

NEWSLETTER

Dunstable & District Local History Society
No. 38 August 2012



Chairman's Notes

One of the very special visitors to the History Society's Olympic display at Priory Gardens on May 19 was Olympic athlete Fred Alsop, of Dunstable.

Triple jumper Fred represented the United Kingdom at three Olympics and has had a road near his former home in Houghton Regis named in his honour.

When Sue and David Turner were assembling that mass of material for the Society's magnificent series of Olympic panels, they wanted to make sure that all the local Olympians were included, and Fred was one of the people they contacted.

Fred looked out his splendid British Olympics suit for his trip to Priory Gardens and was gratified to find that it still fitted!

The Olympic panels are much too good to be jettisoned after just one day's display so the Society has been arranging for them to be put up at various other venues, including the library and the Priory House exhibition area.

PHILIP BUCKLE

It is very sad that we will not be seeing Philip Buckle at our meetings any more. Many of us were among the packed congregation at his funeral in the Priory Church on May 10 and heard many tributes to him and anecdotes about his life.

Philip was a long-standing member of the Society with a vast knowledge of Dunstable and its history. His reminiscences about the town and his gents outfitter's shop in Middle Row have been featured a number of times in this newsletter and his article about the origins of The Avenue, where he lived, is still on our website. He gave us a talk not so long ago about his involvement with the great Dunstable Pageant. Had he lived, we would doubtless have been calling upon his expertise once again for the forthcoming Medieval Project.

Philip devoted a great deal of his time to the work done by Dunstable Rotary Club and he shared with our late president Colin Bourne a great fondness for his formative years at Dunstable Grammar School.

Our condolences to Pam, his wife, who is also a member of this Society.

TEABREAK

I mentioned in the last newsletter that we would have a vote about the serving of tea and coffee at our meetings. The result was a bit of a surprise – the majority decision was to have none at all.

The breakdown was: in favour of refreshments at the beginning of the evening, three votes; in favour of refreshments halfway through the evening, 20 votes; in favour of refreshments at the end of the evening, 15 votes; against having any refreshments at all, 32 votes.

So the Nays have it, but you'll notice that our efforts at proportional representation ended with no clear mandate!



Fred Alsop, visiting our Olympic display at Priory Gardens

Significantly, only two or three people actually volunteered to serve the tea and coffee, so that really ended the debate.

BURY ST EDMUNDS

We also had a surprise at the response to our planned outing to Bury St Edmunds, where we had intended to tour the newly restored theatre, and then split into two groups to visit either the brewery or the cathedral, according to taste.

Well, almost everyone opted for the cathedral rather than the brewery, but overall we just did not have enough people to cover the up-front costs and the decision was made to cancel the trip.

It was a disappointment, particularly for Gordon Ivinson who had gone to a great deal of trouble to try to keep the event on course despite an unusual number of difficulties. We had to change the scheduled date because a theatre company needed the building for rehearsals, and then the cathedral had problems accommodating us because they were assembling an exhibition.

We always try to keep ticket prices to a minimum, even if this sometimes means risking a small subsidy from Society funds. But this time the losses would have been unacceptable.

Gordon, meanwhile, has been having tortuous negotiations with Highclere Castle, where the tv series *Downton Abbey* is filmed.

Our intention had been to go to Highclere this year but the tv plays have been such a success that the venue was fully booked. We went on the waiting list for next year and, by all accounts, we have been lucky, even at this early stage, to get a place. So make a note of the date: We will be visiting Highclere on THURSDAY, JULY 25, 2013. We'll put the tickets on sale in January with prices yet to be finalised.

NORTHAMPTON OUTING

We HAVE had two outings during the summer. At Northampton we were shown around the Guildhall, which really is an architectural gem, and then we visited the fascinating crusader church of the Holy Sepulchre. On the way home our party stopped off at the National Badminton Centre in Milton Keynes where Rita Swift's son, Colin, showed us round and arranged refreshments. All we needed after that was for the GB badminton team to win an Olympic medal but, alas, it was not to be!

VINTAGE LEYLAND BUS VISIT

Quite a large group of members visited the hidden treasure of Totternhoe – the collection of Leyland buses restored there by Mike Sutcliffe. Mike had given an illustrated talk at a recent Society meeting but nothing could beat seeing these magnificent vehicles for real – and hearing some extraordinary stories about their survival. Cheese and wine, plus sumptuous cakes provided by Pat Sutcliffe, rounded off a very convivial evening.

