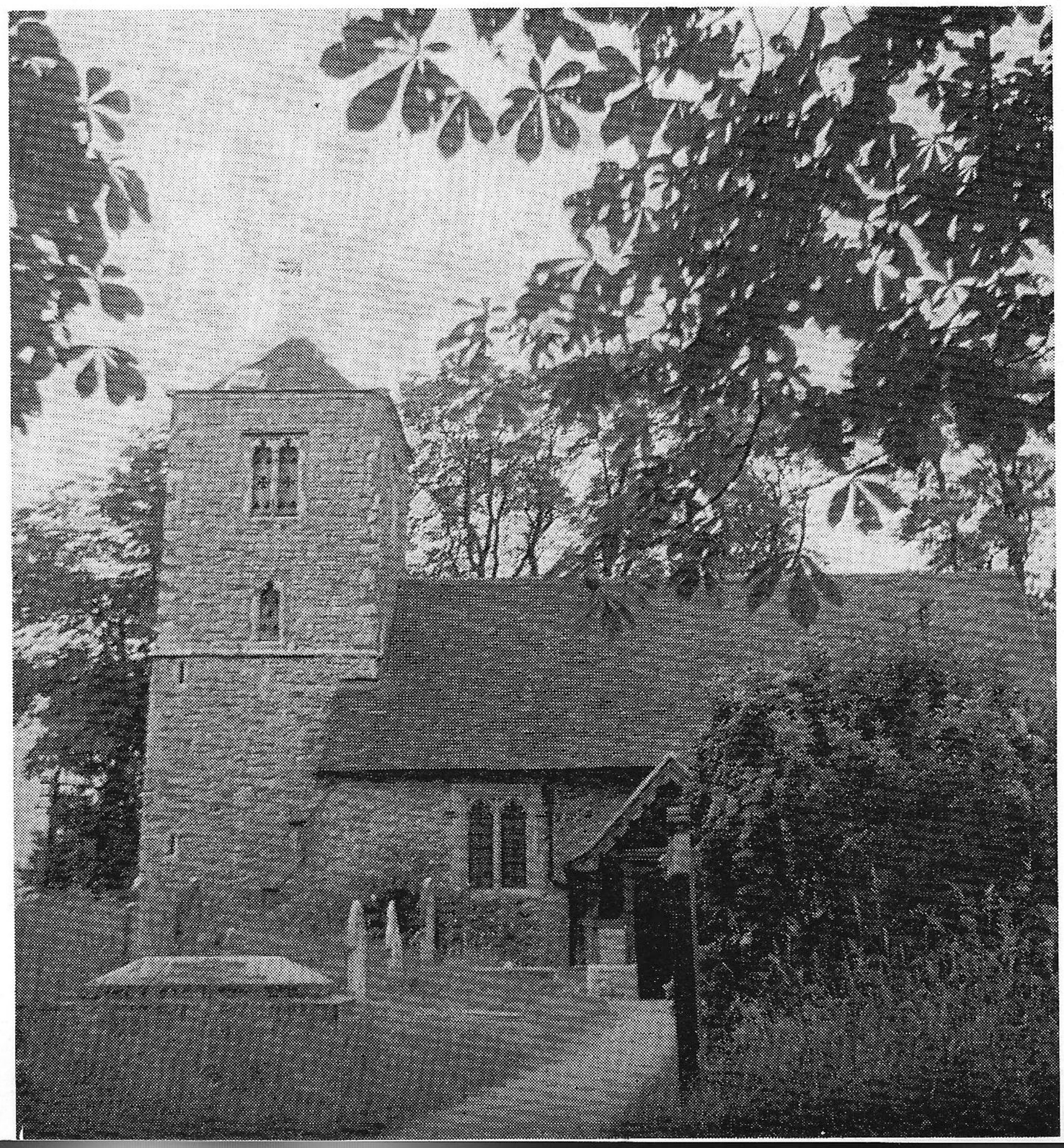
The interest of a Dane in this district is understandable, for here was fought the great battle of Assandune which delivered England to Canute the Dane. The Rochford hundred is, if anything, more prominent in Danish history books than in our own, yet it seemed significant to me that this man should have explored the field Great Hydes, which is at some distance from the actual battle-field yet which had associations with the stone god.

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With these facts in mind I explored a mystery which had been forgotten for 113 years. I discovered that the only historical reference was that of Philip Benton, while the incident itself had long faded from local memories. One of the surprising aspects of the modern Essex countryside is the complete change of ownership of land in recent times. I could discover no single farmer or farm worker whose roots in the parish extended back more than a generation, and therefore no family traditions about the discovery. Pudsey Hall was in new hands, as was the field called Great Hydes. This now belonged to Scaldhurst Farm ("the wood of the bard"), but the owners here were newcomers and knew nothing.

Reference to the curator at Colchester Museum brought a slight clue. Some years ago statues had been discovered at Canewdon and sold to a junk merchant. This lead proved abortive, for the junk merchant was now out of business and his yard at Asheldham was a housing site.

It appeared that nothing at all was now known of the stone god, and I was beginning to wonder if Benton had been mistaken in the location of the find when I was informed by a lady now living at Rayleigh that she had lived at Pudsey Hall as a girl and that one



THE CHURCHES OF ESSEX (2)

Photographed by

C. K. Sherriff

The church of Holy Cross at Basildon, which is chiefly of fifteenth-century date. It was restored in 1880. The weather-vane is dated 1702.

A mystery of the witch country of the marshlands

day an old farm labourer had said to her : " Where you're standing there's a stone god buried." She was standing in the stack-yard at the time. She clearly remembered the incident and gave me a sketch map of the site.

★ ★ ★

My next task was to try to excite the interest of local archæologists, but I utterly failed to whip up any enthusiasm for a " dig." The prevailing attitude seemed to be that it would be best to wait until some future occasion when the site was given over for redevelopment, as nothing would be lost by delay. In any event there were no funds available for speculative ventures.

While admitting the justice of this argument I felt that if this work was undertaken it might be possible to shed light upon what was to me, as a collector of witch lore, a fascinating mystery. This concerned the long-standing tradition of witchcraft in the village of Canewdon and, in particular, the folk memory of witches who danced round the church at night. This legend has strong affinities with other legends of women dancing around churches built upon what had once been pagan shrines and indicated the possibility that where Canewdon church now stands might once have been a pagan temple. If that were so, was the deity worshipped there the stone god of Pudsey Hall?

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The mystery is not entirely beyond our powers to solve because, if Benton's report is correct (and his accuracy has been confirmed in all other respects), only *part* of the statue was disinterred in 1847 and the remainder, one presumes, still lies buried beneath the surface of the field called Great Hydes.

This constitutes a challenge to those who see the importance of investigating one of the strangest mysteries of south Essex and possibly shedding light upon the origins of the unique traditions of witchcraft in Canewdon.

It is not always advisable to wait too long. Speculative builders have the habit of hastily reburying or losing archæological finds, which if reported might well lead to a hold-up of work on the site. It would be a tragedy if what still remains of the stone god was, like the discovery of 1847, broken up to repair a stack-yard or mend the pot-holes in the road.



An unusual view of the Woolpack inn at Great Coggeshall, which has been the subject of comment in our correspondence columns recently. Photograph by Douglas Went.

The Woolpack inn at Great Coggeshall

THE Woolpack inn at Great Coggeshall dates back to the latter part of the fifteenth century. It has a two-storied central hall and crosswings at the north and south ends. It is thought that the north wing may be of earlier date as it is not in line with the rest of the building.

Additions were made on the west side of the wings about 1520. Inside the lower hall are moulded ceiling beams, above which can be seen the central king-post truss, with moulded tie-beams. The roof also has a king-post with curved braces.

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It is an interesting example of a medieval house. The earliest recorded tenant appears to have been the Rev. Thomas Lowrey, who bought the property in 1665. Although close to the church it was never the rectory, and was converted into an inn about 1700.

