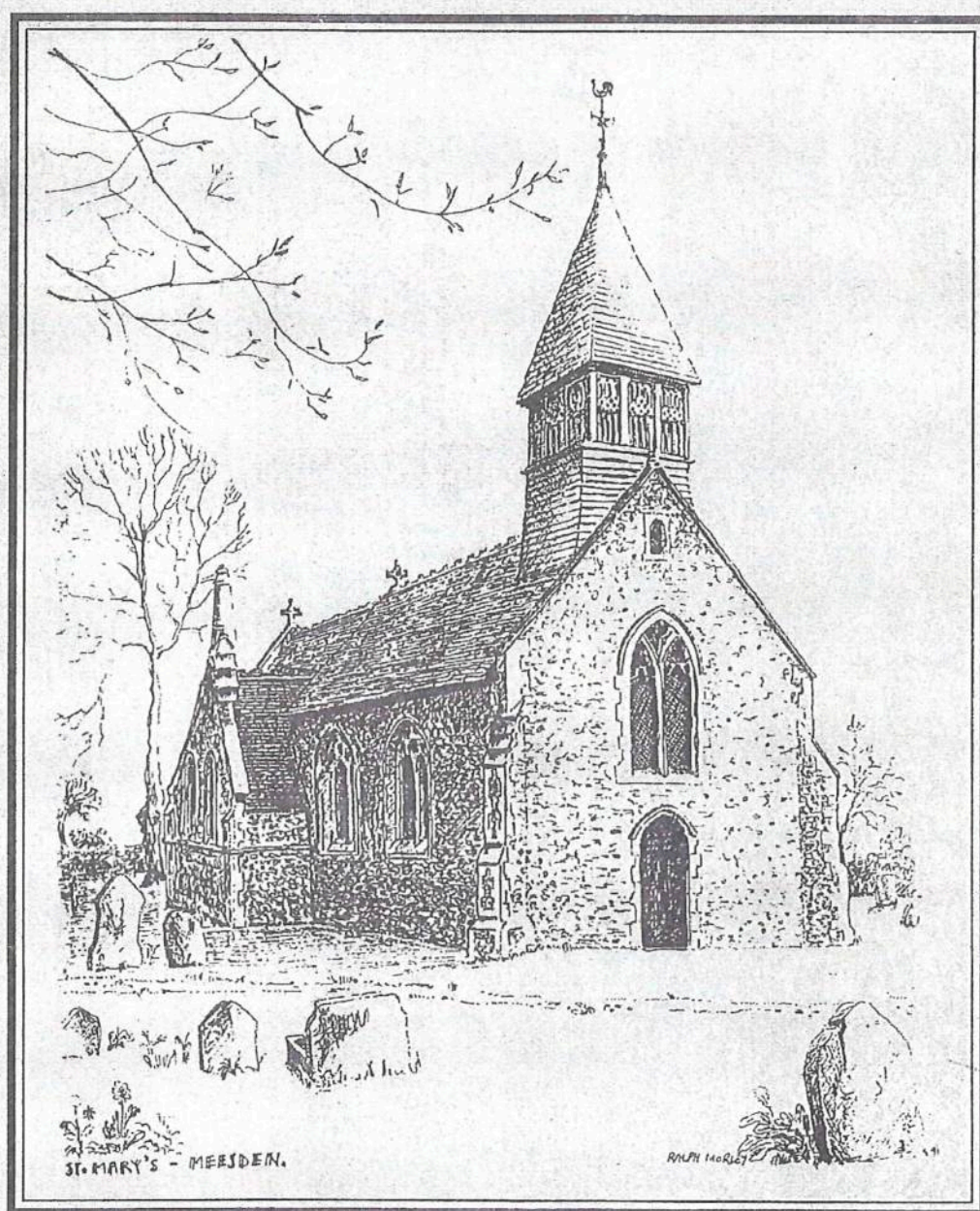


FOR MEESDEN CHURCH

# MEESDEN

A Hertfordshire Village



APRIL 1995



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## INTRODUCTION

The late Mr Stan Thorogood gave me the idea of delving into the history of Meesden. I met him one day and he reminisced about the properties and how they had changed. Mr Thorogood spent at least seventy years of his life in Meesden. Unfortunately he died, at the age of eighty six, before the project was started. I enlisted the help of Mrs Pam Jack, and the following booklet is the result of our research.

We spent many hours browsing through the relevant material at Hertford County Records Office, and several happy coffee breaks talking to past and present residents of Meesden, to whom we offer our grateful thanks.

We would like to thank Mr Robert Dimsdale for his enthusiasm, which spurred us into action.

We hope you enjoy reading this booklet as much as we have enjoyed writing it.

We found two quotes which refer to Meesden. The first comes from a book by Brian Bailey: "It cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called a pretty place". The second is a quote taken from an article in the Herts & Essex Observer, written by Kitty Ward Thomas: "Meesden has all that Mother Nature Appeal".

We leave you to judge for yourself.

Mollie G Godfree

We would like to thank Mrs. Pat Sterne for typing this booklet for us.



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEESDEN

The parish of Meesden is in the North East corner of Hertfordshire, bordering on Essex, being separated by the River Stort.

We have only managed to find sketchy information about the history of the village but we will attempt to give a few interesting facts. Much of the information originally came from the Domesday Book, and has been transcribed by various historians whose names and books are listed at the end of this booklet.