John Buckledee

Proceedings of the Old Bailey 1674-1913



I came across this case involving the death of a deserter who had travelled through Dunstable while being transported to London. Although the crime wasn't committed in Dunstable itself, it does give a feel for the traffic that passed through the town. As the case involved a number of witnesses giving evidence, I have included a summary.

HUGH MACK

Hugh Mack was indicted on 16th April, 1806 for the wilful murder of Timothy Kirby. Mack was a sergeant in the army, escorting a company of 15 or 16 Irish deserters who were being marched in two columns of men, handcuffed and roped together, from Lichfield to London, together with a commanding officer, about 20 private soldiers and a number of wives who were following at the rear of the party. William Wiltshire, the commanding officer, had been allowed 8 days to cover the distance but the state of the roads meant that they only achieved 8 miles a day for the early part of the march.

TIMOTHY KIRBY

At Northampton gaol there was a delay before the gaoler could be persuaded to accept the prisoners which led to disgruntlement amongst the prisoners over lack of food and rest. Sergeant Mack states that the 'damned Irish rebels should all be put to death' and an altercation ensued when Timothy Kirby, one of the prisoners, accused Sergeant Mack of once being a deserter himself. Mack was clearly annoyed at this revelation, as the information could only have been imparted to Kirby by one of the private soldiers and he threatened the prisoner with his life if he spoke to him again.

By day 7, Saturday, 22nd March, 1806 they had reached Dunstable but had not had any refreshment since noon the day before at Northampton. After unsuccessfully trying to secure a stable near Dunstable to rest the prisoners they pushed on with the promise of refreshment at the end of the town.

WILLIAM WILTSHIRE

William Wiltshire told the court that Sergeant Mack had been falsely accused of being a deserter while on his way to a new regiment and that Timothy Kirby had been 'excessively riotous' during the journey. At the foot of Chalk Hill, he pulled on the rope and refused to go on. The officer drew his sword and struck the prisoner on his back with the flat of the weapon, who then moved on. At the top of the hill the party were halted and some

prisoners borrowed money from the officer for refreshment. It appears that the prisoners' subsistence pay was being withheld or not available. They continued the journey and spent the night at a gaol in St. Albans having marched about 30 miles that day.

DAY EIGHT

Sunday, being the 8th and final day allocated for transporting the prisoners, the officer was determined to reach London by nightfall, another 30 mile march. After 12 miles they had reached Barnet and the prisoners halted opposite a public house without authorisation demanding refreshment. However, a mob had gathered around the company so the officer instructed them to march to the end of the town whereupon they halted again outside another public house. With the mob still in attendance, the officer gave orders to march to a public house half a mile outside the town which the prisoners leading the column proceeded to do. Kirby, however, pulled on the rope with his right hand and refused to move. Sergeant Mack approached the prisoner and some witnesses claim that Kirby attempted to strike the sergeant, who took evasive action and swung his halbert at the man, the guard of which entered the man's skull. Several witnesses say that the sergeant had attempted to hit the man with the wooden handle but when Kirby withdrew his head to avoid the blow he was struck instead by the sharp metal guard of the halbert. The prisoner cried 'Oh! I am killed, I am killed'. After his handcuffs were removed, he was carried to a stable and a surgeon called. The surgeon informed the officer that it was a serious wound and Kirby would not live long, but that he could be transported to London by cart without increasing the danger.

SAVOY

He was placed in a straw-lined cart with his wife and child, lying with his head on his wife's lap, and then transported to the Savoy in London (then a hospital and military prison) arriving on the Sunday evening.

He survived until the following Thursday morning and was found at the post mortem to have received a small fracture of the skull, with a wound that had penetrated his brain.

Hugh Mack was found guilty of manslaughter, confined to six months in Newgate prison and fined one shilling.

<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=t18060416-1>

David Turner



An army sergeant of the period together with a halbert

Greeting New Members

We would like to take this opportunity to welcome the following new members:

Mrs K Atkinson
Barry Church
John Hockey
Colin Simpson
Robert Cato
Elizabeth Houghton
Patricia Rycroft



Sad Farewell



We are very sorry to announce the sad loss of

Philip Buckle
Grace Day
Sheila Furnell
Norman Langford

THE LITTLE BLUE MAN OF STUDHAM COMMON



A Dutchman in Dunstable: in search of the little blue man of Studham Common

THEO PAIJMANS

Let me introduce myself briefly. I am a Dutchman with a passionate interest in ghost stories, folk- and fairylore and other weird and wonderful tales. Since my good mother raised us on a healthy diet of English children's literature, the foundation for my interest was implemented early on. England, as we foreigners interested in collecting accounts of strange experiences fondly say, is certainly the most haunted country in the world. But this still does not explain what I, a Dutchman and living in the Netherlands, am looking for in Dunstable.

