

Newsletter

*Dunstable & District
Local History Society*

N°27

February 2007



The Chairman's Report

I begin my last Chairman's report by thanking all the Committee for their unstinting support and work. Gordon Ivinson, our Vice Chairman, excelled himself in the quality of the outings he organized for us during June, July and August. Joan Curran continues as Secretary and keeps us in touch with other History Societies in Bedfordshire. She and Rita Swift are doing sterling work in setting up our room at Priory House. Cynthia Turvey, our Treasurer, maintains our accounts in meticulous order and keeps a watchful eye on our finances. Ron Frith makes sure that our audio-visual needs at our meetings are met. Omer Roucoux continues to produce this newsletter and ensure that it contains material of great interest. Peter Boatwright keeps us in touch with the Town Council and town centre developments. John Buckledee sends in reports on our meeting to the Dunstable Gazette and has booked many interesting speakers for some of our meetings. Bernard Stevens continues to host our committee meetings and to give us the benefit of his wise counsel.

We have had a most successful year, with packed meetings and fully booked outings. It has been a real pleasure and privilege to be your Chairman for all these years. Some people have expressed surprise that I am not standing again. A Society of our size and vibrancy should be able to find itself a

new Chairman every five or six years. When I took over from Colin, I saw myself as a stop-gap until we found a Chairman with better Dunstable credentials. I would also like to thank Dorothy Harman and her team who serve the refreshments, and all of you who put out the chairs and then put them away again.

One of the recent highlights was the book launch on the night of November 14th. The book, 'Dunstable and District at War' contains contributions from many people and is a wonderful collaborative effort. Nothing would have happened, though, without Jean Yates, our prime mover. Without Jean there would have been no History Week, no Tudor Days, only limited commemorations of VJ Day and no book. Dunstable would have been the poorer and we need to record our thanks to her for all her input and enthusiasm. She set us our dead lines and told us in no uncertain fashion when we were behind schedule but it was always the most amazing fun.

In my last report, I spent much time writing about Priory House. From now on, I will be submitting a separate report on Priory House. My first one appears elsewhere in this newsletter.

Hugh Garrod

Do you know that you can read some articles from our Newsletter on the Internet ?

Look at www.galaxy.bedfordshire.gov.uk then click on Virtual Library, then on Local and Family History, then on Places, then on Dunstable.

You are offered a number of subjects. You can find articles from our Newsletter on many subjects for example under : Customs, Dunstable Downs, General History, Railways, Roads, Schools, WWII, Witches, etc.

You can also search for a subject or an author in the top right hand corner of the site

DUNSTABLE MARKET in the XIIIth century

Omer Roucoux

(continued from Newsletter n°26)

Market rules from 1221:

Laws and Customs of the Town (Customale burgi).

1. Every burgess may rise on his property a windmill and horse mill, a dovecote, a bakehouse, a hand mill, a malt kiln and also a woodstack and dungheap unless the woodstack and the dungheap are a nuisance to the King's highway or to the Prior's market, in the opinion of the loyal men of the Town.

2. To those dwelling in the shops, it is not allowed to brew in them for danger of fire; it is not allowed to them either to make pigsties outside their doors or to fix stakes in the ground without permission of the bailiff.

3. Butchers are not allowed to throw blood and filth of the animals which they kill in front of their houses or elsewhere in the street as a nuisance to the neighbours or the market.

4. The Townsmen or strangers who, on market day, set their stalls in the market must remove them at the end of the market (the same day).

5. The goods of any person killed or any person who runs away shall become the property of the Prior.

6. Traders of this and other towns must not buy foodstuff before the first hour (sunrise) nor to go outside the town to meet sellers.

7. If a purchaser buys by the cartload anything that is usually sold by retail he shall not be allowed to diminish the number or sell it on the same day at a higher price.

8. Bread made for sale at a farthing ($\frac{1}{4}d$) must not be refused to someone who offers a farthing and the same for ale when four gallons are worth a penny (d).

