

NEWSLETTER

Dunstable & District Local History Society
No. 41 February 2014



Chairman's Notes

Sadly, I have to record the deaths of two stalwarts of Dunstable's local history scene.

BERNARD STEVENS

Bernard Stevens, a founder member of this society who was our president in recent years, died in October – just a few weeks short of his 103rd birthday.

In the same month, we lost James Dyer, the distinguished Luton schoolteacher who took a huge interest in Dunstable's past. He was 79.

Bernard had been a familiar figure in Dunstable high street, serving customers in his ironmongery business, J.B. Stevens, which he founded in 1934. He became chairman of Dunstable Chamber of Trade, president of Dunstable Rotary Club and chairman of Dunstable Magistrates. He was a life member of the National Trust, an active member of Dunstable Probus Club and had served on the management committees of the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Luton and Dunstable Hospital. He was a devout Christian, taking a leading part in the life of the Methodist Church at the Square.

Bernard was a generous and convivial man, whose house and immaculate garden in Friars Walk was a regular venue for a host of fund-raising events for local societies. He had such a wide circle of friends that when he decided to celebrate his 100th birthday in style, he held TWO party luncheons at the Old Palace Lodge so that there was space for everyone. He was still in correspondence with a French family with whom he was billeted while serving in the army during World War Two.

The Dunstable Gazette devoted almost a page to his obituary, but there was nowhere near enough space for all the anecdotes about him. His passion for motoring was mentioned during his funeral service, when it was revealed that he decided to stop driving only when he was in his nineties – and had just received a speeding ticket.

And the Gazette had no room to mention the great events which particularly stimulated his interest in local history, when he allowed the Manshead Archaeological Society to excavate Friary Field, which he owned. Over a period of 15 years, from 1965, the society made numerous discoveries, including the famous Dunstable Swan Jewel which is now in the British Museum.



Bernard Stevens at home in his much-loved garden

Barry Horne wrote eloquently about those exciting times in the November 6 issue of the Gazette.

JAMES DYER

James Dyer, who taught at a number of local schools including Harlington Upper, was appointed editor of the Bedfordshire Magazine in 1965 and also edited the Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal. He had been chairman of South Beds Archaeological Society and Bedfordshire Archaeological Council. His books included *Discovering Prehistoric England*, a guide to more than 600 prehistoric monuments, and the Penguin Guide to Prehistoric England and Wales. He collaborated with John Dony to write *The Story of Luton*, and his history of Luton Grammar School, titled *Rhubarb and Custard*, was published in 2004.

He was an expert of the life of the pioneering Dunstable historian Worthington G. Smith, about whom he wrote an authoritative article in the Dunstable Gazette in 1965.

In more recent times he was enormously helpful to me with my work on the republication of the early Dunstable history, *Dunno's Originals*.

Dunno (William Nicholls) had produced rough drawings of various Roman coins discovered in the early 1800s in the Dunstable area and had made guesses at their identification. Dr Dyer, always hugely generous with his time, took the trouble to show the drawings to Mr P.J. Casey, author of *Roman Coinage in Britain*, with the result that the coins were authoritatively identified.



James Dyer

Both Bernard Stevens and James Dyer made themselves readily available to help with captions to the weekly Yesteryear feature in the Dunstable Gazette. Their expertise will be greatly missed.

John Buckledee

Dunno's Originals

About 15 years ago I became involved in a project to reprint an old history book about Dunstable called **Dunno's Originals**.

Its success led to all sorts of other things and in the end no less than THREE rare old books about the area were republished, plus an old novel about Dun the Robber.

DUNNO REVISITED

I have been asked to revisit the story of Dunno here because tales about the “mysterious” author have been repeated yet again recently, and we’ll now try to lay these conjectures to rest.

The idea for the reprint started when Paul Bowes, who owned the Book Castle in Dunstable, discovered a battered old copy of Dunno's Originals while he was browsing in a second-hand bookshop. Paul in his publishing days had what were very much busman's holidays...he took piles of manuscripts and unread books to his holiday house and couldn't resist popping into any bookshop in the area.