STUDHAM COMMON

My reason for having an interest in Dunstable is found in a strange event that occurred nearby nearly half a century ago. It was late January, 1967. A thunderstorm had been raging in the area, and six young boys from the Studham Primary School, Alex Butler, Tony Banks, Kerry Cahill, Andrew Hoar, David Inglis, Colin Lonsdale and John Mickleburgh, were playing on the common on their way to school. A few minutes after lightning had struck, Alex saw a little blue man with a tall hat and a beard. He shouted to his friends who came running and they too saw the strange figure. They began to run to him but then the little man disappeared in a puff of smoke. He appeared in another spot, the boys again approached him only to find the little blue man disappearing again. This occurred four times in total. The school's headmistress, Miss Newcomb, interviewed the children and pasted their written reports into a book, probably a scrapbook, entitled: 'The Little Blue Man on Studham Common.' The boys estimated the little blue man as three feet tall, with an extra two feet for the hat he wore. This was described as a tall, brimless bowler with a rounded top. The little man had two round eyes, a small flat triangle in place of a nose, and clothing consisting of a one-piece garment extending to a broad, black belt carrying a black box at the front about six inches square. The arms appeared short and were held close to the sides. The beard extended from the mouth downwards, to split and run to both sides of the chest. As one of the boys commented: "I and my friends were startled, he was horrid."

ST. ELMO'S FIRE OR ANOTHER DIMENSION

Having read an account of the affair in an English UFO publication (although there was no mention of the sighting of a UFO), I became so interested in this event that I decided to contact the Dunstable and District Local History Society. My e-mail was answered by its chairman John Buckledee, who kindly provided me with a clipping of the event that was published in the *Dunstable Gazette*, on 3 March 1967, and a clipping of the newspaper published a week later where two readers intrigued by the account offered suggestions as to its nature. One thought, in connection with the thunderstorm that had been raging, of St. Elmo's fire as a possible explanation. Another pointed out that since all the children told the same story, they must have seen something unusual: "... it resembles the old legends and

folk tales of earth fairies and elementals. Could it possibly be that in that freak atmosphere caused by the flash of lightning these children saw into that other dimension which generally we are only dimly aware of?"

So exactly what happened on that common, one day nearly half a century ago during a thunderstorm? An answer might be found in the most early of the sparse sources of this tale, the scrapbook that Miss Newcomb assembled. I learned, however, that it was not found at the school where she taught. It was suggested that perhaps she took it with her when she retired. Sadly, Miss Newcomb has passed away, and the principal witnesses either left the area or have passed away too. It is hoped, however, that someone reading this article might remember where the scrapbook is. Did she pass it on to her next of kin or to relatives? Were there any other strange sightings reported in previous or ensuing years? Are there any family members, friends or relatives of the boys who remember their strange experience? If so, I hope that these persons may come forward and contact either the Dunstable and District Local History Society or me, my e-mail address is at the bottom. Obviously, any correspondence directed to me will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

These days the fame of The Little Blue Man of Studham Common has spread on the internet where it even has its own website (alas, without giving any further information). Whatever the cause, and whatever those frightened boys saw more than half a century ago, the tale forms an integral part of the local lore of Dunstable and its surroundings. And wouldn't it be lovely if we could learn just a little bit more?

Bibliography

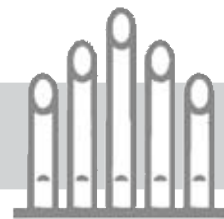
- 'A Little Blue Man At Studham', *Dunstable Gazette*, 3 March 1967.
 - 'Letters To The Editor', *Dunstable Gazette*, 10 March 1967.
 - R.H.B. Winder, 'The Little Blue Man On Studham Common', *Flying Saucer Review*, Volume 13, Issue 4, 1967, pages 3-4.
- I am indebted to the kind help of chairman John Buckledee of the Dunstable and District Local History Society. Those wishing to communicate directly to me can do so at Theo163@gmail.com*

Theo Paijmans



The path leading to the Dell at Studham Common, where the Little Blue Man is said to have appeared

The Organs of the Priory Church



The history of the organs of the Priory Church of St. Peter.

The first recorded organ at the Priory was built in approximately 1780 on the West gallery (now gone) at about the same time as the gallery.

