

In the latest in the series of features on villages in the *Observer* area, **HOLLIE DARKEN** visits Hempstead, where blood is high on the agenda



Turpin robs Harvey of the historical limelight

BLOOD — it seems to have an association with Hempstead.

Infamous highwayman Dick Turpin, who was born in the village, spilt much of it in his time, while 17th century physician William Harvey discovered circulation of the blood and is now buried in Hempstead parish church.

It seems a strange way to introduce a profile of the Essex settlement, on the outskirts of Saffron Walden, but it is often the curious and fascinating tales of the past that capture people's imagination and leave them yearning to know more. It is the unusual that puts a place on the map.

Hempstead certainly features on tour guides that pinpoint historically interesting buildings — Dick Turpin's birthplace in 1704 being the main attraction. The dashing rogue and his loyal steed Black Bess have become the romantic heroes of their time, but the truth behind their night-time activities, patrolling the dark forests of Essex, is more sinister.

Born at what was the Bell Inn (now the Bluebell Inn) where his father was a landlord, Turpin is described in an Essex history book as "no more than 5ft 9ins tall with a scowling, pockmarked face and there is little doubt that his tough, brutal nature matched his appearance".

The story goes that he worked as an apprentice butcher before he teamed up with a gang of smugglers and then joined forces with the highwaymen that were the terror of Epping Forest.

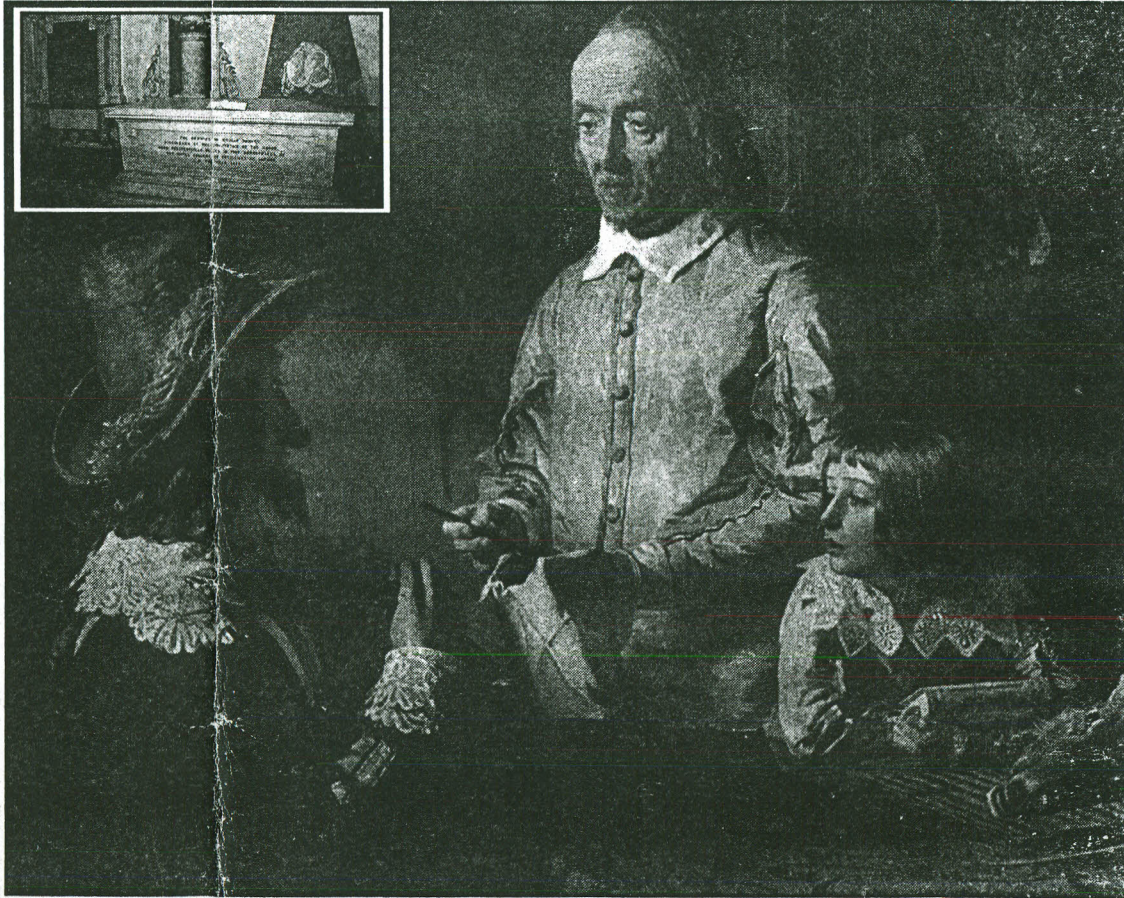
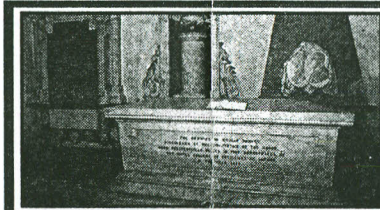
Visitors to the pub today cannot help but notice the Turpin memorabilia that adorns the walls. Sketches of the dastardly villain hang adjacent to dining tables — a bowl of soup and a potted account of Turpin's life go hand in hand here. You can't help but read as you eat!

