

Newsletter

DUNSTABLE & DISTRICT
LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

N°13

March 2000



From the Chairman

I would like to begin my first report as Chairman by paying tribute to my predecessor, Colin Bourne. Those of you who have been members of our Society for any length of time will be in no doubt about the dedication which Colin brought to the post. He was our first Chairman and steered us through the early days when we were deciding what sort of Society we wanted to be

Our early meetings were held upstairs in Dunstable Library. It fairly soon became clear that this venue was not big enough to hold the people who wished to attend. We moved to the Parlour at the Methodist Church and still our numbers increased until there was not enough room there either. We moved again, this time into our present Hall, and the numbers continue to increase. If all our members attended, the present venue would not be big enough to house them all. This steady increase in numbers is a tribute to Colin and the way in which he nurtured and guided our Society during his tenure of office.

I am sure you would wish to join with me in thanking him for all his hard work on behalf of our Society and to wish Colin and Joy a long and happy life in Blandford Forum.

You will have been saddened to hear of the death of our President, Mr. Nicholas Bagshawe. He had a lifelong connection with Dunstable and was a great supporter of historical research in Bedfordshire. Joan Curran, John Lunn, Vivienne Gutteridge and I attended his Memorial Service in London and, between us, represented the Society. The service took place in the Church of Saint Lawrence-Jewry-Next-Guildhall, in the City of London, on Saturday 27th November. This moving service, in a beautiful church, contained tributes to the three main areas of his life, his family, his business world and his enthusiasm for history. Patricia Bell, former Bedfordshire County Archivist, spoke of his dedication and involvement over the years with historical research in Bedfordshire and in Dunstable. Nicholas Bagshawe will be greatly missed by many people. (see obituary on page 76)

I would like to thank all my fellow officers of the Society for the time and enthusiasm which they expend on our behalf. Successful organisations such as ours do not just happen. They are the result of dedication and commitment over many years and it is right that this should be acknowledged.

Thanks should also be given to two very important groups of people. We have an excellent rota who organise the refreshments for the end of each meeting and we have a well drilled group who put out the chairs and tables so that the meeting can take place.

We continue to arrange a wide variety of talks on local issues. All our speakers tell me how impressed they are by the size of our gatherings and the quality of the questions they are asked at the end.

We have enjoyed wonderful summer outings in the past, either for an evening, an afternoon or a whole day. The weather has usually been most generous to us and I hope it will continue to be so. Your Committee is putting its combined thinking cap on again and I trust that we will be able to organise outings for this summer which are every bit as enjoyable as those which we have experienced together in the past.

Hugh Garrod

The Workings of the English Parish

A talk by David Dymond Chairman
of the *British Association for Local History*.
At Houghton Conquest Village Hall
on Saturday 13th May at 3.00 pm.
(Following the AGM)
Visitors welcome - Admission free

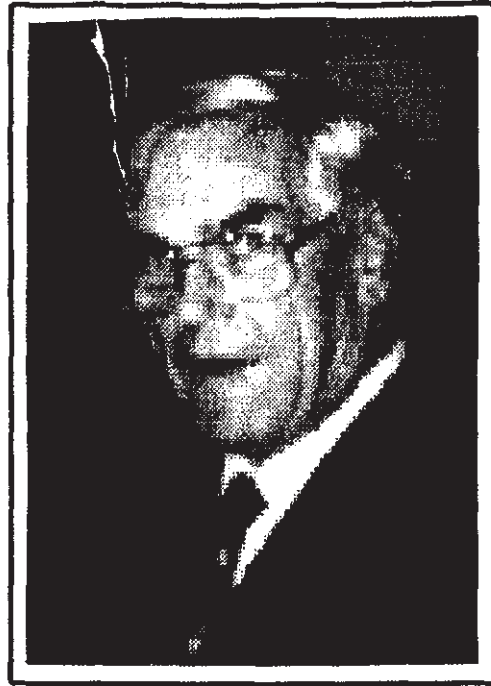
DUNSTABLE PHOTO 2000

Dunstable Town Council has been very fortunate in securing a grant of £25,000 from the Lottery Millennium Festival Fund towards the cost of making available to the general public previously inaccessible photographic collections of the town. These include over 30,000 images taken by the *Dunstable Gazette*, now stored uncatalogued at Luton Museum, and the equally vast collection of local photographer, Mr. Bruce Turvey. The Town Council itself has a collection of over 1,000 images which Society Members have been assisting in recording and indexing over the past year.

