

Newsletter

*Dunstable & District
Local History Society*

N°22

August 2004



The Chairman's Report

With every newsletter, the news about Priory House gets better and better. The Town Council is to be congratulated on persevering with its bid to buy this valuable asset. There is much work to be done until the building is fit for its planned use. Floorboards need to be lifted and ancient timbers checked for load-bearing properties. Internal walls will be removed and the upper floors strengthened. A lift will be installed and modern toilets provided. The bus stop is to be removed and a window put in the street wall. The main entrance will be on the side of the building.

The main features of the Ground Floor will be the exhibition areas, including the Undercroft, the Tearoom and kitchen and the Tourist Information Centre. On the First Floor there will be more exhibition space and a Meeting Room which will have a spectacular view of the Priory Church. There will also be a Local History Storeroom and an Archive and Research room. The Second Floor will house Commercial Offices, which will generate much needed income.

Our Society is represented on the Project Partners group, which is part of the Priory House Management Structure. The Project Partners group is chaired by Richard Walden, Town Clerk. Also represented are the Luton Museum Service, South Bedfordshire District Council, Bedfordshire County Council and the Priory Church. I attended the first meeting of this group on 9th June. The Society's main input will be with the content of some of the displays and the stewardship of the Archive and Research room and of the Local History Storeroom. We will also have a vital role to play in telling the town about the activities which will take place in Priory House. Despite the amount of work to be done, it is hoped to have some access to the Undercroft during Tudor Day, on Saturday 20th November. The main opening is planned for May 2005, but there may be some slippage of time if unforeseen problems come to light during the restoration work.

I would like to thank Bernard Stevens for the excellent Coffee Morning which was held in his garden on Saturday 12th June. My thanks also go to everyone who organised the refreshments, sold raffle tickets, took the admission money, sold the 'bring and buy' items and brought all the garden chairs. It was good to see so many members and friends there.

The Society had its biggest audience ever when Marguerite Patten came to the Priory to talk about Wartime Food. All those who were there are agreed that it was a memorable occasion. Marguerite, who was nearly 89 years of age, talked for an hour without notes, answered questions and then signed copies of her books which people had bought. She had been driven up from her home in Brighton before the talk and was driven home after it was over. She had looked Dunstable up on the Internet and knew all about Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon.

History Week was a great success. Everyone I spoke to was impressed by the quality of our exhibition and the amount of it. I would like to thank everyone who prepared our material and all of you who came to meet and talk to visitors to our exhibition in Grove House. These displays do not happen by themselves. There is much work involved and those of you who worked on it deserve our thanks. We have more material each time we put on a display because people respond by bringing us more. When Priory House is up and running, we will have extra display room and also more space to store donated material until it is needed for display or research.

Your committee is working hard on the Winter Programme. We are trying to provide varied and interesting speakers within our budget. In 2000 our speakers cost us £100. This year it will be over £200. This is the main reason why we are not covering our annual costs with the income from subscriptions. I feel that the time is approaching when we will need to look at our membership rates again.

Finally, I would like to thank Gordon Ivinson and Ron Driver for their work in planning the Summer outings to Biggleswade and Apsley House. As with the displays, these do not happen by themselves.