9. The regulations about ale (price and quality) are not enforced where a sign is not exposed outside.

10. When a widow gives up her 'free bench' (that is the estate she inherited from her husband) she must give up to the heir the utensils which are fixed to the ground by nails or pegs. Also the main table with stools, the best wine measure and cask, kneading trough, basins and hatchet, the best cup, the coulter with share (cutting blade of a plough-share) and the well bucket with the rope. All the rest she can dispose of by will or gift. She shall not be bound to answer for damage to buildings as long as she has not done it after the prohibition by the King.

This last rule does not really concern the market, we have included it to present the full set of these ancient rules. They show the concern of the Prioxy for the welfare of the inhabitants and probably stem from very real happenings.

The *Annals of Dunstable* are a precious source of information for many events of the Middle Ages. They relate events from all over the world and some local events which concern the Prioxy and the Town in various ways. They are written in Medieval Latin and cover in detail the years 1201 to 1297⁽¹⁾ They has never been completely translated and some sections are very difficult to understand.

There are many allusions to events concerning the Dunstable market. We give here some of them which give insights into the life of the time.

In 1253, the wheat was sold, before the autumn, 5 shillings a quarter — that is 60d or 25p for 512 pints ⁽²⁾ In 1258 the wheat is very scarce and the price rises, in Dunstable, to one mark per quarter, that is nearly three time more. In Northampton to 20 shillings, that is 4 times more. The chronicler mentions that this year the Prioxy spent more than £80 for bread, drink and provisions.

The King's marshal, from whom the Prior was supposed to take standards for weights and measures, frequently visited the market to check the weights and measures used. On 20th July 1274



Inspection of Weight and Measures

every one of the bushel measures (8 gallons) in the town was found defective and the Town was fined four marks (£2.66p)⁽³⁾ They were given a new standard but at the end of the year they were again inspected and fined because there were still some short measures in the town.

In 1275 the brewers had broken the law either by short measure, low quality or excessive price, and the town was fined 40 shillings (£2). The author of the *Annals of Dunstable Priory* — the source of all this information — is pleased to mention 'nothing wrong with the bushels this time'.

On 21st December 1278, the town was fined again by the King's marshal for false measures, probably used in the Christmas market.

In June 1279 the Bedford justices enquire about the clipping of coins, In the same year the butchers erected wooden sheds over the benches where they were selling meat, but as these were fixed to the ground, the prior and the town removed them. Later the sheds were allowed to be covered with foliage not set in the ground.

In 1286, the Prior — William de Wederhore — was summoned by the King's justice in Bedford to show by what warrant he claimed to have his privileges in Dunstable and elsewhere. The Prior answered that the town of Dunstable was his fief which he obtained by a charter of Edward I, the present king. This being the continuation of charters by Henry I, his ancestor, confirmed by Henry III, his son, in the first year of his reign, in 1227. Amongst other things the rights of markets and fairs were questioned. The Prior gave the following rulings: a market is held every Wednesday and Saturday each week, and a fair held on First of August. He also mentioned that, in 1203, a fair of three days had been authorised by King John, grandfather of the present King, to be held on the 10th of May (St. Fremund's day) and the following two days. The Prior was completely exonerated and the court was fined 40 marks (£13.66) for false judgment. The expenses of the Prior for the trip to Bedford were £18 and 1 mark (£18.66) and in Dunstable £14.7s.3d. (£14.36)

In 1290, the year the funeral cortege of Queen Eleanor passed through Dunstable, the bakers and brewers were fined 5 marks (£3.33p) for using false weights and measures.

On 13th April 1292, the King's marshal did his inspection in Dunstable. The town was fined for having too small measures and because the butchers had sold rotten meat,

The chronicler of the *Dunstable Annals* tells that, in 1294, the market of Dunstable and other markets in the area suffered very much from the stay of Prince Edward — son of the king — in St. Albans and Langley. Two hundred meals a day were not enough for his kitchen and he paid for nothing. His servants took all the provisions brought to market and even the cheese and eggs and any merchandise, even in the townsmen's houses, they left hardly anything. They took bread and beer from the bakers and brewers and forced those who did not have any to bake and brew. Later in the year the price of wheat in Dunstable increased to 16s.8d per quarter.

