



News and events

- While we are unable to arrange our usual programme of talks, many local and national organisations are offering online talks and webinars. Some of these are listed on our website www.wheathampsteadheritage.org.uk/history-society-events.asp

Notes and queries

Visiting Mackerye End

Some two hundred years ago, the writer Charles Lamb and his sister Mary found inspiration in the country lanes around Wheathampstead, in particular from their visits to their great-aunt Gladman at the farmhouse at Mackerye End. Charles was a mere four years of age and in the care of his sister, older by eleven years, at the time of their first visit in 1779. He later claimed that his first visit to Mackerye End was his earliest memory and led to a lifelong love of Hertfordshire. In adult life, he sought to “escape dry drudgery at the desk’s dead wood” whenever he could and got away from the “rushing tides of greasy citizenry” to the “rural solitudes” of the Hertfordshire countryside.



The Farm House, Mackerye End

Evocative descriptions of farmhouse scenes in their book, *Mrs Leicester’s School*, are thought to depict their experiences at Mackerye End. “The common supper that we had every night was very cheerful. Just before the men came out of the field, a large faggot was flung on the fire; the wood used to crackle and blaze and smell delightfully; and then the crickets ... used to sing, and old Spot, the shepherd, who loved the fire as much as the crickets did, he used to take his place in the chimney corner; after the hottest day in summer, there old Spot used to sit. It was a seat within the fireplace, quite under the chimney,

and over his head the bacon hung. When old Spot was seated, the milk was hung in a skillet over the fire, and then the men used to come and sit down at the long white table.”

Charles and Mary revisited Mackerye End one sunny day in June 1815, nearly 40 years later, looking up their former relations and trying to recapture past memories of innocence and pleasure. Charles described this later visit in his essay *Mackerye End*.

They arrived “by a somewhat circuitous route, taking the noble park from Luton in our way from St Albans”. They arrived at the spot of their “anxious curiosity” about noon. He goes on: “the sight of the old farmhouse affected me with a pleasure which I had not experienced for many a year. For though / had forgotten it, we had never forgotten being there together, and we had been talking about Mackerye End all our lives, till memory on my part became mocked with a phantom of itself.”

Charles was “terribly shy in making himself known to strangers and out-of-date kinsfolk” but Mary had no such inhibitions and went ahead. She soon returned with the youngest Gladman who, by marriage with a Bruton, had become mistress of the old mansion. In five minutes they were as thoroughly acquainted “as if we had been born and brought up together”. Mary (who is called “cousin Bridget” in the essay) was eager to see all the old familiar sites and “traversed every outpost of the old mansion, to the old wood-house, the orchard, the place where the pigeon house had stood, with a breathless impatience of recognition which was more pardonable perhaps than decorous at the age of fifty odd.”

Ruth Jeavons

There is a link to Charles Lamb’s essay *Mackerye End* in the ‘Miscellaneous’ section of the Sources page of our website and a link to a short history of Mackerye End at 1307 on the Timeline.