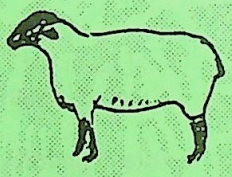
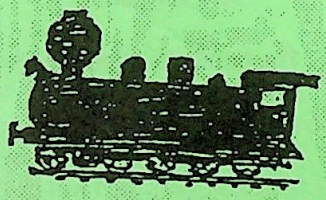
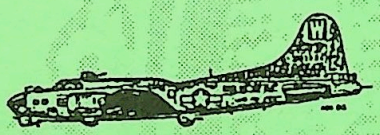
Sold in aid of
Acton Church

Some Notes on the History of

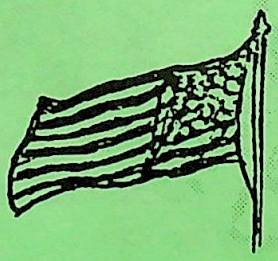
The Church and Parish of Acton, Suffolk



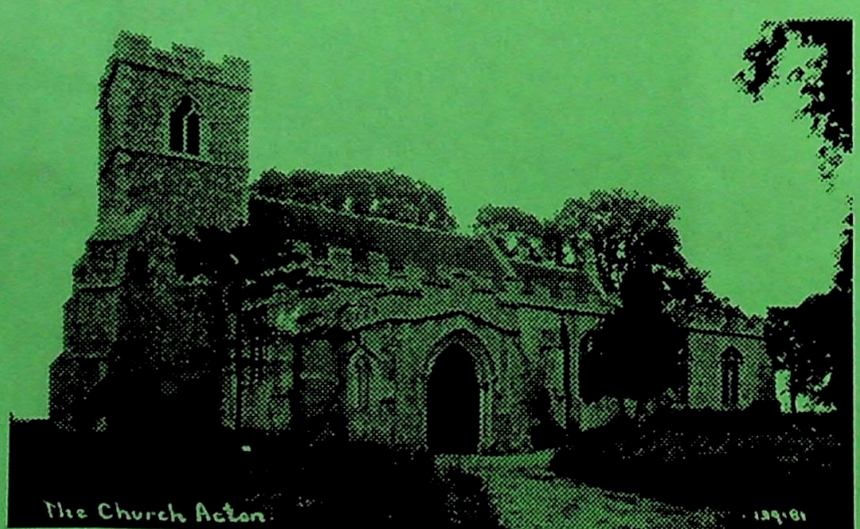








Map of Acton in the 1920's



The Church Acton, from a postcard of the 1920's

Acknowledgements

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The hundreds of people who have helped over the years to build the subject of this booklet to what it is now – a major exhibition which will be mounted again in 1995.

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Foreword to the Fourth Edition

In the Summer of 1976, with the help of dozens of people, The Acton Exhibition was mounted, and extensively reported in the local press and BBC Radio. It was an illustrated history of Acton from the Stone Age to the 1950's.

So much material was accumulated that many people said they could not absorb it all in one visit and asked whether the information could be made more generally available. Hence this booklet, which does not pretend to be a completely comprehensive history of the village.

Since 1976 there have been two more exhibitions (in 1985 and 1990) with much more material. Thousands of people have now seen the display and over three thousand copies of the History Notes have been sold. Every month more information comes in. With refreshments, raffles, floral displays, etc., it is estimated that The Acton Exhibition has raised over £4,000 towards the maintenance of the Church building.

The building itself is inseparable from the history of the village, and although there are some comments on its development through the centuries, the reader of these Notes will find many other references to the Church and its features.

Special thanks are owed to Richard Webb, whose association with Acton is mentioned in the Notes and whose kind donation has assisted in the printing of this booklet. Indeed, I am grateful to all those who have helped in any way.

It is hoped that the information herein will more than justify the description applied to Acton in a press report: "One of Suffolk's most historic villages".

Post Office Row, Acton

David Johnson

The Church Building

For the architectural purist the Church was probably too extensively restored in Victorian times but for the student of village history it is fascinating because the additions and adaptations reflect life in the country for over seven hundred years.

It was probably built about 1250 when the main entrance was through the tower. The south aisle, with a flat roof and parapet, and the porch are 15th century. The aisle was lengthened in the 18th century to form the Jennens Chapel with the family vault below.

It seems likely that the splendid canopied tomb on the north side of the chancel is a Founder's tomb.

Memorials in the Church: the brasses of de Bures, Dame Alice and the Daniels are dealt with in the relevant sections of the Notes, as is the Jennens monument.

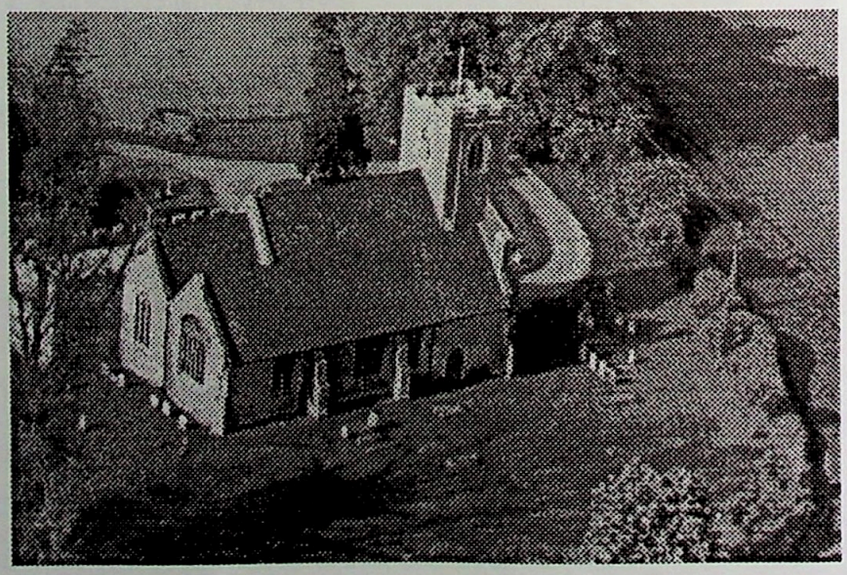
In 1885 at Lord Howe's request a Mr. Thynne inspected the tower but said his "life was not sufficiently insured to go up it in that state", so it was partially pulled down. When the rest of the building was restored the tower was left. One bell was hung low and was rung by pulling the hammer with a rope through a hole in the wall. Even so, bits of masonry would fall down and hit the bell. The other bells were stored in the basement.

The roof timbers are of Acton oak and date from the 19th century, but some earlier carvings were preserved.