Landlords Jason Scott and Jo Anderson are newcomers to Hempstead, having taken over the pub just 18 months ago, and love the village.

"I was born in London and then lived in Crawley in Sussex and always thought I preferred a town to a village, but since moving here, I think it's so much nicer," said Jason.

The couple prepare all the food which is helping to put the pub on the map just as much as Turpin has and there is always a steady stream of customers.

There is, of course, much more to Hempstead than just Dick Turpin. Its historical background is richer than the jewels you would find in the highwayman's swag bag. There is the 14th century church and its dedicated William Harvey chapel which has become a place of pilgrimage for those in



● **BODY MATTERS:** This picture of William Harvey telling King Charles I about the circulation of blood hangs in St Andrew's church. Inset: William Harvey's tomb, also in the church

stead oak, now no longer around, but still remembered for its sheer enormity; the ring of trees; and the historic water pump that never dries up, to detail but a few extracts from Hempstead's past.

Resident of 38 years, Alan Weedon is compiling a history of the village for a millennium book and says he despairs at its association with Turpin.

"People come along to find out about Dick Turpin and don't know anything about William Harvey. They remember this pretty foul, pox-infested thug and not somebody who did a lot of good by discovering circulation of the blood!"

On his journey back in time he has recorded the history of St Andrew's parish church, built in 1330 on the village hillside. Unusually, the exact details of its consecration are known as they were detailed in a diary. It was a ceremony carried out by the then Bishop of London, Simon of Sudbury, on January 8 1365.

Mr Weedon said his interest in Hempstead's past came about when he moved there in 1960 with his wife, Hazel, herself an historian. Anyone with old records, photographs or documents relating to the village would be welcome by Mr Weedon and his colleagues preparing the millennium booklet.

Parish councillor and farmer David Haylock is another character who knows most there is to know. Hempstead born and bred, his family have farmed the land on the village outskirts since 1919 and with his council and conservation interests, there is not much he misses. "I'm in the village all the time so tend to be able to monitor what's going on, on a day-to-day basis, better than people who are away in London during the day," he said.

As with most small communities of the modern

age, they are more like dormitories than bustling settlements. People go out to work and come back to sleep. But Hempstead maintains a tremendous community spirit among residents and a pride that has earned it second place in the best kept village competition and a highly commended in the Essex village of the year award.

Regular village clean-ups ensure it stays smart, the water pump has been given a new lease of life and plans are under way for a complete overhaul of the village hall, thanks to a £100,000 lottery grant.

"Most people do things for nothing to help the community," said Mr Haylock, who has seen many changes in his time. "Our farm was at one point the major employer with around 30 people working here. I can just about remember horses working on the farm, the old fashioned tractors and threshing machines. I can remember how tractors have got bigger and bigger."

He took over the running of the 1,400 acre (567 hectares) arable and cattle farm following the death of his father in 1980 and has the help of his wife, Meryl, and two daughters, Laura and Sophie.