The Bishop of London owned the manor in 1086, and it formed part of the Barony of Bishop's Stortford to whom it paid rent of two shillings to Bishop's Stortford Castle.

The tenant of the parish in 1086 was a man called Payn, who had three villeins, or peasant farm workers in his employ. Meesden was, and is, a parish of 1,008 acres, with ground rising from 400 feet at the church to 450 feet at Meesden Green.

There are the remains of a Roman Road showing near Meesdenbury. It went between Braughing and Chesterford. There is speculation that, as it passed this location, three separate settlements existed. The village is still divided into three distinct groupings - Meesdenbury, Meesden Green and Meesden Lower Green.

The most notable feature of the area in the eleventh century was the large amount of forest of mainly oak and ash. The wooded area could contain four hundred pigs, which gives an indication of its size (see section on agriculture). The wood was cut in quantity in the fifteenth century, being used for building and fuel. The only wooded areas remaining in the parish are White Hill, Smaley Wood and Meesden Hall Wood.

We have found many spellings of the name Meesden, which means Moss or Bog Hill or Valley. Here are a few of them:- Meesdone (eleventh century), Miesdon (thirteenth), Mesedon (sixteenth), and Meesden (from the seventeenth century).

The county of Hertfordshire was divided, for purposes of administration, into eight Hundreds. Each Hundred was of about eighty square miles and contained one hundred free households. Meesden was, and is, in the Edwinstree Hundred. Other villages in this Hundred are Barley, Barkway, Buckland, Throcking, Wyddial, Aspenden, Layston, Anstey, Great and Little Hornead, Brent Pelham, Stocking Pelham, Furneux Pelham, Albury and Little and Much Hadham.

Meesden had a windmill between 1262 and 1766, half a mile west of the church. That would place it near Mill House. On a map dated 1815 a windmill is shown on the corner of Willoughby Lane. There was, incidentally, also a windmill at



Brent Pelham in the grounds of the hunt. The two were connected via Willoughby Lane and a footpath.

The census of 1881 indicated that there were forty-two occupied houses, and our count in January 1993 shows that there are forty-four occupied houses now. Of course some have been built in the past thirty years (we think five) but some have disappeared. From conversations we have had with residents we think there was a house in the field near The Beehive, one house at Doll's Corner, and one somewhere near the entrance to Wood Lane. From a map dated 1815 a building was indicated within Wood Lane and one near The Beehive. There was a cottage in the garden of Yew Tree Cottage and one in the grounds of The Fox.

Houses built since 1960: Farthings, Lawers, The Sycamores, Ty Llawn and Town Close.

#### Department of the Environment

##### Buildings of Special Architectural Interest in Meesden

Black Hall	16th Century on earlier site
Alma Cottage	17th or early 18th Century
Thatched Cottage Lower Green	17th or early 18th Century
Stag View	18th or early 19th Century
Meesdenbury Farm	Late 17th Century
Meesden Hall	circa 1710
Walkers Farmhouse	15th or early 16th Century
Walkers Farm Granary	Early 19th Century
Manor Farm	17th Century or earlier
Home Farm	17th Century or earlier
Home Farm Barn	Early 17th Century converted in 1980



Alma  
Cottage



### MEESDEN PARISH CHURCH

The Church, which is dedicated to St Mary, is a very small and ancient building of flint, can be traced as far back as 1086 as there is a record in the Domesday Book of a Priest being here. The Bishop of London, who owned Meesden at this time would have been failing in his duty in looking after the spiritual needs of his flock had there not been one.

No trace of the 11th Century building remains today. It was possibly replaced early in the 12th Century by the present nave, with quite probably a small chancel and south porch. Perhaps the Bishop's tenant at that time, a gentleman called Payn(e), or his successor was responsible for this. So it remained until the middle of the 13th Century when the Botiller family were tenants of the manor. In 1265 it passed to a Robert Le Botiller's widow, Denise, who became the wife of Warine de Monchensey. She and her husband undertook the rebuilding of practically the whole church. The pavement enclosed by the communion rails is a mosaic composed of many coloured vitrified tiles, which are in excellent condition and are a most interesting feature of the church. The Monchenseys left their seal here for all times, for amongst the tiles are two which bear details of the Monchensey arms.

Alterations were made in the 14th Century by putting three windows in the chancel, which are there today although their exteriors have been rebuilt in modern days.

To whom we owe the addition of the south porch with its beautiful 16th Century brickwork we are unable to say. An extract from the Building News No 3201 dated May 10th 1916, by Anderson, A Whitfield ARIBA reads:

"The south porch is built of brick and although the design is of a mid-16th Century type, I think it must have been built in Flemish bond, which I have never met with earlier than about the middle of the 17th Century, and the 2" bricks are also of that period".

Throughout the 17th Century the Luther family reigned at Meesden and it is perhaps by them that the present octagonal font was placed in the church, together with the Communion Plate and Paten dated 1621 and one of the bells marked CG 1666. (The other bell is unmarked). A possible alternative donor would be the Younge family. The font is simply panelled, the base of which appears to be considerably more ancient than the bowl.

The only memorial in the church is a monument to Robert Younge, placed against the north wall of the chancel. His bust is carved in marble within a circular opening. His right hand is on his breast and in his left an open scroll, on which is depicted an anchor.

