

Swadelands Close and Mitchell Close

by Annette Tomarken ¹

For once, we are combining the story of two streets into one web site entry. This is because both names are linked to one particular Lenham house, Swadelands Manor, and one particular Lenham family, the Mitchells.

Swadelands Close. The origins of the name ‘Swadelands’ are still shrouded in mystery. The name itself, however, has long been part of Lenham’s history. According to Judith Glover’s Place Names of Kent, the term ‘swade’ in the may derive from ‘swain’ (i.e. ‘peasant’), but might possibly come from ‘swallow’ (Old English ‘swealwa land’). On the site of today’s quiet close there once stood a grand house.



¹ with many thanks to Andrew Barr, Sandys Dawes, Anne Edgar and Amy Myers

The house was described in the 19th century Epitome of County History as “a neat modern house”. At the time of our illustration it belonged to George Harrison; the last owners to live in the house before it was demolished were Major Gordon Mitchell and his wife Katharine.

Among the oral history recordings of the Imperial War Museum is the recollection <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80020748> by Margaret Joan Oliver, who, as a 7-year-old, spent the first year of World War II as an evacuee in Lenham and attended school in what she called the ‘big house’. Some of the children were accommodated in what she refers to as ‘the coach house’.

In 1952, a secondary school named ‘Swadelands School’ was opened in part of the grounds of Swadelands Manor. Many Lenham residents have fond memories of going to school at Swadelands in those early days. By 1987 the old manor house had fallen into disrepair and the school did not have sufficient funds to repair the leaky roof. At a school governors’ meeting on October 14, 1987, the need for major repairs to the former manor was discussed. The local vicar said that he would pray to God for a solution. His prayer seems to have been answered, because during the night of October 15, 1987 the South East of England was hit by a major storm, which uprooted many venerable specimen trees and devastated some buildings, among them being Swadelands Manor. Since then local legend has had it that the big storm of 1987 was caused by one man’s prayer!

The old manor was then demolished and its site was used for the houses of Swadelands Close. Those of Mitchell Close were built in its grounds.

Swadelands Close contains 14 houses, all built in the 1990s. Thanks to having been built in the grounds of a large house, the street is fortunate in having its own small ‘pocket park’ at end of the street. This area contains a number of old trees from the original estate that survived both the builders and the great storm of 1987.

Further traces of the house that once graced this part of Lenham were discovered a few years ago by one resident of the close who, when searching for access to their drains, found instead a beautifully built drainage pit from the olden days, completely lined with tiles like a Victorian underground station. From tall trees to underground cisterns, the past lingers in the present Swadelands Close.

Mitchell Close

Also built in the 1990s, this close, directly south of Swadelands Close, contains 27 dwellings of varying sizes and similar style to those in Swadelands. The two streets are linked by a much-used alleyway. The name honours Captain Gordon Mitchell (1896- 62), son of Major Henry Mitchell, who had come to Lenham from Yorkshire in the second half of the 19th century. After living briefly first in Kennington, near Ashford, and then in Charing at The Moat, Henry settled in Lenham at Swadelands Manor, where he and his wife Hephzibah remained for the rest of their lives. He bought 32 acres at first, then added more, for a total of around 50 acres.

Henry's son Gordon went to France in July 1915 as a second lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery. He and his wife Katharine (nee Watson, from Harrietsham) were very active in the village throughout their years here. As our photo shows, he was a keen cricketer. In 1938, he donated his tennis court to be turned into the present Lenham Bowling Club. The bowling green was built by Fred Parks, groundsman for the Swadelands estate. Gordon's widow Katharine (see photo) remained active in the village. She was clerk to the Parish Council for many years and lived first in Glebe Gardens and then at Atwater Court. From Lenham's bowling green to its cricket club grounds (originally part of the Swadelands estate and now owned by Andrew Barr), the Mitchell family name is thus linked to some of Lenham's favourite community sites.



Title for photo: Photo courtesy of Andrew Barr. Captain Mitchell, as he was known at the Cricket Club, is standing third from the right in the back row, with a cap on.



Title: Katharine Mitchell, wife of Captain Gordon Mitchell. Photo courtesy of Anne Edgar.