The wooden blocks were set in the aisles in Victorian times. The Parson remarked with pleasure in the Acton Parish Magazine that they deadened "the sound of our honest countrymen's boots". In those days men sat on one side of the church with women and children on the other, and a man was hired to patrol and wake up those who nodded off.

The tower was rebuilt in 1923 by Browns, the local builders, and the bells were rehung in 1926.

Maintaining the fabric of the Church is an ongoing problem and thousands of pounds are still required for work that needs doing now.



The Church Acton, recent photograph from the air

Palaeolithic Man

The countryside of what is now Acton was moulded and eroded by successive ice-sheets of the last 500,000 years.

The gravel from the former Acton Stone Pits was glacial outwash probably from the Lowestoft glaciation of approximately 450,000 years ago when the great ice-sheets, advancing from the west covered all East Anglia, converting it into an Arctic landscape. In this gravel were found in 1908, the relics of Stone Age Man - three worked flints. Their state of preservation and their workmanship suggests, however, that they are more recent than the gravel in which they were found.

They are Palaeolithic flakes of the Late Middle Pleistocene, making them up to 200,000 years old, and they were struck by the Levalloisian technique.

When the Stone Age man worked his flints, the land around Acton was probably an open grassy plain with patches of mixed forest, in which hornbeam was common. The men, who were of course hunters, would have met mammoth, rhinoceros, bison and herds of wild horses. In the woods there would have been red deer, the great Irish deer, the aurochs, bear, wild pig, and wolves.

Man himself was probably not dissimilar from twentieth century man, but dressed in skins and living in crude shelters.

There is evidence of man's continuing presence in the countryside down through the centuries - one of the earliest known lamps, probably 13,000 years old, was found only three miles away and a Neolithic chisel was found at Chilton.

The Romans - and Boadicea, perhaps.

Acton, as such, did not exist in Roman times but there is evidence of Roman influence, activity and occupation in the parish, and perhaps a few words on its tribal connections would be of interest.

The region, before Caesar's invasion, was in the tribal area of the Trinovantes who, together with the Cantuvellauni, were ruled over by Cunobelin, one of the few Iron Age chiefs of whom much is known. He is Shakespeare's Cymbeline and had his capital at Colchester, thus giving that city the possible right to call itself the oldest city in Britain.

These twin tribes, under his sons Togodumnus and the better known Caratacus, put up a very fierce resistance to the Roman invasion, to such an extent that when Caratacus was eventually captured he was paraded in chains through Rome.

The Trinovantes, possibly because of their resistance, suffered rather under Roman occupation and when the neighbouring tribe in the North, the Iceni, under Queen Boadicea, rose in rebellion, the Trinovantes joined them readily, marching with them to burn Colchester and London to the ground.

One of the only two known roads from the Iceni territory to Colchester passes through what is now Acton, so it seems quite possible that at least some of Boadicea's Iceni and Trinovantes actually surged through Lime Tree Park Estate and the High Street. This Roman road from Colchester to Ixworth crossed another east-west road near Bassett's Farm. A small marble head and numerous coins have been found in Acton, suggesting that there was a settlement here in Roman times.

Thus as there appear to have been Trinovantes living in what is now Acton, they were very possibly connected with both of the best known British rebels - Caratacus and Boadicea.

Saxon Acton

The name Acton is Saxon, being a combination of "Ac" meaning oak, and "Tun" which has numerous meanings such as an enclosure, settlement, paddock, farm. All the different spellings of Acton, Aketun, Akhetun, Aketune, etc., mean something like "oak settlement".

Bearing in mind the scarcity of real information of boundaries in Saxon times, the northernmost part of the Parish of Acton is very interesting, for the boundaries of this estate can still be walked with confidence, which makes it almost unique in Suffolk.

In 962, the King, Ethelred, granted the estate to one Aethelflaed. It passed to Aelfflaed, wife of Byrhtnoth. The estate was "Balsdon".

As described in Aelfflaed's Will, it consisted of five 'hides', north of Acton, and its boundaries coincide exactly with those of the parish.

Later, in the Domesday Book, Balsdon is contained in the larger Acton Estate, held by Seward of Maldon, who had added to Balsdon the poorer lands to the south - another seven hides, making twelve in all - thus forming the present parish of Acton.

Balsdon, as well as being unusual on account of having its boundaries so clearly defined in Saxon times, is also of great interest in that it belonged to the family of Byrhtnoth.

"The Battle of Maldon", sometimes known as "Byrhtnoth", is the name given to a fragment of poetry describing a battle at Maldon, Essex in the year 993. The poem, of which only 325 lines survive, is one of the earliest poems in the English language.

"It is the only extant fragment of a national epic in Anglo Saxon" - History of English Literature.

The poem, which is based on historical fact, describes how Byrhtnoth, a chief of the East Saxons, met his death as he strove to drive back a band of Vikings whose ships were coming up the Blackwater. He allowed the Norsemen to cross the river before he attacked, thus throwing away his advantage. However, it might have been that he saw it as his duty to wipe out the enemy, not merely to repel them and thus leave them free to attack elsewhere. He did not succeed, but died a hero's death.

an extract from "The Battle of Maldon"

"Byrhtnoth drew out his sword from its sheath,
Broad-faced and gleaming, and made to slash at the seafarer's corselet,
But his enemy stopped him all too soon,
Savagely striking Byrhtnoth's arm.
The golden hilted sword dropped from his hand.
He could hold it no longer.
Nor wield a weapon of any kind. Then the old warrior
Raised his men's morale with bold words,
Called on his brave companions to do battle again.
He no longer stood firmly on his feet.
But swayed and raised his eyes to heaven:
'O Guardian of the people, let me praise and thank you
For all the real joys I received in this world.
Now, gracious Lord, as never before,
I need Your grace.
That my soul may set out on its journey to You,
O Prince of Angels, that my soul may depart
Into Your power in peace. I pray
That the devils may never destroy it.
Then the heathens hewed him down
And the two men who stood there supporting him;
Aelfnoth and Wulfmaer fell to the dust,
Both gave their lives in the defence of their Lord."

Domesday Book A.D. 1086

The description of Acton contained in Domesday Book is as follows:-

Aketune - Land of Ranulf of Pevrell

In the time of Edward the Confessor, Seward of Maldon held Acton as a Manor. There were 12 Carucates of land with Soc and Sac. There were then always 23 Villeins, and 28 Bordarii, and 17 Serfs. There were then and afterwards 8 ploughs on the demesne lands, but now there are 6. There were then and afterwards 20 ploughs belonging to the men, now there are 14. There are 50 acres of meadow, and woodland sufficient for depasturing 40 hogs. There were then and afterwards 2 Mills, now there is 1. There were then 8 horses at the Hall; there are now 11. There were then 34 beasts, now there are 31. There were then 200 pigs, now there are 160. There were then 300 sheep, there are now 424, There were then 9 hives of bees, now there are 7.