Beneath is this inscription:

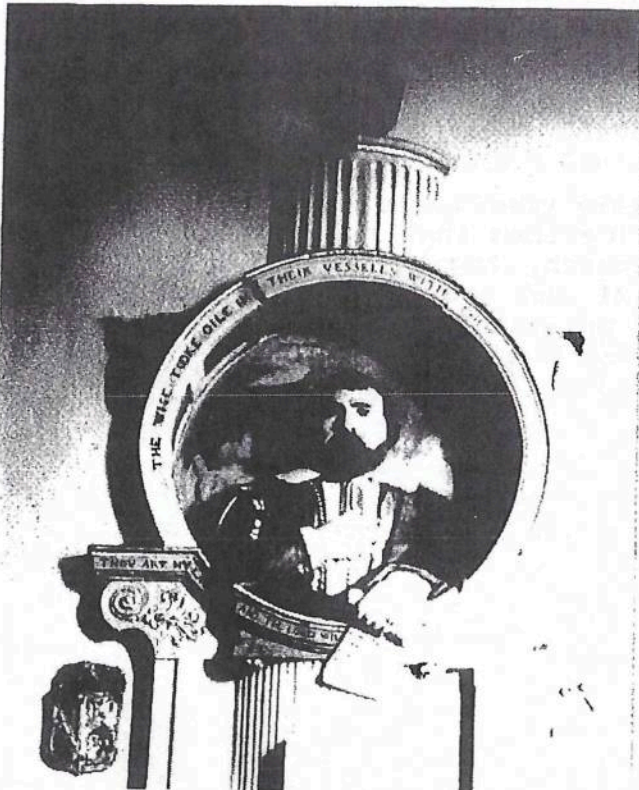
HERE RESTETH IN THE HOPE OF A GLORIOUS  
RESURRECTION THE BODY OF ROBERT YOUNGE  
GENTLEMAN WHO BY ELIZABETH HIS WIFE HAD  
8 SONS AND 5 DAUGHTERS. HE LIVED 72  
YEARES AND DYED THE 15TH DAY OF NOVEMBER 1626

In the south wall is a piscina (a perforated stone basin for carrying away the water used in rinsing the chalice and the hands of the priest; generally placed in a niche on the south side of the altar), with a pointed trefoil head. Adjoining the piscina is a single trefoil headed sedile.

**SEDILE:** A series of seats usually three in number, either movable or recessed in the wall and crowned with canopies and other enrichments.

The 18th Century saw destruction meted out to Meesden Church as it did others. It would appear the transepts needed repair and instead of doing what was necessary to them, they were pulled down and their arcades bricked up. What other enormities were carried out we do not know, but in modern times this has been atoned for by rebuilding them on the original foundations. Other modern works are the roof, the west door and the bellcote. There are registers of baptisms and burials dating from 1739 and marriages from 1795.

A Samuel Gaussen planted the lime avenue in around 1835, so that he could walk from the church down to his farm.



Wall Plaque to  
Robert Younge



### MEESDEN PARISH ROOM

Our Parish Room was opened at Christmas 1900, adjacent to the school. The school had been in existence since 1874.

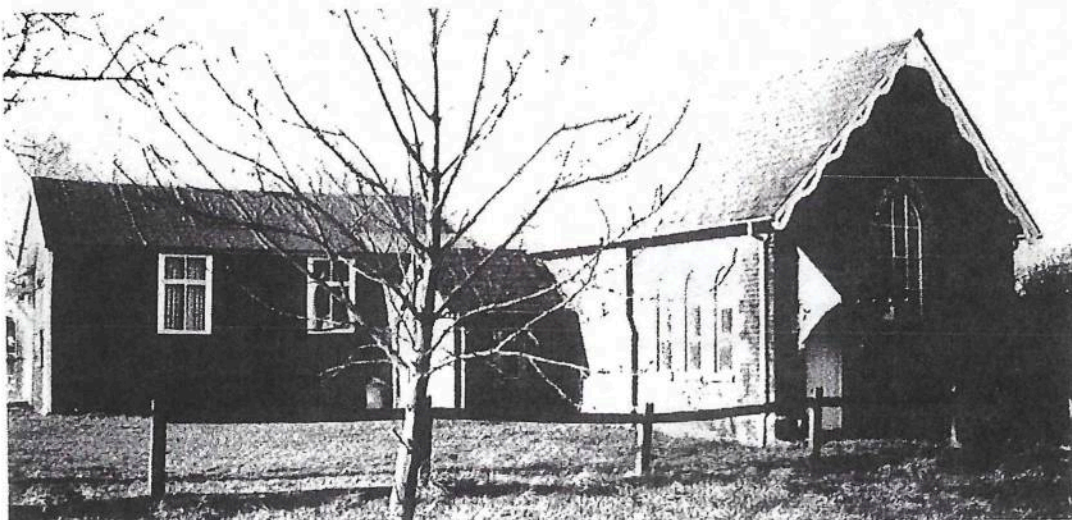
In letters written to Baron Dimsdale in 1946 and 1950, by Rev H G Cockerton, we learn about the cost of the 'P Room' and how the money was raised. The Rev Cockerton started fund raising for the 'P Room' soon after he came to the parish in about 1897. The Patron gave him £5, and then £50 or so was raised by concerts, jumble sales etc.

