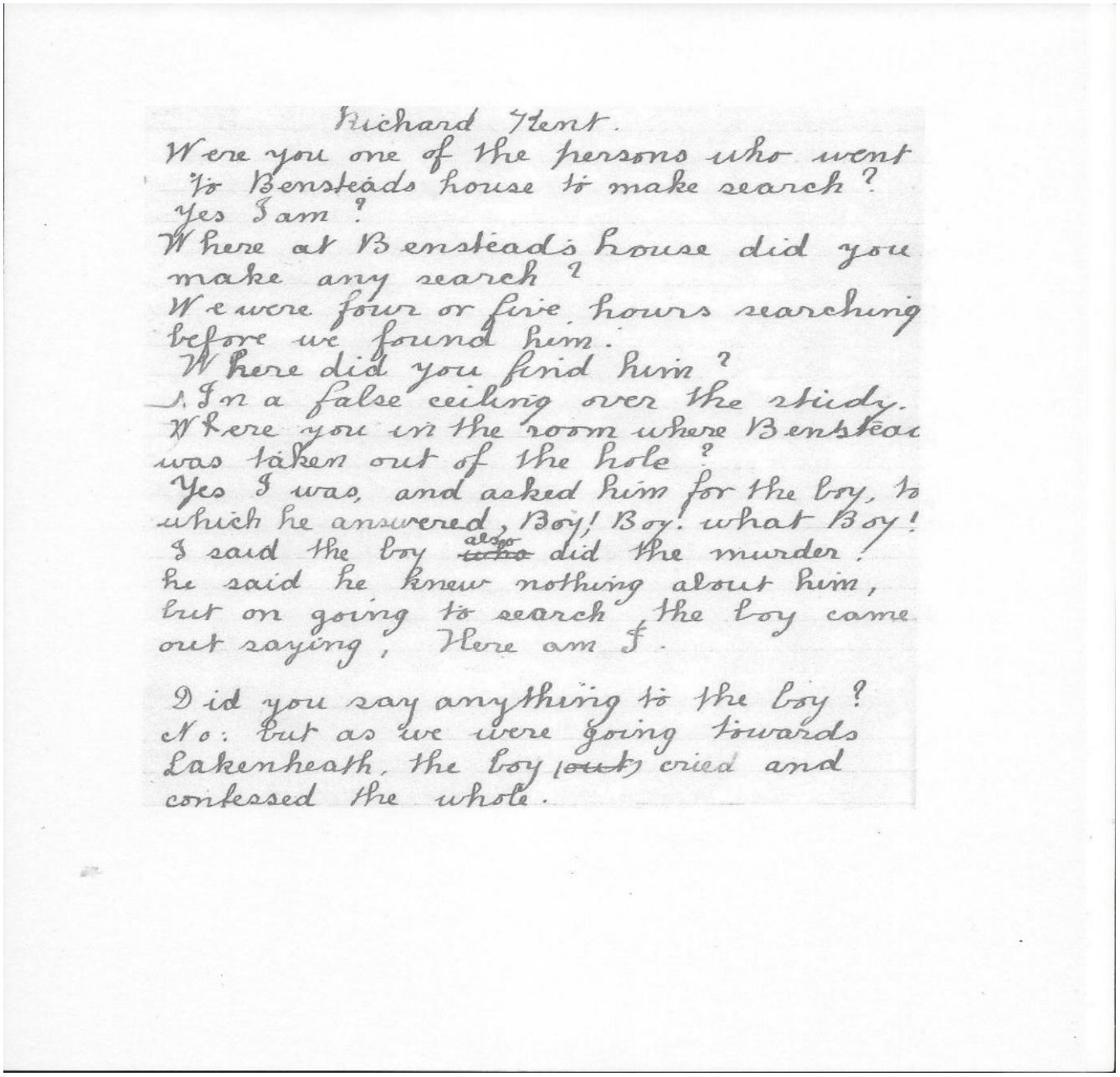
1791-92. The Murder of Thomas Briggs of Undley.

