

**JEREMY'S WALK
THROUGH
CROMER HYDE**



LEMSFORD PARISH LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

Publication 2

Introduction

Jeremy Summers led the members of the Lemsford Parish Local History Group on a walk through Cromer Hyde on Saturday, January 25th 2003. Born in Welwyn Garden City, Jeremy was christened at St. John's Lemsford and married in Welwyn Garden City to Shirley Davies who hailed from South Wales in the late 1930s, they met when she was sixteen and he was eighteen. Having lived in the area for most of his life and in Cromer Hyde since 1986, with his keen interest in Local History, he seemed the natural choice to lead fifteen group members on this walk and this is a record of what was seen and discussed on the day.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Lemsford Parish Local History Group would like to thank Eric Aylot, Shirley Knapp, Jenny Reed, Pam Sherriff, Jeremy Summers & Mill Green Museum for allowing us to use their photographs. Likewise Brocket Hall Estate, the Crooked Chimney, local farmer Julian Sherriff and the residents of Cromer Hyde Lane for indulging us.

This booklet contains some known facts as well as many local memories of residents past and present who we would also like to thank.

Cromer Hyde



Cromer Hyde was incorporated into the newly created parish of St. John's, Lemsford in 1859. It naturally divides into three - Lower, Middle and Upper Cromer Hyde. The Lane runs from the Marford Road westwards for one and a half miles to the Roman Road from Verulamium to Camulodunum (Colchester) via Welwyn. It is crossed and joined by many old drovers tracks and ancient roads.

It is a community that in the 1800s possessed its own pubs, school, bakery, blacksmith as well as as some twenty eight houses and four farms, whereas now there are only sixteen houses, one farm and one pub. Most of the houses originally belonged to local landowners like Salisbury, Brocket, Cowper, Melbourne and Bassill.

In the 19th century many of the male inhabitants worked in agriculture while most of the females did straw plaiting to supplement their meagre incomes.

It is altogether an enchanting lane full of character with a strong sense of history.

Lower Cromer Hyde

We met at the Crooked Chimney car park on a bright Saturday afternoon in late January, which was fortunate as the previous week saw very heavy rain and only a few days later, snowy chaos.



The Chequers in the 1900s

The Crooked Chimney can be traced back to the 1600s when it was owned by George Bassill. It started life as a farm house, possibly called Hornby or Hornbeam Hall, and turned ale house around 1756. There were several barns where the car park is now as well as an orchard at the back up until the 1940s. Formerly called the ‘Chequers’, due to its reputation as a good gaming house, it has only been called the ‘Crooked Chimney’, for obvious reasons, since the 1960s. It is now a Vintage Inn. We set off to find the trig(onometrical) mark - a mapping reference point denoting height above sea level, and found it on the wall facing the road. We compared a photograph taken around 1900 with the present building and concluded that the new extension had been tastefully done and blends in well. The bay window close by, has been smashed into on several occasions by cars coming off the Marford Road. The field at the back is called ‘Hick Field’ on the 1838 Tithe map and we saw that the stubble was full of golden plovers. Many of the old field names on this map have been used to name roads in Welwyn Garden City.

Moving on into Cromer Hyde Lane itself , which was not tarmacaded until 1942, we looked at the first house on the right which had once been three cottages as marked on the O.S. map of 1899. There is quite a big cellar under the left hand one with two large niches in each of the four walls. This may give credence to the story that it had at one time been an ale house. There is a well in the front garden now capped with concrete.



Next door there were two cottages, now converted into one, but otherwise they have remained untouched since the day they were built. I call it the ‘Hardy Cottage’ because it reminds me of Thomas Hardy’s house at Higher Bockhampton near Dorchester.



The first house on the left, once three cottages and known as Strawberry Cottages, has the lane running behind it, as do others but there used to be a track in front of them on the field side which rejoined the lane higher up. Before the introduction of the motor car, in the age of the horse, both routes were probably of equal importance. Eventually one became preferred, which may explain why so many of the houses here appear to have been built the wrong way round with their backs facing the present day lane. However, all this was long before living memory.