In 1295, after an exceptionally bad harvest and scarcity of corn, the bakers charged a very high price for bread. At the request of the people, the Prior, with the agreement of the community, had his bailiffs set the situation right and severely punished the bakers. Defects were also found in measures and fines paid.

In 1296, the *Annals* cease to be regularly kept, and so disappears this source of information.

Foot notes

1. The first part of the *Annals* starts in AD. 1 and gives a brief survey of the Church history up to 1201. In 1202, the text becomes original and was written by Richard de Morins, the 4th Prior, until his death in 1242. The following chroniclers are not known. The detailed chronicle stops in 1297 but there are some odd reports of events until 1459 on the blank pages of the document. The last entry is a declaration made in Dunstable by Henry VI.

2. A quarter equals 8 bushels, each bushel being 8 gallons. A quarter is thus 64 gallons or 512 pints or about 291 litres. The quarter was mainly a unit of volume for dry substances like wheat. In weight a quarter of wheat was approximately equivalent to 510 lb or 230 kg. This would put the price at 0.1p per kg if we use present day units.

3. The pound sterling was the value of one pound weight of silver. It was divided into 240 small pieces of one penny each. Three marks were £2. So one mark was 2/3 of a pound sterling or 13 shillings and 4 pence, or in the present money between 66 and 67p. It is difficult to make a valid comparison with the present day because the social and economic structure of the Middle Ages was so different. In the 13th century an unskilled labourer was earning 1/2p a day, a skilled carpenter made 1 1/2p, a prosperous freeman could live on £4 a year. So to have an idea of the real value of the money we have to multiply the figures quoted by a factor of 500 with the possibility of making mistakes from half to twice the value!

Priory House *- was it used to control Dunstable market?*

The latest Newsletter, No 26, has a number of interesting articles, in particular one about Dunstable Markets by Omer Roucoux. In this he tells us that the Priory could collect taxes for the movement of goods and passengers on their roads, and for the erecting of stalls and the selling of goods in the market. In an earlier article, Newsletter No 16, Omer tells us that a market was held every Wednesday and Saturday each week. Nigel Benson in "Dunstable in Detail" tells us that in 1221 the Prior published Bye-laws stating, amongst other things, that:

- no trading to be carried out on the way to the market
- prices of bread and ale are strictly controlled
- no bulk buying of goods in order to change the retail price set by the Priory.

All this *passage* and *stallage* as it was known, would have given the Priory a considerable income which it sought to maximise. It was therefore important for the Prior to know what was happening on the Watling Street and at the market, who was setting up stalls, how much was being sold and who was selling it; the Prior wanted his cut: he had a very costly Monastery to run.

I would like to suggest that this is where Priory House comes in. Research by Jon Hitchcock shows that Priory House, when first built, was out in the road well beyond the original Medieval building line. From its first floor there would have been excellent views up and down Watling Street as well as of the market area. The Prior, through his lay representative, could thus ensure that few people escaped paying their dues.

As time passed more and more people would have encroached on the road to line up their property with Priory House, and no doubt the Prior charged them for the privilege. By this time of course, Middle Row and Whites Lane would have been built in the road so Priory House would have lost its strategic importance as an observation post to monitor and control the lives of the people of Dunstable. Big Brother really was watching them.

Barry Horne

Did you know ?

October 1870 Police Promotion

It was suggested that P.C. Addington with 5 years service be promoted to the rank of sergeant. This was agreed on condition that his salary was not increased.

August 1872 Borough Police

The Superintendent of the Borough Police Force applied for an increase in pay. Councillor Derbyshire stated that it was the rage everywhere for an increase of wages and that this spirit permeated every rank. However P.C Toffield's wage was raised to 21s; P.S Addington's to 26s; and Superintendent George's to 33s per week .