According to past records, and the story as passed down to present village folk, the year 1791 saw a terrible event at Undley.
A man named Roger Benstead owned cattle which strayed from his land, and these were impounded by Thomas Briggs. After the refusals first by Benstead to pay the fine and then by Briggs to release the cattle the matter reached a deadlock. On promise of a green suit as payment, a boy named Thomas Harper agreed to shoot Briggs. This eventually took place on July 29th, and the unfortunate Briggs was said to have crawled a considerable way before eventually dying in the village street.
The two terrified wrong-doers, although going into hiding at Undley Hall, were at last captured. After the trial, when the boy Harper was released, the man Benstead was hanged and gibbeted at Undley, not far from the scene of the crime.
The gravestone of Briggs still stands in Lakenheath Churchyard and he gibbet still stood for many years at Undley.
Lakenheath W I. A History of Lakenheath1951.

These extracts are taken from an old hard backed note book, kindly lent by Marie Laflin, which record the whole trial and it's aftermath.
The writers are unknown. They appear to have copied, from another source, perhaps an original newspaper.
The book was discovered by Marie's grandfather, George Pryke Gathercole, barber and antique dealer in the village in the 1930's in the drawer of a desk or bureau he had bought.



Richard Kent.
Were you one of the persons who went to Bensteads house to make search?
Yes I am?
Where at Benstead's house did you make any search?
We were four or five hours searching before we found him.
Where did you find him?
In a false ceiling over the study.
Were you in the room where Benstead was taken out of the hole?
Yes I was, and asked him for the boy, to which he answered, Boy! Boy! what Boy! I said the boy ~~who~~ also did the murder! he said he knew nothing about him, but on going to search the boy came out saying, Here am I.

Did you say anything to the boy?
No: but as we were going towards Lakenheath, the boy ~~(out)~~ cried and confessed the whole.

The capture of Benstead and Harper

Were you present when the prisoner were examined?
Yes, I was at the Bell at Lakenheath when Harper was taken, there was a gentleman, who came into the room clapped Harper on the back, and said, you ought to speak against your old & your young master, to save yourself: Mr Willet was there, who set a great face at me [threatening me], & put his hand into his pocket, saying, My girl, I will give you twenty guineas if you will tell all you know about the business.

The barmaid Elizabeth Battley's evidence

awfull tribunal of the laws of God may go still further if now only Remains for me to pass the usual sentence of the law that you be taken from hence to the place from whence you came and from thence to the place of execution the day after tomorrow there to be hanged by the neck untill you are dead and your body be delivered to the surgeons to be dissected and anotomized and may the Lord have mercy on your soul
After condemnation his sentence was changed from being anotomized to hanging in Chains which seemed at first to affect him more than any other circumstance He was very strongly urged to confess his guilt on the morning before his execution that he might receive the consolation of the holy communion but he persisted in his innocence and the sacrament was not administered he showed no signs of penitence whatever but apparently went to the place of execution unmoved by the great event that was about to ensue nor was he observed to change countenance till the rope was put about his neck and so far was he from wishing his execution to be delayed that he seemend to count its earlier execution much more dreading the resentiment of the populace from whom he had recived insult in going to and from the place of trial than the dreadfull judgement of that future state before which all must appear to render an account of the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil. Having hung the usual time at the end of northgate Burg he was conveyed to Undley common near Lakenheath and there suspended in Chains on a Gibbet within a quarter of a mile of his late residence
THE END. 58

The sentence, execution and afterwards

A recent record of the trial of the boy Thomas Harper has been found.

The trial took place at the Lammas Assizes (the summer assizes) at Bury St. Edmunds in front of Sir William Henry Ashurst.