There is a Church here to which belong 30 acres of freeland adjacent to and appurtenant thereto.

Then and after the Manor was valued at £15, it is now worth £30.

There are in Acton, 4 freemen on 50 acres, over which land Radulfus has protection.

Sir Robert de Bures

Sir Robert was granted the Manor of Acton at the end of the thirteenth century in the reign of Edward the First, known as "The Hammer of the Scots", a warrior king who led his armies in the Holy Land, the Continent, Scotland and Wales.

Nothing seems to be known of Robert's parents or childhood, but his surname suggests he came from the vicinity of Bures and his parents were possibly yeoman farmers.

Robert is first heard of working for Edward in Wales between 1283 and 1295, assisting in the crushing of rebellions and concerning himself with the judicial and administrative work. For example, in 1287 Robert was ordered to come himself and bring one hundred foot soldiers to assist with the suppression of the revolt of Rhys ap Maredudd in Wales. At the time he was styled the Bailiff of Queen Eleanor and acted as custodian of the Queen's castle in Haverford West.

From the terms used to describe him, it would appear that Robert was a trooper in the King's small standing army. These men performed a wide variety of tasks; they garrisoned castles, helped to administer new conquests, fought near the King and requisitioned supplies. Each had to maintain two servants and three horses.

After his year in Wales Robert was frequently employed on commissions of enquiry and on judicial commissions mainly in the North of England.

Before Edward I died, Robert was receiving certain pecuniary rewards at the hands of the King and after the King's death he acted as a steward in East Anglia on the great estate of Clare owned by the Earls of Gloucester who ranked amongst the most powerful nobles of the age. This post carried wide administrative responsibilities; but the legal aspect was the most important.

Edward II, like his father, was deeply involved in the Scottish wars and after 1314 hoped to reverse his disastrous defeat at Bannockburn. However he was no soldier and his campaigns were ineffectual. In 1316 Robert acted as a commissioner of array

in Suffolk to raise troops for the war.

In 1322 several nobles, led by the Earl of Lancaster, rebelled against the King but were defeated at the battle of Boroughbridge. The Earl was executed shortly afterwards and Robert was given the custody of the lands of the rebels in Norfolk and Suffolk.

From early in the fourteenth century it was Robert's ambition to acquire estates. In 1302 he obtained the Manor of Bansfield in Wickhambrook and in 1309 he added land in Waldingfield. His most important acquisition was the Manor of Acton Hall in 1310 when he married his second wife Hilary, widow of John de Hodebovile, who was tenant of the estate held of the King. Robert, for Hilary's lifetime, thus acquired an interest in Acton which became his family seat.

By 1331 Robert held land in fifteen Suffolk villages besides Acton, including Kettlebaston, Lavenham, Cockfield, Monks Eleigh, Great and Little Waldingfield, Long Melford, Sudbury and Bures. He had an estate in Essex, the Manor of Foxearth, which belonged to the Honour of Clare.

Robert had died in 1331, probably early in September, and Hilary did not long survive him, dying on December 13th of the same year. They had no children but Robert had a large family by his first marriage. He was succeeded by his eldest son Andrew.

[Anyone seeking more information should consult Jennifer Ward's paper on Sir Robert de Bures or the booklet by Bernard and Madeline Brenner of Falls Church, Virginia, U.S.A.]

The date of the brass in Acton Church is still argued about but it was certainly between the years 1300 and 1335. In some ways it is difficult to see why there is an argument. It is accepted as being not only one of the earliest but also as the finest military brass - as is shown by the following :-

"This is perhaps the finest and most beautiful figure of the cross-legged period" - Suffolk Monumental Brasses

"The most famous military brass in England" - East Anglia

"The finest military brass in existence" - Victoria and Albert Museum.

There is an interesting reference to the de Bures family and Acton Church in Pritchard's book "English Medieval Graffiti". The author says - "On a pillar in the North arcade the name "Edmundus de Bures" is inscribed. Presumably it belongs to a member of Sir Robert's family but so far I have been unable to trace the precise relationship."

The scratched inscription is still visible.

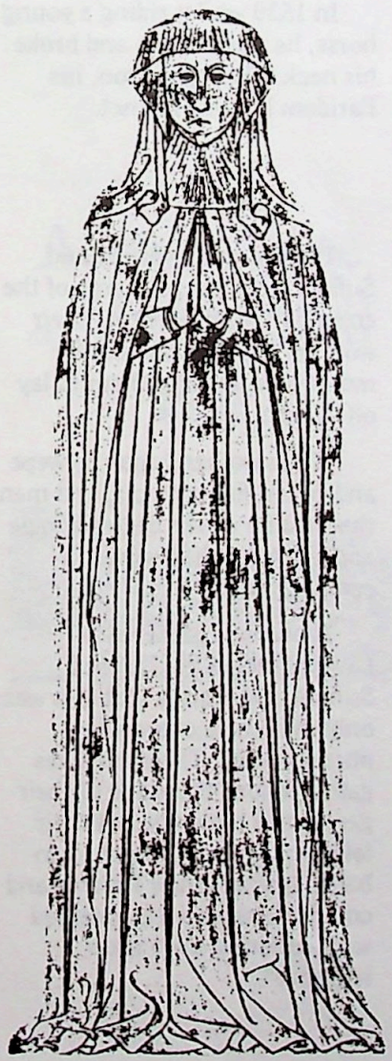
Dame Alice de Bryene

Dame Alice de Bryene was probably Sir Robert's great granddaughter. She married Sir Guy de Bryene from Gloucester, the eldest son of the Admiral of the Fleet before Calais. He died young in 1386 leaving her with two daughters, Elizabeth and Philippa, and so she returned to Acton Hall to be near her kinsfolk.

Dame Alice belonged to a very rich and privileged section of society, and she was probably frequently present in the royal court of London, but it would be wrong to assume that it was a life of peace and order. The year of her birth 1361 saw the second outbreak of the Plague, or Black Death, in England. In 1381 the Peasant's Revolt was crushed by the military power of the King at North Walsham.

The brass of Dame Alice in Acton Church is of interest and perhaps what is more interesting is a Day Book (or Household Account Book) of the expenses of Dame Alice's household during the year ending 28th September 1413. This is now amongst the Chancery Miscellanea at The Public Record Office.