He got very excited about Dunno's Originals, and understandably so. It is an extraordinary book – a mixture of local history, jokes, anecdotes, poems and imaginary conversations between Dunno and a shepherd on top of Dunstable Downs. It was first published as a series of small booklets throughout 1821 and 1822 and is very unusual, very much an acquired taste, but totally fascinating.

There's a little verse in the book called “Modern Dunstable” which particularly appealed to me.

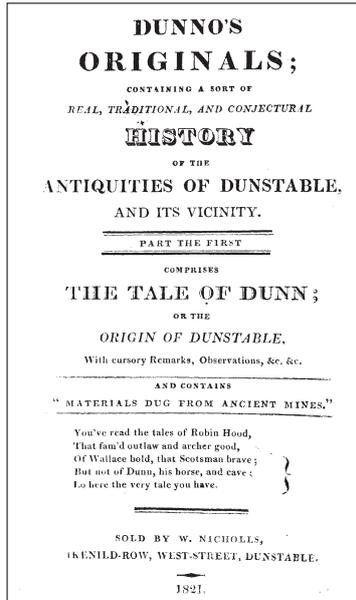
*Fam'd is their bread,
Their Waters clear,
Their Larks are fine,
They've wholesome air,
With lovely Lasses,
Near and fair;
O happy may they be.*

Bread, larks and lasses... what more could Dunstable want?

WHO WAS DUNNO?

Paul was determined to republish this little curiosity but he remarked to me that the great mystery about the book was: Who was its author?

Well, I just happened to know the answer – Dunno was the pseudonym of William Nicholls, who lived in West Street, Dunstable. Paul was impressed and in fact I impressed myself. I can't normally remember the names of people I met yesterday, so why this obscure piece of Dunstable knowledge had lodged in my mind, I don't know. But I was able to tell Paul a little bit about William Nicholls and Paul then asked me to write a preface to the book giving some details about its author.



Cover of Dunno's first edition

I got to know about William Nicholls when I was made editor of the Dunstable Borough Gazette in 1964. One of my first tasks was to produce a souvenir magazine to celebrate the centenary of the Gazette and this meant researching the history of the paper.

DANIEL TIBBETT

There wasn't much to go on, but I knew that its first proprietor was a young man called Daniel Tibbett whose father had founded Index Printers in Dunstable, originally based in what became Moore's department store in High Street South. I got in touch with various members of the Tibbett family and they steered me in the direction of the county records office, where some of the family archives were stored. Alas, there wasn't much about the Gazette in these, but there were references to Dunno's Originals, which James Tibbett had assembled into a book and reprinted in

1855. There was also the manuscript of extra chapters to the book which had never been published.

By chance, one of the articles in the Gazette's souvenir magazine fell six inches short and, to fill the space, I rapidly typed out from memory a little story about the Tibbett connection with this old history book called Dunno's Originals. And that, I thought, was that.

THOMAS BAGSHAWE

But one of the regular visitors to the Gazette in those days was Thomas Bagshawe, whose family owned the Bagshawe's engineering works in Church Street, Dunstable. Mr Bagshawe had discovered a copy of Dunno's Originals in a second-hand bookshop and had written to the Gazette in the 1930s about his find. He suggested in the Gazette that the mysterious Dunno could well have been Mr Henry Brandreth, the wealthy owner of Houghton Hall, who was an antiquarian and just the sort of person who might have published the Originals under a pseudonym.

DUNNO'S GRANDSON

This had brought an indignant response from R.H. Nicholls of Lovers Walk, Dunstable, whose grandfather William was, without doubt, the original Dunno.

Mr Bagshawe, having seen my little piece in the magazine, told me the story, and pointed me towards the Gazette's interview with Dunno's grandson.

William Nicholls was of Scottish descent but the family had lived in Dunstable for many years and could be traced back to the early parts of the 17th century.

The Gazette reported: “William Nicholls attended the Free School at Dunstable and among the most treasured possessions of his grandson today is one of his schoolbooks, which is dated 1790.