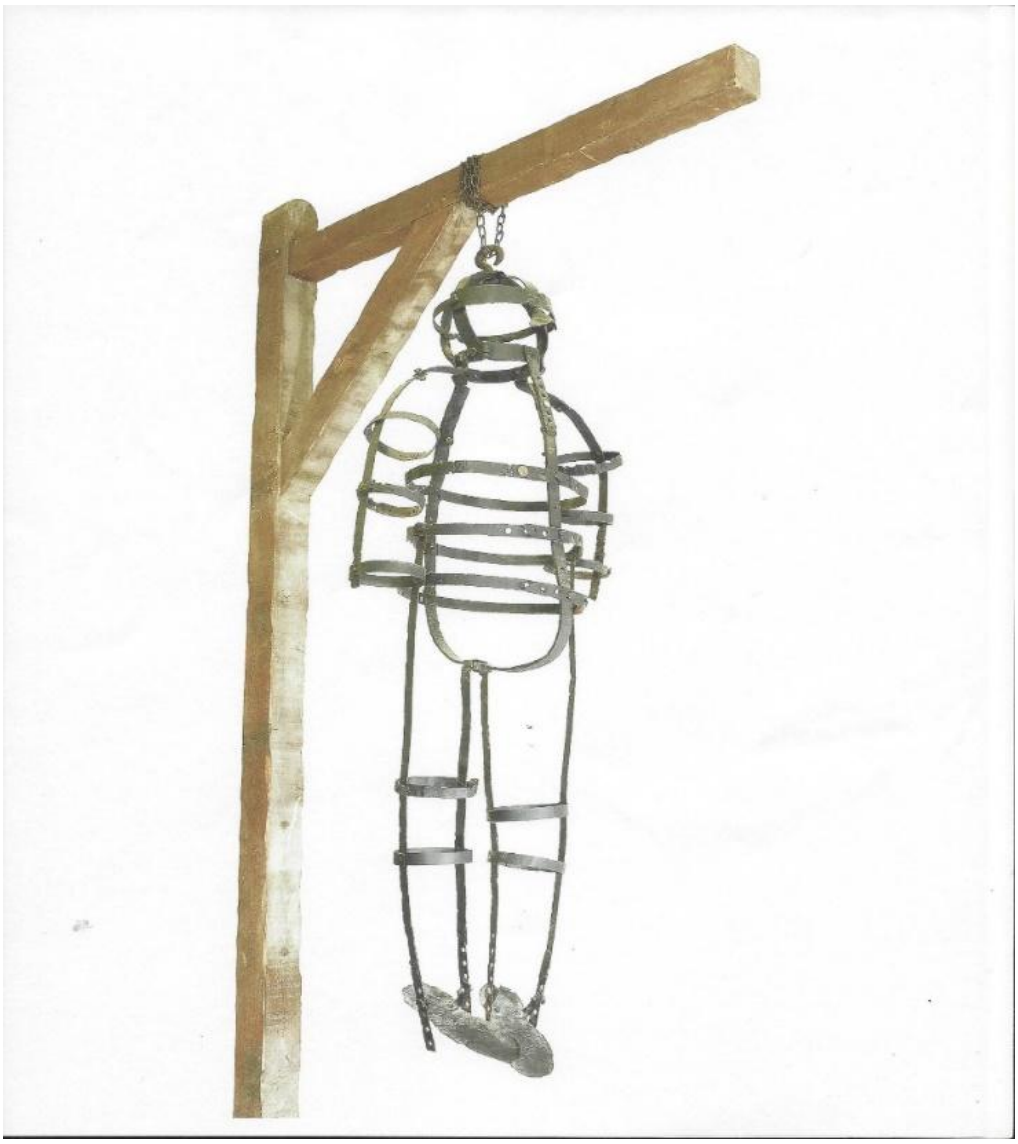
A witness, Thomas Mortland, declared that Thomas Briggs had made a dying statement to him as follows:

"That on Friday 29th July, about 11 o'clock, I Thomas Briggs the elder, went to Undley Hall to water my cow, when I was shot out of the cow house at a distance of about 5 or 6 yards. I saw no person, but shrieked 'MURDER.' Soon after I saw old BENSTEAD look out of the window who enquired what was the matter? I told him I was shot. Through loss of blood I was so faint that I could not get home."

The Trial of Thomas Harper. Pub. W Whittingham (Lynn). 2nd Edition.

Extract from the Norfolk Chronicle 7th April 1792.

"Whilst the gibbet was preparing for Benstead's body at Lakenheath common, a stripling, who had lived servant with him, was held up to public view with his back bare, and shockingly lacerated by a severe flogging he received from Benstead's son, it had afterwards been rubbed with salt and pork lard, many pieces of which were picked out of the wounds. This piteous spectacle worked up those present into such a pitch of phrenzy, that they could scarcely be restrained from cutting the flesh of the deceased; and had the son been to be found at the moment, it is thought he would have accompanied the father on the same gibbet."



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The Gibbet was used following the execution of Roger Benstead, the elder, was probably very similar to the one shown.



FREE PRESS & POST. SATURDAY. FEBRUARY 21. 1942.

Local Milestones.