The accounts show the whole management of the household of a great Suffolk lady in the time of Agincourt. It gives details of the numbers fed at her table and what they ate, down to the last pigeon or herring. For example, on Sunday 2nd July 1413 at Acton Hall:



"Breakfast 6, Dinner 20, Supper 20, - Sum 46

The Baking	:	*206 white and 30 black loaves*
Pantry	:	*56 white and 6 black loaves:*
		wine from supply:
		ale from stock
Kitchen	:	*One quarter of beef, one quarter of bacon,*
		one joint of mutton, 2 chicken
Purchases	:	*Beef and Pork*
Provender	:	*Hay from stock for 7 horses, fodder for same,*
		one bush. oats

Sum of purchases 3s.2d. "

[These details are translated from the Latin]

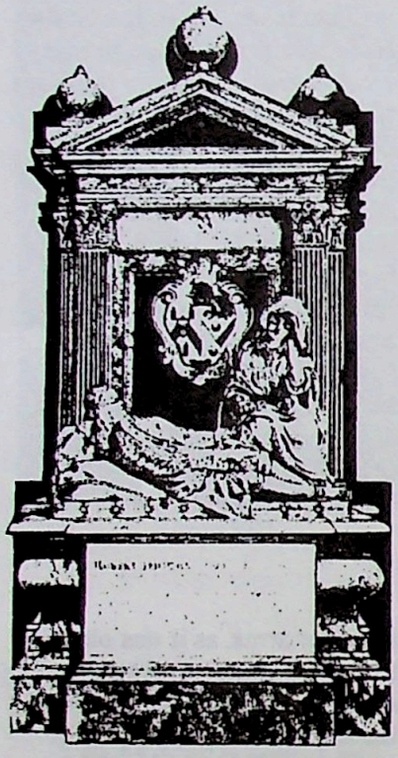
Comparatively little is known of Dame Alice herself but from what few records do exist a shadowy figure emerges. Her gifts to the poor were quite large. The accounts suggest a careful methodical lady. Some of the letters she received from her friends and relatives she left neatly in a Letter Book. The letters reveal that she was held in genuine affection by a number of her correspondents.

Robert Lovel, one of her sons-in-law writes thus :-

"My most honoured and above all other my most dearly beloved lady and mother, may the Blessed Trinity keep you in its most sacred care and bring you a good life of very great length, with full accomplishment of your worthy desires."

Unfortunately, no letters have yet been discovered written by Dame Alice but it is thought that she lived to be over seventy and it is pleasant to think this devout and kindly woman probably lived to fulfil the kind wishes of her son-in-law.

Acton Place and the Jennens (or Jennings) Family.



Monument in Acton Church to the memory of Robert Jennens

The Jennens family is of very ancient origin and seems to have been settled in England before the Norman Conquest. They were of Danish extraction and the first who settled in this kingdom seems to have been a Viking captain brought into England by Canute, King of Denmark. King Canute gave him certain land on the coast near Harwich as a reward for former services done for Canute's father, Sweyn (Forkbeard) of Denmark.

Little more is known of the family until the reign of Henry VIII when a Robert Jennens (great, great, great, grandfather of the miser of Acton Place) was employed in the Royal Household. He became a favourite of Henry VIII, who in 1545 made him Chief Warden, Deer Stalker and Ranger at Shottle, Duffield, Derbyshire.

His grandson John Jennens became a great ironmaster in Birmingham. The family became very rich. It is highly likely they were involved in the political life of the country and in 1642, at the outbreak of the Civil War, Robert Jennens' great grandson John (No.2) is known to have left London suddenly. In the following years the War was raging and he appears to have been forced to move from place to place to avoid the consequence of war.

It has been suggested that the family was divided amongst itself on the issue of the Civil War and that consequently family records may not have been accurately kept. This may account for some of the confusion which arose upon the death of William Jennens, the miser of Acton Place, in 1798.

On 29th December 1708, Acton Place was purchased from the Daniels family in trust for Robert Jennens, the father of William Jennens, the Acton miser.

Robert Jennens began to buld a noble mansion at Acton Place, which he was on the point of completing when he died suddenly in 1725, It is said to have been a magnificent country seat, which for the grandeur of its hall, and massive elegance of its marble chimney pieces, as well as the beauty and extent of its stables and other offices was "totally unrivalled in that part of the country". It was superbly furnished, the walls were hung with tapestries, the ceilings were decorated. The whole of one room was hung with needlework in blue and white with bedcovers and chairs to match. The adjoining room, known as the "Silk Room", was furnished with elegantly painted silk. The staircase and one entire wing of the house, which was to have been a superb ballroom, were left totally incomplete at Robert Jennens' death in 1725.

His son William never added another stroke to the unfinished structure.

After William Jennens' death the house was almost totally demolished and the furnishings and building materials were sold in 1825. All that remained of the great house was the brewhouse and bakehouse which formed one of the wings. These were standing until fairly recently.

Nothing remains now except a broken gravestone of Robert Jennens' dog, and four plaster busts which for many years were in Sycamore House (now demolished) opposite the Old School in High Street, and which are now in the Church.

[Note: More information about the recent history of Acton Place will be found later in these Notes.]

It is known that amongst the furnishings of the house there were portraits of William Jennens' parents and grandparents and in "A History of the Jennens Family" compiled

on behalf of the family by Messrs. Harrison & Willis of Sheffield in 1879, it is suggested that Acton Place was destroyed in order to remove every trace which might have led to the discovery of the parentage of William Jennens.

William Jennens (or Jennings) was a bachelor and a miser. He was born in 1701 and was the Godson of William III. As a youth he was page to King George I.

He was excessively rich but spent very little of his money. Although the family apartments at Acton Place were furnished before his father's death, William lived in three poorly furnished rooms in the basement.

In one thing, however, he was particular. His meals were plentiful and always properly served on the family plate. He would never allow anything left over from one meal to be served up at the next. The poor did not benefit from this, however, as all the scraps were fed to his dogs.

There is no record of his ever having done any charitable action. No one was ever invited to spend the night at his house, although he did occasionally invite a few gentlemen friends to visit him in the mornings.

He frequently visited the gaming houses of London, but not as a gambler. He would lend money to the unlucky for the evening. It is said that for every £1,000 he advanced at night he received 1,000 guineas (£1,050) in the morning. To enable him to pursue this profitable business he purchased a house in Grosvenor Square, London where he occasionally lived up to his death.

On leaving either his town or country house, he personally drew up a list of articles left behind, including the tiniest ornament, and noting the exact position of each item in the house. On his return he would carefully check the list to see that everything was still there and nothing had been moved.

One thing in his favour was that he never oppressed his tenants. Although he would never assist them in any way, he never once increased their rents from the time he inherited the estate from his father; nor did he press them for payment if they were not punctual.