“This clearly shows that at an early age William Nicholls possessed remarkable genius as a writer and arithmetician. All the entries in the book have been splendidly executed with a quill pen without a single blot or mistake either in the writing or the arithmetic.”

William Nicholls began a painting and decorating business in 1801 which was afterwards carried on by his son and grandson. He was a collector of pictures and curios, and an expert engraver. In fact, the illustrations in Dunno's Originals were printed from woodblocks which he had carved himself. His son lent the blocks to James Tibbett when the Originals (which first appeared as a series of booklets in 1821 and 1822) were reprinted as one volume in 1855.

UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL

There were four additional booklets written by Dunno but which had never been published because he had died before they were ready. Paul Bowes decided to include these as part of the 2001 facsimile, with me transcribing the manuscript on to computer in as similar a typeface to the originals as possible.

The difficulty with this was that Dunno's handwriting was a bit shaky and he included a lot of place names and other phrases which were puzzling in various ways. For instance, there was a poem describing the scene in Dunstable as stagecoaches thundered down the high street. There was a word there whose letters seemed to be J E H U P. What on earth was that? Then the penny dropped. This was Dunno's way of describing what coachmen said to horses when they wanted them to go faster. Gee up, they would say.

BEAUMONT'S TREE

There was a place, said Dunno, called the Bowman's Tree near Silsoe where a tree with healing properties had sprouted from a wooden stake which had been thrust through the body of a highwayman who had been shot nearby. A call to the Flitwick Local History Society revealed that Dunno had obviously misheard a reference to Beaumont's Tree, so called because it grew on land belonging to the Beaumont family. This is the sort of thing which editors usually try to correct before they get into print but with the author long gone it was perhaps better to put in an explanatory footnote rather than alter the original. But there were so many things of that nature that my explanatory notes almost became a book in themselves.

DUNNO'S COTTAGE

William Nicholls lived at Ikenild Row in West Street. His cottage was probably on what is now St Mary's Gate car park, near the junction with what was once Cross Street, which has now been replaced (approximately) by the road at the side of the new police station. The old Ewe and Lamb pub stood until 1961 on the corner of Cross Street. A study of street directories shows that the Nicholls' home would have been three doors away from the pub in the town centre direction.

John Buckledee

The Custumal

Helen Walker-Sygrove, the manager of Priory House, asked me to produce a replacement interpretation panel to go on the wall of Farmfoods at Ashton Square and to include a translation of the original byelaws for the town.

The byelaws, which included customs and rules for the operation of the market, were listed in a legal document written in 1220, known as a custumal and believed to be the second earliest in the country.

I felt the text should be accompanied by an image of the original custumal, but I wasn't sure that it still existed as no one I spoke to had ever seen it. However, the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service were able to tell me that it was in the Harley collection of documents at the British Library. After a lengthy search at the British Library, the custumal was eventually located and a scanned image, with permission to use it, on the panel was obtained. Because it was in medieval latin, we weren't certain that it was indeed the custumal, but a transcription in the Society's history room in Priory House confirmed that the wording in the left hand column corresponded. We are not sure yet what the right hand column refers to, and it's possible that it's a record which has nothing to do with Dunstable at all.

The byelaws stipulated that windmills, handmills, horse mills, dove-cotes, bakehouses or malt kilns were permitted on land occupied by the burgesses. Woodstacks and dung heaps were allowed as long as they did not obstruct the king's highway or the market. Brewing was not allowed in shops because of the risk of fire and pigsties should not be made outside people's doors. Butchers were not to throw refuse on to the street and market booths had to be removed by the end of market day.

Being able to see the custumal on the panel somehow brought the town's historic byelaws to life.

David Turner



The left hand column shows the 1220 custumal with the original byelaws for Dunstable

MONUMENTAL INSCRIPTIONS



WEST STREET CEMETERY, DUNSTABLE 1861 - 1989

I became the project leader, in 2007, of a team of volunteers who were embarking on recording the monumental inscriptions in Dunstable Cemetery.

This became a project which lasted over 5 enjoyable years. It entailed visiting the cemetery several times a week and inputting data onto a computer for at least two hours every day. It was hoped that this information could eventually be put on to a website for free public access, but unfortunately this has not been possible.



