

MAJOR THOMAS JENNER SPITTY DL. JP.

About 1750, the "Spitty" family came to Bowers Gifford. Originally, his father and the family had come from Wales with cattle for the London market. He arrived at Bowers Gifford in his coach and four. His coach may still be seen in Colchester Museum. The overseer and constable were mainly concerned with the poor, and the vestry meetings were held in the local church until 1833 when, according to the Overseers Accounts Book 1833-1834, they were held in the Gun Inn and continued there until the latter part of that century.

At first they owned and lived at the farm at Great Tarpots but afterwards came to Bowers Hall Farm. Together with Bowers Hall they owned Blue House Farm Pitsea and the nearby cottages, the Gun Inn, and Sadler's Hall Farm. This last farm was built by the son of our first Thomas Spitty. Thomas Spitty was overseer to the parish in 1751 and his son, the first Thomas Jenner Spitty was church warden from 1765-1800, and this name appears in all the rate lists until 1816, when the landowner's name for the same property is shown as Mr. Offwood.



As farms go Great Tarpots farm in 1841 was small, consisting of 33 acres, 2 roods and 9 perches (marked in yellow on the map). 19 of the acres being devoted to arable farming.



Great Tarpots Farm, Thundersley, near Pitsea.

**GREAT TARPOTS,
SOUTH BENFLEET.**

A CATALOGUE
OF THE WHOLE OF THE

LIVE AND DEAD FARMING STOCK
COMPRISING

10 CART HORSES
BAY COB, SUCKEREL CART FILLY
THREE SHORT-HORN COWS, WELSH HEIFER
YOUNG SHORT-HORN BULL
21 EWES, 20 LAMBS
5 SHEARLING HALF-BRED RAMS
5 SOWS, BRAWN, 34 STORE PIGS
14 GEESE, 2 DUCKS, 24 FOWLS
AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENTS
STUMP OF OLD 2nd CUT CLOVER HAY
SURPLUS

HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE
AND MISCELLANEOUS EFFECTS
WHICH WILL BE SOLD BY AUCTION, BY

MR. T. W. OFFIN

By direction of Mr. A. TALBOT, whose lease expires at Michaelmas,
ON THURSDAY, SEPT. 26th, 1889,
UPON THE PREMISES,
SALE OF FURNITURE AT 12. FARM STOCK AT 2 P.M.

J. FRANCIS AND SONS, STEAM PRINTERS, ROCHFORD & SOUTHELD.

**GREAT TARPOTS FARM,
THUNDERSLEY.**

Equi-distant about 2 miles from South Benfleet and Pitsea Stations
on the Midland Railway, and 4 miles from Rayleigh on the G. E.
Railway.

CATALOGUE
Of the whole of the LIVE and DEAD
FARMING STOCK,
Comprising

8 HORSES & COLTS,
72 Head of Cattle,
250 EWES & LAMBS,
THE USUAL ASSORTMENT OF
Agricultural Implements
Barn and Hand Utensils, Harness, and Miscellaneous Effects.
A FEW LOTS OF SURPLUS
HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE
WITH

OFFIN & RUMSEY

Are instructed by the Executors of the late Mr. JOHN TALBOT, to
Sell by Auction, on
THURSDAY, 20th SEPTEMBER, 1917.
Commencing precisely at TWELVE o'clock.

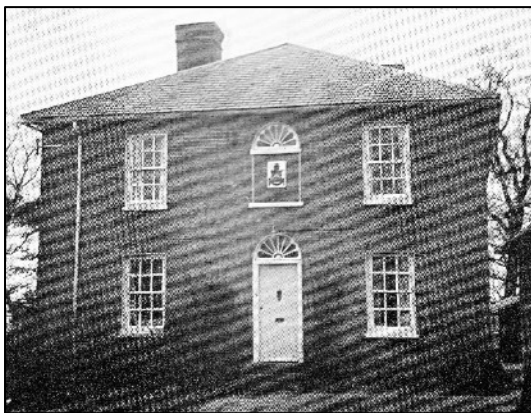
CATALOGUES may be obtained at the Farm; and of the
AUCTIONEERS, ROCHFORD, Essex.

Francis & Sons, Steam Printers, Rochford.

Blue House Farm Bowers Gifford.



Bowers Gifford Hall



Sadlers Hall



The building or site itself may now lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

The first Thomas Spitty died on April 24th 1779 leaving two sons, Charles and Thomas. His widow later married the Rev. Robert Powley, the Rector of Bowers Gifford.