The intention is to digitise the images and make them available on computer in the local reference section of Dunstable Library. The programme selected to accommodate the images will also be capable of including reminiscences from local people to accompany the images. Unfortunately the funding is insufficient to allow every available image to be scanned and Society Members are again assisting in the project by identifying key photographs which have appeared in the *Dunstable Gazette* over the years which they feel should receive priority treatment.

It is intended to recruit a postgraduate Project Worker to manage the scheme which will run throughout this year. The intention is to have available by December 2000 the basis of a uniquely accessible photographic record of the development of Dunstable and District over the past 100 years. The Chairman of the Society, Hugh Garrod, sits on the Steering Committee for the project and would be pleased to hear of any Members who may be able to contribute to the Society's support. He would be particularly pleased to hear from any Members who have photographs of Dunstable, which they would be willing to have copied.

Richard Walden



OBITUARY

Nicholas Thomas Bagshawe 1927-1999

Nicholas Bagshawe, who had been President of our Society since 1992, died at King's College Hospital in London on 30th September, aged 72.

He was born at Kingsbury in Church Street, Dunstable, which was the home of his parents, Thomas and Grace Bagshawe. Nicholas was the grandson of Arthur Bagshawe, the founder of the conveyor manufacturers, Bagshawe and Co. came to Dunstable from London in 1906 and were major employers in the town. The Bagshawe family also lived in Grove House, now the home of the Town Council. Thomas Bagshawe was intensely interested in local history, amassing a huge collection of artifacts and documents.

Nicholas inherited his father's enthusiasm for this subject. He studied engineering at Cambridge and later qualified as a chartered accountant. He served in the RAF and was then financial director of several companies. Retirement enabled Nicholas Bagshawe to become even more involved with the history of our town and of our county. He was connected for a long period with the Bedfordshire Local History Association and the Bedfordshire Historical Records Society. He is survived by his wife and their three sons. One of the sons, William, is now a member of our Society.

Data Protection

The Society recently asked its members to supply information about their skills, abilities and interests. The object of this exercise was to help the committee to find, quickly, members who might be able to assist the Society with specific projects from time to time.

At a recent committee meeting, the subject of Data Protection was raised. I agreed to make enquiries and to report to the committee and to members.

Guidelines issued by the Data Protection Registrar say that we do not need to register our Society so long as:

1. The information only refers to members and is only for the members' use.
2. The members know that the information is being kept by the Society and do not object.
3. Any member who does object can have their information deleted.
4. Permission is sought when new information is added.

These guidelines apply only to information on computer and do not relate to material which is stored manually.

Hugh Garrod

Memories of Dunstable North Station 1942 - 1965

by J.F. WILLIAMS

The recent talk by Steven Summerson was especially interesting to me as I worked at Dunstable North station in the booking Office, apart from Army Service, from 1942 until its closure in 1965.

As a boy I was not particularly interested in railways and had no real idea of what I should do on leaving school. However, Mr Underwood, the Headmaster at Northfields School, obviously had other plans for me. When the then Station Master called on him wanting someone to train as booking clerk I was approached. After passing the necessary educational and medical examinations at Euston, in February 1942, I started my career with the London, Midland & Scottish Railway Company as it was then called. Their employees were always known as railway servants and employment usually ran in families.

The duties, I soon found out, were numerous and it was six months before I was allowed to be left in charge on my own, quite a daunting task for a 14 year old, although I had an out-and-out railwayman porter with me, Arthur Gibbs, who had been all his working life on the railway. This was during the war and the black-out and I well remember trying to collect tickets, part of my duties, with an oil lamp in one hand, not the easiest of tasks. At that time there were 3 horses stabled in the