A page of the wonderful hand-written registers

Initially, the burial records for each section of the cemetery were transcribed from the wonderful hand-written registers. After the burial maps were photographed we then set out, armed with a print out of the burial records, a map, clipboard, brush, water, secateurs and

trowel. It proved both difficult and challenging as the plots were not in any order. I must say at this point that Kate Dimmock, Cemetery & Grounds Administration Officer, for Dunstable Town Council, was extremely helpful during the project. Where a headstone existed, it was transcribed and photographed. The data and each photograph was entered onto the computer and hyperlinked to the burial record, which I believe is a unique method of recording inscriptions.

Here are some of the interesting inscriptions we came across:

JAMES TURNEY

The first person to be buried in West Street Cemetery was a young boy named James Turney who died on October 20th 1861, aged 4 years. The details on the headstone can be seen halfway down the main walk on the east side. It contains inscriptions of his father, Thomas Turney, who died May 21st 1905 aged 74, his sister, Emily Turney, who died April 22nd 1906 aged 51 years and his mother, Eliza Turney, who died December 6th 1922 in her 90th year. It is surprising that this grave should be so far into the cemetery – perhaps the area was reserved for the burial of children.

FRANCIS CLEWS

It was whilst working on the first section that I came across the Clews family memorial stone which mentioned their son, Francis, who had been killed in action during the Great War. Francis Clews, Private 14364, 7th Bn., Bedfordshire Regiment died at the Somme, aged 20, on 4th December 1915. Having researched the family's background I was delighted when visiting the refurbished chapel at the cemetery, to see a beautiful wooden plaque on the wall with Francis' name on it. It was donated by Waterlow & Sons in memory of their employees who had been killed during the Great War.



The wooden plaque which has Francis Clews' name on it

There is much information on headstones which could be very useful to family historians and there are many inscriptions that touched my heart, such as the families who had lost many young children.

LUCY DALES

The first Lady Mayor of Dunstable, Miss Lucy Dales, is buried with her father John Thomas Dales (JTD), the owner of Dales Dubbin for which Lucy was the factory manager.

As well as the different types of stones and designs there were also many wonderful inscriptions on the kerbs and headstones.



Lucy Dales, Dunstable's first Lady Mayor

CAPTAIN BAKER

One interesting headstone I discovered, was Constance Baker, the 14-year-old daughter of the Rev. and Mrs William Baker. Canon Baker was the rector of the Priory Church of St Peter from 1903 to 1924 and a Canon of St Albans Abbey. There was also a mention of their two sons who were both killed in action; Captain Charles Tanqueray Baker, who is buried in Gallipoli in Turkey and Second



Captain Baker

Lieutenant Aveling of whom no further information is currently available. When I visited Gallipoli, on a battlefield tour, I was able to visit the cemetery where Captain Baker is buried and pay my respects. Within our party was a lay preacher, who kindly said a prayer at Captain Baker's grave, which I thought was touching.



Captain Baker's grave in Gallipoli

June Byrne



During our project, we went to extraordinary lengths to see what was written on the headstones that had fallen over; often using a mirror to read the inscription on the underside. This is my partner in crime, Keren Bonner.



The first time I came to Dunstable was the Summer of 1952.

INTERVIEWS

Having received my O Level I started job hunting and applied to be a Temporary Scientific Assistant at the Air Ministry. An interview in London was followed by one at the Met. Office Headquarters in Dunstable.

Having arrived at Luton Railway Station I was directed across the road for a bus to Dunstable. Asking to be put off near the Met Office I was taken to RAF Stanbridge. After a very long wait I arrived back in Dunstable and found the bus that I needed. That conductor put me off at the correct stop but sent me down Green Lanes instead of Drovers Way.