Its name is most appropriate, for the growth of the town was due to a large extent to the wool merchants of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The earliest mention in deeds of the name Woolpack is 1708. The writer cannot trace its original name.

The Rev. Thomas Lowrey, who was an ejected minister of the Church of England, in his will of March 12, 1680, gave the residence and £900 to his son Jeremy ; various articles of silver to his daughter, Rebecca ; £5 for distribution among eight nonconformist ministers ; and the residue of the estate to his three children.

Jeremy died in 1708 and his son, Jeremiah, like his father a citizen and apothecary of London, sold the residence, which had then recently been converted into a hostelry, to one George Long.

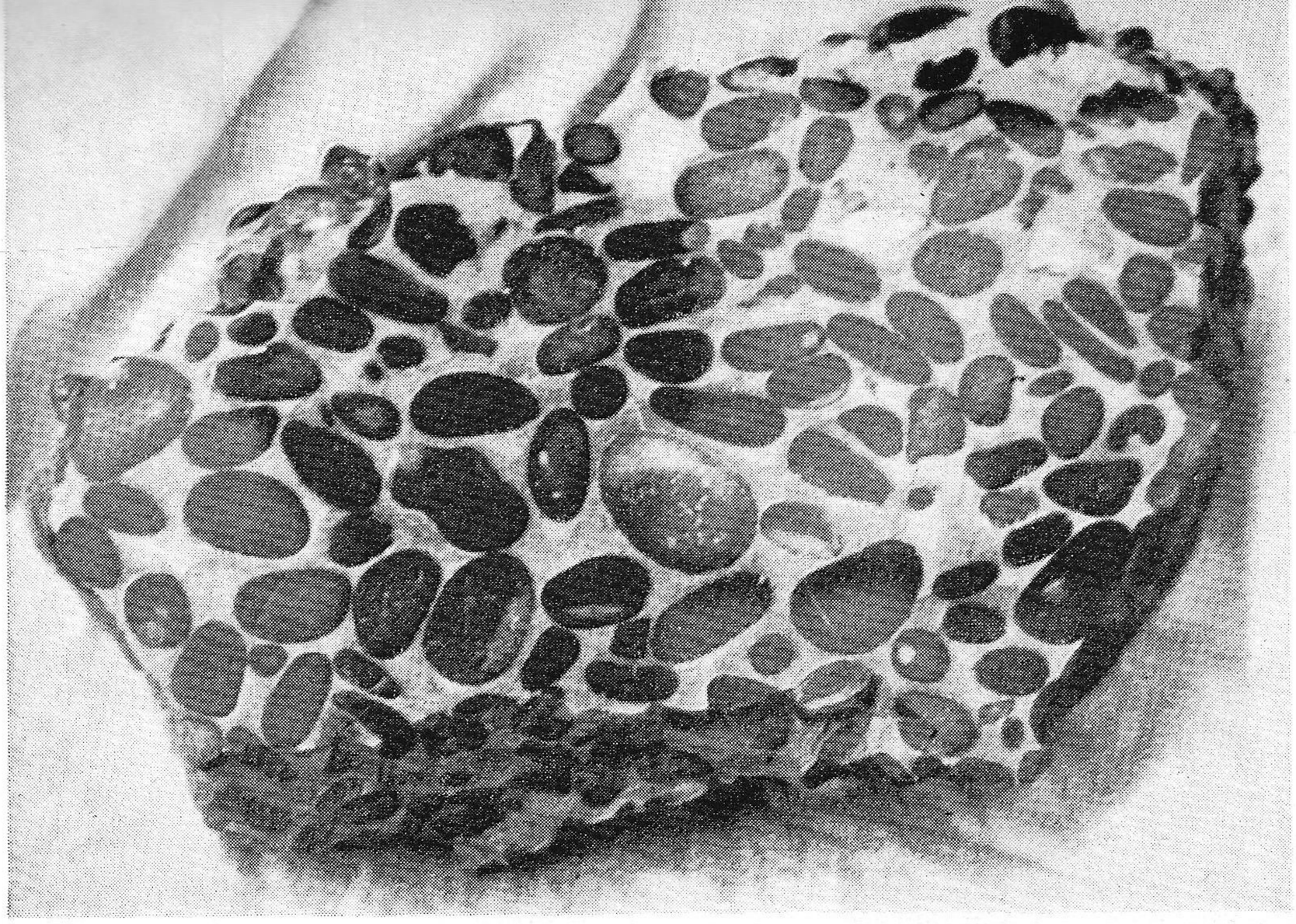
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In documents dated 1769 and 1803 the inn is called the Woolpack and Punchbowl, but later reverted to its original name.

There is a record of soldiers setting up a maypole at the door of the Woolpack on May 1, 1693, and at an earlier date, February 12, 1678, Abram Emming roasted a small bullock whole, it being Shrove Tuesday.

This well-preserved building is but one of Coggeshall's many architectural treasures.

DOUGLAS WENT



A close-up of pudding-stone to show its texture.

Mystery of the stones

by Lilian Rudge

IN " The secret places of Essex " in the March issue of THE ESSEX COUNTRYSIDE I mentioned Pucks Lane, Holyfield, Nazeing, as one of many delightful Essex picnic spots. But in our case it was more than a pleasant green triangle of grass beside the old north lodge of the Monkhams estate ; it was the starting point for us of a treasure hunt across Essex with clues laid down about 5,000 years ago !

Little did we realize as we sat there in the warm afternoon sun, beside an unusual stone boulder, just where our finding of that huge stone would lead us.

In the first place it was a kind of stone not common to these parts ; it was a conglomerate, or " puddingstone," so called because of its resemblance to the old-fashioned plum pudding—the " fruit " being flint pebbles in a silica matrix. It stood about three feet high and eighty inches around the base, right beside the gate of the lodge. As a scientist, my husband was interested, and we returned again and again to picnic beside our stone.

★ ★ ★

Soon we became known to the farm folk at Pear Tree Farm, opposite Pucks Lane, and a comment on the stone to the tractor driver who often passed us on his way back to the farm brought the reply : " Yes, it *is* unusual, and there's another just like it in the corner of the next field. I'm always catching my cutters on it when I'm clearing the thistles." This was intriguing, and further inquiries found us five more of these puddingstones in a line leading from the River Lea towards Epping Upland and Hayleys Manor Farm, where we found two more. Hayleys Manor Farm lies to the west of Thornwood Common, Epping, where, opposite the Cross Keys inn behind the hedge bordering the road, another puddingstone came to light.

From here on we took our finds seriously. Surface boulders had previously been listed and recorded as " glacial erratics," but we felt that a glacier in the Ice Age capable of discriminating between stones and depositing one particular kind of stone in a line over several miles showed unusual intelligence !

So, armed with a one-inch map, a large compass, a camera and a notebook, we pursued our hunt for puddingstones across Essex.

