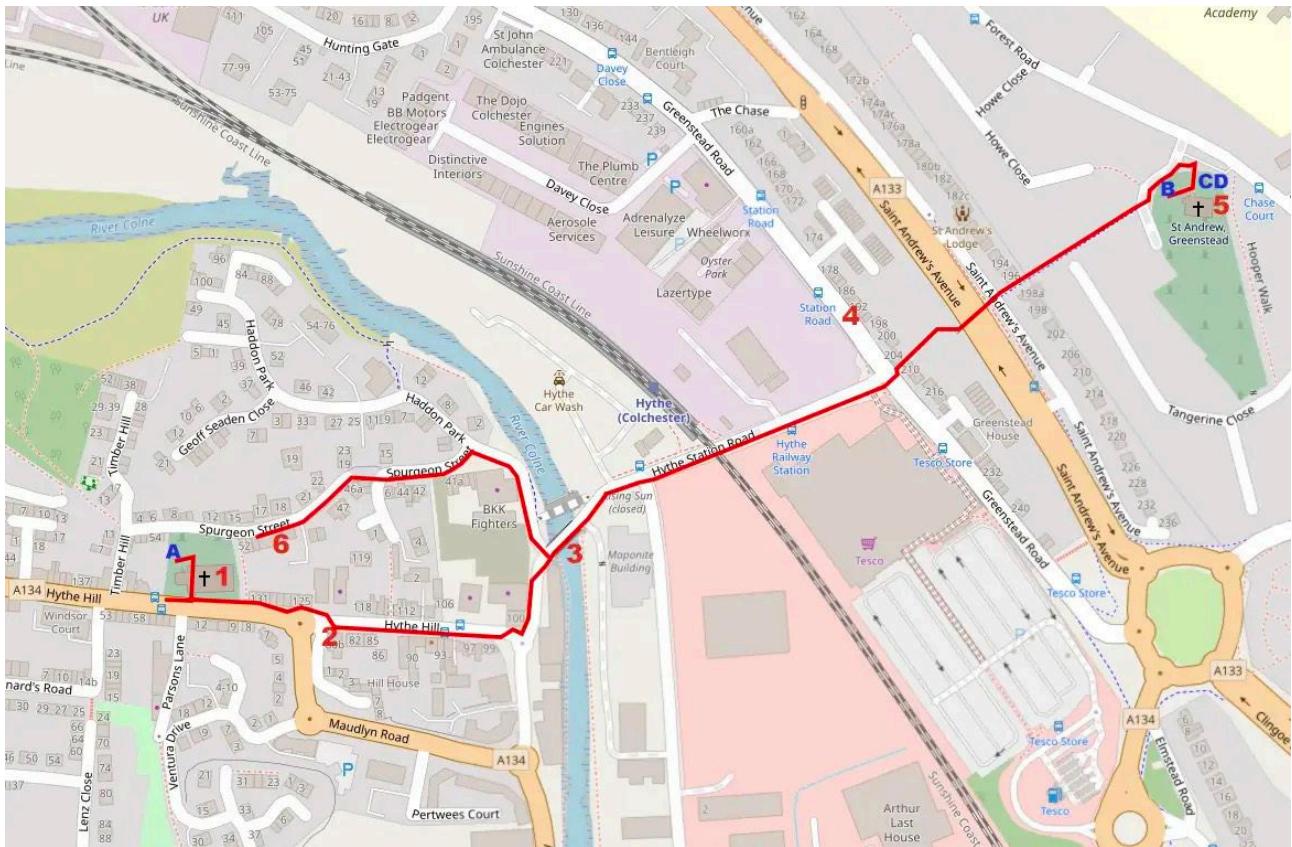


Finding Willett and Mills ancestors in Colchester

A walk around the Hythe and Greenstead by Ian Henghes.



1. Tessa and I spent a fascinating few hours of discovery in the Hythe area of Colchester in June 2025. We started our walk at St Leonard's Church on Hythe Hill, Everard and Maria Willett's local church. The church is only open two hours a week, but it is possible to arrange a visit at other times. We were lucky enough to be shown around by Joy Hopkinson, a volunteer and enthusiast who was keen to tell us all about the history of the church; how the steeple was destroyed by an earthquake in the 1880's and a tower built in its place, how above the church door there is a cell of a room where people were at one time incarcerated. On one occasion a baker supposedly took pity and got them some bread, only to be incarcerated himself.

The church is 'redundant' so is now looked after by the Churches Conservation Trust. The font in the church is medieval, having come originally from elsewhere, but supposedly in place since the early 19th century which means my two times great-grandfather William Willett would have been baptised in it.





Outside in the churchyard a good number of the gravestones have been removed or moved to be against the wall at the back rather than in their original positions. The grave of Everard and Maria Willett my four times great grandparents is one such gravestone (left of centre of the photo) with the inscription of their names still visible, but gradually eroding and hard to read in full. Fortunately it has been transcribed and a book in the church carries its inscription. (See below)

As we left the church we looked with more interest at the door which has a number of holes made during the civil war when the Royalist 'Cavaliers' briefly held out by poking their muskets through to take pot shots at the Parliamentarian 'Roundheads' who were taking the town.