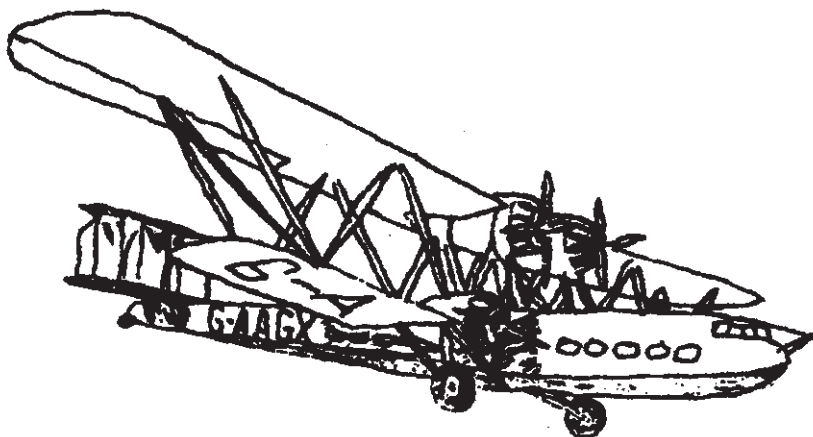
Hugh Garrod

PUPS, KITTENS & MOSQUITOS

The aircraft industry in South Beds and North Herts.

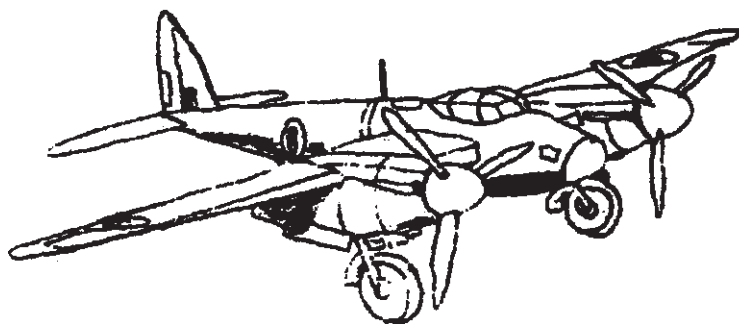
It has been said that Brooklands is the birthplace of aviation. If that is so then South Bedfordshire and North Hertfordshire must surely be the nursery, for it is in our locality that aviation has grown and flourished. The list of manufacturing companies that have resided within this region reads like a Who's Who of aviation history: de Havilland, Handley Page, Napier, Percival etc.

Probably the earliest resident company was Handley Page, who moved from their Cricklewood premises to Radlett and Park Street in about 1919. Here they produced civil versions of their wartime O/400 bomber. In later years Handley Page produced a family of airliners culminating in the HP42 (right) of the thirties, an aircraft



with the notable distinction of never having killed a passenger. During the second world war the company built the Halifax bomber. Handley Page became so well known for the manufacture of large aircraft that any sizeable plane was known as a 'Handley Page'. Post-war the company produced the Victor bomber and Herald airliner. Just as another airliner, the Jetstream, was about to be put into production, the company ran into financial difficulties and closed.

de Havilland moved to Hatfield from Stag Lane, Edgware, in 1933 to build their famous range of 'Moth' light aircraft. During the war they built the Mosquito fighter/bomber (below), of which the prototype was designed and built at Salisbury Hall near London Colney. The production of the aircraft was subsequently shared throughout the country — in many cases at furniture factories



ideally suited for making wooden aircraft. The Mosquito became known as the 'Wooden Wonder'. One of the firms making the fuselages was believed to have been in Matthew Street in Dunstable, from where they were transported to Percival's factory in Luton where the aircraft were assembled.

Post-war de Havilland built one of the first jet aircraft, the Vampire fighter, later developed into the Venom, and the

world's first commercial jet airliner, the Comet. Unfortunately this turned from success to failure when two Comets inexplicably crashed. Subsequent investigations proved that the crashes were due to metal fatigue but the aircraft never recovered its reputation. The company faltered but later recovered to build the highly successful Trident airliner.