The villagers put in a lot of work in helping to run a Grand Bazaar. It lasted two or three days and raised £100. Fund raising continued until about £200 was in the kitty. The Rev Cockerton wrote to the Marquis of Salisbury, who owned most of the parish, and he sent a £30 cheque to make up the required money. The Parish Room was built, with the Baron's approval, at a cost of about £275. The foundations and brick walls, up to about three feet above the ground, were built by Tinworth of Brent Pelham. A firm from Standon did the rest. The specifications were drawn up by Mr Nevitt of Buntingford who built the hunt kennels and stables, also some half timbered houses at Brent Pelham.

The school made use of the extra space, which was used as the infants' classroom. The Parish Room nowadays is seldom used other than to raise funds for its upkeep, although events held here act as social events in the village, as it is the only meeting place.

One of the main fund raising and social events is the annual Pie and Punch Evening held just prior to Christmas. This brings many villagers, and friends from adjoining villages, together for what has become a most enjoyable evening.

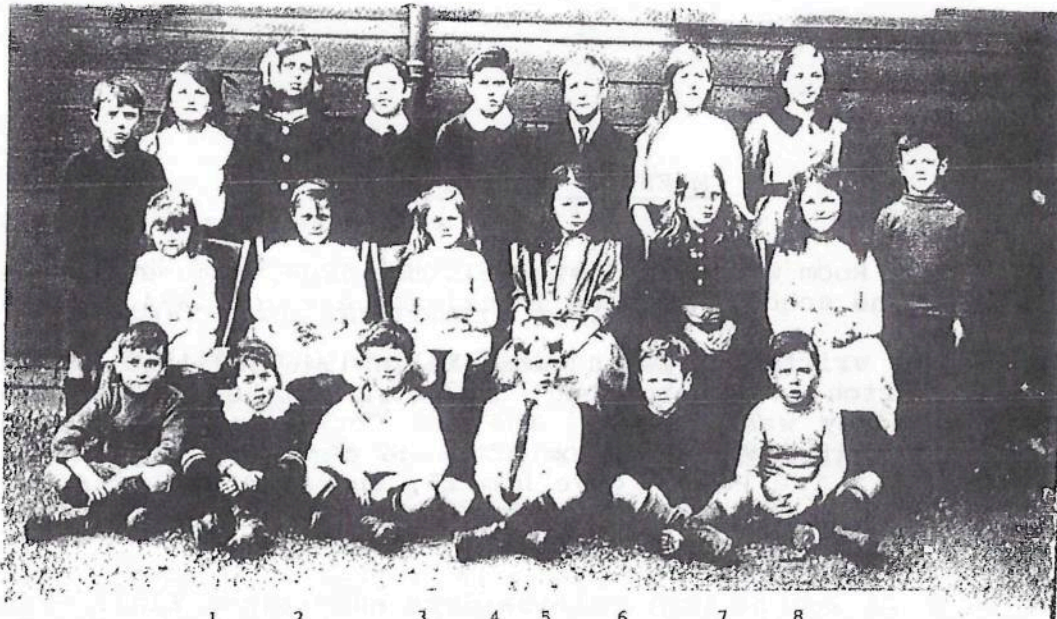
The Parish Room is or has been used for Table Tennis evenings, Parish Council Meetings, Women's Institute, Over 60's and various other meetings.



Parish Room and Original School Building



Meesden School Pupils Circa 1922-23



1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
?	Eunice Westwood	Dolly Dodkin	?	?	Alfred Hill	Mary Hill	?
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
(Westwoods)			Mary Martin	Gwen Martin?	Rhoda George	Harold George	
16	17	18	19	20	21		
Levi Hill	Cyril Brooks	John Welch	?	Len George	Stanley Kimsey		

Meesden School Pupils Circa 1926-28



1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ivy Fish	Joey Millbank	Esther Hill	?	Eric Wilson	Harry Wilson	? Jennings	? Jennings
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Walter Sell	Iris George	Coral Hill	? Macleod	? Archer	Betty Millbank	Ivy Martin	



## SCHOOLING

Although Meesden school was not opened until 1874 or 1875, schooling was provided for the children. There was a school mistress resident in the village in 1851 so presumably, at this time, the children were being taught in a school room at Rectory Farm. The school would be funded by the church. The Rev Armytage Gaussen is supposed to have built houses at the Meesden Hall gate as a school.

The Elementary Education Act of 1870 encouraged local authorities to provide education in their area. Education became compulsory in 1876.

The following information has been taken from and quoted from the School Log Books. These were written daily by the mistress throughout the existence of the school. We were legally, unable to read the last Log Book.

Meesden school opened with forty pupils and Mary Thorogood as the mistress.

In 1877 Clara Wisbey was withdrawn as her parents objected to "fables in MacMillans reading Books".

The Rev Frederick Rudge attended the school on a daily basis and gave an annual report. Miss Thorogood received a "creditable report". The children were not regular attenders due to hay making. The Summer holidays, of six weeks duration, were called Harvest Holiday. Absenteeism was due, at various times in the school's history, to gleaning, measles and whooping cough epidemics, and bad weather - "rough and stormy in Feb 1885".

There is reference to the amount of recreation the children had. Juniors sometimes missed drill and were "allowed a few minutes play. The infants nearly always have a little recreation - it brightens and refreshes them for the last hour's work".

