

Newsletter

DUNSTABLE & DISTRICT
LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Nº2

August 1994

Annual General Meeting

The third AGM of the Society was held on 15th March and over 50 members attended. Following the actual meeting there was an interesting selection of slides of old Dunstable.

The following officers and committee members were elected for the twelve months:

Chairman	<i>Colin Bourne</i>
Vice-Chairman:	<i>John Lunn</i>
Secretary:	<i>Joan Curran</i>
Treasurer:	<i>Bernard Stevens</i>
Committee members:	<i>Ron Frith</i>
	<i>Pat Reeves</i>
	<i>Omer Roucoux</i>

Thanks were expressed to Hugh Garrod for his work as Vice-Chairman over the preceding two years, a position he has had to relinquish owing to increased commitments in his educational field. Ron Frith will be Programme Secretary for the next winter session. Nicholas Bagshawe continues as our President and Fred Moore as Auditor.

Bernard Stevens, who incorporates Membership Secretary within his duties as Treasurer, reported a healthy financial position and that our membership has now reached three figures - 101.

An appeal for ladies (and gentlemen) to help with the overall duties of refreshments at each of our meetings brought a good response and has enabled a rota system to be set up, thus sharing the work-load.

C.E.B.



Nos. 16-20 West Street are amongst the 'Listed Buildings at Risk'. NPS Builders of Hemel Hempstead have now found that the structure is unsafe and have applied to South Beds council to demolish the whole building and reconstruct it to a similar appearance (Dunst. Gaz. 13 July 1994). This view shows its state in 1984. The house at the extreme left was demolished to make space for the Midland Bank. About 'Listed Buildings at Risk' see Joan's article on page 7.



Summer Outings

At the time of writing these notes we have just had the second of our three major outings for the summer, both of which have been enjoyed by those present in good weather.

The first, to Elstow, enabled us to visit the 17th century cottages, the Moot Hall, opened specially for us, and the Abbey (guides at all places) and to conclude the evening with light refreshments at The Swan, where we were made very welcome by mine host and his wife.

The second, to the Swiss Garden at Old Warden, was another very pleasant occasion, made all the more interesting by the narrative of the area given by our guide for the evening, Vivienne Evans. The coach tour of the surrounding countryside and the gentle, quiet (except for the peacocks!) walk through the garden were followed by refreshments at The White Horse at Southill.

We did have another visit, mentioned at our winter programme meetings, but with numbers limited, to the County Record Office at Bedford, where Chris Pickford, the County Archivist, and a colleague gave an informative talk about the work of the Office in its varying ways and conducted us round behind the scenes. They had gone to a lot of trouble to put certain material out for us in the main room and to talk about subjects relative to the Society and this was appreciated.

Arising out of this visit one of our members (not on the committee) has suggested that the Society research a local subject of our choice as a project. This would best be done informally by a small group, or team, or two groups co-operating together. Your committee agree about this, so ... can we have suggestions as to the subject, and who would like to take part? All thoughts are welcome, and to the Secretary, please.

C. E. B.

Dunstable Larks were once famous. Our logo, for this issue only, shows the bird in full flight above the Downs. Did you know that a 'flock' of larks is actually called an *Exultation of Larks*? More about these birds overleaf, page 6.



Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis*

Identification : 7". ... longish tail with conspicuous white on outer feathers ... Walks in crouched position. Flight strong and slightly undulating, with alternate spells of wing-beats and 'shooting' with closed wings; soars and hovers in song flight.

Voice : A clear, liquid "chir-r-up". Song, a high pitched, musical out-pouring, very long sustained, in hovering and ascending or descending flight. ...

Habitat : ... Nests on ground.

Collins *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain & Europe*, London, 1965, p.208.

The *Victoria History of the County of Bedford*, mentions that Thomas Baskerville in 1681 (*Hist. MSS. Com. Rep.*, xii, App. ii, 274) noted Dunstable as a place « having large fields about it where in the season they catch good larks, which have the great esteem for birds of that kind in London».

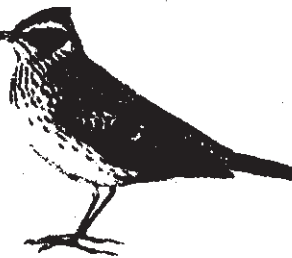
VCH. (1912) p. 363

Larks are still occasionally eaten, in England, in the traditional Steak, oyster, kidney and lark Pie, but there was a time when considerable numbers of these little birds were also eaten roast. Larks were sent to the London market, chiefly from Dunstable, during over 200 years; also but not quite to the same extent, from Cambridgeshire. Yarrell states that 1,255,500 Larks were taken during the winter of 1867-68.

