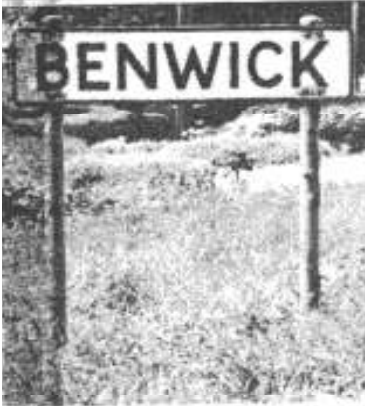


IT HAS THAT STRANGE, DESERTED APPEARANCE OF A GHOST TOWN IN AN OLD MOVIE, BUT . . .



# 'Dying' village is fighting back!



By Maggie Gibson

Pictures: Malcolm Springett

A piece of old England, undisturbed by the passage of time with quaint leaning houses is how the outsider might view it, but it is affectionately known in the Fens as good old mucky Benwick.

Unless you have a purpose for visiting Benwick it is quite possible to live in the area oblivious of its existence. It is also possible to drive through it without ever realising you have passed it.

Visit the village on a Monday, Wednesday or Saturday and it always has that strange deserted appearance of a ghost town in an old movie. However, underneath the tranquility Benwick is alive and kicking.

Park a car in the seemingly deserted High Street and you immediately create interest and a certain amount of suspicion. Almost everyone knows everyone else and a stranger, if he is from Doddington or Dundee is a stranger.

## SOLIDARITY

There is a great sense of solidarity among the inhabitants — a solidarity which leads them to defend their village to the end.

Looking at references to Benwick in the history books as a thriving village it would seem it is a dying one. But mention the word dying to the villagers and it arouses a mixture of anger and confusion.

Certainly its amenities have been gradually eroded

and taken away. Anyone wishing to find out just what the village was like in its prime should visit Mr Percy Coulson at one of the two shops.

At the age of 76 Percy and his wife Jane are an absolute mine of information. They were both born and bred in the village, they got married in the village church and would like to die in Benwick.

Percy can remember a time when there were about 10 public houses — now only one, The Five Alls remains.

"They all must have done a good trade because I can't remember the owners doing

anything else for a living but run the pubs," he recalls.

After a thirsty day's work on the land the men could go for a drink at their favourite pub. It might have been the Boot and Slipper, the White Hart, the Plough or the Nag's Head.

Their shop has been in the Coulson family for over 50 years but it was once one of several thriving businesses including butchers, fishmongers, grocery and drapers shops.

Only 40 years ago Benwick could boast it had traditional village craftsmen living there. It had a harness

maker and a wheelwright — now the modern equivalent a garage, is also closed.

"People who were born here never used to leave," recalls Jane, "but now they have to leave to find work."

"We have lost a resident parson and we used to have a village policeman but I think we must be too good because even he has gone."

If people in Benwick can ever be said to be in a fighting mood about anything they are at the present time over the future of their church.

Like so many of the other buildings in the village the church is sinking and leaning because of the peaty ground on which it is built.

The Rector, the Rev John Harrington, has put forward the idea of building a community centre to replace the church — he has met with almost total opposition.

"It would be a great shame to pull down our beautiful church," said Jane. "The church has always been the centre of village life."

The final report on just how much it would cost to save the church is being eagerly awaited but it is quite probable it is something else the village will have to do without.

What has happened in recent months to change the outlook of the village as regards its uncertain future? Ironically for people who have warded off any possible changes it is a small new housing estate.

It is amazing what 20 houses can do to boost village life. Once more the school has a reasonable number of pupils and the mums and dads are getting together to organise village events.

## FRIENDLY

A new breed of people have arrived and are learning to cope with village life with the aid of cars and deep freezers.

