

Bridges Farm

In 1937 my great-aunt Mrs Maud Erith (1871-55), whose husband had died in 1926, moved from Loughton to Dedham, where she bought Westgate House (then Westgate Place) from Captain Mortimer Elwell. Besides a large garden, the property included two fields, one immediately to the west of the house (where Dedham's allotments are now) and the other known as "*Boat Meadow*" running down to the river behind the house. There was already a boathouse in this field but in 1939 she commissioned her architect nephew Raymond Erith (1904-73) to replace it with the present little classical building in order to help the builders, Wheelers of East Bergholt.

They had carried out repairs and alterations to Westgate House for her but with the onset of WW2 they were short of work and in financial difficulties as a result. So that construction could begin quickly Raymond Erith re-used his design for the columns of the porch at Great House in the High Street which he had recently completed for his parents-in-law. Maud Erith was also able to buy further adjacent land from its owner, a Mrs Rodwell.

In 1937 she bought Bridges Farm which was being sold by Alfred Abbot, the farmer and seedsman whose nursery business was next to the level crossing at Ardleigh and she gave a seven-year lease to the existing tenant farmer William Langton (1887-1948) who lived at Ivy House in Dedham.

He had already been farming it with his son Dick (1911-84) who must have been doing the real work by then because his father is described in the 1939 Register of the population as disabled. I remember seeing Dick Langton after the war coming and going to what is now the Waterworks field. He probably kept some livestock there because an indistinct photograph, taken from the top of the church tower before the old Great House burned down in 1936, shows various sheds and what may be some sheep.

In 1945, following the death of its owner Arthur George Aldous, Maud Erith had an opportunity to add yet further to her acreage by buying Hillands (now the Maison Talbooth) on the Stratford Road. As well as the house there was the land of Hillands Farm to its north, running right down to Bell Meadow beside the river. This included Bell Cottage (formerly known as Smith's, now Robinson's) immediately across the road, which Ted Eley remembered having farm buildings behind it. Maud bought the entire property in order to acquire this extra land and use it to consolidate Bridges Farm; she then sold the big house on to its next owners, Sir Percival and Lady Robinson. The land to the south, now Moorats Park, remained with the house. It was eventually purchased by the National Trust in 1992 using bequests from the architect Marshall Sisson (who had left Shermans in the High Street to the Trust in his will of 1979) and Mr L. J. Middleton.



*Maud Erith c.1951 when she gave
Bridges Farm to the National Trust*

William Langton, who had been suffering from ill health, did not renew his lease of Bridges Farm after the war but sold up in 1945. Then Maud's nephew, my father Raymond Erith rented the farm from her when he moved to Dedham in 1945. In 1951, having given him (and subsequent members of his family) an 80-year lease, she made a gift of the whole of Bridges Farm to the National Trust. Under the terms of her will when she died four years later some small additions were made, bringing it up to approximately 79 acres. There was a further addition in 1987 when Dalethorpe Park (6.7 acres), already in use as part of the farm, was bought by the Trust using bequests from Miss E. C. Kirkwood and Mr J. F. Lawson. The recent lockdown due to Covid restrictions has unfortunately delayed the National Trust's long-planned repairs to the boathouse; also

outstanding is the reinstatement of Bell Cottage to remedy unauthorised work that has been done to this important listed building.

Raymond Erith was an architect who had farmed at Normans Farm, Little Bromley during the war with George Soames (1901-1974) as his foreman. When he returned to his architectural practice in 1945, he could only be a part-time farmer. The day-to-day running of the farm was done by George, who moved to Dedham with his wife and daughter and lived in Hillands Cottage (now Hillands) on the Stratford Road. Some of his cart horses, including his favourite Smiler, came too and were still working at Bridges Farm into the 1960s long after horses had been superseded by tractors and modern machinery elsewhere. George was an experienced horseman and champion ploughman who won numerous cups and medals in furrow-drawing competitions and I remember bicycling with him to a ploughing match near Elmstead Market to watch the impressive skill of the local contestants. The last of his carthorses at Dedham was massive Cecil, who played a leading part in village life when he was the subject of a "Guess the Weight" competition at the British Legion fete in the 1960s. After the event he was taken to Clover's Mill and put on to their weigh-bridge in order to discover who had won.

The longest-serving men employed at Bridges Farm over the years were George Soames and George Stiff (1911-88) who worked there together, in the

early days with George Bullett too; so when Raymond Erith's eldest daughter Rebeckah got engaged to George Curtis they assured her that "you can't beat a George!" It was he who he took over the tenancy from his father-in-law in 1967, when he and his family moved to Dedham from Houses Farm at Great Sampford and he farmed it, helped for several years by George Stiff, until he retired in 2006.