Larks were provided for the Lords of the Star Chamber on many occasions : they cost but 6d per dozen, in 1519 and 1520, rising to 8d., in 1534, 1s. in 1605 and 3s.4d. in 1635. Their price on the London market was 4s. per dozen in 1807; 3s. in 1922, and 4s in 1941.

A Concise Encyclopaedia of Gastronomy, Birds and their Eggs. The Wine and Food Society, London 1944. p.33

«The kingdom is much pestered with flies in summer ; and these odious insects, each of them as big as a Dunstable lark, hardly gave me any rest while I sat at dinner, with their continual humming and buzzing about mine ears.» The larks are obviously in proportion. «The queen would craunch the wing of a lark bones and all, between her teeth, although it were nine times a large as that of a full grown turkey; and put a bit of bread in her mouth as big as two twelpenny loaves.»



Dunstable Larks

Also this town has for ages been celebrated for its numerous emigrants of the feathered tribe, which annually resort to the adjoining fields in the winter season; viz. Dunstable Larks, which are sometimes caught in great quantities; and for size and richness of flavour, are not to be equalled in the world.

Their quality, I consider, is owing, in a great measure, to the chalky soil of these parts; as on their first arrival they are very lean and weak, but they recover themselves in a very short time, owing probably to their pecking considerable quantities of the finest particles of chalk with their food, which braces and fattens them in a surprising manner. These larks are caught by labourers in the evenings and mornings, from Michaelmas to February, with trammelling-nets; and are served up in great perfection, at some of the inns of this town (owing to a peculiar and secret method in the process of cooking them), they are admired as a luxury by the Nobility and Gentry who travel through Dunstable in the lark season; also by an ingenious contrivance in their package, Larks are sent, ready dressed, to all parts of England.

William Nicholls (Dunno) : *History of Dunstable*, 1855, p.18-19)

The neighbourhood of Dunstable has long been celebrated for its Sky-larks. They breed on and near the hills in vast numbers, and their singing often fills the air with music.

Professional "larkers" catch them in nets of a large size, sometimes carried by two men. In the season the larkers start work at seven o'clock in the evening and return at one or two o'clock in the morning. They can catch from 300 to 400 larks in one night, and often take birds of a much larger size. They send the larks to London, some alive in small cages, others dead for the poultry shops. There is practically no call for them now in Dunstable, although the demand is said to have been great at the hotels and inns in coaching days. If the London demand could be made to cease, the Downs at Dunstable would not be defaced by lark-catching vagrants. It is locally reported that about 50,000 Dunstable larks are sent to London annually.

Worthington G. Smith. *Dunstable, Its History and Surroundings*. 1904. p.161

Dunstable is remarkable for the Plenty and Largeness of the Larks taken in its Neighbourhood.

Magna Britannia et Hibernia, Antiqua & Nova.
Bedfordshire, 1720

Larks are not fit for the spit that do not weigh over 13 oz. to the dozen.

(Dr Lister, *Queen Anne's physician*, 1703)

Jonathan SWIFT in *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726 mentions our larks. In one of his voyages Gulliver is stranded in Brobdingnag. The gigantic inhabitants of this kingdom are twelve times taller than himself. Towards the end of chapter III he tells us :

Research and compilation by O.R.

Eggington Census Workshop

On 15th February 1994 Joan Curran and Barry Horne held a census workshop at a meeting of the Society. The evening had a number of objectives. These included familiarising people with the data on 19th century census returns and demonstrating what useful information could be extracted from them by getting the members present to do it. Eggington was chosen because it was a small parish which could be tackled in less than two hours. To make it more interesting and show how the returns could be used to trace the changes and developments in a community it was decided to use the 1851 and 1881 censuses.

The evening started with a brief description by Joan about the census procedures and their development from the first one in 1801 to that of 1851 which was the first one with the standardised format. Barry then showed slides of early maps of the village to show the distribution of houses and farms etc.

Those present were then divided up into groups with one half of the room tackling the 1851 return while the other half did 1881. Typed copies of the appropriate returns were supplied to each group. The groups were then asked to analyse a particular aspect of the data. These were :

- Ages of males within 5 year periods
- Ages of females within 5 year periods
- Place of birth by village in Beds, otherwise by county
- Occupation
- Forenames - female and forenames - male.