This was replaced in about 1840 by another small organ on the West gallery. This was a small organ "of surprising power for its appearance and beautiful tone and was so exquisitely played by Mr. Gresham that persons have been attracted from London to hear it." (Historical & Topographical Notices of Dunstable by J.D. Parry, Gentlemen's Magazine Vol. 24 (1845) p479). One of the many changes to the church made during the Victorian age was the demolition of the gallery and the moving of the organ to the current North aisle position. This move was effected in 1892 by Nicholson organ builders for £291-5-0. The money for this was raised by subscription over several years. This organ was powered by manual blowers.

NORMAN AND BEARD ORGAN

This organ remained for many years until 1912 when it was decided the instrument was outdated. The meeting to discuss the future of the old organ was held in the National School, now the church hall. The old organ was so broken down that the organist had to make do with a piano. Two builders were approached, JJ Binns (Leeds) and Norman & Beard (London and Norwich). The contract was awarded to Norman & Beard. Some pipes from the 1840 instrument were used in the 1913 instrument. The rest of it was used in the building of a new organ at St. Thomas, Hove and this generated another £150 for the organ fund (this church has since become a Coptic Orthodox Church and the organ removed). Many fund raising events were held in the eighteen months before the dedication, including a Garden Fete at Tower House, hosted by Councillor JT Dale. Many local people joined a subscription list. Millionaire Andrew Carnegie also contributed £365 to the fund. The Norman and Beard organ cost £1,000 and further money for installation and tuning.

SABOTAGE

On October 7th 1913, a man called at the house of Edgar Franklin, the churchwarden, in Church Street. He asked for the keys to the church as he wished to see inside. Mr. Franklin replied that the church was open as Harold Deacon, the organist, was inside practising on the new organ. The man went to the church but could not get in, as Mr Deacon had locked himself inside. A little later Mr. Deacon reported, in great agitation, to Mr. Franklin that the visitor had climbed down a ladder into the engine chamber of the organ and was attempting to sabotage the machinery. The police were summoned and the man was eventually committed to the Three Counties Asylum, in Arlesey.

THE 700TH ANNIVERSARY

The work of restoring the organ was completed on time for it to be dedicated by Frederick Chase, Bishop of Ely, on the afternoon of Saturday 18th October, the 700th anniversary of the consecration of the church. The Mayor and the Council, ministers from other Dunstable churches and clergy from neighbouring parishes were invited. The church was full and beautifully decorated with flowers. The church was full again next day when the Rector, Canon WWC Baker, conducted the Communion service. The following Sunday was Harvest Festival.

In 1926 when electricity came to Dunstable the gas engine was replaced by an electric blower. Little work was carried out on the organ for many years.

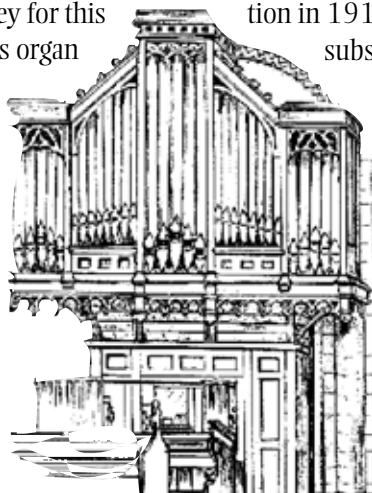
At some stage in the instrument's history, between its construction in 1913 and 1983, the Choir orchestral oboe (8) was substituted for a Nasat (2 $\frac{2}{3}$).

COMPLETE REBUILD

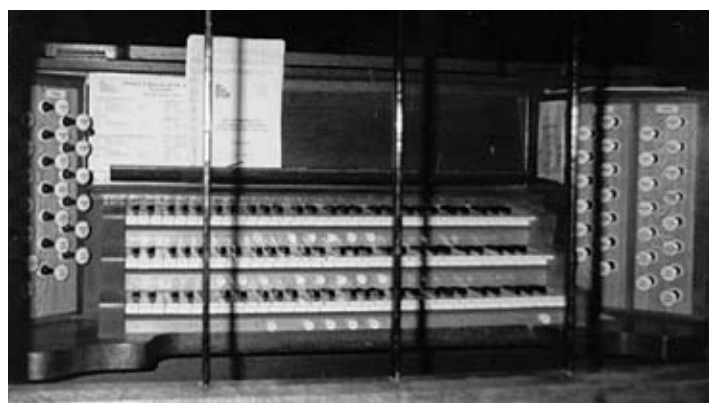
By 1983 the instrument was regularly breaking down or failing in some aspect. There were several choices on offer; to raise the amount needed for a complete rebuild, to have the organ rebuilt as a smaller instrument or to have it replaced with an electronic organ. Fortunately voting was in favour of a complete rebuild with additions. Four organ builders were asked for quotes: Bowen Organs (Northampton), Brian H. Bunting (Epping), Peter Wood (Thaxted) and Keith S. Bance (Harrow). The Brian Bunting quote was accepted and in mid 1984 work began. During the rebuild