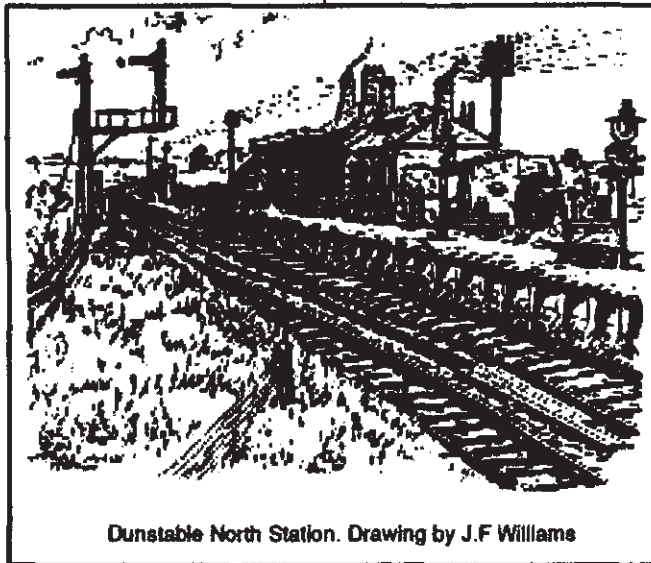
Goods yard there, used for deliveries around the town. Fred Beckett (Joe) was one of the draymen, and Harry Newman, who I believe is still alive, and Percy Leach who drove a Dennis lorry and did the out of town deliveries to Whipsnade, Studham, Hockliffe etc. All kinds of traffic were carried by passenger train. I had nothing to do with the goods side of the station, the office of which was in charge of Chief Clerk Fred Pollard, and the yard foreman was Horace

Freestone, later followed by Sid Williams, no relation!

Various livestock included day old chicks from farms around the area, rabbits and mice going and coming to shows and exhibitions, and pigeons for release to return to their lofts, as far away as London perhaps. Sometimes more exotic animals were sent off from Whipsnade Zoo, usually brought in by Head Keeper Fates. Flowers arrived from Covent Garden for Mr Beavington at the Flower Shop and Phillip Buckle was often awaiting arrival of dress suits wanted for an evening do. A fish van came daily from Grimsby and Hull with fish for the local fishmongers. David Sewell collected his in his

three-wheeled vehicle, the rest had theirs delivered, Pratts in Union Street and Stubbs in Church Street, among others. During the Season herrings would arrive in open topped boxes from Lowestoft and Yarmouth. One day one of these fell onto the railway line, someone had very gritty herrings that day. The station was always lighted by gas, had no electricity at all, and when there were cuts after the war during fuel shortages the station was a blaze of light in an otherwise blacked out town. On Saturday mornings at this time there would be quite a queue of prams and barrows waiting to be filled in the nearby coal yard. A special train was run for several seasons in connection with Vauxhall children's visit to Wembley to see either a pantomime on ice or something similar and this would be during January. I well remember one occasion when a heavy snowstorm came on before the return train was due. Anxious parents filled the waiting room and a fire was lit outside in an oil drum to help keep them warm. The train finally arrived some hour or so late, two engines storming up Sewell bank to ensure it didn't come to a stand. We managed to get all the children for Dunstable North off safely, none fell off the platform in the darkness and snow, before the train roared off to Dunstable Town and Luton. I well remember the incident referred to in Steven Summerson's talk of the

sad occasion in which the train had a blowback resulting in the death of the fireman who I knew well. How no children were killed on Brewers Hill level crossing I'll never know. This level crossing, in earlier years, was only used to get to Brewers Hill Farm, so was not used very much; but when the Beecroft Estate was developed, it became quite busy and had to be closed to road traffic when the yard or gas works was shunted. As this sometimes happened when A C Delco



Dunstable North Station. Drawing by J.F Williams

were coming out at dinner time, tempers were easily aroused between them and the signalman.

The original signal box stood near the gas works, adjacent to their coal and coke storage pit and into which it gradually sank, resulting in a new signal box being built on the other side of the line. Although on a hot summer day Dunstable North Station appeared from High Street North to be sleeping in the sunshine, in fact it was quite a busy place and I have some happy memories of the time I was there and of the people I worked with, particularly of Jack Sear of Eaton Bray and Frank Powis of Tebworth, among many.

Landscaping at Valence End

The Chairman has asked me to bring you up to date with the current position with the restoration of chalk grassland at Valence End, that part of Whipsnade Wild Animal Park below Bison Hill.

