

Local Residents In Visit To Chelmsford, Eng.

by George Adams Parkhurst
CMFD-A home in Chelmsford that dates back to the 14th century? "Impossible," you say. Well, yes it is if you are talking about Chelmsford, Massachusetts but in Chelmsford, Essex County, England it's definitely possible as we discovered.

The particular home in question belongs to Helen and Aubrey How, a couple whom many of our local residents met five years ago when these charming people were guests of the Town during our Bicentennial celebration. At that time, Mrs. How was mayor of our British namesake although her official title was Chairman of the District Council. (Since then the title has reverted to "mayor" as it had been prior to 1974.) The Hows will be remembered as honorary marshals of the 1976 Fourth of July parade.

During a recent visit to Chelmsford, Essex, the writer and Mrs. Parkhurst spent two most enjoyable days as guests of Helen and Aubrey. Contact was made with our hosts shortly after our arrival at the County Hotel on one of Chelmsford's main streets. The Hows then took us on a sightseeing tour of several of the quaint hamlets that surround the city. Particularly interesting were Great Bardfield and Finchingfield in the Town of Braintree with their ancient stone churches and thatched roof houses. Returning to the Chelmsford area Aubrey drove along a tree shaded, single lane road -- if you met a car coming from the opposite direction, one of the drivers had to back back to a "turnout" to allow the other to pass. A turn to the right through a white gate brought us to the front yard of a white stucco cottage with a genuine thatched roof. This picturebook residence is the Hows' home.

Our thoughts immediately went back to 1976 when we proudly showed off our Garrison House, Barrett-Byam Museum, and our other old houses. Although nothing was said at the time, it is doubtful that our English friends had been awed by our antiquities which must have seemed almost modern to them.

While Helen went into the house to prepare tea, Aubrey showed us around the yard and introduced us to their pet duck and two dogs. Their small garage is a unique timber and plaster building near the gate. This, a small greenhouse, and a tool shed are located on their well landscaped two acres along with flowers, shrubs, and trees. A group of trees in one corner of the lot was pointed out as being "cricket bat willows." Our puzzled looks were met with the explanation that the bats used in Britain's national sport of cricket

are manufactured from this special kind of willow tree.

With the announcement that tea was ready, we got our first look at the interior of this charming old cottage. The antique furnishings, illuminated by sunlight filtering through small diamond-shaped panes of the leaded glass windows, produced a truly homey atmosphere. One thing that caught our eyes immediately was that all the doors had handmade wooden latches, each with its latch string. The door between what might be termed the family room and the dining room was intricately carved and, Aubrey explained, was believed to have been the cover of an ancient monastic chest. In the bathroom and also right in the center of the kitchen -- a most inconvenient place -- were hand hewn columns attached, in each case, to a "ground sill" that was well worn from 600 years of foot traffic. These are part of the original barn from which the cottage was built about 1820. Experts claim that the cutting marks indicate that the tools used in hewing the columns went out of existence about 1400 A.D. and the original construction is thought to have been done sometime between 1330 and 1400 A.D.

Passing through the dining room and a tiny entry hall to the living room, we noticed several souvenirs of the Hows' visit to America. Over tea and biscuits we caught up on each other's activities since meeting here in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. Then it was off again for more sightseeing. As on later occasions also, we noticed that Aubrey, in the interest of safety, signalled his intention to enter the narrow road by sounding his horn before exiting through his gate.

This trip took us to the hamlet of Great Leighs (the Hows live in Little Leighs) where we visited the church they attend. The guide book states that "the church has one of only six round towers left in Essex county, built possibly as a defense against sea pirates who came up the Chelmer River in the 10th century; most of the rest of the building is of the Norman period."

After returning to the Hows' cottage, Helen prepared a delicious dinner which she served on her centuries-old dining table. While Helen has many antiques, the main conversation piece is her sideboard in her dining room. This huge carved chest, she informed us, has been in her family (the Stansfield family) for over 400 years. Late that evening, the Hows drove us back to the County Hotel, bringing to a close a very pleasurable and educational day with the promise of a look at the city of Chelmsford itself on the morrow.