POSTED TO DUNSTABLE

The interview must have been alright because I was employed and spent several weeks training at Stanmore. From there I was posted to Dunstable. Carrying our suitcases, and with the addresses of the 'digs' where we would be living, another girl and I travelled out to Dunstable. The bus conductor did not know the names of the roads and dropped us in the town centre. It was November, dark, snow on the ground and a Sunday evening with nobody in sight. Luckily a young man from the Salvation Army appeared pushing his bike through the snow and he very kindly escorted us to our 'digs'

WORKING AT THE MET. OFFICE

On Monday morning I entered a whole new world. The Met. Office worked to a twenty-four hour clock and was always on GMT. We worked three shifts every day of the year. 06-00hrs-14-00hrs, 14-00hrs-22-00hrs and 22-00hrs-06-00hrs. The first department in which I worked was the Communications Room. Here we received weather reports from a large area which we coded and put them on maps in the Forecasting Room. These reports came in by teleprinter. We were not so busy at night and I became friendly with the switchboard operator and I learnt to use the PBX (private branch exchange) – unofficially!

After a few months I was transferred to the Cathode Ray Direction Finder Dept (CRDF). The cathode ray tube was slightly convex, had a pale green tinge and was just like the first TV sets. There were maps of Great Britain and the North Atlantic with compass points round them.

For ten minutes every hour I was connected to RAF Stations in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Cornwall and Norfolk. We switched on our tubes and reported the direction of any flashes seen. I plotted them and where they met was the centre of activity. This was all coded and put onto the weather maps. We saw the rain that fell in London on Coronation Day coming across the country.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE LUTON NEWS

As well as the CRDF side of my work I also had to make regular weather reports including wind speed and direction, maximum and minimum temperatures, rainfall and cloud cover; type and base above sea level. One day there had been excessive rainfall and a photographer from the Luton News was sent out so I had my picture in the press measuring the rainfall.



A photograph of the Met. Office in Drovers Way before it closed down in 1960

SOCIAL LIFE

There was a good social life within the Met. Office. We had inter RAF sports competitions (I came second in the long jump), whist drives and dances. A square dance team was formed and we gave demonstrations. In Dunstable there was a cinema, roller skating, although I never went there, and a very good library where the Little Theatre now is. Plays at the old Town Hall and dances somewhere every weekend. The outdoor California swimming pool was at the foot of the Downs and there were many local pubs.

I lived in four lots of digs – two good, one terrible and one O.K. If I had wanted promotion I would have studied to A level or even degree standard. Deciding that was not for me and starting to feel home sick I left Dunstable in June 1954 to return to London to start my nursing training.

While I was working my notice at the Met. Office, I started going out with Barry Wolsey. Knowing I would be leaving Dunstable in a few weeks I thought it would be a short friendship, but by the end of September when we were still in regular contact I realised it was more. He went to do his National Service and indicated he would be asking me to marry him. When I agreed, we got married, in April 1958. I then came back to Bedfordshire to live, not in Dunstable, but in Luton, where he worked, and have lived there ever since.

1954 was quite a momentous year for me.

Pauline Wolsey.

Greeting New Members

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

Mrs Hannah Lawrence

Mr David Janes

Brian McVay

Dudley and Janet Smyth

Freda Hunkin

Ms Bernice Jones

Amanda Senft



Sad Farewell



We are very sorry to announce the sad loss of

Mr Bernard Stevens

Kingsbury



The remnants of the beautiful Norman King pub in Church Street remain a derelict eyesore after the disastrous fire.

Unfortunately, lawyers at the trial of the man convicted of the arson attack described the pub as an ancient coaching inn – a myth which is now widespread.

THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE SITE

Henry I built a palace called Kingsbury on part of nine acres of royal land at Dunstable/Houghton. It was likely to have been a luxurious hunting lodge.

The King and his court celebrated Christmas there in 1122.

The site of the palace is not known and it is even possible that it was not on the same land as the present Kingsbury buildings. No traces of its foundations have yet been found.

King Henry founded the Priory monastery in 1132 and this was built to the south of the royal residence.

King John bestowed the palace site to the canons of the Priory in 1204. Details of his gift describe it as “all that place and garden where (King Henry) once had houses... to build on them or dispose of them as they will.” The phraseology suggests that the “palace” had already been destroyed.