The Percival company moved from Gravesend to Luton in 1937. Founded by Captain Edgar Percival in 1932, the company was well known for the Gull light aircraft and the Mew Gull racing

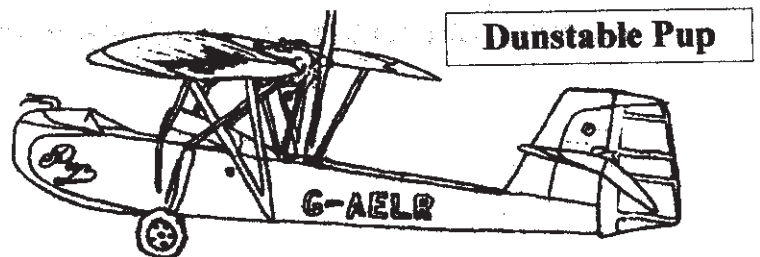
aircraft, winner of many King's Cup races. The Vega Gull became famous for its record long distance achievements, flown by Miss Jean Batten in the 1930's. During the war the Percival factory produced Mosquitos, Oxfords and the Proctor (a military version of the Vega Gull). Post-war production included the Prentice (an all metal trainer), Provost, Pembroke and the Jet Provost. The company was taken over by the Hunting Group and became Hunting Aircraft and later still was incorporated into the British Aircraft Corporation. It then closed in the aftermath of the TSR2 cancellation.

Luton Airport opened in 1937 in its present location. Prior to that there had been two other Luton airfields' at Barton and Leagrave. During the war Luton Airport was the home of Percivals and D.Napier & Son and saw a great amount of military development flying. Post-war saw the above mentioned activity from Percival Aircraft and from Napiers there was considerable engine development and work on de-icing equipment for aircraft. In addition, Napiers performed special engine installations for other manufacturers, apart from various other projects. The airport continued to expand its commercial activities with successive airlines choosing Luton as a base, until it reached its present position as one of the major airports for tour operators and Easyjet

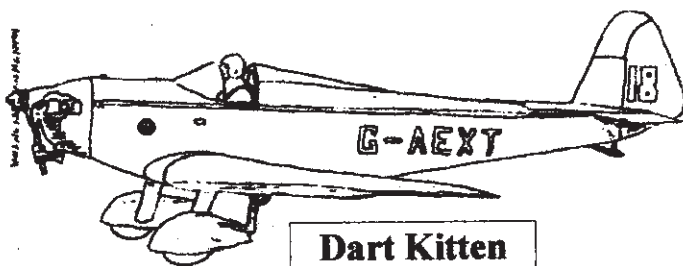
There were a few small firms in South Bedfordshire in 1910s and 1920s, including Morgan & Co. in Leighton Buzzard and Hewlett & Blondeux, who had an airfield on the site where the Electrolux factory was later built. But the best known was probably Dart Aircraft Ltd. of Dunstable. It was founded in 1934 as Zander & Weyl with premises in Luton Road, Dunstable, to build and repair gliders and light aircraft. In 1935 they made several replica gliders including a 1902 Wright for the film 'Conquest of the Air' directed by Alexander Korda. The first powered aircraft built by Zander & Weyl was a 'Flying Flea' which was followed by the 'Dunstable Dart', was based on a Slingsby glider.

In 1936 the name of the firm was changed to Dart Aircraft Ltd with new premises at 29 High Street North, Dunstable. The Dart aircraft was renamed the 'Dunstable Pup'. Also built at this time was the 'Dart Flitter-mouse' and an ultra light aircraft the 'Dart Kitten' This last was described in the magazine The Aeroplane as 'one of the most practical small aeroplanes yet produced'.

Mr E P Zander left the firm in 1937 and established another company, Scott Light Aircraft Ltd, with premises in Albion Street. The Kitten was developed in 1938-39 into a two seater version but the aircraft did not get into production before the war. During the war the company was involved with contract work from the larger aircraft companies. After the war Mr Weyl further developed the 'Kitten' with a version suitable for home construction. He died in 1965.



Dunstable Pup



Dart Kitten

The main part of this article originally appeared in issue n° 6 of Topic, the Magazine of the Friends of Dunstable Museum, and was written by John Reed. There have been a few minor amendments and the words in italics are additional to the original text. The drawings are by Barry Home.