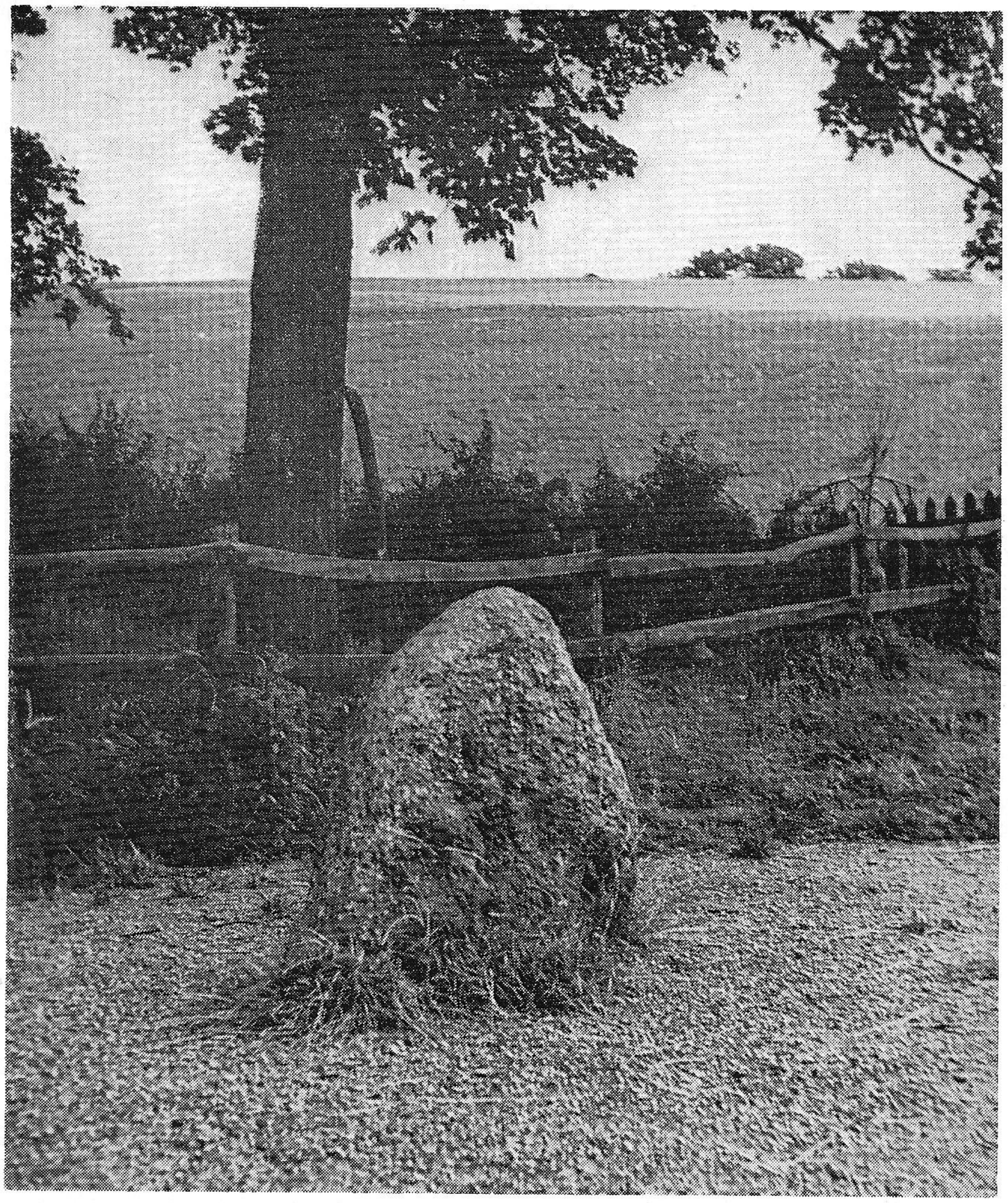
We found that these particular stones went under different names in different parts of the county, such as " growing stones," breeding stones, mother stones, mother lode and " drake stones." In Suffolk we found that a farm named Drakestone Green Farm had a large puddingstone in the orchard. (It was the name of the farm that had first attracted us to the spot.)

Sometimes we found these stones embedded in the footings of a church wall, as on the corners of the north wall of Magdalen Laver church and in the south wall of Broom-

The Epping Bury stone, lying beside Epping Bury Farm.



Do they mark a forgotten highway across Essex?



The stone in Pucks Lane, Holyfield, Nazeing, which started the author and her husband on their hunt for puddingstones across Essex.

field church, near Chelmsford. On looking up church history* we found that instructions were sent by Pope Gregory in A.D. 601 by his missionary, St. Mellitus, to St. Augustine in Britain "not to destroy the standing stones, but to incorporate them into the building of the new churches to bring the natives to the new religion."

★ ★ ★

So these stones had a significance before Christian times. But what ? Were the pagan Saxons stone worshippers ? We know they had sacred groves and sacred wells ; we know that all the implements, tools and weapons were made of stone in the days of prehistory, so that stone was of paramount importance to our ancient forefathers.

And so, over a period of years, we continued our searches, and to date have found nearly 300 of these stones, sometimes close together, sometimes with a gap of several miles between them, and often in the foundations of or near a church (as at Beauchamp Roding). Where did this track of stones lead us ? It led us through Essex into Suffolk and on into Norfolk to the old flint mines near Weeting, Thetford, called Grimes Graves, and not far from Brandon, where flint knapping is carried on to this day. (In passing I would mention that besides making flint-locks for export these knappers supply flints to replace those taken from the walls of Windsor Castle by visiting tourists!)

★ ★ ★

But to return to our track of stones. Could it be that our track of puddingstones marked a forgotten highway dating back to the days before the existence of wheeled traffic or even roads, when our nomadic forefathers travelled the country on foot with all their possessions—skins, perhaps clay beakers and certainly stone implements —on a rough wooden sled pulled along behind them ?

One thing is certain—they would need to journey to the flint mines to replenish their supplies of flint, and no less than six flint-chipping floors lie on or near this track of ours. Certainly the Roman missionaries St. Augustine and St. Mellitus realized the significance of these standing stones to build them into the foundations of their churches. In the case of Chesham church in Buckinghamshire we found puddingstones under every buttress, still rough-hewn and unshaped.

We are still following our track of stones, this time westwards, and only last September we found a very fine specimen in the coaching yard of the old Bull inn at Nettlebed, Oxfordshire, which is now listed as of historical importance by the British Museum. Nearby, at Stonor Park, Major Stonor has discovered a circle of puddingstones, and another in the wall of his private chapel. We think our track of stones points in the direction of Woodhenge at Durrington in Wiltshire, two miles north of Stonehenge, which is a prehistoric site of the New Stone Age.

We can only conjecture, but this quest has proved a most fascinating hobby which all began with a picnic one sunny afternoon at Pucks Lane, Holyfield, near Nazeing in Essex.

* Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*.

COLD AND HEAT IN 1895

A GOOD deal of interest has been aroused by the correspondence concerning the frozen Thames in 1895 and 1905, which is remembered by a number of readers.

Actually, 1895 was a year of extremes of temperature. There was intense cold in the early part of the year, so that the river traffic of the Thames, Humber and Severn was stopped. France, Belgium, Germany and Spain were also affected.

The late spring gales in the southern and midland counties brought great damage to buildings. The mail boat from Dover was carried by the force of the wind against one of the piers of Calais harbour and was severely damaged.

In the summer the thermometers in London reached 103 degrees in the sun and 86 degrees in the shade.

LEGENDS OF THE ESSEX WITCHES (2)

The savagery of the Essex witch-hunt mania

by Eric Maple

THE annals of English witchcraft present a picture of a fantastic world of magic and cruelty extending from the Reformation until the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1735. During those 300 years the persecution of witches became an obsession among the English people, but nowhere was the witch hunt more intense than in the eastern counties and in Essex. Here began the great witch purges of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and here too Matthew Hopkins, the "witch finder general," carried out his reign of terror among the villagers of the Tendring hundred in 1645.

The dry records of the old trials convey a little of the savagery of those days, of men and women hounded to death on the gallows, or cruelly subjected to the swimming ordeal in the belief that if they happened to float they were guilty of witchcraft. We read, too, of the farcical trials of the accused, in which, demented by suffering and fear, old women often in their dotage were subjected to a travesty of a trial and then hanged after being found guilty of sending their familiars, generally small domestic animals, upon marauding expeditions against their neighbours.

★ ★ ★

In those days of hideous religious bigotry very few voices were raised on behalf of justice and humanity. Reginald Scot, a Kentish gentleman, stood almost alone in ridiculing the fantastic ideas of the witch hunters, but it required an Essex man to give voice to a great cry for justice and to point an unerring finger of accusation towards those responsible for the terrible crime.

That man was George Gifford, a noted nonconformist minister of Maldon, which was then in the heart of the witch country. He produced two works which open the windows of the past for the inquiring reader and reveal the true character of Essex witchcraft in the sixteenth century. In 1587 Gifford produced his *Discourse of the Subtle Practice of Devils by Witches and Sorcerers*, followed six years later by *A Dialogue concerning Witches and Witchcraft*, two works which should be read by all who would know the truth about English witchcraft.