In 1888 attendance was listed at:

In standards 1 and 2	Boys	12
	Girls	16
Infants	Boys	6
	Girls	8

In 1893 mental arithmetic was considered poor by the mistress as "children have been always taught to count on their fingers and they can do little without such aid". Have things changed? Two boys were "punished with the cane for continual inattention".

In January of that year the timetable had to be changed as "the children's hands were benumbed with cold". Needlework was changed to arithmetic.



Mr Macklin, the attendance officer, was a frequent visitor to the school.

The cane was used "for bad language".

In May the school room was "very nicely cleaned during the holiday, and the rector has kindly had the walls painted .....a great improvement in colouring". Pictures for the walls were given to "inspire the children on Natural History".

1894 The school still had about 40 children on the register but there were usually several absentees. The first mention was made of Mrs Dimsdale of Smaley Lodge visiting the school.

1895 During a bout of very severe weather the children were very cold and unable to work. The mistress was absent with influenza and Mrs Dimsdale came to help. The school had eventually to close for a while because of an influenza epidemic. In May temporary charge of the school was taken by Miss L M Brookes as the mistress was "absent from duties with the consent of the managers".

1898-99 Two of the bright pupils in the school were given the posts of monitors - Emma Clarke who worked with the older children and Margery Clarke who worked with the "babies". The ages of the children ranged from three years upwards, with one mistress and a school leaver to help.

1900 The school closed for three weeks in January and February due to measles and whooping cough.

1904 School inspectors report "Discipline good, drill and sewing praiseworthy. School well conducted and taught with intelligence and success. History weak and infants should improve arithmetic, drawing and object lessons".

I found this latter entry in the Herts and Essex Observer as reported by C I Cherry, a lady who has written at least one village chronicle, that of Stocking Pelham.

There is mention in the log books of children from Clavering, Brent Pelham and Stocking Pelham. There is little wonder that numbers were greatly reduced in the severe winters which occurred towards the end of the last century.

An Evening School took place in the school between 1902-03 with eleven scholars on the books and an attendance of approximately seven, but we do not know any more particulars than that.

The school closed in 1933 and the pupils were transferred to Brent Pelham. It reopened during the war years on a temporary basis, to cater for the evacuees billeted in the village.



Local residents, or previous residents, who attended the village school have been helpful with information about their school days.

"We helped clean Miss Cooper's car on Friday and then ran around with rags to dry them."

"We took our own sandwiches for lunch and had hot Horlicks at school."

"The heating was from a stove."

"The boys from Meesden and Brent Pelham went for woodwork to Barkway on Mondays."

"We had a school trip to the sea in a charabanc with hard wheels."

"The infants were taught in the Parish Room."

"We (the girls) went to Anstey to learn cooking in Du Boulay's shed. We had oil heaters which burnt the cakes."

"We had a little garden at school and all had our own plots and could set what seeds we liked."

"I didn't go to Meesden school. It was closed so we walked to Brent Pelham school over the fields."

"Mother paid one penny a week as my father was tradesman."

"There were three classes, infants, second and first class."

"We left school at 14."

"The desk (which is still there) used to be at the far end near the door that doesn't open now."

"All the chairs had MPR on. The Rev Cockerton said it stood for 'My Parish Room'."

"My grandfather was a copyholder. He stipulated that if ever it wasn't a school the gardens had to be turned back to a village green, and it was turned back."

"The children who walked from Ford End brought sandwich lunches but we went home from 12 - 1.30pm."

"There was nice crockery with blue on it."

"We lads used to lift up the teacher's Austin 7 and put bricks under the wheels. She drove in from Standon."



"There was a playground at the front of the school with a flagpole. We used to try and climb to the top".

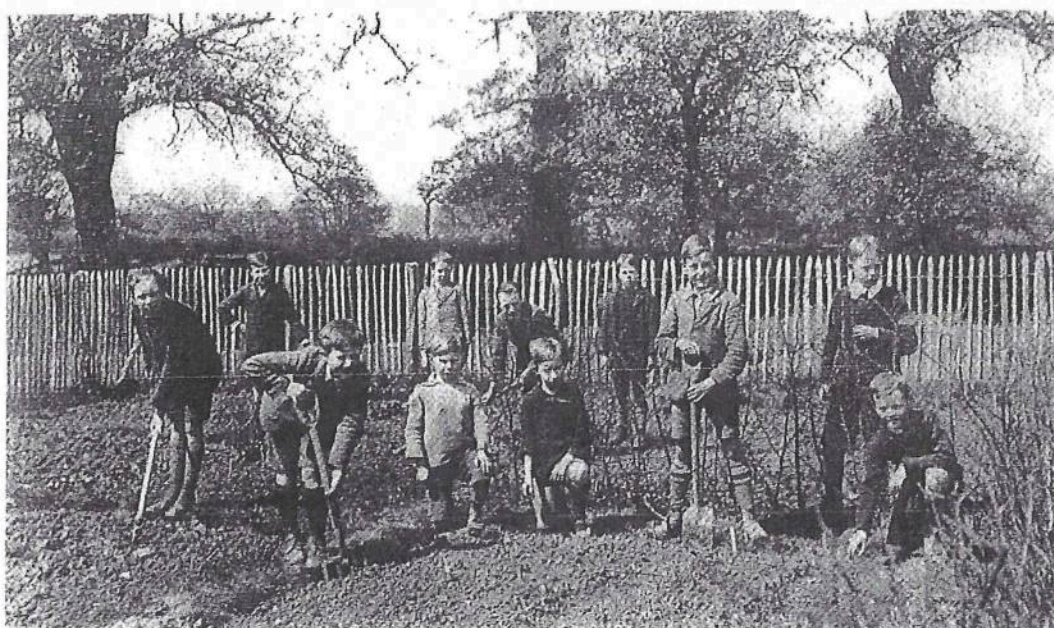
List of teachers - collected from the log books we were allowed to see - with gaps:

Mary Thorogood	1875
Sophia Jones	1883
Jane Garland	1884 - 87
Harriet Mason	1887 - Jan 1889
Annie Smith	1889 - Dec 1890
Sarah Hodder	1890 - Dec 1891
Harriet Tutton )	
Mary Griffiths )	1892 - Jan to Nov
Harriet Johnson)	

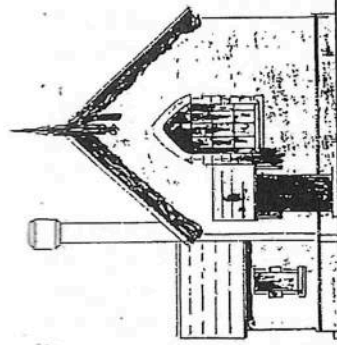
(gap in records)

L M Brooks	1895 - 96
J Chapman	1896
Monitors -	
Emma Clarke and	1897 - 99
Margery Clarke	
Gwendolen Whiffen	1911

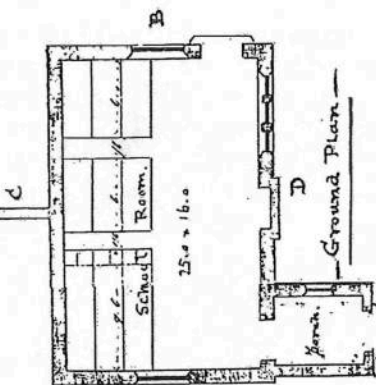
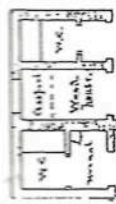
Meesden School Pupils Circa 1924



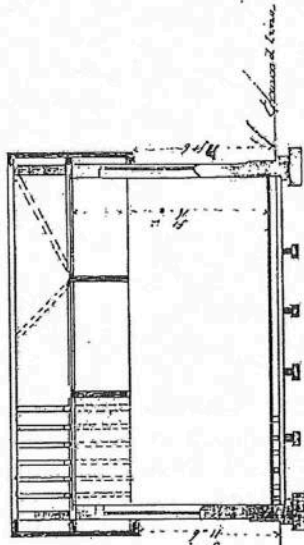
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
?	?	John	Stanley	?	?	?	Cyril	Levi	John	Harold
Westwood		Welch	Kimsey				Brooks	Hill	Trigg	George



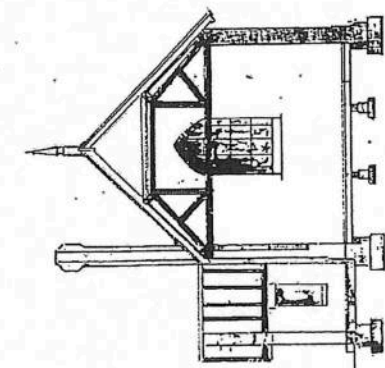
West Elevation



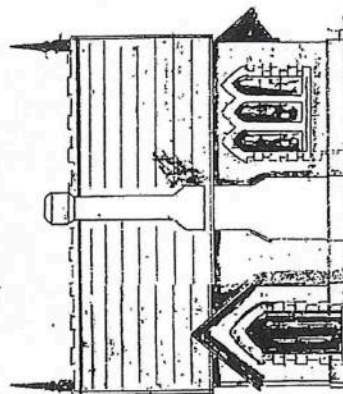
Ground Plan



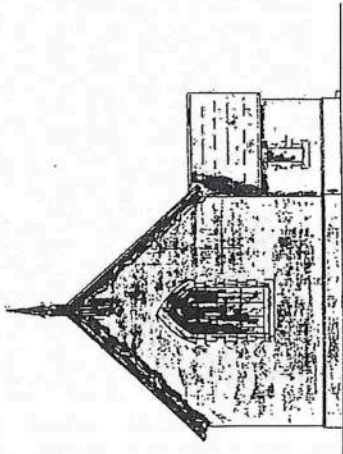
Section A-B



Section C-D



South Elevation



East Elevation





Group of Village Residents 1937  
 Mrs Abrams (Ted's Grandmother)  
 Stan Kimsey, Ted Kimsey, Barry Freeman & dog Peter, Stan Thorogood with Ken



Kitty and Will Dodkin  
 (sister and brother of Aunt Doll)  
 They lived in Yew Tree Cottage



## AGRICULTURE

Meesden was essentially a farming community for hundreds of years, whereas now we are surrounded by woods and agricultural land, and there are only two resident farmers in the village.