Next on the left we came to two pairs of houses built in 1909 by Admiral Walter Keir, tenant of Brocket Hall. They bear his escutcheon with the date and are similar in style to those to be seen in Lemsford. These houses replaced at least six earlier agricultural workers cottages.



The fir plantation opposite was planted by the Brocket Estate in the late 1940s and early 1950s and is now reaching maturity. We looked at a photograph which was taken before the trees were planted and it plainly demonstrated that when this tall crop is felled it will make the nearby houses very much lighter.



Photograph taken before the fir trees were planted

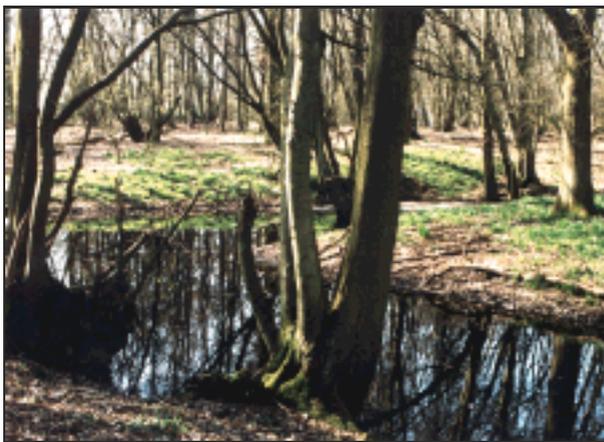
The next house on the left, also once two houses, has a well, now covered, built by master craftsman Jack Cowlan. It is flint lined and 66 feet deep.

The last house on the left going up the lane was originally three very small cottages. It also has a well and there is a trig point on its wall. Just beyond is where the field track mentioned earlier rejoined the lane. During World War II a stick of German bombs fell in the field behind these houses resulting in one of the occupants being thrown out of the house by the force of the blast, then catching pneumonia and tragically dying. In the field opposite - 'Backside Field' which is bounded on two sides by an avenue of trees leading from Brocket Hall, there once stood a farm and school along with several other buildings, long since gone, demolished doubtless to improve the view for the 'posh people' in the 'Big House'. We took a group photograph here with Brocket Hall and its decorative gates in the background.



The avenue, much damaged by the hurricane of 1987, terminates at a designated 'Ancient Wood' whose shape has never altered since 1672. An earthwork stands in these woods - the site of a moated and fortified manor house called Chewells, dating from 1277 in the reign of Edward I. By 1349, in the reign of Edward III, it belonged to Edward de Benstede. Even today the moat is full of water enhancing the image of what it must have looked like back in the middle ages. Very visible in the field called Benstede 'Pightle' (middle English for a small parcel of land) is a causeway leading from the earthwork, across the field, to the lane. This is possibly the original trackway to a bridge