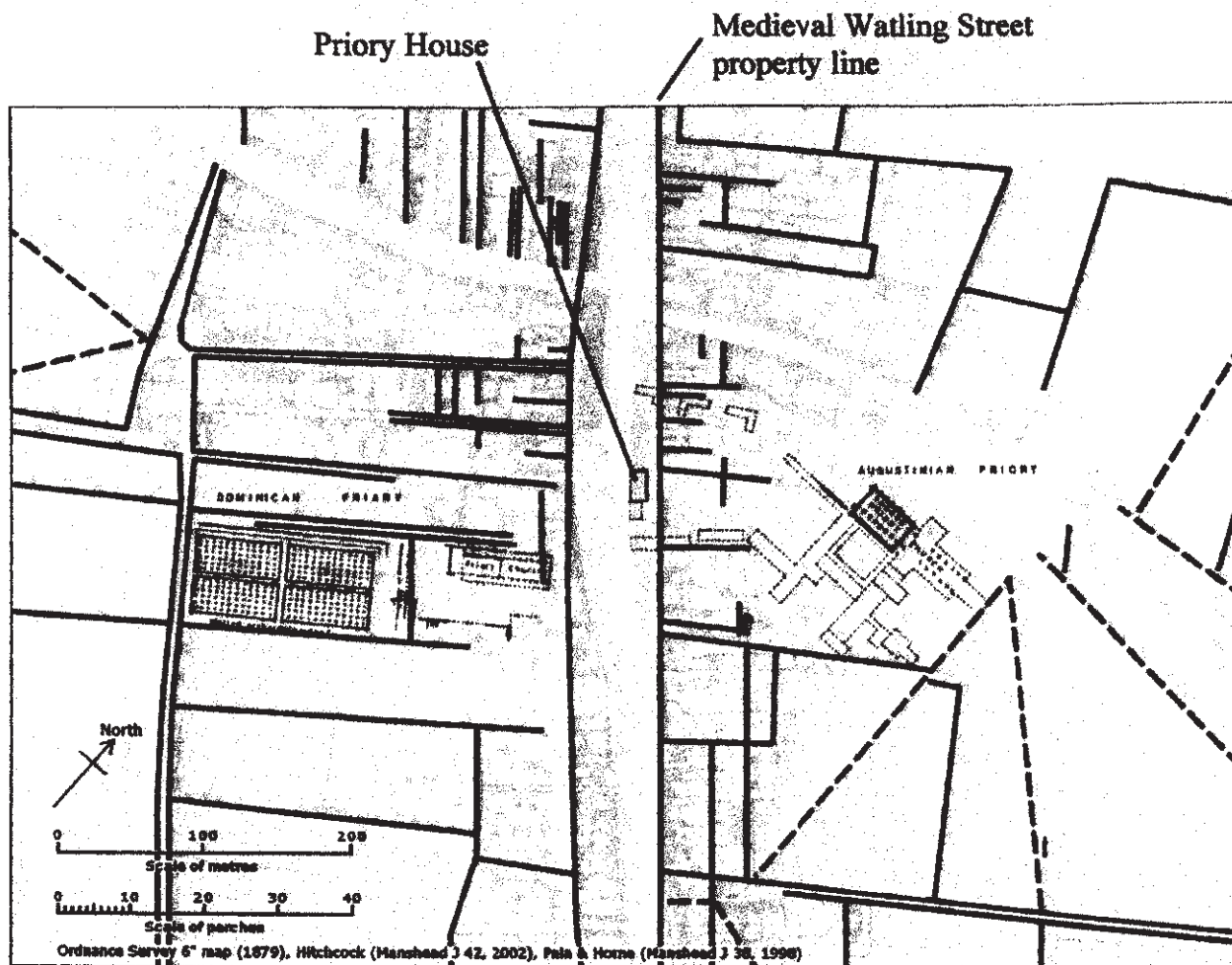
February 1879 The High Street is a Dangerous Place

A poor woman sustained severe injuries from the savage attack of a bull in the High Street. It is hoped that some provision may be made to secure such dangerous animals in future.

July 1879 Searching After Burglar

Early one morning a family were woken by strange noises coming from the cellar. They sounded like an iron instrument was being used on the bricks and also trampling feet. The male members of the family were not prepared for what they found. Instead of a burglar they found a pony seeking shelter from the storm. It had somehow got into the cellar through a broken door.

Medieval Dunstable Town Centre



This map shows the possible Medieval property boundaries (black) over the 1879 OS map (grey) with the two religious houses superimposed. The isolated position of Priory House is very clear. I am grateful to Jon Hitchcock for use of his map.