Kingsbury is believed to have become a farmhouse by the time of Henry VIII and it had probably been sold by the Priory before the Dissolution.

Kingsbury farmhouse and its outbuildings, as some of us remember them, seem to have been built, or rebuilt, in the 18th century.

In 1934 Kingsbury was split into three parts after attempts to sell the whole building proved unsuccessful.

The eastern end of the house (the newer part of the building) was sold that year as a private residence and became known as Kingsbury, the name being changed to Old Palace Lodge in 1936.

BARN AND STABLES

At the same time an old barn, further to the east, together with the farm stables at the rear, were sold for use as riding stables. This became known as Kingsbury Stables.

A year later the west end of the house (the original farm house, nearest the town centre), was sold and became a doctor's house and surgery, named Kingsbury Court.

In November 1959 Old Palace Lodge was acquired by Creasey Hotels Ltd and opened as the Old Palace Lodge Hotel in February 1960.

THE NORMAN KING PUB

In April 1960 Kingsbury Stables were purchased by Flowers Breweries Ltd of Luton. The premises were opened as the Norman King public house in October 1961.



The Norman King pub as it was

The brewery's architect had taken enormous trouble, when converting the barn and stables, to create a pub (in the barn) and a restaurant (in the stables) which were very much in keeping with the original building. Stone from Norman Picot's 12th century Castle at Bourn near Cambridge was used as well as clunch blocks from a 12th century cottage site in Cambridge. Panelling was obtained from a former medieval inn, the George, at Caxton in Cambridgeshire. Old church pews formed much of the seating and reed thatching, rather than straw, was used on the roof.

In 1984 the pub's interior was gutted and modernised.

THOMAS BAGSHAWE'S MUSEUM

There's a very detailed history of Kingsbury written by a former owner, Thomas W Bagshawe, published in four parts in the Bedfordshire Magazine (volume 11).

He restored the farm's barn in 1927 so that it could be used as a town museum and library.

He investigated the 18th century rebuilding of the farm. Caddington bricks, with an attractive glistening look, were mainly used, with some blocks of Totternhoe stone added at random. Timber which had belonged to some older building was used for the roof which was slated over for the farmhouse section. Some farm buildings were thatched rather than tiled. The front wall of the barn was thought to have been put up in the 18th century using Totternhoe Stone from the demolished Priory monastery or even from previous Kingsbury buildings.

Renee Adams (nee Kibble) of Croft Green is the daughter of Arthur and Edith Kibble who ran the Royal Oak pub in Church Street from 1924 until it closed in 1961. The licence was transferred to the new Norman King pub which had been created from the old Kingsbury stables.

When she was 11 Renee had learned to ride at the stables on a New Forest pony named Warrior. She well remembers magical rides through the countryside around Dunstable with her friends Dorothy Gibbard (whose parents owned the corn and seed merchant's near the crossroads), and June England, whose father owned the large house, Beechwood, in West Street on the Green Lanes corner. They would trot down Friars Walk and then ride across the downland towards Whipsnade, or go down West Street and explore the Green Lanes.

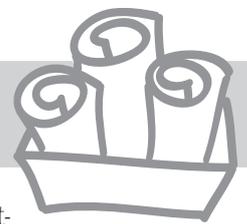
The stables and adjoining land were purchased from Thomas Bagshawe by the entrepreneur T.C. Flory who built the houses at Kingsway and Kingsbury Gardens and had the idea of creating a livery stable to accommodate horses used for hunting. This was run by a former army officer named Captain Irving, but he eventually left to run a team of polo ponies, and the stables became a riding school. The exercise field for this, behind Kingsway, later became the first football ground for Dunstable Town FC.

John Buckledee



The remnants of the Norman King after the fire

THE LUCK OF THE DRAW



William Chew died in 1712, 'intestate, unmarried and without issue'. His estate was worth about £28,000, an absolute fortune.