In fact, he took little interest in the estate or his fortune at all. For the last twenty years of his life he was losing up to £2,000 a year by the large sums of money he kept unemployed at his bankers.

At her death in 1761, his mother left a large chest containing her family plate and other valuables. William never even bothered to open it.

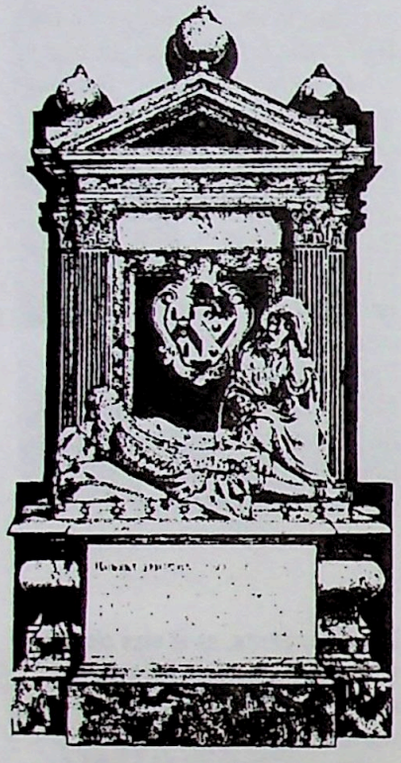
After his death, a search of the house revealed a chest containing £19,000 in bank notes and several thousand new guineas. He is reported to have always kept £50,000 at his bank for emergencies.

William Jennens died on 19th June 1798, aged 97, without leaving a Will. At his death he was said to be the "richest commoner" in the United Kingdom and it was estimated that his property amounted to almost £2,000,000.

Because of his immense wealth, many members of his family immediately put forward claims to his estate. Up to 1879, eighty years after his death, there had been seventeen claims put before the Courts and other claimants still coming forward.

The chief dispute in deciding who were the rightful heirs to the fortune was the question of William's parentage. It was known he was descended from John Jennens the wealthy Birmingham ironmaster, and that his father was called Robert Jennens, but John Jennens of

Acton Place and the Jennens (or Jennings) Family.



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He was excessively rich but spent very little of his money. Although the family apartments at Acton Place were furnished before his father's death, William lived in three poorly furnished rooms in the basement.

In one thing, however, he was particular. His meals were plentiful and always properly served on the family plate. He would never allow anything left over from one meal to be served up at the next. The poor did not benefit from this, however, as all the scraps were fed to his dogs.

There is no record of his ever having done any charitable action. No one was ever invited to spend the night at his house, although he did occasionally invite a few gentlemen friends to visit him in the mornings.

He frequently visited the gaming houses of London, but not as a gambler. He would lend money to the unlucky for the evening. It is said that for every £1,000 he advanced at night he received 1,000 guineas (£1,050) in the morning. To enable him to pursue this profitable business he purchased a house in Grosvenor Square, London where he occasionally lived up to his death.

On leaving either his town or country house, he personally drew up a list of articles left behind, including the tiniest ornament, and noting the exact position of each item in the house. On his return he would carefully check the list to see that everything was still there and nothing had been moved.

One thing in his favour was that he never oppressed his tenants. Although he would never assist them in any way, he never once increased their rents from the time he inherited the estate from his father; nor did he press them for payment if they were not punctual.

In fact, he took little interest in the estate or his fortune at all. For the last twenty years of his life he was losing up to £2,000 a year by the large sums of money he kept unemployed at his bankers.

At her death in 1761, his mother left a large chest containing her family plate and other valuables. William never even bothered to open it.

After his death, a search of the house revealed a chest containing £19,000 in bank notes and several thousand new guineas. He is reported to have always kept £50,000 at his bank for emergencies.

William Jennens died on 19th June 1798, aged 97, without leaving a Will. At his death he was said to be the "richest commoner" in the United Kingdom and it was estimated that his property amounted to almost £2,000,000.

Because of his immense wealth, many members of his family immediately put forward claims to his estate. Up to 1879, eighty years after his death, there had been seventeen claims put before the Courts and other claimants still coming forward.

The chief dispute in deciding who were the rightful heirs to the fortune was the question of William's parentage. It was known he was descended from John Jennens the wealthy Birmingham ironmaster, and that his father was called Robert Jennens, but John Jennens of

Birmingham had married twice. By his first marriage he had a son John, who had a son called Robert who also had a son called Robert. By his second marriage he had a son Humphrey, who in his turn had a son named Robert.

It was known that in 1799 Anne Guidott married Robert Jennens and they had a son William, of Acton Place. It was not clear which Robert Jennens was the one who married Anne Guidott and thus was the father of William Jennens.

William had no close relatives living, and many distant relations were exceedingly anxious to prove that he belonged to their side of the family.

The real estate eventually passed to Richard William Curzon, Earl Howe, an ancestor of the former patron of Acton Church. Curzon claimed that both he and the miser were descended from Humphrey Jennens.

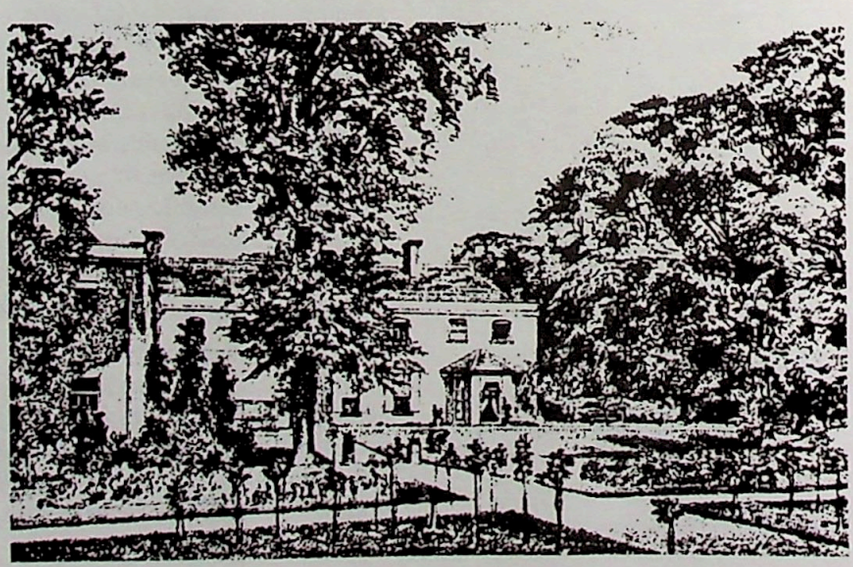
It is alleged that in trying to prove their right to share in the vast Jennens fortune, many people resorted to forging Parish Registers, certificates and other documents. One interesting example is the monument to the Jennens family in Acton Church. On 8th July 1805, Mr. Richard Long of Ballington, Essex, sent to Baroness Howe a bill for work which he had done to the Jennens Monument. He charged for cutting and painting 165 letters on the marble table and for repainting the old inscription of 471 letters, making 636 letters in all. But on 11th April 1859 (54 years later) Mr. James Coleman of Bloomsbury copied every letter on the monument. It is stated there were only 454 characters. Who had the 182 letters removed? And why? The monument now bears 625 letters.