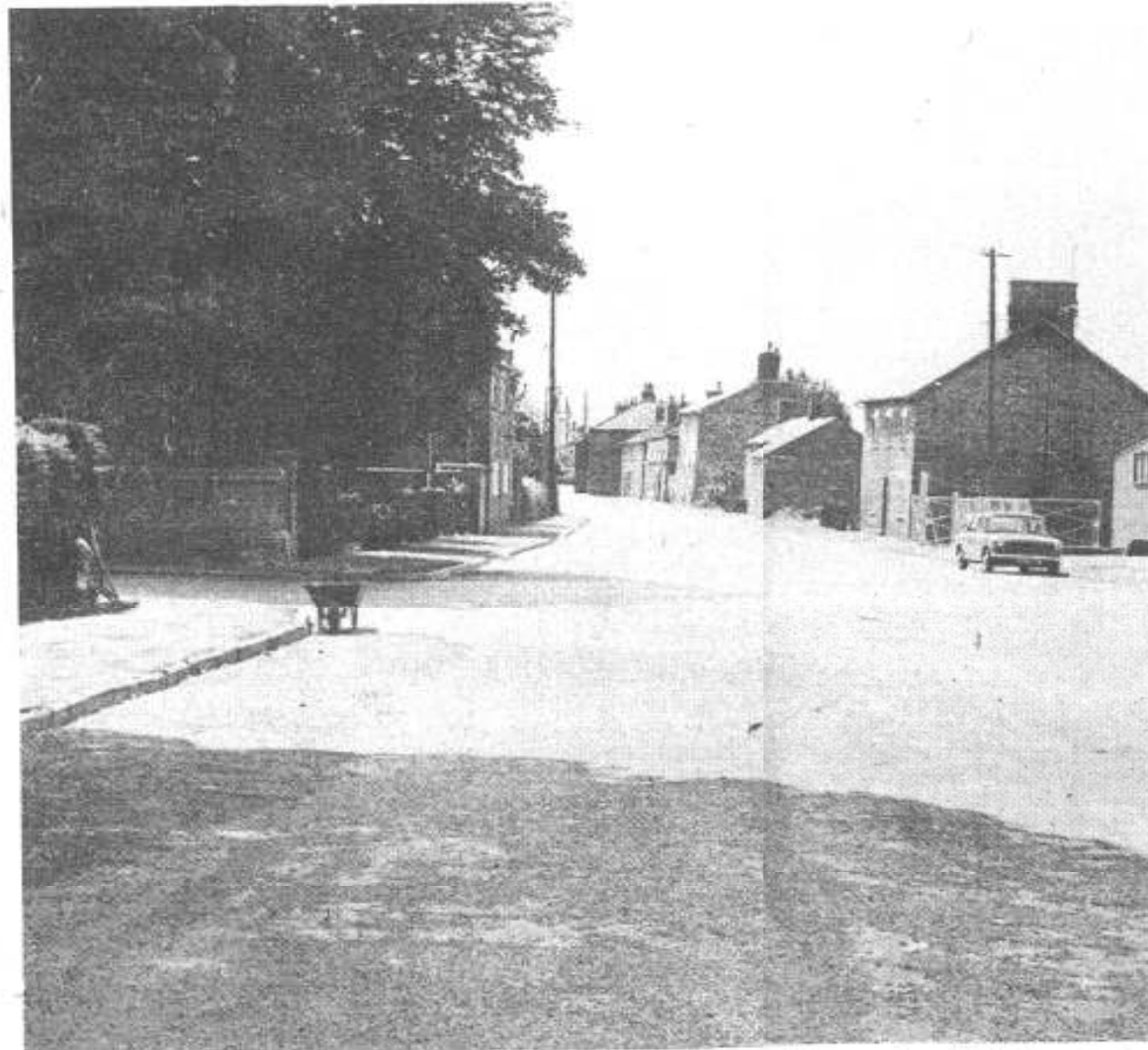
Mrs Susan Monteith, a Londoner, is one of the newcomers, and she would not move from the village for anything.

"Everyone is so friendly and we all seem to have settled down to village life. It is so quite and peaceful I would hate to have to go back to London."