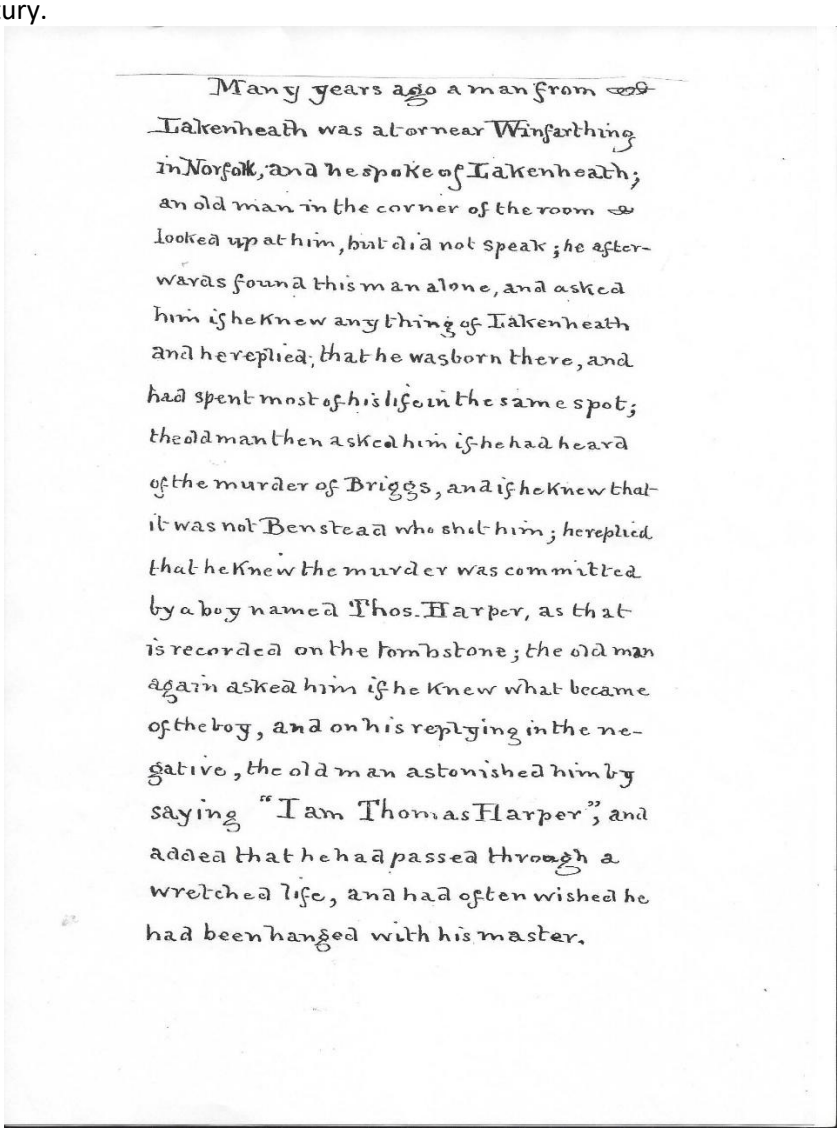
Extracts from our Files.

150 Years Ago—

April 11th, 1792.

Roger Benstead, the elder, who was sentenced to death at the Suffolk Assizes at Bury St. Edmund's for the wilful murder of Thomas Briggs, of Lakenheath, was, after being executed, conveyed to Undley-common, near Lakenheath, within a quarter-of-a-mile of his late dwelling, and there hung in chains. Many people have visited the gibbet and on one Sunday, no less than 2,000 persons were present in the course of the day.

This is the ending given in a hand written account by a former resident of the village in his reminiscences of village life in the mid-19th century.



Many years ago a man from Lakenheath was at or near Winfarthing in Norfolk, and he spoke of Lakenheath; an old man in the corner of the room looked up at him, but did not speak; he afterwards found this man alone, and asked him if he knew anything of Lakenheath and he replied, that he was born there, and had spent most of his life in the same spot; the old man then asked him if he had heard of the murder of Briggs, and if he knew that it was not Benstead who shot him; he replied that he knew the murder was committed by a boy named Thos. Harper, as that is recorded on the tombstone; the old man again asked him if he knew what became of the boy, and on his replying in the negative, the old man astonished him by saying "I am Thomas Harper"; and added that he had passed through a wretched life, and had often wished he had been hanged with his master.

Reminisces of Lakenheath 1896. Dr F W Newton.