The analysis showed that in 1851 the population of Eggington was 425; of these 289 had been born in Eggington, 10 in Leighton Buzzard, 16 in Hockliffe, 4 in Stanbridge, 6 in Tilsworth and 5 in Billington. A further 34 were born in Bedfordshire. 39 were from Buckinghamshire, 1 from Northamptonshire and 4 from Hertfordshire; 17 came from other counties. By 1881 the population had fallen to 269; 197 being born in Eggington. The number born in surrounding villages had fallen to 6 from Leighton Buzzard, 8 from Hockliffe, 1 from Billington. This time 41 were from outside Bedfordshire (2 of these were born in Malta).

The analysis of forenames showed there was little difference in the popularity of female names between the two returns. In 1851 the top six were : Elizabeth (38), Sarah (32), Mary (30), Ann (19), Jane (14) and Emma (9). By 1881 the order changed only slightly : Elizabeth (16), Mary and Sarah (15), Ann (11), Emma (7) and Jane (6). The smaller numbers reflect the drop in population.

The top seven for men in 1851 were: William (46), Thomas (26), John (18), David (16), Joseph (13), Richard (10) and Charles (6). By 1881 the order had changed somewhat: William (21), John (13), Charles (10), Joseph (7), Thomas (6), David (3) and Richard (2). In common with other census returns from the 19th century no woman was found called Victoria. Care must be taken when looking at these figures because they are of people of all different ages and the name to some extent reflects the fashion of the time when they were born.

When the occupations were counted it was very clear that three predominated, these were straw plaiter (99 in 1851, 40 in 1881), agricultural labourer (66 and 56) and scholar (74 and 43). In 1851 the scholars were divided into straw plait scholars (12 boys and 24 girls) and ordinary scholars (22 and 16). There were a large number of other occupations such as railway labourer (none in 1851, 3 in 1881), brickmaker (3 and 5), toll keeper (1 and 1) and carpenter (2 and 3).

The figures derived from an analysis of the ages of the inhabitants of Eggington showed that in 1851 there was a young population with a bias, both males and females, to the range of 5 to 30 years of age. By 1881 the ages were more evenly spread although there was still a bias, more pronounced for females, for the range 5 to 25 years of age. Clearly in the 30 years between the two census returns the youngsters had moved away to seek their fortune elsewhere and those who remained had aged and not been replaced by an influx of outsiders as had clearly happened prior to the 1851 census.

We would like to thank those who took part in the workshop and hope that it may encourage one or two to do their own project.

Barry Horne.

Listed Buildings at Risk

Historic buildings are symbols of permanence in town and village, but this image can be misleading. Not all listed buildings get the care they deserve from their owners, though planning law does make the owners responsible for their upkeep.

Recognising that the problem was widespread English Heritage devised the Building at Risk Project to assess the problem nationally. As part of that project, with a grant from English Heritage, Bedfordshire County Council and South Beds. District Council undertook a survey of listed buildings in South Bedfordshire. Out of 500 such buildings in the area there are 26 which are considered to be at risk. In the Dunstable area there are three in the town itself - 30 High Street South, 16-20 West Street and the Windmill - a bungalow and a cottage in Whipsnade, a barn in Kensworth and a barn and Doolittle Mill in Totternhoe. There are also eight buildings, mainly ornamental, within the Luton Hoo Estate.

The two Bedfordshire local authorities have now published a book giving details of all the local buildings at risk (see the Secretary to look at the Society's copy or buy one from the Council) to bring them to the attention of the public. They hope that as a result there will either be prompt action on the part of the owners or that other interested parties will make the future of the buildings more secure. (One barn in Totternhoe has already been sold by the owner to a buyer interested in restoring it.)

J.C.

Can you solve some problems from the Domesday Book ?

The Activity Page

The Domesday Book was published in 1086, twenty years after the defeat of the Anglo-Saxon army of King Harold at Hastings. It consists of an extensive survey of everything on which taxes could be obtained. Dunstable at the time was not a village but probably only a market place at the cross roads where the inhabitants of the surrounding villages came to exchange their goods. The villages at the four quadrants of Dunstable are Houghton Regis, Sewell, Caddington and Kensworth. In the following table we have also listed Eaton Bray, Edlesborough, Hockliffe, Studham, Tilsworth and Totternhoe. It must be noted that Totternhoe is listed twice because it was divided into two Manors.