a part of the organ was usable for services. The main results of this rebuild were the addition of a detached console on the South side of the choir and the change to electric action. Other work included the transposition from French Diapason pitch to the standard A=440Hz, a second-hand 'Discus' electric blower was also fitted to replace the elderly electric blower.

Tom McKeand, with additions by **Hugh Garrod**



1913 Norman & Beard Case
(Brenda Mills)



1985 Detached console

Sylvester Daggerwood



Many a theatrical historian has been misled by the existence of bogus playbills, designed to poke fun at the rather ridiculous touring actors who, for instance, were caricatured in the Dickens' novel *Nicholas Nickleby*.

One such was published in 1797, advertising a performance at The Theatre, Dunstable, for the benefit of Mr Sylvester Daggerwood.

The blurb promised that the fertility of the author's incomparable genius never appeared to greater advantage, presenting an assemblage of "all the beauties of desperation, execration, detestation, perturbation, humiliation and ostentation".

Just like a typical episode of *EastEnders*, you might think, but suspicions might then begin to be aroused by a promise that Mrs Daggerwood would attempt a recital of Collins Ode on the Passions, accompanied "on the bladder and string" by Mr Sylvester Daggerwood.

The poster continues to advertise a ballet about Don Juan which would conclude with a pleasing view of the Infernal Regions, after which there would be a farewell address to the Town of Dunstable by Mr Sylvester Daggerwood, in the Character of the Devil.

MOUSE AND TINDER-BOX,

Tickets were to be bought at the Mouse and Tinder-box, near the theatre, and to prevent confusion the nobility were urged to order their coachmen to set down, and take up, with their horse's heads towards the Cow and Snuffers.

History Society members should not be tempted to begin a search through the records for these two forgotten public houses.

The clue is the presence in the poster of Sylvester Daggerwood, whose name would have been a well-known source of mirth in the 18th century.



George Colman the Younger

He was a central character in a short play (just two scenes) called *New Hay* at the Old Market which was first performed at London's Haymarket Theatre in 1795.

GEORGE COLMAN

It was written by George Colman the Younger (1762-1836) who was one of the most popular English humorists of his time. He was famous for his warm wit and convivial conversation. And with the creation of Sylvester Daggerwood he invented a character whose popularity continued for many decades.

Daggerwood is the actor-manager of a theatrical company based at Dunstable who has played the great Shakespearean characters so many times that he mutters their lines in his sleep and introduces literary quotations into every other sentence he utters.

Seeking an engagement at the Haymarket Theatre (which was managed in real life by Colman himself) Daggerwood describes the success of his performances "to an overflowing and brilliant barn — house, I mean — with unbounded and universal applause."

MOCKING FAMOUS ACTORS

The Daggerwood character was first played by a comedian, John Bannister, who seized the opportunity to mock in his performance the styles of the famous actors of the day. Audiences saw the joke, and when the character was revived in future productions other actors adopted different impersonations, which added to the fun.

Colman, son of the manager of the Drury Lane and Covent Garden theatres, published his play in various formats, and copies (including some USA editions) are readily available (for substantial sums) on the internet.

And there are other examples of Daggerwood posters.

THE INVISIBLE GIRL

The *Sporting Magazine* (1802?) quotes an entertainment by Sylvester Daggerwood, at the Royalty Theatre, Comical Gardens, Dunstable, featuring an Invisible Girl, Mammoth, Galvanism, Ventriloquist, Gentlemen Actors, and Phantasmagoria.

"The uncommon brass of some modern playwrights, and the leading wit of others, induces Sylvester Daggerwood to use the silvery voice

of intreaty and modesty to assure those who may honour him on his night that novelty and ingenuity shall be exerted to please them (in) . . . the most comical, tragical, operatical, pantomimical, farcical, and bombastical comedy in 5 acts... it is trusted none of the gallery people will imitate the Londoners by braying in a Jack Ass stile, or by imitating any of the Swinish multitude.