Joan Curran

History of Dunstable Town Hall

Joan Curran

Prior to 1800, Dunstable had a Market House which stood, with a cluster of houses and inns in the middle of High Street North, near the cross-roads. Among the inns were "The Lion", "The Peacock" and "The Rose and Crown". Below is a map drawn for the Duke of Bedford in 1762, showing this group of buildings. Between 1803 and 1805 they were all demolished and a new Market House paid for by the Duke of Bedford, was built on the west side of the road, where the Abbey building is today.

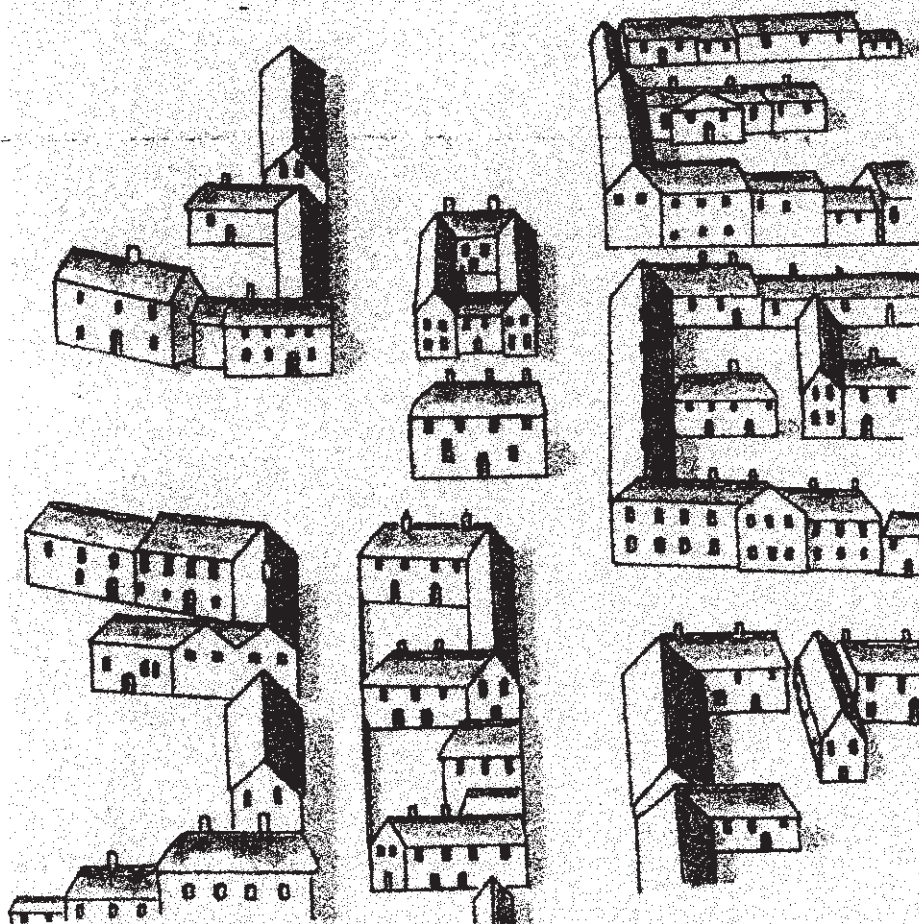
In 1864, when Dunstable was granted a charter giving it borough status, one of the new Town Council's first actions was to buy the Market House for use as a municipal building. The photograph on the right shows how it must have looked around that time.



As it was about 1864

In 1869 a clock tower was added and in the following years the building was renovated and used as Magistrates Court, Plait Hall and Corn Exchange (photo far right)

Unfortunately in December 1879 it was gutted by fire, but the good news was that the facade had survived and remained sound, apart from the gable end, which could easily be repaired. The Town Hall, as it was now called, was quickly rebuilt with a new parapet and clock tower and was opened in January 1880 (photo on the next page). On the lower level the Plait Hall and Corn Exchange occupied one great room, separate from the Town Hall above, with a separate entrance. If you look



From the Duke of Bedford Map 1762 Drawn by Tony Woodhouse
From a photo of the original in Beds. Record Office

closely at the photographs you can see that the facade is basically the same in all three, though it has acquired some Victorian embellishments in the final version.

