

# *Kersey Within Living Memory*

An oral history compiled by Anne Maltby  
with an introduction by Ruby Ling

This book is dedicated to the memory of  
*Mary Holden*  
A lifelong inhabitant of Kersey

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An oral history compiled by Anne Maltby  
with an introduction by Ruby Ling

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**A**NNE MALTBY, now in her sixties, was born in Essex and lived there all her life prior to 1994, raising two children, Nicholas and Michèle, from her first marriage, as well as an assortment of animals! A self-confessed unmotivated student in her schooldays, Anne took the first step towards serious study in 1976 when she obtained her English 'O' Level, followed by 'A' Level and finally an Open University BA (Honours) in 1987.

Anne's passion for literature competes with her involvement with animal welfare, from supporting causes and sanctuaries to rescuing lame ducks from the Splash! She and husband John enjoy gardening and walking, visits from their four grandchildren and life at home in the house they named "Pax".



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*If I should have left anyone out of this list, please forgive me and accept my sincere thanks.*

# PREFACE

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**W**ITH MY HUSBAND, JOHN, I SAW KERSEY FOR the first time in the late afternoon of a dreary day in November 1993. Before that we had been unaware of its existence.

Because he was taking early retirement, we wanted to find a smaller house in a quieter area than Essex where he had worked for the past 30 years and I had lived all my life.

Having spent many weeks looking at houses in Suffolk we chanced upon our first view of Kersey over a five-barred gate on the road from Lindsey. Windows each side of the distant street glowed in the dusk, and I felt the catch in my throat remembered from childhood when something

exciting was about to happen. We drove on slowly, rounded a sharp corner and entered the quiet and magical place that is the village. The sights that have captivated thousands before and since lay in front of us – curving street, quaint houses, old pubs, ducks dawdling in the stream across the

road. The church towered in majesty on top of the hill up which the car now climbed. And there, on our left close to the road, stood a thatched cottage like a child's drawing of a thatched cottage.

It was for sale! We drove to the Agents in Hadleigh, viewed the cottage and made our offer. Our house in Essex was snapped up by the first couple who looked at it and we moved into Number 7,



*Our first view of Kersey*

Church Hill, Kersey on the 4th of February 1994. We have since named it “Pax”.

I have never doubted that we were led to this village because, almost immediately, we could not imagine ever again living anywhere else. John, in particular, has involved himself in almost every aspect of its life and – from the very first week – I have enjoyed hearing memories of the true villagers, those for whom Kersey has always been home. The notion of tape recording these memories and compiling them into a book occurred to me after we had lived here for about a year. Not knowing how it would be received, I confided my idea to Ivy Tricker and she became my very first interviewee in November 1995. Since then I have interviewed over forty people, including some old and new “newcomers” to the village.

On page 248 is a list of contributors in alphabetical order, with the month and year on which they were interviewed. These are the people whose memories and impressions of Kersey form the body of this work, and words cannot express

my gratitude for the time they gave and the thoughts they shared. Their words have been repeated faithfully throughout, exactly as they were spoken. This is primarily an oral history and I have neither wished nor presumed to alter



*“Pax” as we first saw it*

the spontaneous syntax that occurred in our conversations. The views expressed stand as given by each individual at the time he or she was interviewed. If there appear to be discrepancies, we should remember the words of John Locke in his *Essay on Human Understanding*, published in 1690: “It is one thing to show a man that he is in error and another to put him in possession of truth.”

There is a list of acknowledgments at the end of the book but, separately from that, I want to thank my husband for the mental and physical support he has given me during the final compilation of this work. Only I know how many ups and downs of mine he has smiled through, the proofreading he has done and the meals he has produced for us both! John – a thousand thanks.

# INTRODUCTION

by RUBY LING

Ruby Ling, (nee Mann), who wrote this wonderful introduction, was born in 1923. One of two girls, she lived in Kersey until she married at the age of twenty-one.

Her older sister Mary, who married Lewis Mowles, was a Churchwarden for 26 years. Their father also had been a Churchwarden for a considerable time. Sadly, Mary was not well enough to be interviewed for this book and died in 1996. There is a plaque in her memory on the North wall of the chancel.

Ruby did so well at the village school that she was one of the first to win a scholarship to Sudbury High School for Girls and

eventually became a school teacher. Her favourite hobby is painting, including many pictures of Kersey and she has had several poems published. Her

husband, Stanley, was born in Ipswich in 1920, moved to Hadleigh at the age of three and lived there until wartime. He was also a school teacher as were three of his brothers.

Ruby and he have three children – of whom two are teachers – and seven grandchildren. The couple have lived in Hadleigh for the past 32 years but Kersey has always been and still is very close to Ruby's heart.



*Ruby and Stanley Ling celebrating their fifty-fifth wedding anniversary in Kersey Village Hall*

**K**ERSEY, ONE OF SUFFOLK'S MOST FAMOUS BEAUTY spots, is beloved and well known by so many tourists who visit every year but indeed "home" to my mother who was born here in 1881. From her,

I have learnt much of its way of life and appearance in the past. Her earliest recollections are of a close village community, sharing each other's joys and sorrows, working and worshipping together.