"At the end of the First Act, the young, beautiful, amiable, and interesting Invisible Girl, patronized by the Prince of Pantiles, will exhibit her marvellous parts, and give a specimen of her uncommon powers, in singing, sneezing, snoring, and other natural accomplishments. . . .

"(Tickets may be had, and places for the boxes to be taken, at the Office in front of the Theatre, Dunstable)."

It's another example of the name of Dunstable being used for fun by humorists. The Duke of Dunstable is featured by the great P.G. Wodehouse in his *Blandings* novels. And Wodehouse probably picked up the name from his hero, W.S. Gilbert, who has a character called the Duke of Dunstable in *Patience*. And, bang up to date, the comedian Rob Brydon had a joke about Dunstable... "finished shaving".

John Buckledee

Dunstable's old aircraft factories

By David Underwood

History Society member David Underwood and his family have a passion for aircraft and are at present in the middle of a huge project to restore a vintage Dagling glider. Here David tells of the early days of aircraft manufacture in Dunstable.



Zander Luton Road making Lilienthal glider

ZANDER AND WEYL LTD

Zander and Weyl Ltd started at Luton Road, Dunstable, in 1934, probably near where the Wickes showroom is now.

The founders of the firm, making bits and pieces for self-assembly aircraft, were two Germans, Eric P. Zander and Arthur Weyl, who had come to this country to escape the Nazis.

In 1935 they were asked to make a series of replica gliders for the film *Conquest Of The Air*, which starred Laurence Olivier. There are many replicas in museums which were made for the film and they probably originated in Dunstable.

Zander and Weyl also made a few Zogling gliders, which was a very basic aircraft, with just a frame and fuselage.

DART AIRCRAFT

In 1936 they changed the name to Dart Aircraft and moved to 29 High Street North. These are the premises in what was known as the town hall yard, approached through the Anchor Archway. They started making a powered aircraft which became known as the Dunstable Dart and then the Dart Pup.

My father, Peter Underwood, built a scale model for Mr Weyl after the war. Mr Weyl lived in Kingsway and all his furniture there was made out of aircraft plywood. My dad was at Dunstable Grammar School and in the air cadets with Mr Weyl's son, Manfred.



Zander Luton Road making Cayler glider replica



Dart factory site rear of Anchor archway

Despite his opposition to the Nazis, Mr Weyl was one of the German nationals who were interned in the Isle of Man during the war – a trauma from which he never really recovered. An evacuee who was in Mr Weyl's house still remembers the shock when police knocked on the door one evening and took him away immediately.

Zander and Weyl also built two Grunau Baby gliders which were launched using bungee ropes off the top of Dunstable Downs in the early days of the gliding club.

Later they built a glider called the Dart Cambridge for the Cambridge University Gliding Club. Two versions were made. A brass model of one is now in the London Gliding Club at Dunstable.

There was also a tiny powered aeroplane called Pou de Ciel (affectionately known as the Flying Flea) and then a Dart Flittermouse – little more than a powered glider.

The last aeroplane they manufactured was the Dart Kitten, following the tradition of naming their craft after animals. Two of these were made before the war before they moved out of Dunstable to Chalfont St Giles.

All the Dunstable factories were quite small, making only two or three craft at a time.

After the war they made one more Dart Kitten. Parts for this were made in the living room of my grandfather's house at 219 High Street South. Grandad was Frank Underwood, who became the first headmaster of Northfields School when it opened in 1936.

One of the pre-war Dart Kittens still survives – a lady flies it in Yorkshire.

GRICE AND YOUNG

Another company making parts for aircraft was Grice and Young which opened in 1935 at 240 Luton Road, which was close to the Dart factory, if not in the same building!

In 1940 the firm moved to Matthew Street, and also opened a dope shop in Nicholas Way in 1943. Dope was the sealant brushed on to the linen used for aircraft wings. It had a powerful smell which could make you feel 'dopey'. Nicholas Way was then one of the old tracks off High Street North which later became the Quadrant shopping centre. Gurney Grice had started the business to make aerowheels and brakes for Flying Fleas.

SCOTT AIRCRAFT

Scott Aircraft was founded by Walter Roy Scott who started building gliders when he was just 13 at his home at Thetford. He moved to Dunstable to work for Zander and Weyl and then moved in 1937 with Mr Zander to premises at 32 Lovers Walk where Zander and Scott built tiny gliders named Hutter.

The company was renamed Scott Light Aircraft Ltd in 1938 which was when they moved to 27 Albion Street, still making Hutters.