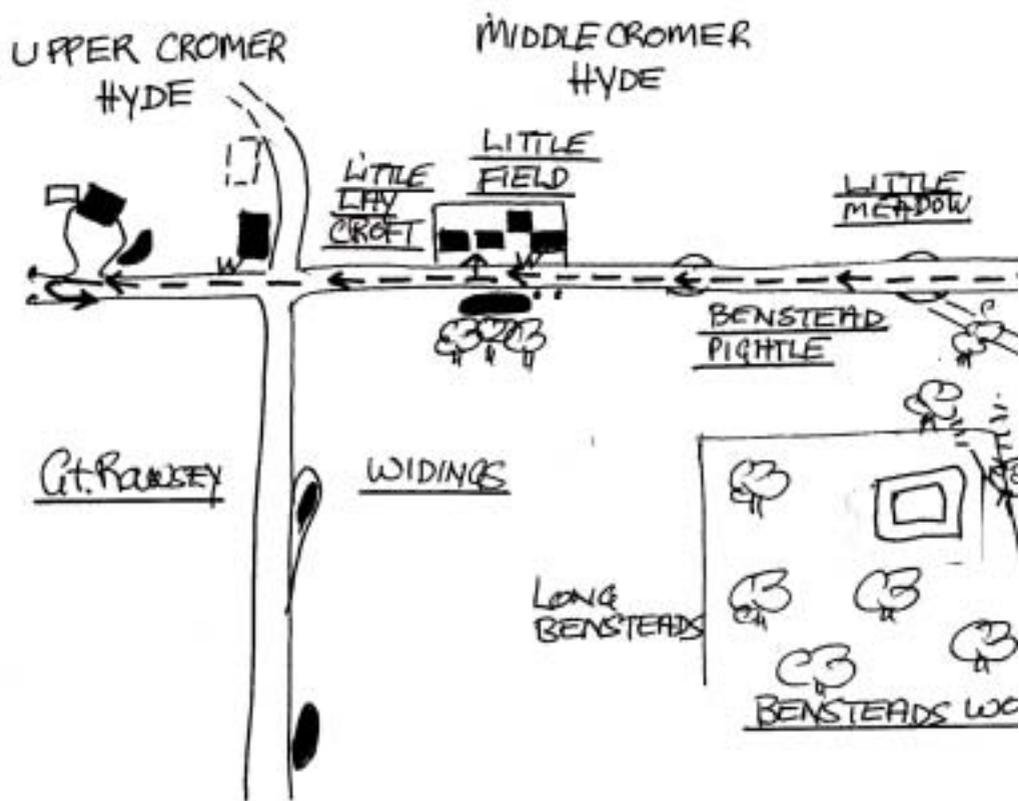
across the moat to the manor. There is a story that in more recent times a flint built game keepers cottage stood in this enclosure but was pulled down by the land owner of the day.