You will be pleased to learn that despite the bad weather at the beginning of the year, the contractor completed his work on time, and the final areas have been grass seeded. As you may have seen, the grass is now growing well, the later sown areas seem to be doing better than the earlier ones. At least, the site no longer looks like a quarry.

The Animal Park has now submitted its 15 year management plan to the County Council's Mineral Planning section who are currently examining it. Hopefully there will be no problems.

Now we have to watch patiently as Nature takes its course. Already the rain has begun to re-create the paths of the new streams and quite a number of chalkland plant species have re-established themselves.



David Lindsey

Change of Treasurer

As many of you already know, Benard Stevens has resigned as Treasurer after serving in that



office since the Society started in 1991. He has kept our accounts impeccably since then and we are very grateful to him for all the hard work he has done on our behalf over the

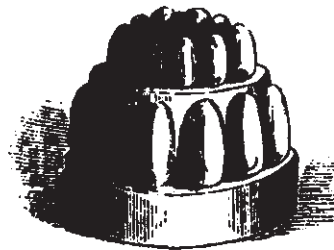
last nine years. Thank you, Bernard.

Welcome now to Mrs. Cynthia Turvey, who is taking over from Bernard as our new Treasurer.

If you need to get in touch with her, her address is Appleacres, Wellhead, Dunstable, LU6 2JR. (Tel. 01582 668531)

The Jubilee Domestic Tinware & Toy Works

The 'Dunstable Gazette' of December 2, 1949 carried the report that this works was moving from Stanbridge to Dunstable. Four local workers were moving with the firm, and others, mostly part-time, were to be given the opportunity of doing so. Much of the equipment had already been transferred. The manager, Mr G H Little said they had been refusing labour by as many as 5 applicants a day.



Limited research has revealed that the firm's new premises in Dunstable were on the corner of Albion Street and Victoria Street opposite the Polish Catholic church, the former Primitive Methodist church.

The previous occupants were the Miss Muirheads (one being Annamaria) who made paper dress patterns. Their address is given in the Dunstable Directories of 1933 and 1939 as No 39 Albion Street. Prior to that, the building is thought to have been a hat factory.

Jubilee made toys for Mr Bob Smith who had a business in London. Bernard Stevens remembers Mr Morris, the owner and the manager, Mr Little, coming into his shop in Albion Street. The premises were taken over by a firm making plastic labels some time before 1961, which means that Jubilee works may have been in occupation for the 10 years between 1949 and 1959-60. They were not mentioned in the 1951 telephone directory.

Does anyone know anything further about Jubilee works?

David Lindsey



S.O.E. Churchill's Secret Army

After the talk about Tempsford Airport a member of our society approached us explaining that he had many memories of the activities as he was a flight engineer during the war. Here are some of his memories which nicely complement the talk of November 1999 by Bernard O'Connor and the recently broadcast television series.

During W.W.2. the German Army overran Western Europe, defeating the armies ranged against them there. As the various Resistance movements against German oppression - especially the French Maquis - sprang up, the Special Operations Executive, S.O.E. (Churchill's Secret Army) based at Tempsford, Bedfordshire, was developed to help and arm them. The resistance, with this aid, soon grew beyond the ability of Tempsford alone to serve it. Transport Command's 38 Group was therefore developed to undertake much of this work.

As a crew member in 190 Squadron, 38 Group, I was involved in this activity. A typical operation was as follows. Take off would be in the late evening, to cross the enemy coast around midnight. Here, there was a band of anti-aircraft guns (flak) to be negotiated by changing altitude, weaving, etc. Then into the peaceful French countryside (rarely to meet the enemy), on our way to the Dropping Zone (D.Z.). This could be as deep into France as the Swiss border. Having navigated our way into the area, we might find that the Resistance had a radio beacon to help in location. Our aircraft would then circle, flashing the agreed code for the night. If the Germans had not interfered, and all being well, our code would be responded to by an answering code flashed from the people on the ground, who would then light a fire in the field. We would then run in at 100 / 200 ft with bomb doors open, and drop the 24

canisters containing explosive, weapons, ammunition and other essential supplies in their struggle against the occupation. Leaving them to collect this, we would climb and turn for home.