They made some high-performance gliders called the Scott Viking and primary gliders called Daglings. The adjoining factory was in Matthew Street where Blacksmith Court now is.



Scotts old factory in Albion Street

HAWKRIDGE AIRCRAFT

Hawkridge Aircraft was founded by E.P. Zander and H.E. Bolton in 1945 in London and moved soon afterwards to High Street North, Dunstable, near the Grice and Young factory in Nicholas Way. They built gliders from components and rebuilt broken gliders. Two Grunau Baby gliders which they built still survive.



Scotts Matthew Street site

They took a broken Slingsby Gull 3 which had been owned by Prince Beira, the racing driver, which they repaired and resold as the Hawkridge Kittiwake. This is now in the museum at Brooklands. They also built primary gliders called Dagling, one of which is now under restoration at Peter Underwood's workshop at Eaton Bray.

Beeston Priory and the Dunstable Arms



While recently visiting Sheringham in Norfolk, I chanced upon the remains of Beeston Priory, of the Augustinian order, which I was told had links with our one in Dunstable.

Interestingly, there is a public house nearby called the Dunstable Arms, so I thought it might be worth researching the story.

According to local folklore, a tunnel is said to have existed, running between the Priory and the Dunstable Arms. The current public house was re-built in the 1930s, after a fire destroyed the earlier building, and the earliest reference I have found to it in local directories was in 1861, with the name of James Dennis, a farmer, being the publican. Although there is no evidence that the tunnel ever existed, it is an interesting parallel to the legend of tunnels at Dunstable Priory. I contacted the landlady at the Dunstable Arms to ascertain if she knew how it came to be named and was told that, according to local people, it was because the canons at the priory had come from Dunstable but no evidence to this effect can be found. Despite extensive probing I have been unable to unearth any other information as to how the Dunstable Arms came to be named.

The Sheringham Local History Society kindly sent me a comprehensive history of Beeston Priory which revealed that the Priory was generally accepted to have been founded in 1216 by Margaret de Cressy after the death of her second husband in 1215. The Priory always seemed to struggle financially and there were never more than 4 or 5 canons plus the prior – in 1291 its income was listed at £27 16s. 8¾d. and in 1535 £43 2s. 4¾d. In 1536 a bill was passed for the suppression of the smaller monasteries, but Beeston Priory was not suppressed until 1539 when the Prior was

granted a pension of £5 and smaller sums to the two canons. Absolutely no reference to Dunstable could be found and a search of the Dunstable Annals revealed no reference to Beeston Priory.

The Priory was constructed largely of local flint with the window arches outlined in stone. It occurred to me that it might be Totternhoe stone, but it is extremely unlikely that it would have been transported about 120 miles.

Obviously being of the same order, the two Pories would have been aware of each other, but whether there was a link and how the Dunstable Arms came to be named, is open to conjecture. Can anyone throw some further light on the matter?

David Turner



The Dunstable Arms, Sheringham, in 1912



Chancel and chapel of Beeston Priory



The Dunstable Arms, Sheringham, today

Memories of old Dunstable



John Buckledee is collecting anecdotes about old Dunstable and district and always welcomes contributions. Phone him on 01582 703107.

THE BRITANNIA INN

Odd, but after all these years there has been a sudden burst of interest in the Britannia pub, which once stood in Middle Row alongside the narrow covered walkway between Ashton Square and High Street South.

James Maskell has discovered that his great great grandfather Charles Cook appears in the 1891 census as innkeeper of the Britannia. Mr Maskell's question was: Did Charles survive the great fire of Middle Row in 1893?

This involved a long trawl through the Gazette microfilms held in Dunstable library where the answer was discovered on the very last page of that year's files.

The fire broke out on Boxing Day of that year. A lamplighter noticed a fire inside Mr Barcock's shop and raised the alarm.

One hour later, at 6 o'clock, the whole of the shop "was in a terrific blaze".

The Gazette reported that it was a "terrifying and disastrous conflagration which tested the pluck for the firemen to the very utmost".