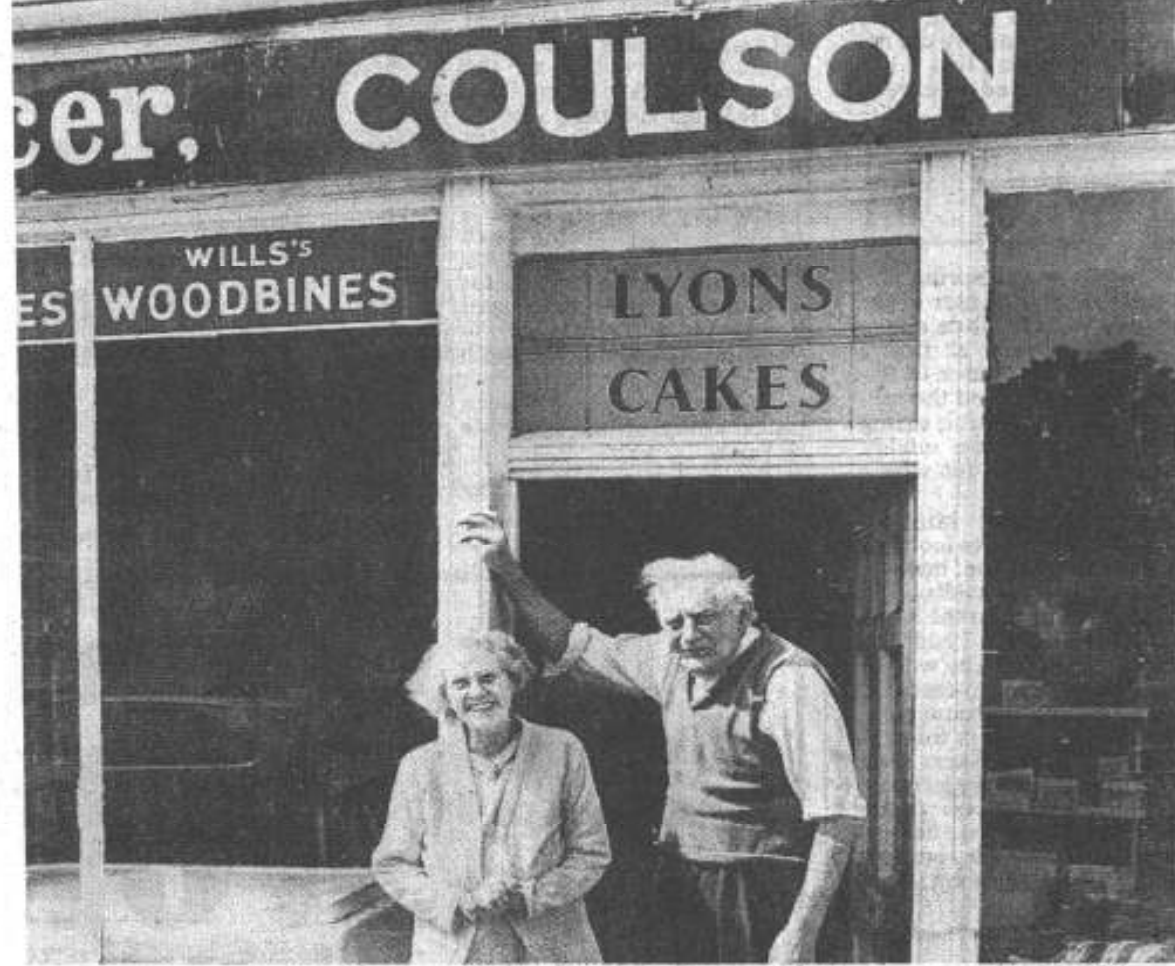
There are problems and Susan is finding them out quickly. "The bus service is absolutely diabolical," she moaned. A visit to Doddington Hospital without a car proved to be an impossibility and she has to make sure she keeps her food stocks up.

Headmaster at the school, Mr Maurice Capper, thinks the new people will get together in the future to fight hard for the amenities the older villagers have let slip away.

"I don't think it will die because we have got too much going for us. We have 65 pupils at the school and we have been much lower than that. It would be uneconomic for us to die as a village." Benwick may be gradually sinking into the Fen peat but if it is a choice between sinking and swimming then the villagers will fight hard to survive.



● Benwick at midday on a Friday — visit it any day of the week and it always looks deserted.



● Mr and Mrs Coulson stand outside their shop which was once just one of many thriving businesses in the village.



● Some of the new and younger residents get down to some work in the growing village school.