Sometimes we would see a train taking advantage of the dark, to travel, giving our rear gunner a legitimate reason to fire his guns at it, as we flew along its length. And once we saw a V2 rocket rising up, to make its way to London or the South East.

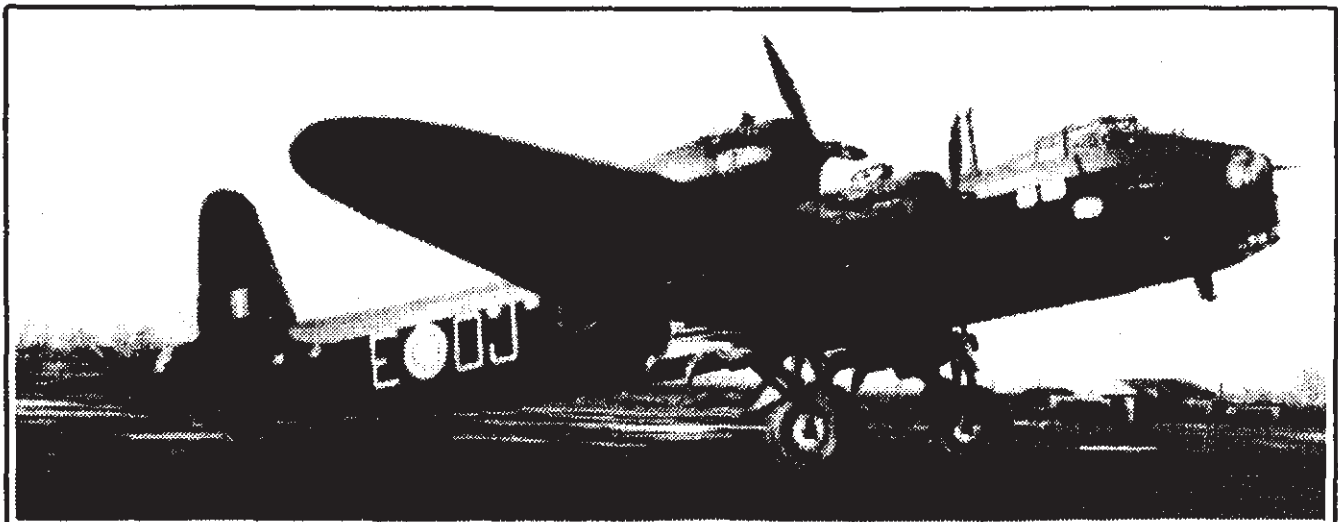
Our aircraft also carried S.O.E. or S.A.S. (Special Air Service) people into Europe. We might find men and women in civilian clothes, standing silently by our aircraft, and I, as the crew member responsible for them, would show them where to sit (on the floor, in our plane) and explain our drill. When near to the D.Z., somewhere in occupied territory, their parachute static line would be hooked up and the jump hole opened. The bomb aimer, map reading the target, would switch on a red light, to be ready, then a green, to jump into the dark countryside, and danger. We would then head back to our airfield, and a meal at the mess.

General Eisenhower estimated that the Resistance was worth fifteen divisions to the Allies, in the battle to liberate France. These operations to supply the Resistance were also made to Belgium, Holland and Norway - anywhere in occupied Europe.

38 Group also towed gliders to Normandy, Arnhem, and the Rhine crossing, and carried out other operations, and 46 Group, Transport Command was also involved in this work, but that is another story.

*Malcolm Mitchell,
one time Stirling bomber Flight Engineer.*

Below : A Short Stirling, in service from Feb. 1941 to Sept. 1944



The Dissolution of the Priory of St. Peter, Dunstable

Gervase Markham, the last Prior, had been elected in 1525 after the death of his predecessor John Wastell. He had been Prior for 8 years when Dunstable Priory was chosen as the location for the tribunal which was to annul the marriage of King Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon. The hearing was held in the Priory Lady Chapel from the 10th to the 23rd of May 1533 presided over by Archbishop Cranmer. Dunstable was chosen because it was the most suitable monastic establishment within reasonable distance of Amptill where Catherine was held under house arrest. This court was held because of the Pope's procrastination in dealing with the King's "Great Matter". Rome had already discussed the question twice, in 1527 and 1529, without arriving at a decision.

