

**BRENTWOOD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CURTIS MILL GREEN
NAVESTOCK**

WILLOW COTTAGE

Grid Ref: TQ517 963

A twentieth century cottage garden and lake developed continuously from the 1950s. Plays have been performed in the natural amphitheatre.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In 1660 Sir Robert Abdy was created first baronet of Albyns in the Manor of Stapleford Abbots, having acquired the property in 1654. Albyns remained in the Abdy family until the death of Sir Anthony Abdy, 3rd baronet, in 1921. The Chapman & André map of 1777 shows the large estate of Albyns near Passingford Bridge and the hamlet of Curtis Mill Green with its smattering of small houses or farms and large tract of woodland. A footpath runs through the centre of Curtis Mill Green leading to Tysea Hill. The mansion incurred damages in 1945 when it was hit by a rocket bomb and was demolished in 1955. Some timber framed cottages were built on the Albyn's estate c1660, probably as farm labourers' cottages. Willow Cottage may well have been one of these as it has been dated to 1660/66. The cottage residents had the rights to graze animals and cut wood: these rights being passed from father to son and the grazing animals kept the forest glades open. These residents' rights had to be registered in 1966 and were made legal in 1979. After the first World War Curtis Mill Green was a popular place for Londoners to picnic, hike, and swim in the river.

In 1950 the children of the Williams family discovered a cottage while picking blackberries. At this time it was inhabited by a writer, Mr. Kelly, who, by the following year had vacated the cottage. Dick and Freda Williams made enquiries at the estate agents and moved in the following weekend: the price of the cottage was £585. At this time there was no garden just four acres of brambles and thistles. There was no electricity and water was from the dip hole with access to the cottage via a track through the trees. Electricity was connected in the late 1950's.

The cottage did not have a name at the time the Williams family moved in and they named it Willow Cottage after the giant willows which lined the pond. The hurricane in 1987 brought down three of the four remaining willows: the last coming down in March 1990. New sturdier species have been planted to replace them.

It took the Williams just two weeks to clear the garden and create a vegetable garden to feed the family, while plum and greengage trees were producing forty pounds of fruit a picking. Digging and soil improving took five to six years and it was twelve years before discussion was started on the laying of piped water to the six cottages in the area. The garden developed with flower beds being designed: all new plantings, including trees, were recorded in a plant book which included a planting plan. Today's tall cypresses were seeds collected on holidays in Spain and Italy. Plants that flourished in the wet were planted in the swamp area, including the gunnera. The cottage was covered in climbing

plants such as wisteria, clematis, japonica, ivy and eccremocarpus and house leeks were planted on the roof. Greenhouses accommodated daturas, lemons, fuchsias from Darjeeling, and Cercis from China.

The Green was designated an area of special scientific interest in 1955 as a wild area of damp woods and marshes of a type rare in Essex. A natural amphitheatre was discovered in 1962 when brambles were being cleared away in the woodland outside the cottage. Pits, which were formed centuries ago by the removal of marl to make bricks, had long ago filled with water and become ponds where local people could fish. Over time the ponds silted up and the water gradually drained away, leaving a perfect space for a theatre. The 'Theatre' was cleared, and two rows of seats dug, and in June 1962 the first performance, Twelfth Night, was ready for the public. Productions have continued annually until 2015.

In 1970 the access track from Lodge Farm was greatly improved and in 1972 Dick's son David, a surveyor, organised laying on water to six properties.

Freda Williams died in 1975 and Dick Williams (1916-2007) produced his first play when he was 13 and taught his last piano lesson the week before he died. Since Dick died in 2007 Liz McGuire has tended the arbours with enormous passion and skill, and, leading a team of volunteers and professionals, has preserved and extended the garden's timeless beauty. Dick's second wife Christine, now in her nineties, and the four children from Dick's first marriage decided to sell Willow Cottage in 2016, the family having nurtured the gardens for sixty-five years.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM & SETTING

Curtis Mill Green and Willow Cottage are located to the north west of Brentwood on the boundary between Brentwood Borough and Epping Forest District local authority areas in one hundred and twenty acres of ancient protected forest and common land. They are in the extreme west of the parish of Navestock, formerly part of the forest of Essex. Curtis Mill Green's north east and south east are still marked by the old forest boundary stones known respectively as Richard Stone and Navestock Stone. The north part of Curtis Mill Green is London Clay and the southern part Boulder Clay, and the site slopes gently from south to north. The Bourne Brook runs through the central woodland and forms the boundary of Brentwood Borough Council ownership. The Green is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and Willow Cottage is set in a wooded glade.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

Vehicle access to Curtis Mill Green and Willow Cottage is from Albyns Lane. Albyns Lane is an exit off the roundabout by Passingford Bridge where roads also lead to Ongar, Stapleford Abbots and Abridge. Curtis Mill Green is overlooked by the M25 motorway. Willow Cottage is over one mile from the roundabout at Passingford Bridge, approached just over half a mile of adopted road before it turns into a private 'no through' lane entering onto the common. The private road is self-managed by local residents.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

Willow Cottage is a timber-framed, weather boarded, house of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries and listed Grade II by Historic England. The house has pantiled roofs, a central stack, is one and a half storeys and has a twentieth century porch. There are twentieth century additions to the rear and both ends in brick and weatherboarding.

REFERENCES

Books and Articles

Norman-Clarke, Ross 2016 *Fairytale cottage in a magical setting* in Brentwood Gazette 11 May
Read, Julian 2016 *The Story of Willow Cottage* in Essex Life May
Sherriff, Sylvia 2000 *Summer Drama at the Cottage* in Essex Countryside July
Williams, Dick and Christine 1990 *Willow Cottage, Curtis Mill Green* private publication

Maps and Images

1777 Chapman & André's map of Essex plate XVI

Archival Items

1938 Sales particulars Essex Record Office SALE/A650
2016 Sales particulars Zoe Napier Country and Equestrian

Websites

www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk
willowcottage theatre.org

Researcher: Jill Plater
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