In the Domesday Book, in 1086, the tenant was a man called Payn. He had three workers. The land was owned by the Bishop of London. Payn had one hide, which is the equivalent of 120 'acres', the latter being the land able to be ploughed in one forenoon. Altogether there was land for three ploughs, which meant that there was enough meadowland for three teams of oxen to be fed on the hay. The parish of Meesden was heavily wooded. We are told this by the number of pigs it could support, in the Autumn, on acorns and beech nuts. In our case it could support 400 pigs. The woodlands were very important as they provided building materials, fencing and fuel for heating and cooking.

In the fifteenth century Meesden must have changed in appearance as most of the woodland, which consisted mainly of oak and ash, was cut down. This would have opened up much more land for agriculture. There were many interesting field names including Millfield, Westfield, Southfield, Longland, Chittoksleye, Romsledefield and many others. It is thought that the fields might have been named as the trees disappeared. In the present day there are only three areas of woodland left in the parish - White Hill, Smaley Wood and Meesden Hall Wood.

In 1835 the parish land was divided by the tythe awards into:-

arable	-	645	acres	approx.
meadow	-	173	"	"
wood	-	61	"	"
waste	-	20	"	"
glebe	-	108	"	"

From the report in the 1893 copy of the Buntingford Union of Agricultural Labourers we get an insight into the working hours and conditions of the local farm workers.

Meesden Labourer - "Young men have been driven away by low wages during the last eight to ten years but there are more men out of work than usual".

Farmer - "Boys are kept at school too long. They could begin work at ten years but we cannot get them till they are thirteen or fourteen. Then they know nothing and want six or seven shillings a week, which is too much seeing that you are teaching them all the time. We are getting understocked with boys".

Farmers said their men were less industrious and only



ploughed half an acre (instead of one acre which was expected of them). This was said to be due to "farmers keep their horses in such bad condition that men have to spend their lives flogging them along".

Contract of work was for one week on either side unless the worker lived in a farm cottage - then it could be two weeks.

Meesden Labourer - "Men have no right to lose a day under a weekly hiring but they do, about two days in a month, though not on all farms. Workers would not grumble at eleven shillings a week if it was a certainty".

In 1890 the crops in the heavy soil with clay subsoil were wheat, barley, beans and peas. Even before the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, fields were left unploughed due to lack of manpower and the Lammas Day passed uncelebrated. The word, Lammas, comes from 'loaf mass' which was a thanksgiving celebration for the wheat harvest held on August 1st. It was celebrated in other Hertfordshire villages as well as Meesden which had common land called Lammas. Cattle were pastured on Lammas Land, by anyone having common rights, between August 1st and Lady Day on March 25th.

In the first half of this century there were four working farms in the parish. Now in 1993 there are only two. The farmhouses in Meesden are Manor Farm, Walkers Farm, Home Farm, Rectory Farm and Meesdenbury Farm. Walkers Farm and Home Farm are residences only with the adjoining land being farmed by the Dimsdale Estate. Rectory Farm has recently sold off its farm land. Manor Farm is farmed by Jim George and the land is rented from the estate. Meesdenbury Farm is farmed and owned by Wilfrid Dimsdale. Much of the surrounding agricultural land is farmed by Ian Welch who lives at Nuthampstead. Mr and Mrs John Welch, the parents of Ian Welch, lived at and farmed the land appertaining to Home Farm.

As we neared the completion of our booklet sadly Jim George passed away. Jim moved, at the age of seven, from Rectory Farm to Manor Farm in 1926. He took over the farm on the death of his father in 1960.

## THE NATURAL HISTORY OF MEESDEN

GRASSLAND A relatively small amount of the land available to agriculture is under grass. Such grassland is almost a monoculture - consisting only of several species of grass, encouraged by the application of artificial fertiliser. Addition of fertiliser promotes the growth of the grasses but at the expense of other grassland species. In other words modern grassland is species-poor and is not much better from a wildlife point of view than, say, a field of barley.

Meesden is fortunate in possessing a substantial area of village green or Common land. Part of it is managed as a Nature Reserve. It is floristically rich - some 90 species of flowering plant have been recorded. It is a fragment of semi-natural unimproved grassland, a vegetational type that is now in sharp decline (some 90% lost in recent years) in England.

Sympathetic management has led to a considerable increase in some species, such as common spotted orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*), southern marsh orchid (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*) and twayblade (*Listera ovata*). Confirmation of the status of this piece of grassland is confirmed by the presence of indicator species such as adders tongue fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) and meadow saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*). Several species extremely rare or absent in Hertfordshire have been recorded, notably crosswort (*Galium cruciata*) and great burnet (*Sanguisorbe officinalis*).

The remainder of the village green is not so interesting and its future management is the subject of debate. The Countryside Management Service would like to manage this part of the village green with a view to improving its species diversity and aesthetic appearance, but there is some opposition to this suggestion.

Several fragments of commonland in front of properties within the village are now managed with the cooperation of adjacent residents. Already the floristic content of these grassland strips is enhancing the appearance of the village.

This area of unimproved grassland has provided the necessary food plants for several species of butterfly and moth. Substantial populations (although subject to annual fluctuations) of the small tortoiseshell butterfly (*Aglais urticae*), meadow brown (*Maniola jurtina*), common blue (*Lycaena phlaeas*) and gatekeeper (*Pyronia tithonus*) are recorded regularly plus other species less frequently. The six spot burnet moth (*Zygaena filipendulae stephensi*) may be seen feeding on knapweeds and ragwort during the summer.