The second Thomas Spitty left Bowers to live at Billericay where he died about 1824. His grandson, Major Thomas Jenner Spitty (1812-1898), frequently visited Bowers Gifford for the shooting. He was to become Captain (London Gazette dated 14 June 1833) and later Major (London Gazette dated 2nd July 1850) of the East Essex Regular Militia (Rifles), Justice of the Peace, and Deputy Lieutenant of Essex, was born at Hutton House on 6th January 1812. He was educated at St. Peters College Cambridge. At one time Major Thomas Jenner Spitty of the Essex Rifles lived at Hill House, before moving to Hurlock, a house in the main street.

It remained distinctive because of the 'look-out' tower. The building was of sixteenth Century timber construction partly modernised in the eighteenth century. The property was purchased in 1946/7 by the London Co-operative Society and demolished in 1958 for the new Co-operative store which in time became the Blue



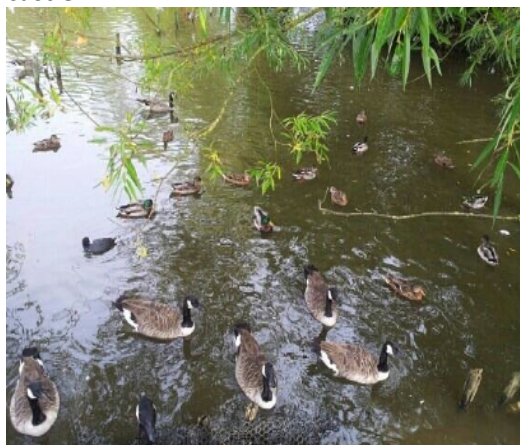
Boar.

Major Spitty was seriously rich. It is estimated that in the early 1890's his annual income from land rental alone was some £2,500. In today's terms that would be worth millions of pounds a year. At a time when Major Spitty was seriously rich the agricultural workers were exceedingly poor. In the early 1890's a series of poor corn harvests, combined with an influx of cheap corn from America, had caused mass unemployment amongst the agricultural workers. In 1831, Major Thomas Spitty purchased at auction, Hill House Farm which then consisted of thirty-nine acres of land but was subsequently extended by purchase to 117 acres, which included the land known as Lake Meadows.

The lake, originally known as 'The Moat' was that area subsequently given over by him for providing work for the out of work farm labourers.

As a keen Astronomer, Archaeologist and shooting man he was also anxious to encourage more wildfowl onto the estate, and a lake would certainly do so. Throughout 1893 and 1894 local agricultural workers toiled to hand dig the lake on wages of a shilling a day. When finished, the lake was slightly bigger than it is today, and also a lot deeper.

Said to be over twenty feet deep in places, the lake had a boathouse at each end. One of these was designed to look like a small castle.





The lake certainly attracted wildfowl, and Lord Kitchener of Khartoum is said to have been a regular member of the elegant shooting parties at the Hill House Estate.

Spitty was related through his mother and maternal grandmother, to the rich and powerful Tyrrell family.

His paternal grandfather (also named Thomas!) was born in 1759, and had originally lived at Sadlers Farm at Bowers Gifford, (one of several properties eventually inherited by the Major), and who died in 1823 of whom there is a memorial at Great Burstead church.

His paternal grandmother was Elizabeth Innott, who was born in 1763 at Shoreham in Sussex, and who died in 1844 and there is a memorial to her in the church at Horndon-on-the-hill. His father (who again was also named Thomas!) lived at Hutton House. His mother was Mary Jenner, the daughter of the Revd John Jenner vicar of Great Burstead, she died in 1813 aged only twenty-eight, when the Major was only a year old Infant.

Her last will took the form of a touching letter to her

husband:-

“My dearest Thomas, you are to become the only parent to a helpless dear little innocent boy little more than a twelve month, old deprived of the full solitudes of a mother at an age when he most stands in need of her, and requires the tender care of one to rear him. Let one entreat you to be very particular in the choice of the person you select to take charge of him, and do not have him far distant from you, that you may have an opportunity of seeing that he receives every attention that his tender age requires.”

As her will was not legally witnessed, it was verified by her uncle, Sir John Tyrell, Baronet of Boreham House. He will feature again in the story a little later on. As requested in her will there is a memorial to her in Great Burstead Church. His father re-married a widow, Charlotte Finch on 21st June 1822, and a half sister, Mary was born later.

The insane Reverend, the Scarborough water, and the court case.

His maternal grandfather, the Revd John Jenner had died in 1828, but his will was contested on behalf of Major Spitty, who was 18 years old and still a legal minor, and the Revd Jenner’s “lunatic” son John Tyrell Jenner, in a costly yearlong court case 1829-30.

It was alleged that the Revd was insane when he dis-inherited his “lunatic” son, and the descendants of his deceased daughter (including Major Spitty) in favour of a non-blood relation Sir John Tyrell, Baronet, his brother in law. This is the same John Tyrell who verified the will of the Majors late mother.