Gifford was no lover of witches. Indeed, he believed implicitly in the biblical injunction "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," but he was quite certain from the evidence of his own eyes that those who were being punished as witches were not witches at all. He described the victims as being often "religious and godly" and he charged their accusers with bearing false witness against them. He wrote: "Experience teaches how some are judging people upon surmise . . . and the fear of witches causes them to be credulous. Many go so far as to entice children to accuse their parents and they think it a good work."

When the accused appeared in court, the unsupported word of a hostile witness was often enough to ensure a verdict of guilty. Gifford emphasizes that a prisoner accused of witchcraft was denied even the elementary legal rights granted to a murderer.

The great contribution of George Gifford to the witchcraft question was his revelation of the role of the white wizards or cunning men, as they were called, who made a living by denouncing the black witches. Cunning people, also known as village wise men and women, were according to Gifford the hidden hand behind the witchcraft tragedy. Gifford said: "When the people fear a witch there is much running to wizards to learn what to do. A man died. His wife went to a cunning man and was asked whom she suspected. She mentioned a woman whom she disliked . . . a woman wearing a red cap." The cunning man showed her (possibly by some trick of suggestion) the face of that very woman in his magic glass. As the result the woman was charged with witchcraft, condemned and executed.

In case after case Gifford brought forward proof that in Essex at least the activities of the cunning people were the main influence behind the witch mania, and this backed by the law threatened the life of every old or ugly woman whom the country people regarded as a likely scapegoat.

Gifford, however, went even farther, insisting that the cunning people were, in fact, the real witches and should be punished as such. He declared that although they masqueraded as enemies of witchcraft they were in fact active agents of the Devil, employed by him to ensnare the innocent and thus divert the attention of the authorities from themselves, the real witches. "Where did the cunning man obtain his magical powers other than from the Devil?" asked Gifford, and he warned the Essex people of the grave danger of consulting these strange magicians. He concluded: "They buy their help dear that which have it at the hands of the cunning men, by running from God after devils."

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So closes a curious record of witchcraft in old Essex, yet the story was far from ended. Where records cease folk-lore begins and there are traditions that these cunning people continued right down to mid-Victorian times and even later. There was a cunning woman in Rayleigh in the 1850s, and the folk traditions of the marshlands refer to the activities of others until almost within living memory. They died out finally in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, men and women of mystery to the end.

The writings of Gifford also enable the student of witchcraft to understand the significance of James Murrell, the great cunning man of South Essex, who died in 1860. Cunning Murrell sought witches by the aid of a magic glass and was regarded with considerable concern by the clergy of his time. It is known that, like his spiritual ancestors the cunning men of the sixteenth century, his activities were unhindered by authority, even though he was defying the law. Those who have visited Hadleigh village will have seen a cottage near the Waggon and Horses where once lived Mrs. Eves, the woman whom Murrell branded as a witch and persecuted with all the means within his power. Because of Cunning Murrell the life of Mrs. Eves was rendered miserable to her dying day, and long after she had passed away she was still remembered as a witch.

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If any proof were needed of the truth of the contention of George Gifford that the so-called witches were innocent victims of the cunning men or professional witch finders the life of Cunning Murrell demonstrates that fact beyond all shadow of doubt, and in addition confirms that the belief in witchcraft survived in Essex almost unchanged for 400 years.

LEGENDS OF THE
ESSEX WITCHES (3)

White witchcraft in the countryside

by Eric Maple

THE magic of the countryside is a term frequently used by writers to describe the beauty of the Essex landscape now rapidly vanishing under the wave of new building which is engulfing south-east England. There is another magic, however, which is as much a part of the beauty of the county as its quiet churches, old country houses and pleasant meadows. I refer to the magical beliefs of the old-time countryman, which, like the countryside in which they once flourished, belong to a world which we shall never see again. This magic was a heritage of the past, when men and women really believed that the power of life and death could be invoked by certain rituals. The darker side of that magic we know as witchcraft, but its happier aspect was concerned with herbal lore, quaint country remedies for sickness, and charms to invoke love and drive away sadness.

Much of this benevolent white witchcraft has long since been forgotten, but some of it lingered on long enough for it to be noted and recorded by antiquarians and collectors of folk-lore. From these we learn that the people of old Essex once believed that a cure for sore eyes was to bathe them in the first rain to fall on June 1, or that to ensure the rapid healing of a wound not only the injury but the instrument that had caused it should be washed and bandaged.

Other well-known recipes included the following. Cramp and rheumatism might be cured by fastening a small bag of camphor below the knee, while a bee sting could be eased by smearing it with honey. For whooping-cough the fishermen took a dose of flounder's blood on a lump of sugar, while in extreme cases roasted mouse would serve the same purpose. Pork lard was universally recognized as a cure, only it was essential that it should be "pure hog's fat," to use the local term, straight from the pig and not via the grocer. Pork lard mixed with the ash of burnt wheat straw would make an ointment to cure the shingles, while melted beeswax and turpentine was often applied to sores and sprains.

It is possible that there was good sense behind these country remedies and that some at least were survivals from the pharmacopœia of Roman and Saxon times. In the case of penicillin we know that this remedy was anticipated by country people long before its discovery by Dr. Fleming. The countryman was a man of good sense and hardly



From an old print of a herbalist.



The Rabbits, Stapleford Abbots. An entry from Mr. E. Nilsson, of Whetstone, in our current photographic competition.

There was benevolent witchcraft too, concerned with herbal remedies and love charms.



An unusual view of Le Talbooth inn at Dedham, entered by Mr. Jack M. Lee, of Colchester, in our competition for photographs of Essex inns.

likely to have persisted in the use of remedies which were totally useless.

During several years of folk-lore collecting in Essex I have come upon evidence that some of this old-time country magic was practised at a far later date than one would have imagined. I discovered men and women who had themselves used curious remedies which would meet with laughter and scorn today. An old barge skipper living near Burnham-on-Crouch told me that it was a common belief when he was young that the shed skin of an adder, known as a hackel, would cure a headache if worn inside a hat. He had tried this out personally and during the ensuing eighty years had never suffered from the slightest headache.

On the other side of the county, at Woodford, now entirely submerged by houses, I learned from an old builder's labourer a curious superstition about the mandrake root. He once discovered one of these in a hedge and sold it to a Stratford herbalist for seven and sixpence, a considerable sum at the time. In telling me his story he confided that wherever the male mandrake grew a female one would be discovered nearby. He had been told this by his grandfather. This is particularly interesting, because the belief has its roots in ancient times and pagan mythology is full of anecdotes about the magical powers of mandragora and its uses as a love charm.

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A curious superstition connected with death survived at Felsted until the early thirties. It was long believed that if a sick person lay upon his death-bed in great pain but was unable to die his end might be hastened by laying him outside the house upon the bare ground. In this particular instance the village layer out of the dead performed the service and the sufferer passed away peacefully within a few minutes.

For the day-to-day misadventures of working life country magic provided its remedies. Lily leaves and gin were often used for the treatment of wounds and sores, as were celandine and ground ivy. The lore of herbs was part of the stock-in-trade of every farm labourer's wife and was handed down from mother to daughter as a precious legacy.

In Hadleigh, near Southend, an old lady in her eighties confided to me something of her philosophy of herbs. In her own words, " We used to pick our own ' yarbs.' People who use herb books don't know when to pick them or how to mix them. I think that for every ill nature has a cure, if only you know where to find it."

The belief that nature provided a remedy for all human ailments was a very old one and inspired the seventeenth-century philosophy the " Doctrine of signatures," which asserted that every herb, flower and plant bore some signature or outward sign of its usefulness to mankind—spotted plants cured pimples, scaly ones skin diseases, and so on. The doctrine lingered on in one form or another until the advent of the medical services in 1911.