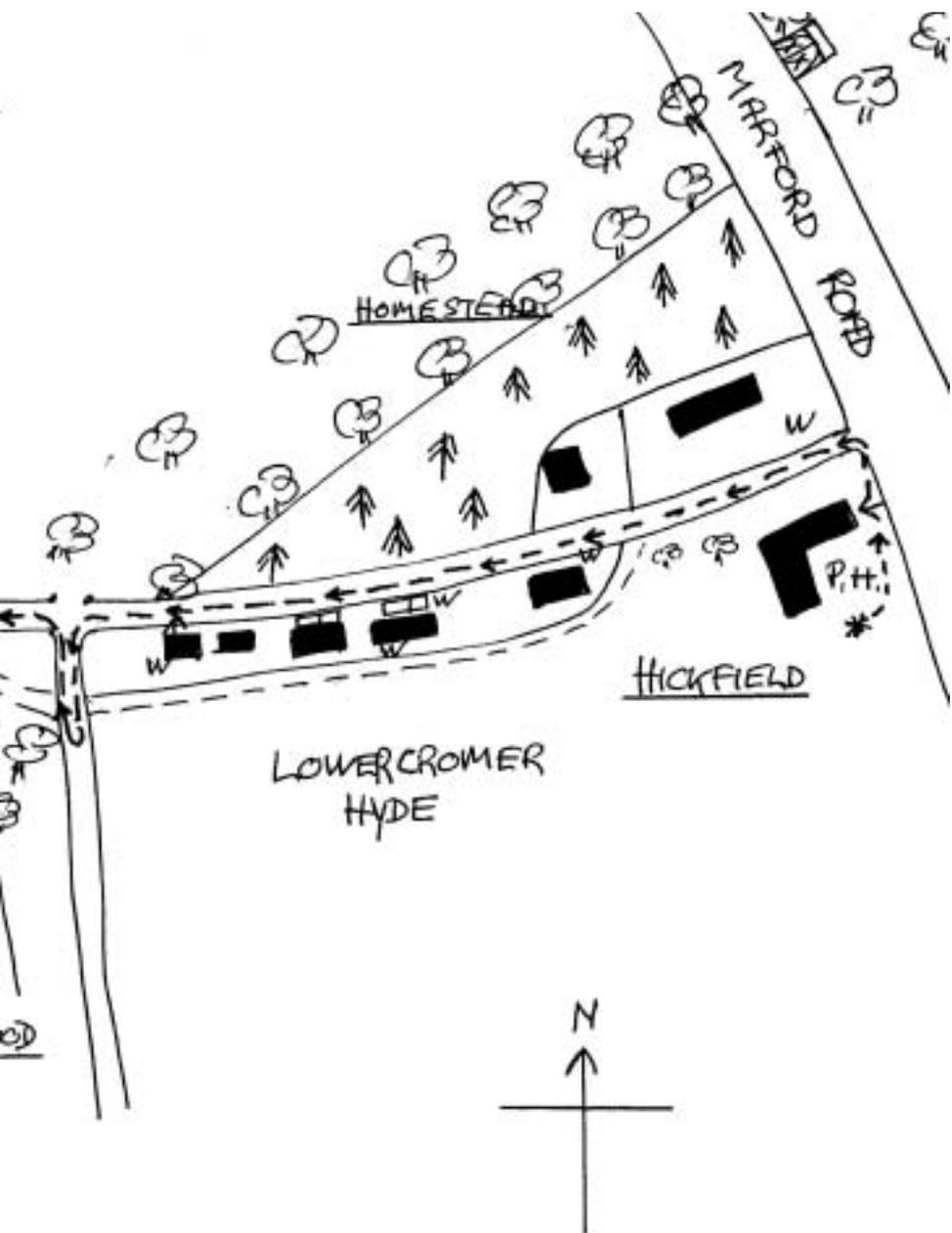
Part of the old moat of Chewells

Further on we came to where 'Archer's Pig Farm' stood in the 1950s. There were no permanent buildings but it consisted of old railway wagons. The swill for the animals came from school and factory canteens in Welwyn Garden City. Pigs were also kept in Benstede Pightle and the lane was constantly invaded by ducks and chickens. It was here in the lane that Jack Cochrane was tipped out of his trap and injured when his pony, Sandy, shied after being startled by some pigs.

CROMER HYDE



ROUTE TAKEN - - - - -



Middle Cromer Hyde

On the right we came to a half timbered black and white cottage built in the early 1600s and attached to another house! A long time ago these were a farm house and its barn. More recently they were converted into three houses, one with a bakery at the back which supplied bread to the local houses. Today they are two houses. There is a well here that supplied several of the houses - mains water and electricity only being connected in in the 1950s.



The mail used to be delivered by the postman who rode his bicycle all the way from Welwyn Garden City and Coulsons of Old Welwyn delivered groceries by van.

A large pond stands opposite and is home to several generations of mallards and moorhens. When some brambles were cleared here a long forgotten gatepost into the field known as 'Widings' came to light. The pond was used to wash down the cart horses after a long days ploughing in the fields.



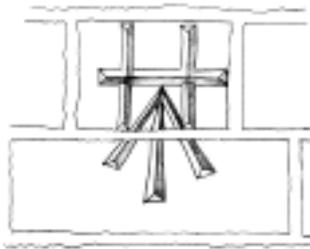
A timber barn, where sheep were sheared, stands behind the cottage and was converted into a house in 1977. We looked at a photograph which had been taken before it was altered. There were several other smaller ponds in front of the barn, now filled in.

The vast ninety seven acre field at the back used to be split into many with names such as ‘Little Field’, ‘Ley Croft’, ‘Voils’, ‘Seven Acre’, ‘Five Acre’ and there was a spinney known as ‘Little Wood’, now only marked by a dark patch in the plough. Some group members remembered potato picking and going camping when children in these fields.