Extracts from the Times reports on the case:-

“Dr. Lushington and Dr. Dodson, for the committee and guardians of the next of kin, contended that this was a case of a person alleged to be of unsound mind, who, at the age of 82, had by a will executed in a stationer’s shop, in the presence of the party whom it favoured, disinherited his only son, and the children of his sister, in favour of a person not related by blood.”

“The counsel in behalf of the son and grand-sons of the deceased argued at very considerable length, that the will was the result of a fraudulent conspiracy between Sir John Tyrell and Jane Bailes, the deceased’s housekeeper; they imputed to the former falsehood and perjury; and they contended, that the imbecility and “senile delirium” of the deceased were amply demonstrated by the acts he was proved to have been guilty of, namely – habitual indelicacy of conversation, absurd notions of his own importance and qualifications, improper language from the pulpit, addiction to gin, which he named “Scarborough water,” dancing in the streets, and familiarity with low characters.”

Despite these arguments, the alleged fraudulent will was accepted by the court, and the Revd Jenner’s property passed to Sir John Tyrell Baronet, who himself died two years later.

Justice of the peace, marriage, tragedy & good works.

Perhaps the protracted legal case is what drew the Major to becoming a magistrate, he qualified as a Justice of the Peace in 1839, and went on to become the most senior JP in the county. He married Mary Ann Carter in October 1863, at Billericay, she was 30 years old, he was 51!

In 1864, Major Spitty, along with friends and business colleagues, founded the Billericay Recreational Rooms Foundation, now known as the Billericay Reading Rooms 'to educate the working classes' and 'to aid the growth and improvement of the common man'. The current building replaced the original in 1886.

Nos. 71 and 73 together were the Reading Rooms, although 74 High Street was occupied as a private home known as 'Westbury Cottage'. Since then, No. 71 has been used as a Dairy, subsequently other types of business premises. The Reading Rooms were founded as a 'Literary Institute' to help educate the working classes. In due course, it became a Public Library. It was a place where men could meet besides public houses and later equipped as a recreational centre with Billiards, draughts, chess, dominoes, shove-halfpenny and skittles. The rooms thrived and in 1904 the committee vowed to open the rooms for ladies, but only on Wednesdays from 3.30 to 4.30pm.



It was announced in The Essex Standard that on 4th June 1866, twins; a son and a daughter, had been born at Billericay to Mary, the wife of Major Spitty. However, we have found no subsequent mention of them, so must assume that they died soon thereafter. The couple had no surviving children.

As deputy Lord Lieutenant of Essex, he is known to have dined with Her Majesty Queen Victoria.

In 1878, he served as chairman of the Great Burstead School Board, and oversaw the building and opening of the first boarding school. For the year of 1881, he was appointed High Sheriff of Essex.

Wealth and property, death and Will.

The Major was a very wealthy man, who owned a large number of properties and farmland across the south of Essex, and it is estimated that towards the end of his life, his annual income from rents alone was approx. £2500, which is equivalent to around £230,000 at today's values, and there was further income from crops, livestock sales and property transactions and investments, and his paid duties. A twice yearly rent review was held at the Sun Inn Billericay, followed by a full dinner for his tenants, he regularly froze, or rebated rents for his tenants dependent upon the income they had generated.

Major Spitty died on 26th January 1898 after a year-long illness, he left an estate valued at £48,487-8s-2d, which in 1898 was a sizeable fortune, and is equivalent to more than £4 Million today. The estate included properties, farmland and houses in Billericay, Buttsbury, Mountnessing, Ingatestone, Vange, Bowers Gifford, Benfleet, Canvey, and elsewhere. At his request, he was buried in the church yard at Great Burstead, close to the grave of his mother, with little ceremony, a handsome marble plaque was installed in Great Burstead church, and in addition, there is a simple engraved copper memorial plaque in Billericay church. Major Spitty's lengthy will with six codicils, held at the Essex records office, here are extracts:-

"I Thomas Jenner Spitty of Billericay in the County of Essex Esquire formerly a Major in the Essex Rifles Regiment of Militia hereby revoke all former Wills made by me and declare this to be my last Will."

"I desire to be buried at the Parish Church of Great Burstead in Essex where my mother was buried and that the conduct of my funeral I leave to the entire discretion of my executors only desiring that anything savouring of parade or display may be avoided And my executors may in their like discretion either give or not give mourning to all or any of my servants."

"I confirm the settlement made on my marriage with my wife Mary Ann Spitty."