The Jennens Dogs

Although he cared little for the society of other people, William Jennens is known to have been very fond of his dogs.

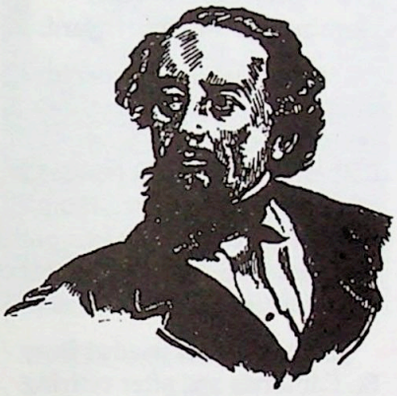
In September 1952, a workman clearing ground at Acton Place with a bulldozer found a battered tombstone. Further investigation by the then Vicar of Acton, the late Revd. Canon R.T. Lambert, revealed nearby a brick vault containing the remains of two dogs and some four inch nails, believed to be coffin nails.

The inscription on the tombstone relates to the dog called Dutches owned by Robert Jennens, the miser's father, but the finding of two skulls in the tomb lends weight to a story which has been popular in Acton for many years.



It is said that William Jennens, the miser, was in the habit of taking an old setter dog with him on his trips to London. On his last visit in 1798 he failed, for reasons unknown, to take his dog with him and left it tied at his Acton home. The day after his departure his housekeeper found the dog had gone. It had set out on the sixty mile trek to find its master, and the third day after its escape it arrived in London and was found utterly exhausted on the steps of William Jennens' town house in Grosvenor Square. Inside the house, Jennens himself lay dying. It is believed that the dog died and was brought back to Acton and buried in the tomb of Robert Jennens' dog, Dutches.

The Jennens Family and Charles Dickens



Nowadays, any local history, it seems, must have a mention of Charles Dickens. Acton can claim a link which is far more convincing than most such connections, in that "Bleak House" was inspired by the famous Jennens case :-

"The case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce was suggested by the celebrated proceedings arising from the intestacy of one, William Jennings, who died in 1798" - Oxford Companion to English Literature.

"Such interminable Chancery suits were no rare things when Bleak House was written to expose them. The case on which Jarndyce and Jarndyce was founded was probably Jennens -v- Jennens which related to a property in Acton, Suffolk belonging to an intestate miser who died in 1798. The case was only concluded some time in the 80's." - The Dickens Encyclopaedia : A. Hayward.

Bleak House from an early edition

Murders, Murderers and Ghosts

The two murders mentioned below are well documented and authentic. The ghost, however, is more suspect.

Charles Drew

a murderer buried in consecrated ground.

On the night of Thursday, 31st January 1740, Charles Drew, aged 25, went to Upper House, Long Melford, occupied by Charles John Drew, a wealthy attorney and his own father, and shot him through the body with six bullets.

The father had kept the son on a small allowance because of the company the young man kept. He was mixing with smugglers and poachers. Taunted by his associates, the son took a dreadful revenge. He hid the gun in a hollow tree by the roadside at Liston.

Charles Drew went to London to prove his father's Will but on his return found a search was being made for him. He returned to London but was later caught in Leicester Fields and was committed to Newgate. From there he was brought to Bury St. Edmunds, convicted at the Assizes on 27th March, and hanged.

The same evening, the murderer's body was surreptitiously interred under the Chancel of Acton Church, the Vicar, the Revd. Charles Umfreville, having married Mary Drew, the murderer's eldest sister.

Catherine Foster

In 1846, Catherine Foster of High Street, Acton murdered her husband, whom she had married only three weeks before in Acton Church, by giving him dumplings poisoned with arsenic.

Dr. Jones of Long Melford assumed the death to be "English Cholera" but at the inquest a post mortem was ordered. Tests on the fluid taken from the stomach soon revealed arsenic, and the body which had been buried was exhumed on 27th November 1846 and examined in the Churchyard.

At the trial the murdered man's eight year old brother remembered having seen Catherine put a black powder in the dumpling mixture. Hens that had eaten the remains of the meal had died, with strong traces of arsenic in their bodies.

Catherine was tried at Bury St. Edmunds and after retiring for only fifteen minutes, the Jury brought in a verdict of Guilty. She was hanged at Bury before 10,000 onlookers - the first criminal to be buried at the Gaol and the last woman to be hanged at Bury St. Edmunds.

The motive, if such it can be called or even discerned, was almost touching in its childish inadequacy. She had no real affection for her husband although he was kind to her; she had married to please her mother but found that she had been happier in service and would have liked to return - so she got rid of her husband. She was aged seventeen.

The Acton Ghost

According to a legend known by many people in the village and mentioned in numerous books, a ghostly coach is said to drive from the gates of Acton Place. The coach has a headless coachman and outriders. The vehicle is supposed to come from a field gate exactly opposite the old stone pits in Bull Lane. The entrance to the field is still visible.

The Ongoing Story of Acton Place (and the 136th Station Hospital)

Nurses outside Acton Place
1944

Before the War, Acton Place was owned and lived in by Mrs. Pearson, who took a benign interest in the village. She opened her gardens for the benefit of District Nursing and held annual parties for the village children at which they all received presents.

The War changed all that. The Government requisitioned the estate and Mrs. Pearson retired (I understand) to Long Melford. 'Rosea Gigantica' was replaced by armoured cars and the 12th Lancers.

When it was decided to create an airbase, Acton Place was obviously well situated to be a Station Hospital. More than seventy American Army Nurses were quartered in the house and 'temporary' buildings were erected for medical and surgical wards, enlisted men and for general services. In all there were some five hundred men and women in the 136th Station Hospital.

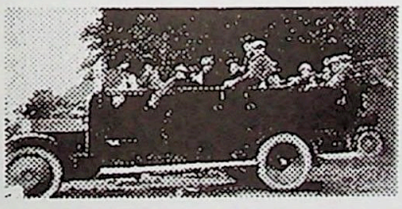
When the War ended, British soldiers cleared up and in the period 1645/6 some displaced persons and Germans who were by then not really prisoners of war were quartered at Acton Place, guarded by soldiers still in look-out towers.