A curious recipe for a perfect complexion was the application of human urine to the skin, a belief centuries old yet still persisting in the Hornchurch area up to a generation ago. A more general belief concerned wart charming. The power of suggestion in curing diseases of the skin is now recognized by the medical profession, but even a psychiatrist might be startled by the claim of a wart charmer living near Dunmow to effect a cure merely by making mysterious passes over a photograph of the wart.

Our Essex ancestors were wise in their time, knowing secrets of nature which have long been forgotten by the townsman ; for the mysteries of country magic belong to the world of the farm labourers and the fishermen, to the age of simplicity and, it must be admitted, great poverty. It was an age when men and women struck down by sickness practised strange rites or went out to the hedgerows at dawn to gather the herbs planted there by nature in her more benevolent mood to ease the sufferings of mankind.

THE WISE WOMEN OF OLD ESSEX

by Eric Maple

ALTHOUGH a good deal is heard about the wizards of old Essex, very little has been written about their equally important counterparts, the white witches or wise women who until modern times were very common in the country villages.

True to the ancient traditions of white magic, the wise women dispensed herbal remedies, charmed away warts and employed curious rituals to destroy the power of so-called black witchcraft.

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One of these strange women practised her curious craft at Rayleigh in the 1850s. She wore a curious hood over her head when she interviewed her clients, no doubt to instil in them a proper sense of awe. She claimed to have the power to discover lost and stolen property by means of a magic glass. Another lived at Basildon at the turn of the century. She is still remembered as an apple-cheeked old woman who could discover the deepest secrets of those who consulted her merely by looking into their eyes. She was skilled in interpreting the future from playing cards, and people of all classes were among her clients. Like so many of her kind, she refused to take a fee, but it was expected that some gratuity in kind, usually a hundredweight of coal or a pound of tea, would be left outside her back door after dark. Though normally an extremely placid woman, she could be extremely angry on occasion, particularly if she discovered that any of her regular customers had gone elsewhere for advice. Even the local doctor was regarded as an intruder upon her domain, yet in spite of her intolerance in this respect she had many friends and no enemies.

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This could not be said for another white witch, an old woman who lived in a village near Dunmow in the 1920s. This woman, who was renowned as a fortune teller for miles around, earned considerable notoriety by her uncanny success at the local flower and fruit show. She always carried off first prize, while her rivals' pumpkins or fruit invariably suffered an attack by wild birds on the day before the competition. Those who traffic in magic, however innocently, invoke the charge of having been guilty of darker deeds. On one occasion the whispers grew into open accusation and she was called a witch to her face.

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The curious power of second sight appears to have come naturally to the seventh daughters of seventh daughters. Such people were believed to have the uncanny faculty of piercing the veil of death and of knowing who in the village would be the next victim of the grim reaper.

One of these women was layer-out of the dead (at one time almost a rural craft) in Felsted some forty-five years ago. She not only had the power to see into the future, but seems also to have been the repository of strange lore. It was she who placed a coin in the hands of a dead man to pay his fee over the dark river. On another occasion she was asked to shorten the agonies of a dying man. This she did by removing him from his bed and laying him gently on the earth outside his cottage door. In a few moments the man was at rest.

It is salutary to remember when considering the tale of the Essex wise women that this strange rite had been practised by the pagan Saxons, who brought it with them from the German forests 1,000 years ago.

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The wise women, like the cunning men, died out towards the close of the last century. Here and there someone who had inherited these powers lingered on for a time, charming away warts or prescribing herbal remedies. Possibly some obscure descendant still practises white witchcraft quietly today, but even so it is unlikely that the secrets of this taciturn fraternity will ever be betrayed.



A photograph of Rochford mill taken last summer and entered by Mr. David J. Martin, of East Ham, in our competition for photographs of Essex bridges and mills.

THE SEA WITCH of OLD LEIGH

by Eric Maple

ONE frequently hears about witches of the land, yet practically nothing is heard of those equally notorious traffickers in the occult the sea witches. These were extremely common in most European seaports at one time and derived a thriving trade from selling fair winds to sailors and fishermen. Nonsensical as this will appear to modern seamen, it should be remembered that life at sea was one of the last great strongholds of superstitious practices, and it cannot be said with certainty that these are dead today.

Rite of controlling wind

Britain, particularly the coastal regions of the north, possessed sea witches until well into Victorian times. The sea hags of the Isle of Man, like those of the Shetlands and Orkneys, were notorious even in the days of the great witch hunts, and rarely suffered from more serious penalties than penances or fines, depending upon which particular religion happened to be prevailing at the time.

Nearer home, and especially in the eastern counties, sea witches made a living from rites which ranged from insuring the sailor against stormy weather to guaranteeing him a safe return. The rite of controlling the winds was a curious one, consisting of tying a number of knots in a piece of cord. When the first knot was undone a light breeze would spring up, with the second a strong wind, and with the fatal third knot a howling gale. The velocity of wind was dependent upon the fee. The price of the third knot, however, could not be measured in terms of money and was purchased often by giving deep offence to the witch herself.