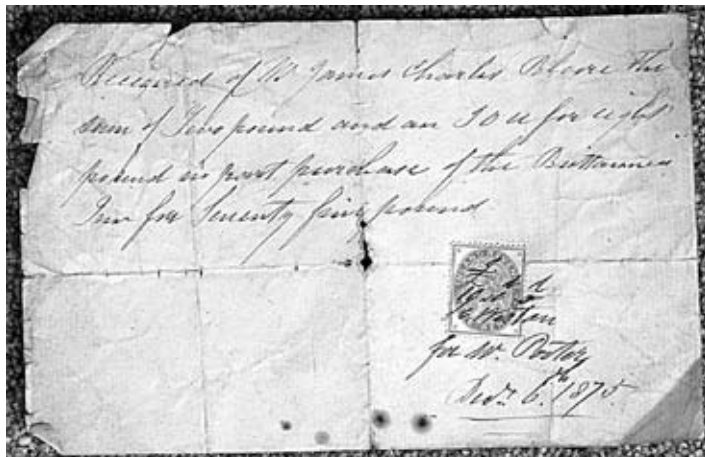
The fire brigades from Dunstable and Houghton Regis rushed to the blaze, but they were hampered by a shortage of water. By 7 o'clock the fire had a good hold upon Mr Janes' shop and the Britannia pub. An immense crowd gathered and, said the Gazette, "excitement was at times wrought to the highest pitch".

The firemen inside Mr Janes' house escaped unhurt when a considerable quantity of masonry fell down.

Shortly before nine the front walls of the Britannia and Mr Barcock's shop fell with a great crash into the street, startling many but injuring none.

The three buildings mentioned were completely destroyed and the premises of Mr Percival at one end and Mr Smallwood at the other sustained much damage.

Everyone was partially insured except the owner of the Britannia, who was not insured at all. But, said the Gazette, the landlord of the pub, Mr Burfield, had managed to save most of his household goods. So – an interesting story from Yesteryear, but only a partial answer for Mr Maskell who has at least discovered that his innkeeper-ancestor had given up the pub before Boxing Day 1893.



An invoice dated December 6th, 1875 for the sale of the Britannia Inn

The great fire came to end on the far side of what later became the Buckle's outfitters shop. There were scorch marks on the walls furthest away from the passageway as a reminder of the blaze.

Meanwhile, a completely separate message has come from Brenda Pittam, of the history group at Yardley Gobion, which has discovered in the attic of an old beer house an invoice dated December 6 1875 and signed on behalf of Mr Porter who was selling the Britannia Inn to Mr James Charles Bloore. The cost seems to have been £75 of which the part-payment invoiced was £2 and an IOU for £8. Stamp collectors will be interested to see that the bill had to be signed over a special Inland Revenue stamp costing one penny.

Mr Bloore was a publican and horse dealer at Yardley Gobion and other documents found include two dog licences issued to him at the Britannia in April 1876. He may have employed a manager at Dunstable because invoices for deliveries from a brewery at Harpenden were sent to him at Yardley Gobion.

This newsletter has previously published some other details about the Britannia. In 1874 the licensee there was someone called Charles Mottram who appealed to magistrates that year after his wife had thrown a jug and two tumblers at him and threatened to "smash and murder" him. Worthington Smith drew a picture of the alleyway and the pub in 1887.

Georgina Phillips added some more pieces to the jigsaw when she discovered a family prayer book saying that an ancestor, Roger Charles Edwards, was born there in August 1873 when his father, Robert, was a publican.

SOCIETY WEBSITE

Our website (www.dunstablehistory.co.uk) is now attracting quite a lot of attention from outside this area. For instance, the articles in our newsletter which featured the Safety Water Elevator Co of Dunstable have proved invaluable to a group at Wherwell, Hampshire.

Excavations there have uncovered an elevator with its stand, column and lid which was used to raise water to six houses which had been built 60-70 feet above the water table. The aim is now to reconstruct the elevator above a dummy well to demonstrate how it worked.

Researchers used the Google search engine to seek information and, of course, up came the articles in 1999 by John Lunn and Omer Roucoux. The elevators were constructed at the Scott engineering business in High Street South.

LITTLE BLUE MAN

Many people attended the photo display by the Friends of Studham Common in which one of our members, Charles Baker, is busily involved. It provided an opportunity to seek memories of "the little blue man" which is the subject of an article by Theo Paijmans elsewhere in this newsletter. Villagers remember that the weather on the day of the sighting was very odd indeed...thunder and overcast. Andrea Maxted described being woken up that morning by what sounded like a sonic boom. Village milkman, George Thorne, delivering at Swannells Wood, was shocked by a loud bang and a rush of wind under which the trees bent double. His friends later pulled his leg for being frightened by a bit of thunder but this, he said, was different.

The children at the local school claimed to have seen the "little blue man" in the area of the common where flint was once excavated. Trees and shrubs cover much of the common today but the circular area of the flint pit is still defined.

John Buckledee