The District of Chelmsford, with a population of 128,000 people, consists of the City of Chelmsford, where most of the population is concentrated, plus 25 hamlets or parishes bearing such picturesque names as Chignall, Good Easter, Margaretting, Runwell, and Writtle. Although there is no evidence of a pre-Roman settlement of any size in the Chelmsford area, excavators have uncovered parts of the Roman settlement called "Caesaromagus", or Caesar's market. There is evidence of the destruction of the first settlement by Boudicca and of later building up to 325 A.D. -- and we think our town is old!

The first written record of Chelmsford appears in the "Doomsday Book" of 1086, the entry being translated: "Celmersfort was held by Bishop William in the name of King Edward. . . . About 1100 A.D. it became the Assize town of the county but it was not until 1888, less than a century ago, that Chelmsford received its Royal Charter of Incorporation. It was in 1971 that the city was amalgamated with a large part of the former Rural District to constitute the present District of Chelmsford.

The second day of our visit was spent in downtown Chelmsford with Helen and Aubrey as our guides. We first visited the Cathedral Church of Saint Mary, now known officially as The Cathedral Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Saint Peter, and Saint Cedd of Chelmsford. No one knows how old the Cathedral is although fragments of Norman work have been found in the tower. However, it is known that a major rebuilding took place in 1424.

Moving from the ancient to the modern, our next point of interest was the new shopping mall, a collection of perhaps 100 stores along covered walkways, not unlike our Burlington shopping mall. Following a stroll through the park along the River Chelmer, we went to the Essex County building, seat of the county government of which Helen How is part, having been elected to the County Council.

Since it was approaching noon, Mrs. How took us to the Councillors' private lounge with its comfortable chairs, a small bar, and a dining area. While lunch was being prepared, preprandial cocktails were enjoyed and Aubrey confided to us that only a councilor, like Helen, can order food or drink here. However, he allows her to entertain him at lunch or dinner sometimes when the Council is in session. A very fine lunch was followed by a tour of the Council Chamber and other areas of the building, ending up in the office of the Council Chairman, Mr. Robert Daniels. During our visit with Mr. Daniels, we found that problems faced by our county and state governments are little different from theirs. We were presented with a small Essex County pen-



AMERICAN VISITORS WELCOMED: Mr. and Mrs. George A. Parkhurst (left) with former Mayor of Chelmsford Mrs. Helen How and her husband, and Essex County Council Chairman Robert Daniels in rear. The Chelmsford coat of arms is on the wall behind the group.



THE 14TH CENTURY COTTAGE of former Mayor Helen How and Mr. How in Little Leighs, Chelmsford, Essex. (Photo by G. A. Parkhurst)

nant, a key ring and stickpin bearing the county seal, and a copy of the Essex County Handbook as mementos of our visit. Before leaving we posed for a photograph with Chairman "Bob" Daniels and the Hows.

The next and final stop on the tour was the Civic Center, or City Hall, where we were met by the mayor's secretary, Mr. Colin Mussett, the mayor having been detained by another engagement. Mr. Mussett had prepared a special exhibit for our benefit. It included the official city seal, the Royal Charter of 1888, the large silver mace carried during official ceremonies, and the mayor's ceremonial robe. While visiting the Chelmsford District Council Chamber, Helen accommodated us by posing for a picture seated in the chairman's chair from which she had presided in 1976.

The present mayor, Mr. Roy Van Tromp, arrived at his office in time for the traditional tea and biscuits. As at the county level, we found

that municipal problems are very similar on both sides of the Atlantic. Mayor Van Tromp called our attention to the display cabinet in his reception room containing many of the gifts we had presented to the Hows when they visited us. He in turn gave us copies of the Official Guide to Chelmsford which, incidentally, contains a picture of Mrs. How presiding over the Council. The visit was concluded with a photo with the mayor and the Hows.

As a means of showing our appreciation for their time and effort in entertaining us, we invited Helen and Aubrey to be our guests at dinner that evening at the County Hotel. All too soon it became time to say goodbye to our host and hostess but our schedule required that we return to London the following day. Both Helen and Aubrey sent their fondest regards

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To all the American Chelmsfordites they met five years ago. They still think of us and the great time they had here.

During the 35 mile train ride back to London, there was time to review the high points of our visit and realize that yes, you can find 14th century homes in Chelmsford. . . provided you go to the right Chelmsford.



WORLD WAR I MEMORIAL in front of the Civic Center (Town Hall), Chelmsford, England (Photo by G. A. Parkhurst)