TRANSLATION OF THE ENTRY FOR TOTTERNHOE

In the Half-hundred of Stanbridge. Walter of Flanders holds Totenehou and Osbert from him. It was rated at 15 hides before 1066, but after King William came to England it was only rated at 10 hides. The men who held and hold the other 5 hides kept and keep all the King's customary dues and tributes. Arable land for 10 ploughs.

In the Lord's demesne 2 ploughs. 22 villagers have 4 ploughs, with a further 4 possible. 2 smallholders and 4 serfs. There are 3 mills worth 10 shillings 8 pence; meadow for 4 ploughs, woodland enough for 150 pigs. In total the value is £8; when acquired it was £10; and £16 before 1066. Leofnoth, a thane of King Edward's, held this manor: he could sell it to whom he would.

- Bibliography.** * Domesday Book, Bedfordshire, Phillimore, 1977.
 * Michael Wood : Domesday, A search for the Roots of England. BBC Books 1986.
 * S.Coleman & J.Wood : Glossary of Terms. Beds CC. Plan. Dept.
 * O. Roucoux : History of Dunstable from the Sources. 1993 (not published yet).

Much has already been written about the Domesday Book but it is always interesting to look at it with new eyes and to try to solve numerous unsolved problems. For example :

- How can we explain the reduction in surface area of Totternhoe (1) from 15 hides in 1066 to 10 hides in 1086 ? By the way a hide is about 120 acres average. We know that an exemption was given, by units of 5 hides, in return for military service. Is it the case here ?
- How do the surface areas of the villages compare with now ?
- Who was holding what we call now the 'Norman Castle'.
- Why such a difference between the places. Compare for example the values of Totternhoe 1 (£16) and Kensworth (20shillings) ?
- Why so many villagers (villeins) in Edlesborough (16) and so few in Caddington (1).
- Why the large differences in the loss of value between 1066 and 1086 ? (Clue : look at who was the lord of the manor).

Comparing the text to the left and the Tott.1 column below will show how the figures have been found.

Some terms need more explanation. For more complete comments see the bibliography below.

The *plough* is used to indicate the size of the land, it means a team of 8 oxen pulling a plough. *Meadows* are used for grazing and hay making, they are measured in equivalent "ploughs". A Manor is a landed estate comprising a Demesne (land of the lord of the manor) and land held by *Villagers* or *villeins* which are the more substantial farmers. *Smallholders* or *Cottagers* or *Bordars* are small farmers. *Slaves* or *serfs* are workers without property including the unmarried dependants. *Woodlands* are measured in the number of pigs they can sustain. Note that the mills have not been listed in the table below. The population can be calculated by multiplying the number of Villagers and Bordars by a factor of about 5 or 6, the average family size. J.C.

The contributors for this issue are Colin Bourne (C.E.B.), Omer Roucoux (O.R.), Barry Horne and Joan Curran (J.C.). Desk Top Publishing - Impression Style - by O.R.

	Cadd.	Eton-B	Edlesb.	Hou-R	Hocklif.	Kensw.	Sewell	Studhm	Tilswth.	Tott.1	Tott.2
Total area in Hides	5	12½	30	10	10	10	3	6	10	15	6½
In demesne.	2	2	15	-	5	5	-	-	-	2	3
Arable / ploughs	6	20	21	24	8	10	2	6	8	10	6
Number of plough											
Lord	2(+4)	4(+2)	8	2	2	2(+3)	1½(+½)	2	1(+1)	2	1
Village	-	8(+6)	14	22	6	2(+3)	-	4	6	4(+4)	3
Population											
Villeins	1	20	36	38	13	8	1	10	10	22	4
Bordars	4	13	4	12	11	3	4	1	6	2	4
Serfs	2	2	10	-	-	3	-	4	3	4	4
Meadows / plough	-	6	4	12	4	pasture	-	-	6	4	3
Woodland / pigs	200	300	400	100	100	100	-	100	100	150	20
Value											
pre - 1066	£5	£20	£24	-	£12	£5	£1	£8	£10	£16	£8
in 1086	10s	£16	£18+	£10+gd	£8	£3.10.0	Added	£4	£6	£10	£2.10.0
REF. DDB Beds :	12.1	2.1	27.1	1.3	55.2	E2	1.4	26.1	22.1	32.1	40.3