Women picking potatoes at Cromer Hyde circa 1910

The next house on the right is built of brick in the Flemish Bond pattern - alternate headers and stretchers in each course with the headers being glazed. This dates it to somewhere between 1690 and 1720. Originally two Brocket



Estate workers cottages that were auctioned off into private hands in 1976. We again looked at a photograph taken around this time when they still had earth closets at the back. We saw another ‘trig mark’ on the front wall denoting three hundred feet above sea level. There is said to be a well buried under the front lawn. We also saw a piece of harness (a hame) recently found sticking out of the lane bank and compared with the harness in a photograph of Jack Cochrane’s pony and trap

taken in the 1930s. We thought it was probably the same piece.

The next house built in 1913 by the ubiquitous W.K. - i.e. Admiral Walter Keir, was a game keepers cottage and the eave again bears his escutcheon. In the 1940s it was the working home of keeper Smith, who accidentally shot himself in the hand.

Upper Cromer Hyde

Further along the deep cut lane, an indication of its great age, we came to a drovers road which crosses the lane and leads to Symondshyde and on to St. Albans cattle market and beyond to the huge area of collecting pens at Caledonian Road. These were still in use until the beginning of the 1900s. The livestock eventually arriving at Smithfield Market.

At this crossing there once was an orchard and paddock where Sandy was kept along with the trap in a shed. The field here was called the 'Widings'. Long before this, according to a William IV map of 1834, there was also a cottage here. On the opposite side the drovers road led past three cottages, only one now left standing, and on to Rowallan Lane which itself led off the Roman road at Coleman Green, past the site of the Lamb pub, across the Marford Road and over the flint bridge to Ayot St. Lawrence.



1926 photograph of Sandy, the pony, with Lucy Cochrane and her grandson in the trap

The first cottage on the left down this road is much extended but it was at one time two tiny dwellings called Upper Cromer Hyde Farm Cottages and whose well has recently been discovered.



Still further down the drovers road we saw where Jack Cochrane's clapboard built cottage stood for over 400 years until it was demolished in 1956. Now only bits of rubble sticking out of rabbit holes mark the spot. Famed for his flowers and vegetables, Jack was proud of the many rosettes, trophies and silver cups that he won. He even supplied fruit and vegetables to Welwyn Stores. Strangely enough Jack's cottage didn't have a well. He took the water for his garden from the many ponds which were around and he collected water for his house from wells further down the lane by means of a yoke and buckets. A big occasion for him was a visit from Lady Brocket when she did her rounds calling on the tenants who lived on the vast Brocket Estate.



1940 photograph of Lucy Cochrane at the gate and Jack bringing water from the well

It is a long time since some of our group had been back here, in one case over thirty-five years. One of the first questions asked was 'where have all the hedges gone?'.

At this point we got a distant view of Hatfield House between the woods to the east and of Brocket Hall to the north east. From here we moved to the farm at the now dead end top of the lane, although originally it went on to cross Rowallan Lane and joined the Roman road near Samuels Farm. On the way we saw the remains of an original sidegate to the Farm Cottages and Jack Cochrane's allotments, now totally overgrown. The farm, now a private house, used to have many buildings around it when it was a two hundred and fifty acre working farm. A doodlebug exploded in the field at the back in the 1940s but luckily the borehole and pump house that had recently been installed were not damaged.



Cromer Hyde Farm in the 1950s

If one were to continue on from here, following the footpath signs, it makes a very pleasant walk to the John Bunyan pub at Coleman Green.

By now the light was beginning to fade so we made our way back to our starting point where we were able to get warm with a welcome drink in front of the cheery open log fire at the Crooked Chimney.

Compiled by M.de S. & J.S. with the assistance of V.M.B.



The walkers, with Brocket Hall in the background

The Lemsford Parish History Group was formed in 2001.

Meetings are announced in *St John's Church Parish News* and the *Lemsford News* and anyone interested in the history of the village and surrounding area is most welcome.

We would be grateful for information, photographs and memorabilia about the village, its people and its institutions.

Lemsford Parish Local History Group Publications.

No.1: Rex's Walk through Lemsford Village.

No.2: Jeremy's Walk through Cromer Hyde.

Printed by KallKwik, Welwyn Garden City Tel: 01707 393991

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