March 1887 Coffin

Mr A Robinson, Basket Maker, West Street, had between 600 and 700 persons visit his shop to see a coffin made from green unpeeled osiers (*willow used in basket work*). This unique article was made *to order*. It resembled a large hamper, with handles on either side, and at each end, is large, well shaped, durable and cheap.

October 1857 Robbery

One Sunday evening, some evil person, entered a poor widow's house, whilst she was at a place of worship, and stole from her 4 half-quartern loaves of bread. This was the second time her house had been broken into and her bread stolen.

February 1881 Reward

Some evil, disposed person having wilfully, wantonly and maliciously torn down, defaced and destroyed placards posted outside the Gazette office. A reward of 1 guinea will be paid to anyone giving such information as will lead to the conviction of the offender or offenders.

Selected from the Dunstable Gazette by Rita Swift

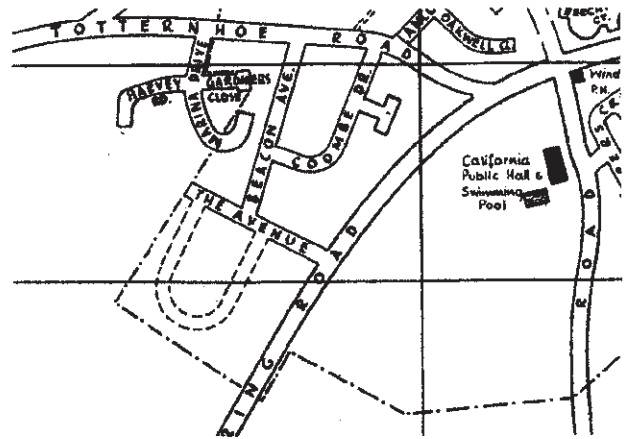
Sunshine Homes DUNSTABLE

By Philip BUCKLE

Many people, both local and from afar, when standing on the top of Dunstable Downs, have looked at the magnificent view towards Aylesbury Vale, and have at the same time had their eyes drawn to the land at the bottom of the Downs lying to the West of The Avenue.

On this land are horse chestnut trees planted at regular intervals, both in straight and curved lines. These trees are still of only medium size although having been planted in the 1930's, the slowness of growth doubtless being due to the fact that they are in chalk soil with virtually no top soil.

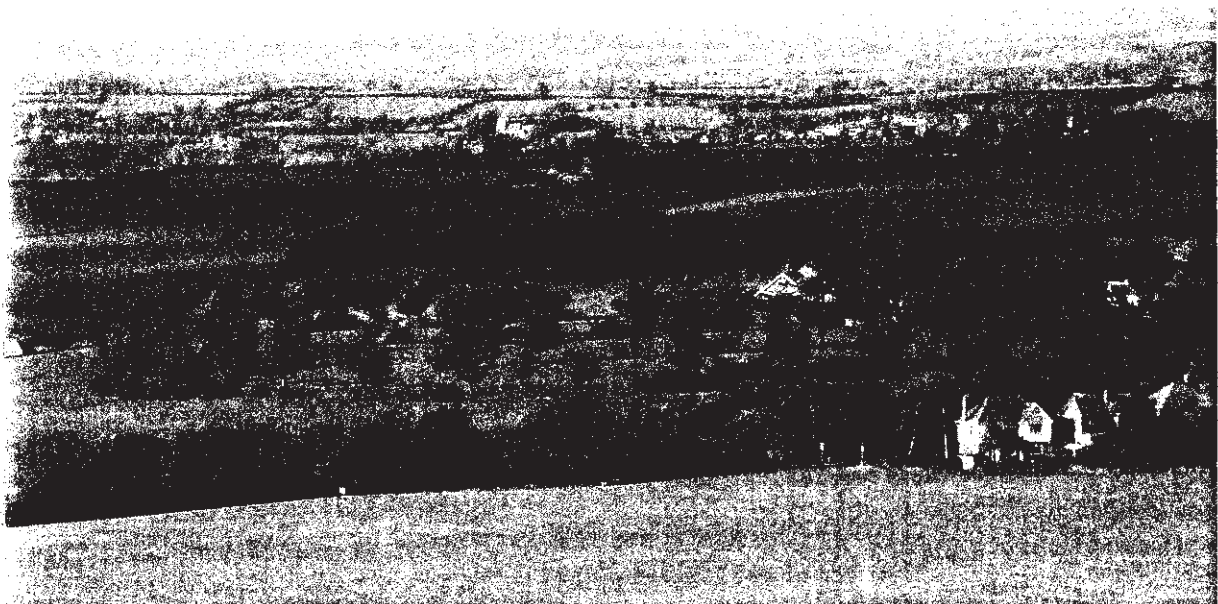
The history of this land is quite interesting as it was owned, together with the land where The Avenue now runs, by the Flory family, and the elder Mr. Flory built and lived in number 1 The Avenue - known as 'Seven Gables'. Several plots of land between Tring Road and the junction with Beacon Avenue were sold and built on during the late '30's, the remainder of The Avenue being planted out with beech hedges to mark out the individual plots and the line of the road. At the same time the chestnut trees in the field were planted and these marked out a semi-circular road running from between numbers 7 & 9, and 17 & 19, the plan being to have large building plots available both on the inside and the outside of the semi-circular road, a large advertising hoarding being erected in the area of the old drove road off