Her father, George Partridge, was born at Oaks Tye Farm, Water Lane in 1841. The boundary of this once open tye can still be defined if the land and hedges are studied, the more recently planted hedges being hawthorn. Until quite recently, two exceptionally large oaks stood on the boundary. It is reputed that Cromwell and his men sheltered beneath them and who can dispute this when information is handed down from father to son.

My grandfather used to speak often of his boyhood there – hard times but happy ones – as the boys enjoyed the activities of country life. He recalled very hard winters with

snow and severe frost freezing the rivers, enabling skating to take place on the River Brett at Hadleigh. He remembered village fairs, which were yearly events, and long walks of ten and twelve miles to other villages to join in their various celebrations.



*An artist's impression of old time Kersey – possibly romanticised.*

Oaks Tye Farm was lit by tallow candles, made by dipping a rush in animal fat, thereby giving a very sombre light. This, however, did not prevent his mother from doing fine needlework and handwork. Between 1850 and 1860 she made bonnets and sailor hats for the children of the Sunday School. The straw for these she fetched herself from Lindsey, a nearby village. This she bleached with sulphur, plaited and finally stitched and fashioned the bonnets and hats.

Little schools were organised in various houses. The children paid a small fee and provided their own writing materials. Those who could read and write were envied by the less fortunate. Sometimes if farm work had to be attended to by day, school would be held in the evening.

When the church chancel floor was rebuilt in 1862 my

grandfather recalled helping to bring tiles from the now disused brickworks at Hadleigh, for this purpose. One of my mother's earliest memories was the restoration of the church in 1887, when the interior of the building was considerably changed. The floor, which had been composed of large square stone slabs, was replaced by one of wood blocks, since replaced again by the existing Suffolk White bricks. The gallery in the West Tower, which accommodated the organ and choir, was removed.

At this time the congregation faced East, but were very snugly seated in square box pews, each family occupying its own pew. These were replaced by the present chairs. The pulpit, which was of dark oak, stood by the niche near the South porch with the old reading desk close beside it. The windows too were given a new look, large square panes being replaced by the smaller leaded lights. Services had to be held in the school – still nearly new – while this renovation took place.

**O**VER THE YEARS A NUMBER OF COTTAGES AND HOUSES in Kersey have greatly changed their appearance and some have been demolished. On the hill, close by the vicarage, stood a blacksmith's shop and this is known as Spencer's Hill. Further down, in Church Hill, on the left facing East, are fine old timbered cottages. (Now "Little Manor", "Woodbine Cottage" and "Arran Cottage".) The first

two once formed a farmhouse where Lucy Carter lived. Her gravestone, found to the right as one faces the South Porch of the church, bears the following inscription:-

*"Reader pass on nor waste thy time  
On bad biography or bitter rhyme  
For what I am this humble dust enclose,  
And what I was is no affair of yours."*

The rest of the cottages were maltings and one at the back, now demolished, showed the shape of the malting kiln. Altogether there were five maltings in the village, providing malt for people who brewed their own beer.

Church Hill cottages, built of red brick, replaced a row of thatched cottages burnt down in a thunderstorm in 1887, in the month of May. The plastered house facing The Green, now "Leys House" was a public house called The Sun. My mother did not remember it as a pub, but she had other memories of this house: The owners also owned other properties in the village and, on Michaelmas Day, the rents of these cottages became due. These were largely paid for by the extra money the men earned at harvest time. My mother used to help prepare the room for this event. New "Churchwarden" clay pipes were laid out on the table. Each tenant, having paid his rent for the year, would stay to smoke some free tobacco and drink ale.

In a garden beyond the Village Hall stood five small cottages; these were bought by Kings College, Cambridge, who demolished them. My grandfather and father rented the garden, but later the land was sold. On the site of the Village Hall stood two cottages with extremely thick walls of clay.

Facing the old market place – the clearing just before the Splash – stood a timbered and plastered farmhouse with leaded paned windows. This was known as Boutell's Farm. It was very carefully pulled down and rebuilt at Bures. The farm buildings consisted of maltings, sheds and a large barn which was converted into a beautiful dwelling house, now "Ayres End".

In those far off days, many village people gleaned enough corn to provide them with flour for the winter. Before the newly-harvested corn field was finally raked by the farmer, he left one "shock" (about eight sheaves of corn standing together) in the field. This was known as "the bobby". Gleaners were meant to observe it and not glean until it was removed, but often they ignored it and found corn in plenty – a great temptation. The gleanings were stored and taken to the barn to be threshed with a flail. My mother clearly recalled the sound of the flail beating the corn.