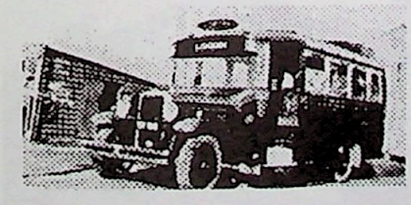
Later, when there were empty huts, local people, desperate for accommodation, 'squatted' until the last soldiers departed and the area was taken over by the Council.

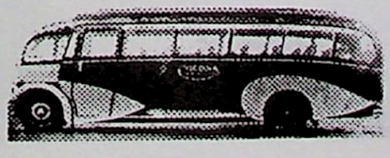
The mansion, for such it still was, was purchased by a Mr. Baldwin at a public auction in the late 1940's. As no bids were made, he offered £3,100 and this was accepted. He and his wife lived there happily for some years with most of the house converted into flats.

When it was sold, the new purchasers had it knocked down, although it was apparently in quite good repair. Ultimately, the grounds were used for light industry.

Corona Coaches







Mr. Nathan Chinery started a business in 1850 as a rag and bone man, and a carrier between Acton and Sudbury. This was taken over by his son Arthur. The grandson, Alan, was in World War I, a private in the Royal West Sussex Regiment, and was a prisoner of war in Eastphalia. He came home in 1919 and was persuaded by his father to stay in Acton with the offer of £100 to buy a lorry to replace the horse and cart.

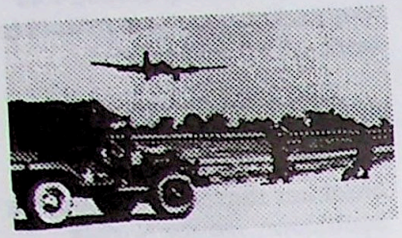
A Ford truck was bought with an open back and removable seats. This ran to Sudbury on Saturdays and Thursdays for human passengers, and the rest of the week for grain, pigs, etc. Then a Reiker was purchased to carry granite for roads, from local stations. A Daimler chassis was bought in Portsmouth and converted to a charabanc, "The Joybelle", the only bus in the district.

In 1929 it was decided to start a London service operating from the bus garage formerly situated on what is now Walnut Close. The coach, a Gilford, ran to Charing Cross Underground, with an agency in Villiers Street. The business thrived; the catchment area increased to a maximum of twenty buses feeding Sudbury with ten leaving for London. The booking office and boarding place were at the corner of North Street and East Street, Sudbury - now Gallery 2 and Peatling & Cawdron the wine merchants.

At its largest, the firm had twenty-two employees.

In 1956 Mr. Chinery retired and the firm was sold to Hibbs and Davidson, who went bankrupt within three years.

The Airfield



The airfield in Acton, now the home of Peter Cobbald's 'Honest Herd' of Pedigree Holstein Friesian cattle, was once the Sudbury Station of the United States Eighth Air Force. The airfield itself was about equally divided between Chilton and Acton, and the majority of the temporary buildings were in Great Waldingfield.

This was just one development in a total of nearly one hundred which in the 1940's turned East Anglia into an aircraft carrier enabling the Eighth Air Force to deliver an onslaught against Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe.

The airfield was constructed by John Laing & Son during 1943 as a "Class 'A' Heavy Bomber Base". The 486th Bombardment Group was originally The Old Ninth, an anti-submarine squadron. The Group started training on B10's and then B24's. The first Liberator arrived at 2.15 p.m. on Sunday, 2nd April 1944. The first mission was flown on Sunday, 7th May - the target, the railway yards at Liege.

'Local' Liberators were involved in the D-Day attack and the Fortresses helped stem the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes. The total number of missions undertaken was one hundred and eighty-six. Forty-six of those were in B24's, and the remainder in B17's. Fifty-seven aircraft were lost, thirty-three in action. If the War had not finished when it did, the runways were to have been extended for Super-Fortresses.

The last mission was flown on 21st April 1945 and on 15th July of that year the Americans returned home, apart from the four hundred who, from this one base, had given their lives.

[Obviously at the Exhibition there was much more information concerning the Base and the 136th Station Hospital at Acton Place - too much to be included in these Notes.]

Wartime photograph of B17 over Acton

Lime Tree Park Estate

When the estate was added to the village in the 1970's, it was decided to incorporate the new community into the old by giving the roads names connected with Acton's history. For those who are interested, a summary is given below:-

De Bures, Daniels, Jennens and Howe are all mentioned previously in these Notes. The name Daniels has also been well known in the village in recent years in the person of Nurse Daniels who was for many years the village nurse and midwife.

Tamage is one of the old Acton Manors and some of the village fields still bear this name.

Kedington refers to the Kedington family and information on this can be found in the Church and Churchyard.

Canons Pugh and Lambert were both former Vicars of the parish. They both lived in the Vicarage (now The Old Vicarage) from which Vicarage Lane takes its name.

Babergh Close - like the District Council - is so called after nearby Babergh Heath.

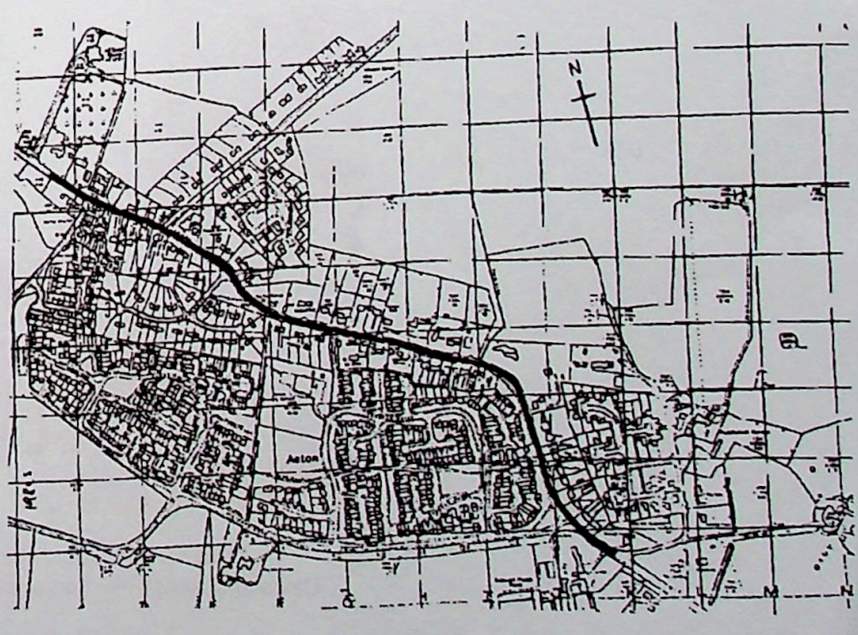
Two closes were named after well-known local families, King and Brown, the latter once a building firm responsible for the construction of many of the houses in the village.