Two species of dragonfly, the southern hawker (*Aeshna cyanea*) and common darter (*Sympetrum striolatum*) may be seen over the grassland and adjacent ponds.



WOODLAND Woodland in the parish of Meesden is most probably secondary woodland, ie does not represent continuous forest from ancient times. The composition of the tree layer and the association of species in the ground flora seem to support this statement. However the girth of some of the stools, eg those of hornbeam suggest that woodland has been maintained for some considerable time. Taking Smaley Wood as an example of the local woodland, oak (*Quercus robur*), hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) with ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) where clearings have been made and in hedgerows, are the main forest trees. The understorey is principally hazel (*Corylus avellana*) with occasional holly (*Ilex europaeus*). In Smaley Wood bramble has increased in recent years.

Introduced species such as sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*), beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and foreign conifers occur in several small plantations within the parish.

The ground flora is not extensive. Probably insufficient management has been a contributory cause. Amongst the more common species are bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) dog's mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*), and wood anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*). Less common are: common spotted orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*), twayblade (*Listera ovata*) and greater butterfly orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*), wood avens (*Geum urbanum*) and one record of birds nest orchid (*Neottia nidus-avis*). The orchids have declined in recent years. Absence of the primrose (*Primula vulgaris*) is noted although in nearby Scales it is quite common along the rides. An addition to the ground flora of Smaley Wood is worth mentioning. In Spring daffodils, snowdrops and snakes head fritillary give a good show. These bulbous plants were planted by a previous landowner who lived in Meesden Manor.

Although there is increasing repugnance against killing animals for sport, it has to be admitted that preservation of the woodlands and hedgerows is largely due to the interests of those who hunt and shoot.

BIRD LIFE The woodlands, adjacent hedgerows and gardens possess good populations of the more common species. Proximity to woodland is, without doubt, the reason why so many birds visit our gardens. Great, blue, coal and long-tailed tits are abundant in gardens and hedgerows whilst several pairs of willow tit have been recorded in the village. All three species of woodpecker have been recorded. The greater spotted woodpecker is the commonest and is recorded at bird tables throughout the year. Greenfinches, dunnocks, wrens and robins occur throughout the village. Flocks of goldfinches are seen occasionally, especially in Autumn when they may be seen on the Nature Reserve feeding on thistle heads.

Several species, once familiar sights in the countryside,



are now much less common, for example linnet, skylark and more recently song thrush. Four species of the crow family are seen frequently, rook, jackdaw (although this species is only seen occasionally), magpie (on the increase) and jay. Despite the reputation of the last three species their depredation on small birds is but a fraction of the predation by domestic cats (BTO report).

Summer visitors include chiffchaff, blackcap, whitethroat (including lesser), willow warbler, spotted flycatcher. Swifts are a familiar sight in Meesden, some nesting in Rose Cottages. Swallows have become less common and this decline in numbers may be due to loss of habitat in the winter feeding grounds. House martins have not returned to Meesden for several years. On very rare occasions a nightingale may be heard within the village for a brief visit, possibly on its way to Scales. Even in Scales this species was not recorded in 1993.

The sparrow hawk has made a "come back" after a serious decline in numbers assumed to be due to pesticides in its food chain. Sparrow hawks have been recorded, hunting small birds in several Meesden gardens during the last three years. Kestrels are frequently seen and rarities like common buzzards and rough-legged buzzards have been recorded during migration. It is not unusual to see a heron flying over the village.

Winter visitors are not abundant. Fieldfares visit the village in small numbers, lapwings may be seen in Autumn on newly ploughed fields but not in any quantity. Two redwings were recorded this year (1994).

PONDS In many parts of England ponds have been seriously reduced in number. This decline has been due to land drainage and being no longer required for cattle. Those that remain are often in poor condition, a place to dump rubbish or simply not managed and become but a stage in the succession to woodland or scrub. However in Meesden we are most fortunate in having a number of ponds, the largest being near 'The Sycamores'. This pond has a high biodiversity and has received sympathetic management. It is an important breeding site for the common toad and frog as well as newts. Invertebrate life is also diverse with dragonfly nymphs, damselfly nymphs, water boatman and microscopic animals and plants which have their maxima in Spring and smaller numbers in Autumn. Introductions of aquatic plants, notably water soldier (Stratiotes) by a misguided man from Buntingford presented a serious threat to other species of pond life. Fortunately the Countryside Management Service spent much time and energy in removing a huge amount of this plant. Another introduced species is the little water fern (Azolla filiculoides), it has covered part of the surface of the pond but will probably not survive severe winter conditions.



Several other ponds are located within the parish. Special mention must be made of a pond that has been re-created by the side of the Nature Reserve. The work was carried out by Countryside Management in the Spring of 1993. It held water throughout the Summer and it is hoped that it will continue to do so. Already it has been colonised by the water plant Callitriche and water crowfoot. Mallards and moorhens are sampling its delights! and during the Summer of 1993 dragonflies, southern hawkers and common darters, were seen flying over the water. At the time of writing several ponds are being restored on land belonging to Manor Farm. Both the landowner, Mr Robert Dimsdale and farmer, Ian Welch have been responsible for this added amenity for the village.

John Godfree



Old Coppiced Oak Tree adjacent to Town Close