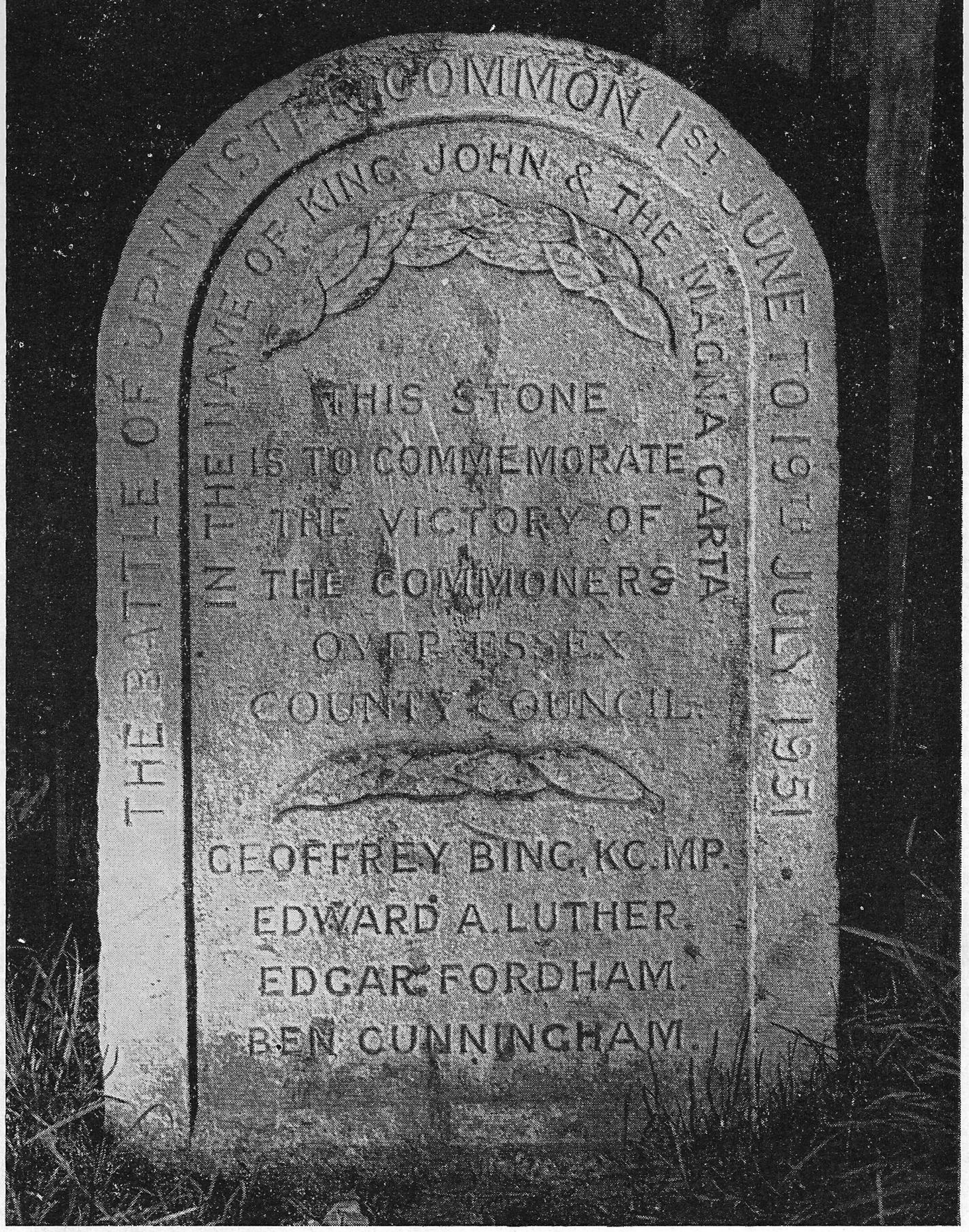
Fearsome old woman

Old Leigh possessed a sea witch in the 1850s in the person of Mother Moore, whose exploits were described to me by the daughter of an old resident there. She was a fearsome old woman with a nutcracker face and could outswear any sailor, and her very presence on the waterside could cause consternation among the superstitious fishermen there. The fear which this old woman inspired led to all kinds of fantastic tales being told about her, perhaps the best of which is the legend of the great storm in the Thames estuary. The incidents which follow were said to have taken place in 1870, significantly enough in the very year of the old woman's death.

One day a new skipper who was obviously unaware of the dangerous consequences of offending Mother Moore passed her on the quayside *en route* to his fishing smack. As he did so she shouted out " Buy a fair wind, buy a fair wind " as was her custom, but instead of throwing her a coin as the others did he merely laughed and boarded the boat. The smack had only been at sea a short while when the sky suddenly became overclouded, while a sudden calm stilled the waves. The wind dropped and the sails became listless; it was as if a dark hand had been laid across the waters, and even the skipper began to grow apprehensive.

Suddenly one of his crew began to cry out wildly " It's the witch, it's the witch," and almost as he spoke the storm broke. The sky became streaked with lightning, a roll of thunder echoed all down the estuary and, caught by a sudden squall, the fishing boat heeled over on her side. It was then that the skipper showed an initiative which appeared for a moment to be an attack of madness. Picking up an axe, he began to hack not at the tangled rigging or the mast which threatened to drag them all under the water, but at the bows of the boat. " I'll kill the witch " he cried, and struck the boat three times with the axe. At the third stroke the storm ceased as suddenly as it had begun, the sun came through the clouds and a slight breeze sprang up.

In silence, the crew turned for home. As they drew close to Leigh, they saw a figure slumped on the side of the quay and discovered to their horror that it was the body of Old Mother Moore, red with the blood of three great gashes in her head, killed by a magic mightier than her own.

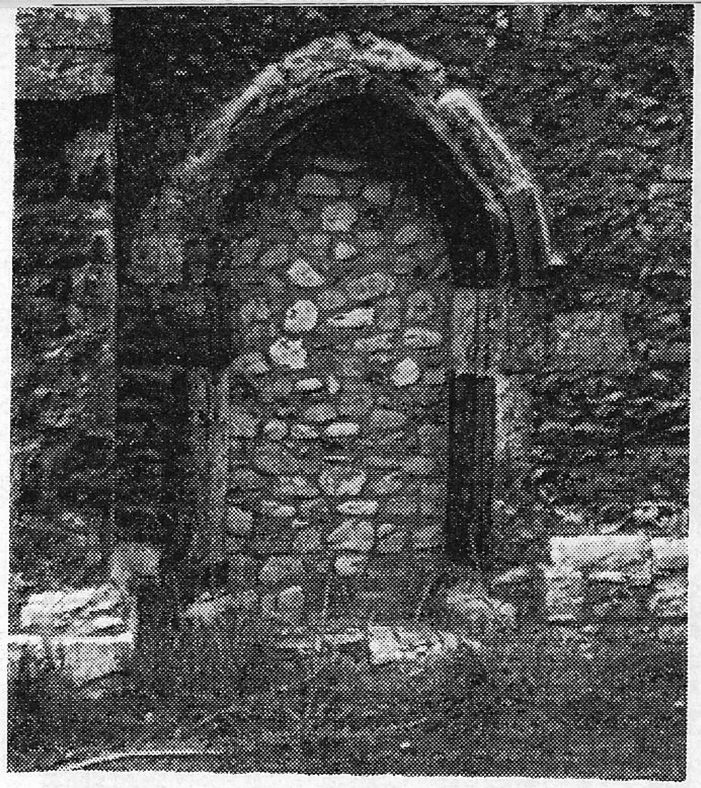


The stone erected to commemorate the victory of the commoners over Essex County Council in 1951. It is by the roadside opposite Upminster Common. An area of seventy-eight acres, the common was requisitioned in 1943 by the Essex County War Agricultural Committee and grew crops until derequisitioned in 1950. It then appears to have been fenced in and sublet. This prompted questions to be asked in the House of Commons. The local people commemorate their victory of common rights with this stone. An entry from Miss J. Bland, of Romford, in our competition for photographs of Essex oddities.