Corona Court is so called because of the Acton coach company which was named 'Corona' by Mrs. A.R. Chinery, the proprietor's wife.

Jubilee Way was completed at the time of the Queen's Silver Jubilee, 1977.

Marsh Walk refers to the low lying meadows on the opposite side of Sudbury Road, which were originally intended to be incorporated in the new development but were found to be impractical for building purposes.

Finally, the two trees - Cedar from the cedar tree growing near The Old Vicarage and which is something of a landmark, and Lime from the avenue of limes which bisects the estate. The lime trees are almost certainly about one hundred years old. Photographs of the village taken in about 1905 show the trees as being quite small. The late Mr. Arthur Parmenter could remember climbing up them as saplings and letting the weight of his body bend the tops over to deposit him into the next tree. Limes were probably chosen as they were recognised as ideal trees for avenues.



Map of modern Acton showing much development since that shown on the earlier map at the front of this booklet.

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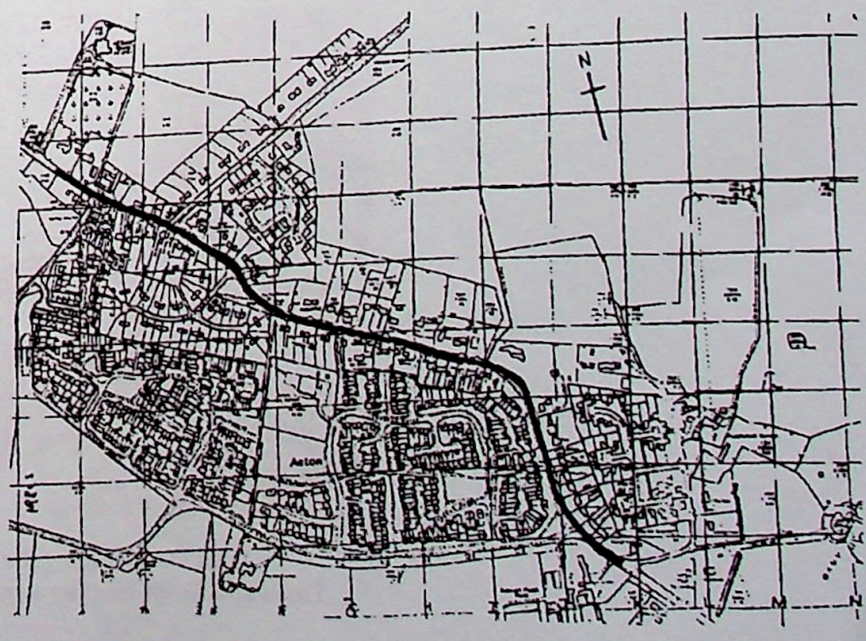

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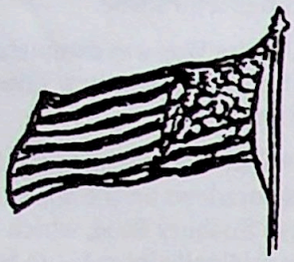
The American Connection



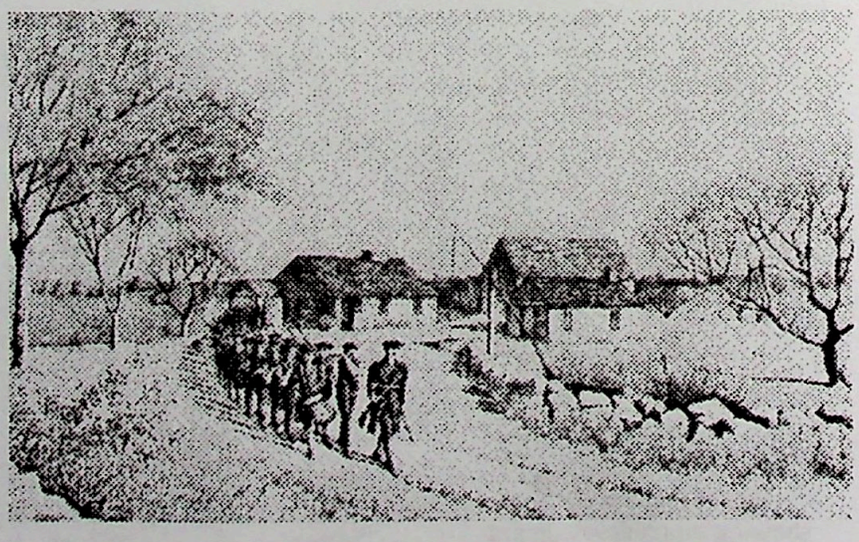
In 1976 it was discovered there was an Acton in Massachusetts. Subsequent enquiries proved that the American town had been equally ignorant of our existence. Members of the Historical Society expressed great interest and paid for The Acton Exhibition material to be flown to America and shown there. They were also very helpful when an exhibition of Acton, Mass., was staged in our church in 1978.

In 1985, when Acton, Mass. , celebrated it 250th Anniversary, representatives from Acton , England were invited to attend. Christine Johnson, Chris Moss and Fred Lane were very hospitably received and entertained.

Many visitors from America have made the pilgrimage to East Anglia and are always welcomed.

It is almost certain that the American Acton was named after our village and it is interesting to note that the New Acton also has its place in history because the first two men to die in the War of American Independence came from that town. They were killed on that fateful day described by Ralph Waldo Emerson -

"By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled;
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world."



Isaac Davis leading the Acton Minutemen to Concord
Davis and Abner Hosmer were both killed in the first exchange of fire

Acton Now

In the last sixty years Acton has changed from a small agricultural village, with a population steady at about five hundred, into a much larger settlement of two thousand people; and a way of life has passed.

Some inhabitants can recall when girls would expect to go into service and older people recall the individual members of the reaping gangs who went forth with belts and braces and scythes to bring in the harvest.

Probably the two main factors in the change are the development of Acton Place as an industrial estate with such varied interests as engineering and dressmaking being represented, and the creation of Lime Tree Park which doubled the population of the village in the seventies. This is fairly high density housing which has kept the village compact and surrounded by fields rather than ribbon development.

It has also had the effect of attracting young people. Although there are many older properties in the village, it has not become fossilised. The new developments have kept it a working village with a public house, four shops, a new primary school and a good bus service to Sudbury, Bury St Edmunds and Colchester; this when many villages have suffered from decreased amenities.

There are still more changes planned, but it is hoped that with its splendid history, Acton will be able to maintain its friendly, rural character.