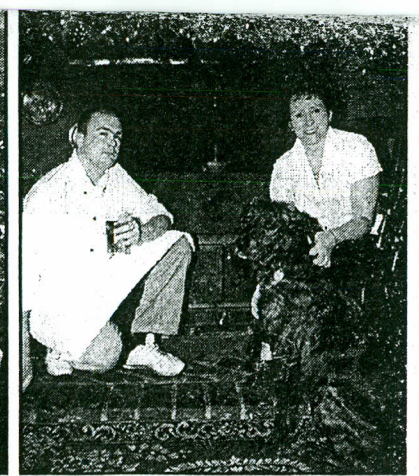
As tree warden, his dedication to conservation is put to good use. "People don't often realise what is in a conservation area. We had a yew tree at the front of the pub several years ago that was chopped down and the village was up in arms."

The Hempstead oak was once a popular attraction. All that's left of the giant structure now are old photographs, but people still remember it.

Said Mr Haylock: "Hempstead was famous for its oak tree. Standing in Witchtree Lane it was one of the biggest in the country with a 55ft (16.8m) girth and around 100ft (30.5m) tall. I can



● MILLENNIUM MISSION: Long-time Hempstead resident Alan Weedon, who is compiling a special book on the village for the year 2000, visits its war memorial while The Bluebell Inn landlords Jason Scott and Jo Anderson sit by the fire with their dog, Bruno



remember its skeleton, but it eventually fell down."

Strolling through the picturesque street scene back up to the church, you pass the distinctive ring of trees, the origin and purpose of which is not really known. One theory is that it was a cock-fighting ring, "but there is no evidence for or against that," added Mr Weedon.

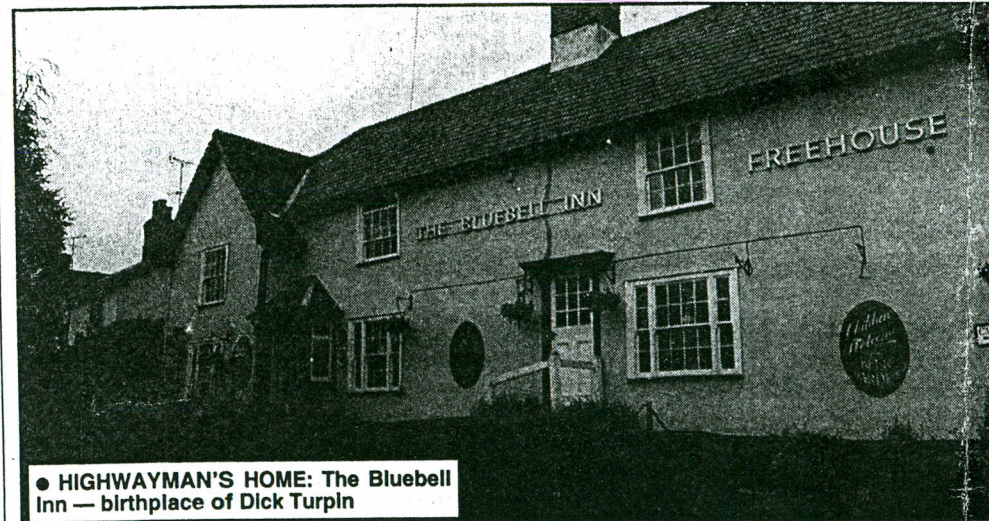
The grand church and its impressive tower further up the road is where I met newly installed rector, David Maudlin, who despite only arriving nine weeks ago to serve the parishes of Radwinter, Hempstead and Great and Little Sampford, demonstrates a keen interest in the church's history and a great affection for it.

A tour of the Harvey chapel revealed the tomb of the prominent physician. There is a Harveyan Society dedicated to him and a visitors book is regularly written in. "How wonderful it is to see his resting place having studied blood and ingestion," wrote one recent pilgrim.

Underneath the church lies a crypt where 49 members of the Harvey family are laid to rest in lead coffins. Above ground, St Andrew's is simple, yet beautiful, said Mr Maudlin.

The tower fell down in 1882 and was only rebuilt this century. Since then, the building has been lovingly looked after and stands resplendent over the village.

With a population of around 440, including youngsters, congregations are not large, but residents are willing to help fund-raise for the church's upkeep. And people always know their rector is available when he tolls the bell.



● HIGHWAYMAN'S HOME: The Bluebell Inn — birthplace of Dick Turpin

Coming next in the series: ELMDON