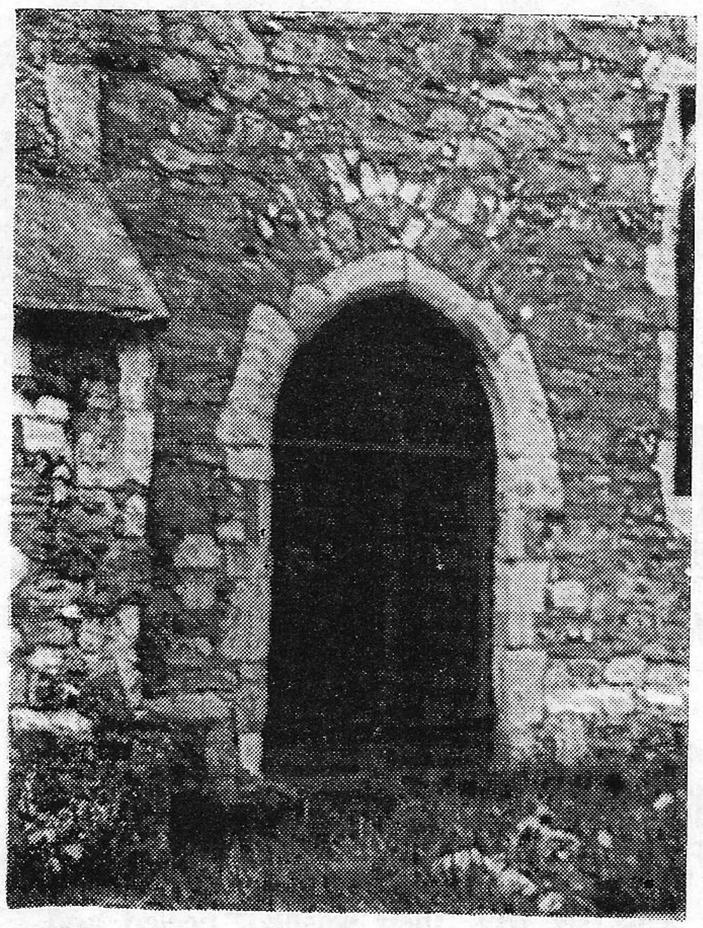
DEVIL'S DOORS IN ESSEX

by Elliott L. Blee

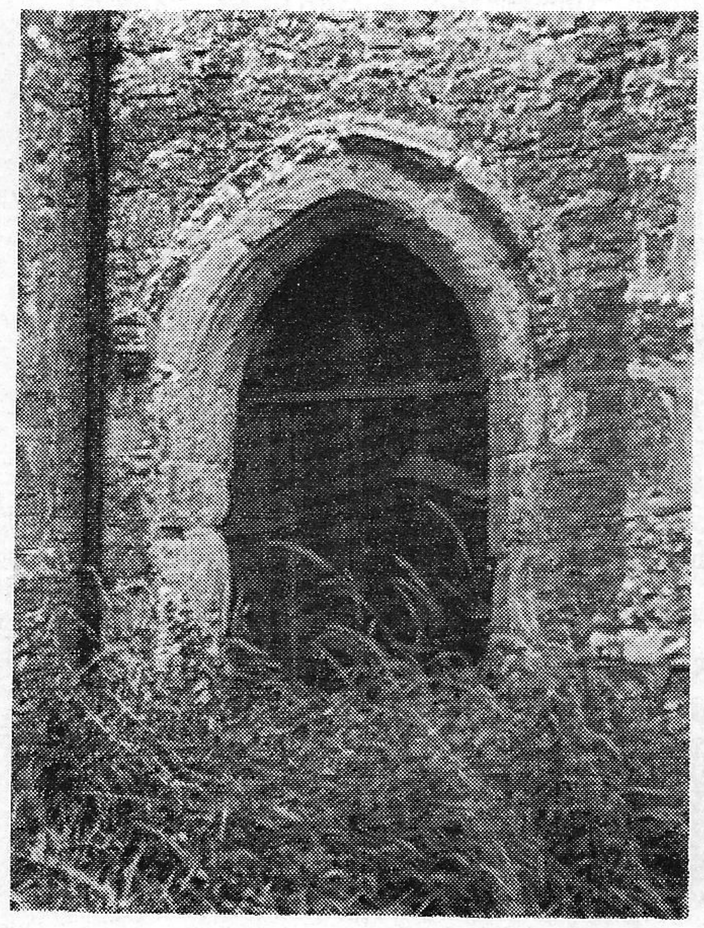
(Photographs by John Curtis)



The blocked-up " Devil's door " at Leigh-on-Sea (St. Clement). The original door, which dates from the Tudor period, has been preserved and is on show.



The unused door in the church of St. Mary at North Shoebury.



Another unused door— at All Saints, Barling.

DESPITE the advice that one should always look at the outside of a church before looking at the inside, most people tend to go straight in, and as far as the outside is concerned confine their attention to those parts near the entrance—usually on the south side. If the entrance is in fact on the south side it may be rewarding to make a point of going round to the north (though the going may be a bit rough), for there, on the less public side, one may find unusual things. The same often applies to inns and private houses.

With regard to churches, one thing will probably be noticed: besides the main entrance in the south, or perhaps at the west end, there is an entrance into the nave on the north side—which may no longer be a real entrance at all. This entrance acquired the sinister name of the " Devil's door," and, according to Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, was so named because at christenings it was the custom to leave it open so that the Devil could leave—presumably at that point in the ceremony where the godfathers and godmothers undertake that he and all his works will be forsaken.

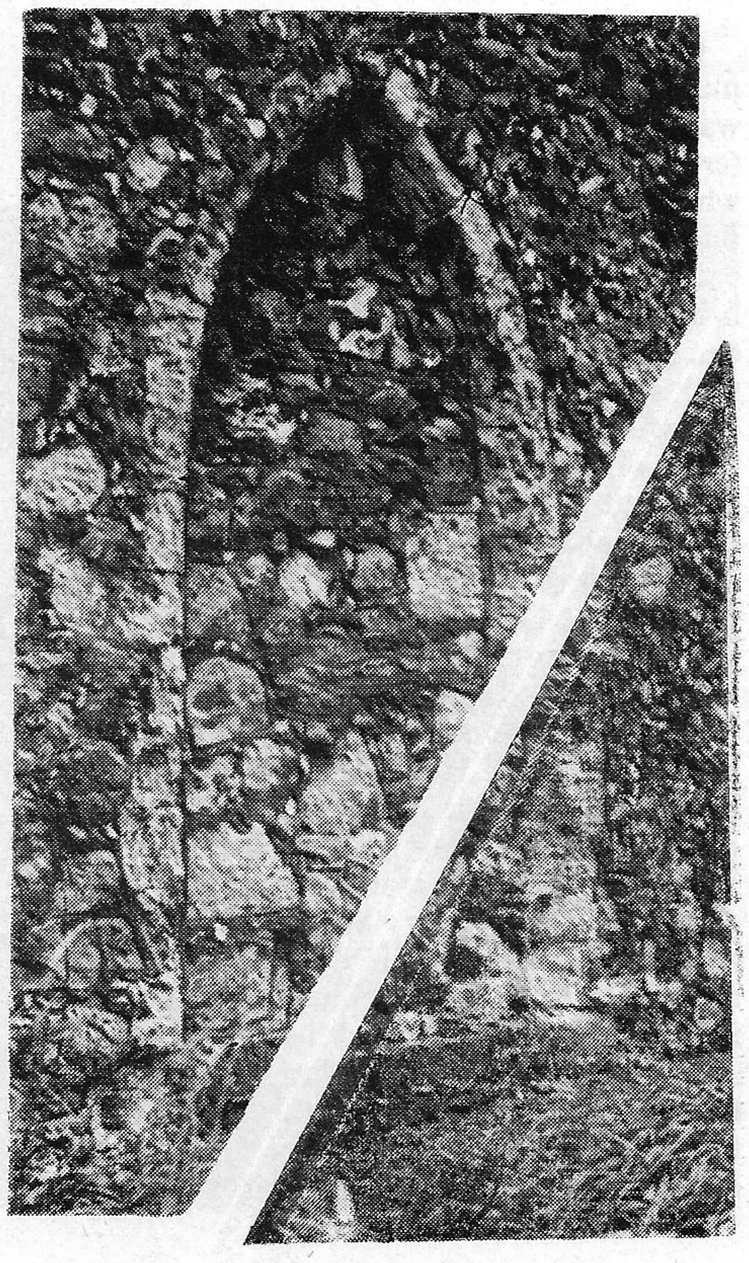
If this explanation is true one cannot help wondering why it was subsequently decided to deny him such a convenient emergency exit, for it will be noticed that in most churches great care has been taken to seal up this north door, and, not content even with that, the whole doorway has often been filled in with brickwork or masonry. Very forbidding-looking doors these are often found to be, quite impenetrable, and usually with no path leading to them, only tall grasses and stinging nettles.

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First of all we have to find out why a door was placed on the north side at all, and perhaps the answer may be that in medieval times there was little distinction between church architecture and domestic architecture. This is clearly demonstrated if we take a look at the medieval halls in the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, or such places as Westminster Hall, Hampton Court or Penshurst. Their windows, doorways and roofs do not differ at all from those in churches of the same period. In fact, when looking at a picture of one of these old halls it would be easy to mistake it for a church.