Often farm hands would be working in the barn all the winter threshing corn. In those hard days this was an envied position as one was warm, dry and fully employed. Finally the corn was taken to be ground into flour at Kersey Mill,

**"GENEROUS  
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FOOD."**

situated on the River Brett on the Hadleigh Road – now disused as a working mill but recently refurbished. As often an old person had to exist on one shilling and sixpence a week and half a stone of flour, plus any gifts from generous neighbours, this flour was a prized possession. Many cottages had no ovens but there were two bake-houses in the village, one of which was situated at a little shop

by the stream. The shop is now closed but the property which included it is called "Bridge House".

Boys collected home-made bread from the various housewives – carrying it on boards on their heads. Each housewife had to mark the top of her loaf with a metal initial stamp for identification. If one wished for a floor-baked loaf, the dough had to be taken to the bakehouse and formed into loaves there. Dinners were also cooked – one joint of meat costing one penny or two joints for a penny halfpenny. The oven was heated by wood faggots, but was later converted to coal.

My mother heated her own wood oven once a week, baking a supply of bread and cakes. This took a whole faggot of wood which was lit inside the oven and allowed to burn

away, and the ashes finally raked out. To test the heat of the wood oven, one touched its domed roof with a “rastling pole” to see if it would ignite. If it did the oven was hot and ready for baking – a far cry from a modern oven with its thermostat and dials for pre-setting.

The village stores was housed in the large plastered house facing the market place, now “Market House”. Later the same family, Robert Stiff and Sons, moved to premises facing The Bell Inn. A horse van was used to serve the country customers. Even tailoring was catered for – my grandmother would make a pair of trousers or a shirt at very short notice, to be taken out on the van to a customer. The charge for making these garments was one shilling for a pair of trousers and eight pence for a shirt.

**T**HE VILLAGE COMMUNITY WAS SUCH THAT EACH helped the other in times of need. A supply of baby garments was kept at the Vicarage, for use when needed by the poor. These were returned when the newborn child outgrew them, to be lent out again as the need arose.

As there was no old-age pension, elderly people invariably lived with their children. My own grandfather, George Partridge, lived with us until he died at the age of eighty-five. As a small child I loved to sit by his side on the arm of his chair, listening to his stories and singing hymns. He kept his little prayer book in his pocket or under the cushion, and this

he read every day. Old people, with no children to support them, dreaded going into the workhouse to end their days. The nearest workhouse was Semer Union, on the West side of the hill on the Hadleigh to Lavenham road, before the left turning to Lavenham. A small cemetery still exists in the grove of trees about a field distance from the road. Generous neighbours helped poverty-stricken elderly folk, giving them a little of their own food. My mother often spoke of taking little offerings to elderly people nearby.

There were many horses in use when my mother was young and she recalled that there were three blacksmiths in the village – one at either end of the village and one a mile away at Kersey Upland. The latter was the last to close and was owned by Mr Alfred Watson. Many times I have watched him shoeing the large carthorses, resting their huge hooves on his leather apron as he fitted the shoes, while other horses queued patiently awaiting their turn. I can still recall the smell of burning hoof!

My mother’s uncle, George Lemon and later his son, Alfred Lemon, were horse doctors. To indicate the house to those seeking help for their animals a horse’s tail was hung up under the eaves at the corner. The house, now “Kedge’s End”, is just beyond the stream at the corner of the lane, and the tail is still there. They were kept very busy attending to the farm animals at all hours of the day and night. In recent times the third member of the family, Donald Lemon,



*The plastered cottages, second row left – now gone*

became a vet and lived in the same historic house.

Visitors to the village may wonder why the continuity of the old cottages is broken on the West side of the street. Old photographs show, and my mother recalled, that here stood a row of plastered cottages. Before the second World War, these were demolished and a bungalow built which, having stood unoccupied for several years, was taken down in 1998 to make room for the big white house now standing. This single property in its large garden occupies the space which once held five cottages and their gardens – indeed, it is still called “The Old Gardens” as was the bungalow before it.

Many of the houses in the village which are so much admired and so well cared for, have been created by joining two or three cottages together with imaginative skill. Farm workers once occupied these little cottages, as so many more men were needed to work on the land. From the village to the farms on Kersey Tye and Sampson’s Hall, there was a well-trodden footpath used by the men each day.

Several of the old timbered houses were once the homes of weavers, who worked hard at their looms, weaving cloth for men’s garments called Kerseymere cloth. It is alleged that this is the cloth mentioned by Shakespeare in his play, “Love’s Labour’s Lost”. Cloth for women’s garments was made at Lindsey, a neighbouring village. This industry has now long

perished, superseded by modern invention. The fine old timbered houses opposite The White Horse public house are believed to have been used as a Guildhall during the days when cloth was woven in Kersey.

**T**HE INFORMATION WHICH IS RECORDED HERE WAS already “history” when I was born seventy-six years ago. As I grew up, I listened with great fascination to my mother’s descriptions of Kersey past. Now the inhabitants of this beautiful village look forward to preserving it into the 21st Century.