This was the last Town Hall, demolished in December 1966, which many of us still remember with nostalgia, (photo below).



The last Town Hall rebuilt in 1880. Demolished in 1966



With the new Clock Tower built 1869

Saturday 6 November 2004 Great Barford Village Hall, 10 am-3.30 pm
THE PARISH CHEST: using church and parish records

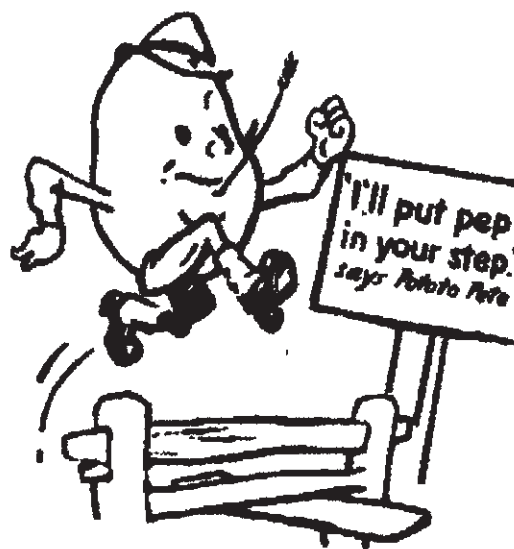
Local services, such as highway maintenance, social welfare and law and order, are now mainly provided by the County and District Councils who also set and collect the rates which fund them. However, until the late 19th century such services had been the responsibility of individual parishes. The meetings of the church vestry, usually including the churchwardens, minister and leading parishioners, did not just deal with church matters but formed a "local parliament" which dealt with a whole range of local affairs. They also appointed officers to deal with particular issues, including the Surveyors of Highways with responsibility for maintaining roads, Constables to deal with law and order, including maintenance of the stocks and lock up, and Overseers of the Poor to administer poor relief and manage the parish workhouse. To support this provision they could raise rates from within their parish.

During the workshop we will examine the rich array of documents produced by these activities from the 16th century, both on screen and in the form of photocopies. Once kept safe in the Parish Chest these are now usually found in County Record Offices. They include Churchwardens Accounts, Vestry Minutes (recording the decisions of residents in regulating the affairs of the parish) and account books kept by the Surveyors of Highways, Constables and Overseers of the Poor. These contain much more than might be expected at first and provide a mine of miscellaneous information on people, health, diet, trades, household goods and events besides giving a fascinating insight into local life at grassroots level.

There will be a small charge to cover costs and refreshments. For further information, contact the secretary Joan Curran.

Wartime Rations

By Marguerite Patten OBE



During the "Dunstable at War" week The Society organized a talk by Marguerite Patten in the Priory Church, entitled "War Time Food". It was extremely interesting and entertaining. Here is a section of her talk which is worth thinking about and comparing wartime rations with what we consume these days.

Perhaps this is a good place to recall the rations. These varied slightly from month to month as foods became slightly more or less plentiful. I have inserted metric measures — unknown in Britain at that time — so that younger people reading this can appreciate the small amounts.

These were the rations for an adult *per week*:

Bacon and ham Meat	4 oz (100 g) to the value of 1s. 2d. (6p today). Sausages were not rationed but difficult to obtain; offal was originally unrationed but sometimes formed part of the meat ration.
Butter	2 oz (50 g)
Cheese	2 oz (50 g) sometimes it rose to 4 oz (100 g) and even up to 8 oz (225g)
Margarine	4 oz (100 g)
Cooking fat	4 oz (100 g) often dropping to 2oz (50 g)
Milk	3 pints (1800 ml) sometimes dropping to 2 pints (1200 ml). Household (skimmed, dried) milk was available, I think this was 1 packet each 4 weeks.
Sugar	8 oz (225 g)
Preserves	1lb (450 g) every 2 months
Tea	2 oz(50 g)
Eggs	1 shell egg a week if available but at times dropping to 1 every two weeks. Dried eggs — 1 packet each 4 weeks
Sweets	12 oz (350 g) each 4 weeks.