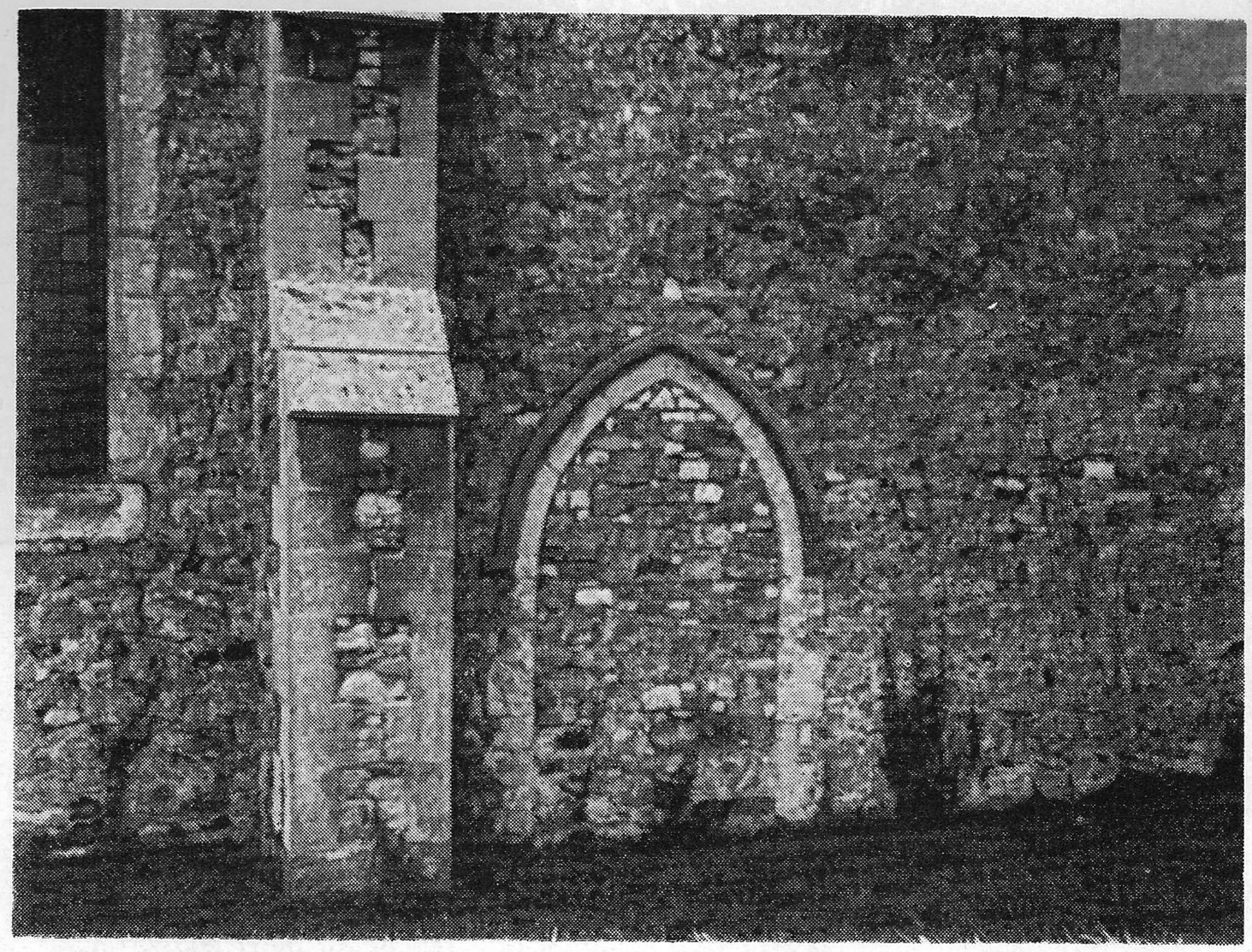
With regard to their doors, it was usual for the main entrance to be matched with another door opposite to it, these being connected by a passage called the " screens " which separated the hall itself from the kitchens and buttery on the other side. The name " screens " was used because screens were put up on the hall side to keep out the draughts. So in building churches there was no reason why the same general plan should not be followed, and the matter of ventilation was also important.

Churches thus found themselves with a door for general use, usually on the south side (because less exposed to the weather), perhaps another at the west end, more for



The door of the church of St. Nicholas at Great Wakering.

The blocked-up door of the church of All Saints, Rettendon.



ceremonial occasions, and this third door into the nave on the north side—which they may not have quite known what to do with. Whatever Mr. Brewer may say about its possible function at christenings, it was probably not used very much, and the fact that it led out into the back part of the churchyard contributed to its rather doubtful reputation, for there seems no doubt that this north door and that part of the churchyard on the north side were thought to have something sinister and shady about them. Why?

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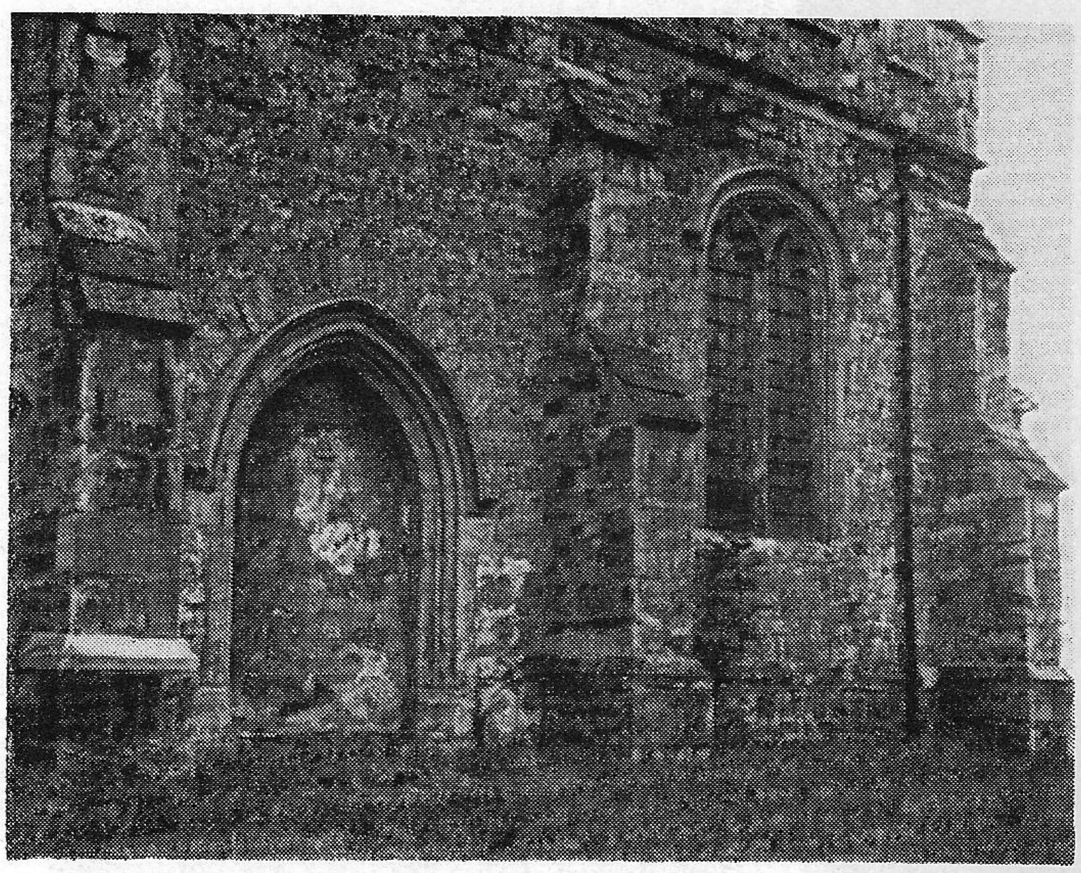
I think it was solely because they were in fact on the shady side of the church. The friendly sun, which served all the other sides, here cast the shadow of the building on that part of the churchyard, and there was always a feeling that darkness had something evil about it. Even the night air was considered dangerous. Such a locality would not willingly be chosen as a last resting place, and in olden times it was either not used at all or relegated to the less desirable members of the flock—backsliders who perhaps only just qualified for Christian burial and who might be considered in danger of a visit from the prince of darkness. Reports may have circulated that such visits did occasionally take place, for one can see strange things in the shadows, though such phenomena might with more likelihood have been attributed to the "resurrection men," who were always after bodies to sell to the surgeons. Any such activities would, of course, be more likely to occur in the shady and more secluded part of the churchyard.

Nowadays it is realized that the once-dreaded night air is just as clean as the daytime air, and similarly the northern part of the church or churchyard is considered just as respectable as any other part; but it was not always so, and it was evidently thought better that these "Devil's doors" should be put out of action just to be on the safe side.

If the reader should think that doors such as those described are exceptional, I can only say that I have visited a number of churches in my own area—mostly in the Rochford hundred—and those illustrated are examples taken quite at random. In fact, in nearly every case where I found no such door it was obvious that the original north wall had either been destroyed or altered to make a new vestry or aisle; and any churches which have kept their north doors still in use, for the Devil or anyone else, are few and far between.

What I would like to know is just when it was decided that rather than leave this door open so that the Devil could go out of the church it would be better to deny him the privilege of having a personal door at all. Meanwhile I can only stand on this shady side of one of these churches, where a chilly breeze stirs the tall grasses and weeds round the sealed doorway, and wonder.

The Devil's door at the church of St. Mary at South Benfleet.



The Devil's door at Hockley, which is now unused.