The event signalled the final break of the English Church from Rome. Henry, through Parliament, passed many laws giving him total control over the English Church. In particular, in 1535, he organised a general Visitation, that is a fact-finding tour, of all the religious houses. Many were found corrupt and in poor moral and physical state. Their suppression, or at least reformation, was needed. These smaller houses closed down, leaving "the great solemn houses where religion is right well and truly kept" stronger than ever. But a rebellion by the gentry and some large monasteries in Yorkshire, the "Pilgrimage of Grace", exasperated Henry who executed 220 rebels and brought down such big houses as Rivaux and Furness. The suppression slowed down for a short time, but slowly restarted for many different reasons. The real - unofficial - reason was Henry's need to replenish his depleted treasury. By 1540 there were no religious houses left in England.

An episcopal visitation of Dunstable Priory in 1530 had declared that "everything is well" (*Omnia bene*). In 1534 the Prior and canons had taken the "Oath of Supremacy" accepting the King as Supreme Head on Earth of the Church in England. Prior Markham had also given the king considerable help at the time of the annulment. These facts probably explain why the suppression of Dunstable Priory came so late (December 1539) and the treatment of the canons was comparatively generous.

At the time of the Dissolution there were 13 canons in residence all needing to be found a living. They were given some choice of where they wanted to go. The next page lists, in short, the pensions and living (stipend) the 13 canons were given. Many of them did not take their new post before 1546 or 1548. It is interesting to note that none chose to serve as the parish priest for Dunstable, particularly as in the previous century the nave had been used as the Parish Church. The reason for this usage of part of the Priory was that at the time the building was in desperate need of repair for which the Prior had very little money. Initially the town had been allowed to use the North aisle for their worship. As numbers increased there was a tendency to extend into the nave, thereby interfering with the canons processional services. A compromise was agreed

whereby the Town agreed to keep the nave in good repair. From this time, about 1400, the nave was referred to as 'the Parish Church'.

So after the dissolution many canons still stayed in the priory, no doubt waiting for the final decision about the destiny of their house. Henry considered some additional Cathedrals in order to reduce size of the Lincoln Diocese and Dunstable Priory was one of these; the establishment of officials was drawn up and details of the endowment listed. It amounted to £807. In the event nothing came of this. The revenues (rentals, gifts, etc.) of the Priory, now going to the Crown, were insufficient to support the expense. The final decision took some years, which explains the reason for the delay in the Canons taking up their new appointments, some as late as 1546 or 1548.

We do not know where Gervase Markham went at the dissolution. He probably first stayed with his brother William, at Husborne Crawley. He did not take charge of any parish and finished his life quite comfortably in a house he had built or bought in Dunstable, if we judge by the content of his will. He is very likely to have met Henry VIII and some of his new wives when they visited Dunstable over the years, first with Ann Boleyn in 1532, then with Catherine Howard during a hunting honeymoon, in 1540 and during another honeymoon with Catherine Parr in 1543.

Gervase Markham's will, made in May 1561, is interesting to analyse. His main beneficiaries are his brothers and cousins and their families. He leaves some money and some goods to his three servants. He leaves a total of £12 cash to various persons and mentions that a cousin owes him £20. The most interesting point is that he makes his cousin Anthony Stubbings his overseer and leaves him " ... my chalice, vestments, ornaments and implements for a chapel and divine service upon condition that if they may, at any time thereafter be occupied in the church again that then he to appoint an set to be there occupied and if they may not the to be sold and the money thereof to be given to my soul's health". This shows that even though he had been a faithful servant of the king, the ex-prior was not of the Protestant persuasion. He had kept with him the main vessels and vestments for celebrating mass and probably used them in his private devotion. The Church of England was certainly not "protestant" from the beginning. It is only in 1559 that Queen Elisabeth's Act of Uniformity laid down a Protestant pattern for many years to come. Before that date, and possibly for many years after, the people and even the clergy continued their religious practices without realising that a break with Rome had happened.

Gervase died in September 1561 and was buried in the church.