In addition, there was a monthly points system. As an example of how these could be spent, the 16 points allowed you to buy one can of fish or meat or 2 lb (900 g) of dried fruit or 8 lb (3.6 kg) of split peas.

Babies and younger children, expectant and nursing mothers, had concentrated orange juice and cod liver oil from Welfare Clinics together with priority milk. This milk was also available to invalids.

During 1942 I was 'loaned' to the scientific division of the Ministry of Food to go to various school canteens to assess the food value and vitamin content of school dinners. School meals were started during the war years to make quite certain that school children had the best possible main meal (remember most mothers were working long hours for the war effort).

The text is extracted from Marguerite Pattens's book We'll Eat Again, first published by Hamlyn in 1985 and in 2004 by the Imperial War Museum

Dunstable Borough Gazette

August 1904 Worthington G Smith's new book, 'Dunstable: Its History & Surroundings.' was published by 'The Homeland Association for the Encouragement of Touring in Great Britain.' The review says that this book is one in 'a series of volumes for which the lover of local antiquities and folk-lore should be duly grateful, calling attention as it does to the archaeological treasures as well as to the quaint superstitions, the old-world customs, and last, but not least, the picturesque scenery which await his recognition on either side of the great thoroughfares that traverse these Islands. Dunstable has never yet been associated in the public mind with any such attractions.'

The quarterly meeting of Dunstable Town Council heard a report from the committee, drawn from 'the Town Corporation, Luton Rural District Council and Eaton Bray Council, in respect to a joint hospital scheme.' The report does not say where this hospital was to be built. The purchase price of the site was £1700. The total cost was to be £4,517. Dunstable's contribution was £720 to Eaton Bray's £925. Running costs involved £2 each per week for the caretaker and the matron, and £104 a year for coal, light etc. Part of the costs was to be covered by selling a hayrick for £20.

'Another case of impudent vandalism occurred near the Half Moon, Dunstable, on Sunday morning, when, for the third time in quite recent years, Mr. Arthur White, Market Hill, Dunstable, had the crops from his fields alongside the highroad just south of the Half Moon Hill, destroyed by a tramp igniting them who had slept there the previous night. About five o'clock, while PC Barker was proceeding up High Street South, a tramp gave himself into custody and volunteered the information that he had set fire to some stacks of straw. The tramp, who said his name was Thomas Hope, said he started the fire because he was hungry and wanted to be locked up so that he could get some food. At the Beds Summer Assizes, he was committed for eighteen months hard labour.'

August 1914 'The one topic of conversation throughout the Dunstable district during this week has naturally been the war and its disastrous consequences. Everybody has been willing at all times to listen to the so-called latest news, and wild rumours have continually circulated and been gravely discussed, until denied, or until more startling and reliable news had been received.'

'In addition to giving a generous donation of £1,050 to the National Relief Fund inaugurated by the Prince of Wales, Messrs Waterlow & Sons Ltd. have displayed a commendable spirit of patriotism by affording their employees both at London and Dunstable every facility for joining the country's service. The company will pay 10s per week to the wife of each man while on service, and in addition 1s for each child under 14 years of age. All those who wish to volunteer for the service of the country will be reinstated at the conclusion of the war, should they be capable of carrying out their present duties in the Company's service.'

As in other towns, there was considerable panic buying of basic foods, which forced up the prices in the shops. As the panic died down, prices gradually reduced and flour resumed its previous price of '6d per quartern.'

'Considerable excitement was caused at Dunstable on Thursday night when a story was circulated that three German spies had been arrested at the Sugar Loaf Hotel. There was a rush to the hotel, and in a very short time a crowd had assembled in the High Street.' They turned out to be three Englishmen who were on their way to join the 25th City of London Cycle Corps.