Bridges Farm is now leased from the National Trust by the Halsalls who farm it from Langham and since they took over the whole of the big arable field, which had previously been planted with rotating crops grown in strips running down from the Stratford Road to the long farm track, has been given over to a single crop each year. Cultivation is done by machinery and one rarely sees anyone working on the land. This makes a marked contrast with my early memories, when the farm was a place of hard physical labour but plenty of teasing and jokes. "What's the time, George," we would ask and the answer would come back: "Just about now!" Men were needed for so many jobs which have now been mechanised. Ditches, for instance, were regularly cleared each winter and hedges trimmed, while the manure in the cattle yard was dug out and spread over the land as fertiliser.

When I first remember them the water meadows were subdivided with a dyke full of water running parallel to the track through the farm. Then as now, winter floods were usual and when they froze over there was skating. Connie

Eley told me that as a child in the 1900s she once fell through the ice and her mother wouldn't let her join in after that. When we skated in the 1950s a field at Flatford was specially flooded to form ice with a much smoother surface, so most people went there instead.

I particularly remember the harvest, which was a lengthy business in those days with everybody joining in and local people, including the postman and the policeman, coming to help after work in the evenings. The corn was cut with a reaper and binder pulled by an elderly tractor. I sometimes had the job of sitting on the seat of the binder keeping an eagle eye on the twine and banging instantly on the metal cover with a stick to alert the driver if it broke; that would mean that instead of a trail of neatly tied sheaves, loose straw would be left scattered over the field! As the area of standing corn "wasted" (dwindled), the rabbits who had been hiding there would dash out and make a break for freedom.

When the sheaves had been harvested they had to be made into stooks (locally known as *traves*) built at intervals in rows down the field. If the weather was wet and they got too soaked, these would have to be taken apart and the sheaves spread out on the stubble to dry before the stooks were constructed all over again. As soon as the sheaves were dry enough they were carted to the stackyard on big wagons drawn by the carthorses and one of the heavier jobs I did when helping was to act as "stacker's mate". This meant using a



Haymaking on the Westgate House meadow (now the allotments) before WW2

pitchfork to receive each sheaf lifted up by the man on the laden wagon which had been brought alongside and pass it on to the man who had the skilled job of actually building the stack. Later on the process of separating the grain from the straw was done by a steam-powered threshing machine hired every year for this job. Nowadays a combine completes the whole harvest process in a single day.

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Raymond Erith at Bridges Farm in 1959



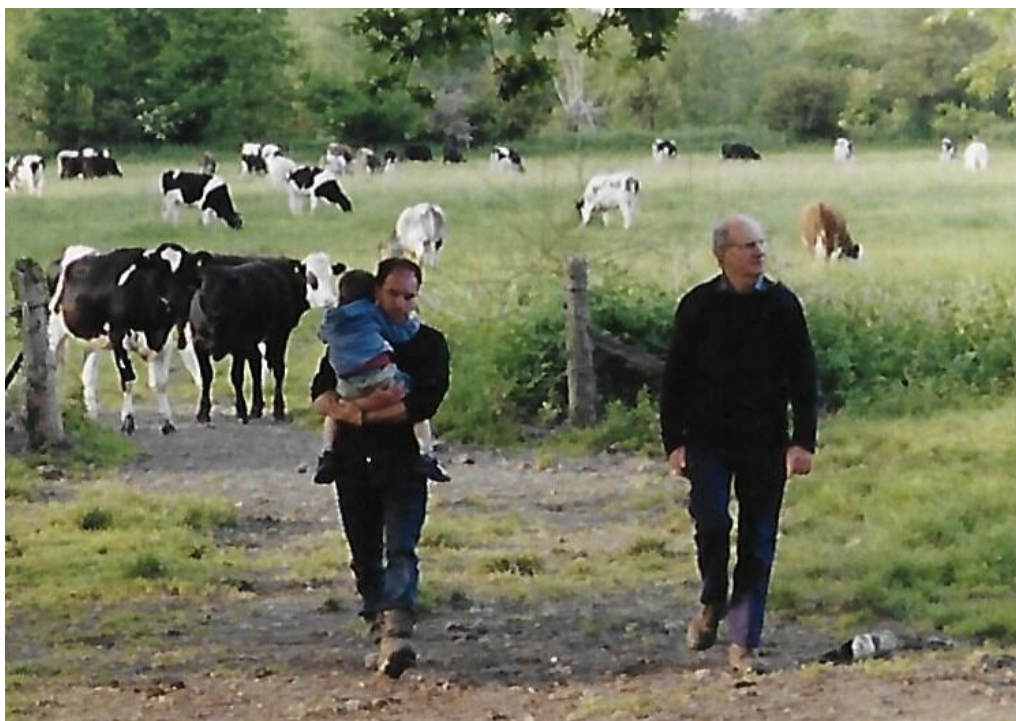
George Soames at Bridges Farm in the 1950s



George Stiff at Bridges Farm with his daughter Maureen c.1955



George Stiff (left) and George Soames planting peas with Prince and Cecil in 1961



George Curtis on the farm with his son Gus and grandson Tom c.2000



Harvesting c.1957. Notice the sheaves thrown out by the reaper/binder and helpers building stooks on the left



George Curtis c. 1992 with his combine, a Claas Matador Standard, 1962



Floods in 2009. On the right is the boathouse built in 1939