Projected lane in the land to the west of The Avenue. From a Connells map (1974)

Tring Road itself. This hoarding featured a rising sun with the words 'Sunshine Homes'.

However the 1939-45 war now intervened and no development could take place - the chestnut trees in the field grew very, very slowly, but it is interesting to note that many properties at the far end of The Avenue - this being sold off for building plots in the '60's - have beech 'hedges' which were planted in the pre-war period, remained untended, and grew into full size trees. This is why many of The Avenue boundary hedges are very high, and contain the sawn-off bases of large beech trees.



The chestnut trees in the field planted to mark out a semi-circular road can still be seen from the Downs

News of Priory House

Joan Curran, Rita Swift and I have continued to spend much time in the Society's research room. We now have our PC, on which we are beginning to sort our database. This will help us to know what we have and where it is. We have already had many enquiries for information and we have done our best to satisfy these requests. When the database is fully up and running, we will be able to deal with these enquiries much more fully.

We have received much new material, especially from the Town Council. We have been given their early account books and many copies of various Dunstable Directories. We also received many of the latter from Richard Gutteridge. Our room now contains quite a range of directories covering the last century. I had an enquiry about a tailor called Stebbing and was able to use the directories to find the years his shop was open and the premises he occupied. I anticipate that we will have more of these in the future.



We are hoping to be able to say when our room is open. We would like to be able to tell the Tourist Information Center /shop downstairs the time our room will be open so that they be able to tell enquirers that there is someone upstairs or indicate when there will be. Initially, we would like to have it open for three sessions a week, say Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings. There should be two people on duty for each session. I hope to ring-fence Wednesday mornings for my time there. Members of the Grammar

School Old Boys' Association have indicated a willingness to help us with this. The more volunteers we get, the more often we will be able to have the room open.

We now have a visitors' book in our research room and are asking people to sign when they come. The Lottery are very keen on numbers of visitors and this will help us keep track of who comes to see us.

The Town Council are appointing a new manager for Priory House. When we have someone in post, I hope to get something done about the display cabinet in the room at the front upstairs. It currently contains much material which is on loan from Luton Museum. We are gradually gathering items which should be put out on display and the cabinet would be the ideal location.

Last July, just before Ashton St Peter moved from its original site, I was given several boxes of Admission and attendance registers. These cover a period from the 1860s to the 1960s and have been archived in Bedford. Before I parted with them I had facsimiles made of the Admissions registers and photographed the more interesting pages of the Attendance registers with the Society's digital camera. These new materials are for research in our Priory House room.

I find it a bit of a mouthful to keep on referring to 'the Society's research room in Priory House'. My initial request that we simply call it the 'John Lunn Room' was turned down by the Town Council. We cannot call it an archive because that would imply that we have facilities for conserving old documents and would upset the professionals in Bedford and Luton. I still feel that we need a snappy title for this room so that everyone knows what we are referring to.

I anticipate writing a regular 'Priory House' page in future editions of this Newsletter.