The Dunstable Post Office stayed open continually from Thursday to Sunday so that notices of mobilisation for local Reservists and Territorials could be delivered on time.

Selected by Hugh Garrod

A GALLANT RESCUE FROM DROWNING

28th May 1870

The names of Benning and Hose were well respected in the town of Dunstable with Mr. C. S. Benning being a local solicitor and Rev. F. Hose the rector of the Priory Church. Therefore when the sons of these two prominent citizens were involved in a near tragedy it was reported in detail in the local paper.

Mr Henry Hose, who was articled to Mr Benning, solicitor, had been in the paper the previous month having passed his intermediate examination and received a certificate from the Incorporated Law Society, London.

On 28th May three young friends set out for a pleasant afternoon, little realising that it would be an afternoon not easily forgotten by two of them. Wellhead, Totternhoe was a popular swimming area as the water was usually about 5 feet deep. However on the day when Messrs. Crichton Benning, son of C. S. Benning, Esq. solicitor, Henry E. Hose, son of the Rector of Dunstable, and Frederick Painter, son of Mrs. Painter, Grove House chose to visit the level had risen to 8 feet. A current of cold spring water running at the bottom made bathing somewhat treacherous because of the risk of getting cramp. Several other young men were already there and Crichton Benning, an excellent swimmer, proceeded to dive in the deeper area while Henry Hose remained in the shallower area but they were out of sight of each other. Not long after arriving, a small boy came running up to Mr. Benning with the news his friend Henry was drowning, and rushing back to the spot they were just in time to see his hands disappearing under the water, for the third time they were informed. Without hesitating Mr. Benning plunged into the clear water intending to get behind Henry and seize him by the hair. Unfortunately the drowning man, panicking, seized his rescuer instead, and by this action could so easily have turned it into a double tragedy. Fortunately Mr. Benning kept his head and gathering all his strength and with a tremendous effort, managed to get them both back to the shore where willing hands assisted to drag them onto dry land. Henry Hose by now was in a near unconscious state with his face already discoloured and his breathing very shallow. Gradually, and to everyone's relief he revived sufficiently to dress and proceed homeward although in a very weak condition.

In the words of the reporter at the time -

It was a gallant and unselfish deed, and we have no doubt that Mr. Benning will receive numerous congratulations for such a manifestation of his bravery and true British pluck from those of our readers who know him, and whose hearts will rejoice when they peruse our narrative. 4 June 1870

This brave act of rescue did not go unrewarded as it so impressed Mr. Frederick Farr that he proposed Mr. C. Benning for a Royal Humane Society Medal. The society were pleased to grant the request but on the understanding that the medal was to be given at a public presentation. In the Town Hall a few weeks later, the ceremony took place with the Mayor W. Jardine, Esq. and many local dignitaries and friends present. Various speeches were made and Mr. Hambling read a grateful letter of thanks from the Reverend Frederick Hose, father of the rescued youth, who explained that regrettably, through ill health, he was unable to be present at this special occasion.

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JOHNNY UNDERWOOD (late 19th Century)

Johnny was a half-wit character well-known in Dunstable and the district as a terror and a menace. One trick he was very fond of playing was waiting until a labourer's wife had dished up the dinner, and then at the first opportunity stealing what ever food he could lay his hands on. One day at Chalk Hill, having grown tired of pelting the ducks and fowls, he crept up to the nearby cottage, as it was dinnertime. Seeing a hot dumpling and no one around he seized it and rushed off to enjoy his booty which nearly proved to be the death of him. The labourer had seen him coming, and had hollowed out the middle of the dumpling and filled it up with mustard. For years afterwards Johnny avoided Chalk Hill. He was found dead one morning between Dunstable and Markyate and lies buried in the Dunstable Churchyard.

Rita Swift

Editor: Omer Roucoue