2. It is only a short distance down Hythe Hill to The Queens Head which is where Everard and Maria ran both a coal merchants business and the inn itself. There is a roundabout so the main road which would have continued straight down the hill now turns right and goes through what would have been the coal-merchant's yard and stables at the back of the inn.

3. Walking on down Hythe Hill following to old main road turn left at the bottom towards the bridge over the river Colne. It is tidal and was very low when crossed.

Looking down into the mud with a skeletal bicycle frame protruding it takes a little effort to imagine the Colne with barges moored along the banks being loaded and unloaded with coal and other merchandise. Over the bridge there is a level crossing next to Hythe railway station. The advent of the railway would ultimately have spelled the end of the barge trade.



Look to the left at the junction with Greenstead Road. One of the old houses on the right was the home of Joseph Willett a gardener. Joseph was Everard's brother, and like him is my four times great-grandfather. Joseph's daughter, Susannah, was to marry William Mills. Susannah and William's daughter, Maria Mills, married her second cousin William Willett Junior, of daylight saving fame. (See ancestor chart below).



4. To reach the church of St Andrew's Greenstead take a narrow but well-used path to an underpass beneath the A133 which at this point is dual carriageway. From here the path climbs the hill to St Andrew's church which would until not all that long ago have been surrounded by fields. Now it is in the middle of a housing estate. Looking through the railings with the church behind at the foot of a large yew tree one can already just make out a headstone for Joseph Willett and his wife Susannah.



they had reached adulthood. The graves are very eroded so hard to make out.

Another grave which may still exist in the churchyard is for Thomas Willett, the father of Joseph and Everard as he is recorded as being buried here. If anyone visits and does locate it please let me know!

We were not able to visit the interior of St Andrew's in Greenstead. The church would have been within easy sight of St Leonard's on Hythe Hill, but now houses largely obscure the view. Walking back along the same path it is possible to catch a glimpse of the tower between rooftops.

5. Back over the river and then turn right and then left into Spurgeon Street which in the late 19th Century was called Back Lane. It was here,



likely in one of the houses closest to St Leonard's that Everard and Maria lived before they moved to the Queens Head inn on Hythe Hill.

On our visit we did not have time to also visit another Colchester church with ancestral links, which is St Mary at the Wall. Here John Mills and Sarah married in 1799. The church now serves as Colchester Arts Centre but there are gravestones in the churchyard around it so it would be worth seeing if any of them are Mills. During the civil war the Royalists had a large cannon they called 'Humpty Dumpty' here. Bombardment by the Parliamentary forces caused it to 'take a great fall' and it was not retrievable. It is thought this may be the origin of the nursery rhyme!



Looking back up Hythe Hill from The Queens Head to St Leonard's Church.

Links:

St Leonard at the Hythe - CO1 2NP

<https://www.visitchurches.org.uk/visit/our-churches/st-leonard-at-the-hythe-church-colchester-essex>

St Andrew's Greenstead - CO4 3XH

<https://andyanneandmatt.org.uk/our-buildings/st-andrews/>

St Mary at the Wall - CO1 1NF

<https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/church/st-mary-walls-colchester>

Other Willett resources including a link to the story of Everard and Maria

<https://henghes.org/family/>

Gravestone Inscriptions:

St Leonard's

A. (1 & 2 on ancestor chart)

Sacred To the memory of Everard Willett who departed this life May 13th 1845 Aged 41 years
A faithful friend, a husband dear, A tender father lieth here, Was taken from us unto rest It was
God's will he thought it best.

Also of Maria, his wife Who departed this life June 2nd 1851 Aged 51 years
She lived respected and died regretted

St Andrew's.

B. (3 & 4 on ancestor chart)

In Memory of Joseph Willett Who died Dec 17th 1878 Aged 81 years

Also Susannah his wife Who died July 11th 1848 Aged 53 years

And William their son who died Jan 17 1850 Aged 23 Years

The lord redeemeth the soul of his servants - Psalms 24.22

Therefore the redeemed of the lord shall return and come with singing unto Zion and everlasting
joy shall be upon their head: They shall obtain gladness and joy: and sorrow and mourning shall
flee away - Isaiah 1.11

Also of Sarah Cottis who died sept. 21st 1910 Aged 69 years *[see note 1 below]* She went unto
death loved by all

C. (6 & 7 on ancestor chart)

Jane Lucas Mills Wife of William Mills Who departed this life January 15 1845 In the 44th year of
her age

Keep this house under Shall ...

Also of William Mills Who departed this life August 19 1856 Aged 55 years

Also Jane their daughter Who died September 1 1817 Aged 13 years

D. (5 on ancestor chart)

In Affectionate Remembrance of Susannah the beloved daughter of W. & S. Mills Who departed
this life 1st May 1872 Aged 9 years She is not dead but sleeping

Also of Susannah. The beloved wife of William Mills Who departed this life 10th September 1872
Aged 38 years *[More lines below this are illegible see note 2]*

Notes:

1) Sarah Cottis features on two census records as living in the same house as Joseph. In the 1871
census she is a Tutoress aged 28. 10 years earlier she was already in the house listed as a
servant. Next door lived a large family by the name Cottis, so it seems likely that Sarah came to
help Joseph some years after his wife died in 1848.

2) The illegible writing may record the younger William Mills who was married to Susannah Willett
- the second Susannah on this headstone.

Willett and Mills ancestors buried in Colchester