"I bequeath to my said wife the sum of five hundred pounds to be paid to her within one calendar month after my death and I bequeath to her all the China glass linen and woollen articles wines liquors and consumable stores and provisions which at my death shall be in or about or belonging to or appropriated for my dwelling house and stables at Billericay aforesaid and all her jewellery and paraphernalia and all the plate and plated articles bought by her since our marriage and all my private carriages and carriage horses and harness used in connection and all my wearing apparel rings pins and other articles of jewellery and ornaments of the person (but not including my watch and appendages hereinafter specifically bequeathed)."

“Bequeath to George Low and Samuel Bettis if in my service at the time of my death a legacy of two hundred pounds apiece and to John Crush and Arthur Crush and Mrs Crush their mother if in my service at the time of my death a legacy of fifty pounds apiece.”

Mary Spitty died in 1908, and was laid to rest alongside the Major in St. Mary Magdalen churchyard Great Burstead, her name was added to his memorial plaque inside the Great Burstead church.



At a vestry meeting in September 1816, these same Bowers Gifford rate payers were nominated as surveyors of the highways. They had to see to the maintenance of all roads, ditches and bridges of the parish. At another vestry meeting in 1822, held in Bowers Gifford church, a “gaol rate” of 1½d was levied.

The Overseers Account Book also shows that “Quarterage” had to be paid, which would appear to be a county rate. The account for September 1757 shows “Quarterage and Bridge money” £1.3s.6d. At the beginning of the 19th century Bowers Gifford was mainly an agricultural community. In the census of 1861 there were twenty inhabited houses in the parish and one uninhabited. The total population was 156 persons. Of ninety-seven men, sixty-four were engaged in agriculture and three in trades.

The census of 1841 gives a total population of 242. The tithe map of 1842 shows 1,300 acres arable, 850 pasture and meadow, with two acres of woodland. Some of the marsh farms and those other farms that had land on the marshes had crops of reeds and rushes. Blue House Farm was one of these, also Gt. Mussels. Gt. Mussels and Rookery also had saltings.

In the Essex Review – a quarterly Journal for the County (No. 26 of April 1898 – Vol. VII) it comments of Thomas Jenner Spitty’s passing.

“By the death of Major Thomas Jenner Spitty at Billericay on January 26th, the county has lost its oldest and senior Justice of the Peace, he having qualified as long ago as 27th April 1839. At the time of his death Major Spitty was in his eighty-sixth year. With his well-known figure we lose another of our fast-disappearing race of liberal-hearted and popular squires.

The son of Captain Thomas Spitty by his wife Mary, daughter of the Rev. John Jenner D.D. who married a sister of Sir John Tyrrell, Major Spitty was born on 16th January 1812. He was appointed Captain to the East Essex Militia in 1834 and on the death of Lord Jocelyn in 1854, Major commanding the Essex Rifles, then stationed at the Tower of London. The Regiment was subsequently stationed at Windsor, when Major Spitty had the honour of being presented to the Queen.

His public work in the county, commenced as we have seen, as long ago as 1839. He was Deputy Lieutenant, and in 1881, High Sheriff. He regularly attended for many years the Court of Quarter Sessions and was chairman of the Finance Committee, In his particular parishes, Major Spitty was no less active. For a long time he was Chairman of the Billericay Bench, where his able and conscientious services were highly valued, his clear and fair views of the administration of justice being such as commended themselves to all. He was Chairman of the Great Burstead School Board from 1873 to 1882. The new Board schools was opened by him on 10th September 1878, when he entertained all the children and their parents on a liberal scale. He was also a generous contributor to the Great Burstead Church Restoration Fund and took a warm interest in the affairs of St. Mary’s Billericay, the church he usually attended.

Major Spitty was a large landowner, and not the least permanent way in which he will be remembered is as a liberal and considerate landlord. When the dark days of agricultural depression in Essex appeared in 1878, he was one of the first to show practical sympathy with his tenants by granting them a remission of ten per cent in their rent.

As instead of the hoped-for improvement, a steady change for the worse set in, he still further met the demands of the altered times by fresh remission, until within the last few years they had amounted to no less than forty-five per cent.

We may remark in passing these figures show to what an artificial value rents had practically attained before the fall. This, however, was probably before Major Spitty's tenure of his estate. Of him, it may be said that to the highest integrity of character was joined a generous and above all, an unostentatious liberality.

As a sportsman, Major Spitty was also notable. In his young days he was particularly fond of driving tandem, and he kept a pack of Beagles which afforded him excellent sport. On the banks of his well-preserved lake, many an angler had been allowed to spend a successful days fishing, while in winter the same piece of water would be freely thrown open to skaters from both far and near. He was a very fair shot and his wild fowl shooting at Bowers Gifford was some of the best in the county. Major Spitty was a Liberal Unionist in politics, but did not take any active part. He was buried at St. Mary Magdalen Churchyard on January 29th 1898.



Lake Meadows today



Norman Bambridge
Basildon Borough Heritage Society
31 October 2024