John Lunn & Omer Roucoux

The following booklet give interesting details on the events surrounding the annulment of the marriage of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon :
John Lunn : *The Proceedings of Archbishop Cranmer's Court ... in the Priory Church ... in May 1533* (1991). On sale at the back of the Church.

Places to Visit

Ford End Watermill - Ivinghoe

Opening Times 2000

Easter Monday, 24 April / Bank Holiday Mondays

1 May, 29 May, 28 August

Afternoon 2.30 to 5.30 pm.

Adults £1, Children (5-15) 30p.

Sunday 14 May (National Mills Day)

open 2.30 to 5.00 approx.

Adults £1.50, Children 50p.

Stoneground wholemeal flour will be on sale.

Enquiries : D. Lindsey : 01582 600391

Bletchley Park

Opening times

Every other weekend, 10.30 am to 5.00 pm.

last tour 3.00 pm, last entry 3.30 pm.

Saturday and Sunday.

Adults £4.50 Children & concessions £3.50

Children under 8 free

Dates : The following weekends :

April : 1, 15, 29. May : 13, 27. June : 10, 24.

July : 8, 22. August : 5, 19

In addition there will be ordinary open days on bank holiday Mondays May 1st and 29th.

There will also be a commemoration of the

anniversary of 'D' day on June 4th

and a Radio Fair on August 27th.

Information line : 01908 640404



Gervaise Markham

The last prior of
Dunstable

from the bottom of the north
light of the west end
window of Dunstable Priory
Church

Pension details of the Dunstable canons

THE careers of the religious after the suppression were very different through the country, some took that opportunity to leave the orders and marry, some went to other orders which had not yet been dissolved, most received a pension and were put in charge of a parish. The destiny of the Dunstable Augustinians is well documented and is probably not typical. Here is a summary of what we know about them*. The first figure after the name is the annual pension granted, then the parish and the "living" is given. This is the amount of money earned annually for the pastoral work, similar to today's stipend. It is quite difficult to estimate the present day value of the sums quoted. After much thinking we reckon that, nowadays, the multiplication factor must be around 700 - 900.

1. Prior Gervaise MARKHAM, pension £60. Lived in Dunstable, and died in 1561. Buried in the Parish Church.

2. Sub Prior Thomas CLAYBROOKE £9 Living in 1548 with Wm. MARKHAM (brother of Gervase) at Hanbury, Staffs.

3. Canon Richard KENT, £8. Vicar of Puloxhill (in the gift of the Priory) from 1540 Living £9/10. also Rector of Higham Gobion from 1553 £9. Died 1554.

4. Canon George EDWARDS £7 Curate of Hockliffe from 1548 Rector Eversholt from 1557, then Rector Milton Bryon in 1558. Livings £12. Died 1561.

5. Canon John STALWORTH £7. In 1546 he became vicar of Husborne Crawley (in the gift of the Priory). Later, in 1555 rector of Greatworth (Northants), Livings £9. Died 1590.

6. Canon Edmund GREEN £6. In 1548 in Leigh, Surrey, later in 1551 in Harrow on the Hill. Living £16. Died 1557.

7. Canon Peter WHYPPE £6. Probably dead by 1548.

8. Canon Richard BOWSTRET £7. In 1548, vicar of Owing and Rector of Lillington, Sussex. Living £23

9. Canon Austin CURTIS £8. In 1544, vicar of Framfield, Sussex. Deprived because he married in 1554. His wife seems to have disappeared as, at his death, he is vicar of Eastbourne and rector of Litlington. A double living of £38.

10. Canon Robert SOMER £6. Rector of Easthampstead Latimer, Bucks from 1546 Living £5. Deprived because he married in 1554.

11. Canon John NYXE £5/6/8 Curate of Lilley from 1543. In 1545 became vicar of Offley with a living of £9. Deprived because he married in 1554.

12. Canon Nicholas CLAYBROOKE £2. Rector of Puttenham, Herts. from 1558. Living £10. Died 1565.

13. Canon John PERCYVALL £2. Rector of Aston Clinton, Bucks from 1556, also Rector of Easthampstead Latimer, Bucks 1558 - 61. Double living of £28. Died 1561.

* This information is a summary of the appendix of Geoffrey Baskerville : *English Monks and the suppression of the Monasteries*. (1937)



Could you contribute to Richard Walden's appeal (see page 76) with photos such as this one of the Old Brewery at the corner of High Street North and Chiltern Road in 1967 ?