Hugh Garrod

Members' memories

History society members have a host of memories of bygone Dunstable which ought to be written down before they are forgotten.

So here is the first of a series of anecdotes told to John Buckledee by the Dunstable folk mentioned below. If you have similar tales to tell, John will be happy to come to see you. Just leave a message on his answerphone on 01582 703107.

The early days of radio are among the recollections of Douglas Darby, a retired chartered surveyor, who was 91 last August. His father, Horace, was a prominent Dunstable personality. The Darbys, in 1924, were the second or third family to have a wireless in Dunstable. A man named Brown had fixed one up for the Royal Oak, the pub which stood in Church Street opposite Priory Road, and then Douglas's father asked Mr Brown to make one for the family home at 10 Priory Road. The wireless was a box measuring about one foot square and two feet tall, powered by a 60 volt high-tension battery and a nine-volt grid bias battery linked up to an accumulator. Most Saturday mornings Douglas, then nine or ten years old, would put the accumulator in a pram and take in to Scott's garage in High Street South to be recharged.

There was just one channel being broadcast a mixture of music and talks, between 7.30 and 11.30 at night. If Douglas had been good he was allowed to stay up to listen to one of the highlight programmes: the Savoy Orpheans band (and later the Savoy Havana band) playing live from the Savoy Hotel in London. This was on Friday nights starting at 10.30

Much later, just before the war, Douglas was staying at the YMCA in London when the pianist from the Savoy called in to play for anyone who wanted to listen. He was Carroll Gibbons, a Canadian, who later became famous in his own right as a band leader.

The wireless featured in one special event for the Darby family. Douglas's sister Jean was celebrating her fourth or fifth birthday and was mentioned on the hugely popular Children's Hour programme run by "Uncle Mac". The gimmick was that Uncle Mac would call out a child's name and tell her to follow a line of string attached to the radio. In Jean's case, this led from the loudspeaker to the cupboard under the stairs where it was attached to a doll. Jean's Mum and Dad had, of course, contacted the BBC in advance and Jean had been chosen for

this special bit of birthday fun. When Jean heard Uncle Mac call out "Jean Darby of Dunstable", she looked up, and said "Where's my string?" Jean is now living in Derbyshire but the doll, alas, was lost a long time ago. Douglas and his cousin George, who lived in Leighton Buzzard, later built a crystal set to listen to the BBC. For an aerial they used to go to uncle's allotment and attach it to the wire around his chicken run.

Fred Moore and Bernard Stevens were able to pinpoint the location of Kent's Meadow, often mentioned in the Gazette as the place where travelling circuses (and gypsy travellers) pitched their tents and caravans. It was a field off High Street North, on the town side of Garden Road, where the Honda garage is situated today. A dairy was on the corner, then a few houses, then Tommy Blake's garage and coach business, then Kent's Meadow. Grice and Young, who made gadgets for the motor trade, were based on Kent's Meadow at one time, in a building set well back from the road. Mr Gurney Grice, an Old Dunstablian who used to be a dispatch rider in the First World War, began his business inventing motor accessories from his home in Luton Road. The firm later moved to the Bournemouth area and its Dunstable building became a *stocking factory* and a *Chad razor blade factory*. Does anyone remember working there?

Do you remember the 1963 DUNSTABLE PAGEANT?

Douglas Darby does and has written down his memories, which are in the process of being typed. Richard Walden has donated programmes, correspondence and minutes to our Research Room but we need more information before it is forgotten. If you took part or were in the audience please write it down no matter how brief and although a film was made there are no still photographs available. Over many weeks the senior girls at Queen Eleanor's School embroidered a cloth to cover the Queen's coffin in Episode 5. Do you know what became of this item and who were the pupils who worked on it? Now that we have a Research Room it is important that we record this type of information. The Pageant took 2 years to produce and the whole town and surrounding area took part including churches, schools, WI and many clubs. So if anyone can help please write to me at 9 Appleby Gardens, Dunstable LU6 3DB or The Local History Society Research Room c/o Priory House, High Street South, Dunstable LU6 3RZ If you are into computers then e.mail rita.swift1@ntlworld.com or h.garrod@ntlworld.com

Rita Swift