Photo David Goseltine

WORLD WAR 2 EXHIBITION

Many of you will by now have seen the display on Dunstable in World War 2 which was put on show at this one-day exhibition at Ampthill recently, and which we put up again at our own AGM.

The exhibition itself was most successful, with 18 displays, including those from the US 8th Air Force, the Luton National Health Trust, the Fire Services, the Defence of Britain Project record of defence sites in Bedfordshire, as well as a wide variety of pictures and artefacts from societies from all over the county. There were wartime posters and newspapers, gas masks and ARP equipment, uniforms, wartime stamp issues, Ministry of Food recipes, and men's and women's service medals.

There were also, of course, photographs galore, in spite of the fact that film was not available to the general public during the war. There were pictures of Home Guard units, of parades for War Weapons and Wings for Victory Weeks, of evacuees, of bomb damage and, finally, celebrations and street parties at the end of the war.

Over 460 visitors came through the doors in just over five hours, and their only complaint was that it was too crowded!

We would like to thank David Lindsey and Omer Roucoux for the hard work they put into the preparation of this exhibition.

Joan Curran



The Dunstable Home Guard Company Marching up Church Street, in 1941 led by Major Horace Derby.
Courtesy of Betty Tarbox.

Reminiscences of the Early Years of WW2 in Dunstable

Based on notes from Bernard Stevens

Like all other towns in the country, Dunstable soon showed signs of wartime. Iron railings disappeared from almost all the properties in the town, including Grove House Gardens, from which the large iron gates were taken. Strangely, the railings in front of Montpellier House escaped and survived the war.

As well as blacking out their windows, shops had to provide curtains or some kind of partition just inside the door to stop the light shining out when the door was opened on a dark night.

The Fire Station (formerly behind the old Town Hall) needed more space for additional fire-fighting equipment and moved to a prominent site in High Street North, where North House had stood until two or three years before (where Queensway is now).

Civil defence was considered very important and trained personnel gave instruction to civilians in the use of stirrup pumps and methods of dealing with incendiary bombs. Most able-bodied people were involved in fire-watching rotas on duty in buildings all around the town, while others helped to man an observation post on Lord's Hill.

But many civilians' main contribution to the war effort was through their work in the factories producing equipment for the armed services. Thermoplastics took over the old hat factory behind the High Street North shops (the main entrance was in Albion Street) and made gun turrets for aircraft. Bagshawe's made tracks for tanks, which were despatched by rail from Dunstable North Station. Part of the Cross Paperware works was taken over by Hughes (instrument makers) who made compasses and bomb sights.

The Roller Skating Rink at the top of Half Moon Hill was also requisitioned for production and an electrical manufacturer took over part of AC-Sphinx. Several of the smaller engineering works, including Headly's paper works, provided smaller parts for aircraft.

There was little damage to the town from enemy action. A stray bomb fell in Totternhoe Road and another fell on an old cottage on the A5 in Hockliffe. The small amount of damage was fortunate, in view of the fact that a large number of evacuee children had been sent to Dunstable at the beginning of the war. They arrived in double-decker buses and the Women's Voluntary Service (not Royal in those days) was responsible for looking after them.

Billeting Officers were appointed and the Methodist Church Institute on the Square was used as a distribution centre for blankets and mattresses, etc.

The Meteorological Office staff were also newcomers to the town. There were two large gates at the entrance to the new Met. Station, in Worthington Road, which was patrolled by armed guards every night. The whole area of the Met. Office buildings and grounds was covered with camouflage nets, so that if you looked down on it from the Downs it looked like a large hill. The lion carved in the hillside at Whipsnade was also camouflaged because it was thought it would act as a landmark to German pilots. Luton had a different kind of camouflage - at night large oil burners were lit which provided a thick haze covering the town.

Out in the countryside farmers had to plough up grassland and were controlled by the "War Ag", as the War Agricultural Committee was known. There was a ready market for the plum crop from the Eaton Bray area and local nurseries had to go over to food production.

The cattle market became a large centre for the assembling and distribution of cattle for slaughter in towns and cities over a wide area.