ESTATE DIVIDED INTO THREE

His heirs in law were his two sisters, Frances Ashton and Jane Cart, and Thomas Aynscombe, son of their elder sister, Elizabeth, who had died in 1711. In 1714 these three drew up an agreement by which a farm in Caddington (occupied by Thomas Taylor), a farm at Cowridge, in the Manor of Luton (occupied by Thos Swaine) and land in Houghton Regis (occupied by Henry Tomkins) were to be set aside to provide a school for poor boys in Dunstable. The rest of the estate was to be divided into three parts as fairly and equitably as possible by two impartial referees appointed by the heirs. All existing legal arrangements with tenants concerning rents, etc. were to be honoured.

LOTS DRAWN

Details of the three allocations were to be numbered 1, 2 and 3 and 'rolled and sowed up or sealed and put altogether in one box or hat'. The heirs were then to draw lots in order of seniority – Thomas first, as son of the oldest sister, then Frances Ashton and finally Jane Cart.

The estate was divided into three categories – farms, property in Dunstable and property in London, and each category was divided into three, as equally as possible. Each heir received a total estate worth approximately £9,200, receiving roughly one third of each category. Unfortunately, although a copy of the allotments has survived, they are only numbered 1, 2 and 3 and the only details given of the properties are the tenants' names and the rent and capital value.

In Dunstable the heirs each received one large valuable property and several smaller ones in their allocation and it is possible, by using other sources, to work out who got which lot, though not where all the buildings were. Jane Cart inherited Lot 2, which included the Sugar Loaf, where the tenant was John Lee, and Frances Ashton received Lot 1, including the Windmill and Still (later the Crown) occupied by John (?) Bissaker, and also the house which later became the second White Hart in High Street North. But the large property inherited by Thomas Aynscombe, occupied by Thomas Odell, is still a puzzle. It was valued at £610, the most highly valued of the properties in the town.

(BLARS Ref. AD 1471)

Joan Curran

Memories of old Dunstable



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



Tower House, High Street North, Dunstable in the early 1900s

TOWER HOUSE

Tower House was a prominent building in High Street North, Dunstable. It was the home of John Dales, founder of the famous Dales Dubbin company, and his daughter Lucy Dales who became Mayor of Dunstable in 1925, the first woman to be so honoured.

Miss Dales was a formidable character, but she had a kind heart as recent correspondence to this society has just proved. The e-mails began with a message to our website from Tim Wright, who was seeking a photograph of Tower House, where he had lived as a child.

It emerged that the Wright family had stayed at the house from about 1945 until 1949 when they moved to Leagrave. They had been left enough money to put a deposit on a house by Miss Dales, who had been very fond of Tim (aged three in 1945) and his brother.

Tim's parents, Percy and Muriel, had met in Southampton during the war when they were both in the ARP. They eloped to Porthmadog in Wales to get married after Muriel's mother opposed the wedding!

Percy later found a job at the Empire Rubber Company in Dunstable and, after living for a time in a farmhouse at Flamstead, the family moved to Tower House which by then had been divided into flats. Lucy Dales lived in one of these, on the ground floor.

Tim's brother was born at Tower House in January 1946. Tim says: "The house was always impressive to us children, especially the turret which gave us fantastic 360-degree views of the surrounding countryside. It was also full of dust and spiders' webs, very attractive to children!"

"There was an impressive staircase at least to the first floor and I remember sliding down the banisters.

"In one of the attics we found the 'saw' of a swordfish.

"It seemed to us that the garden was enormous and certainly it was big enough to have a gardener, Harry Price, who had worked part-time in the dubbin factory before the company was wound up. My brother, once he'd learned to walk, would follow him around like a dog!"

"In one of the other flats was an elderly couple, Mr and Mrs Finn, and in another were Penny Jones and her three daughters, Sarah, Libby and Tina.

continued overleaf

Memories of old Dunstable continued



“Penny had been married to Daniel Jones, the Welsh composer and conductor, who was a somewhat flamboyant and exotic character, and called my brother ‘the Fiend’.

“On one occasion Tina and I climbed into the greenhouse through a window and, in attempting to remove a tennis court marker machine by the same route (goodness knows why), we broke the window. Price, the gardener, covered up for us by telling Miss Dales that boys from the town had thrown stones at the greenhouse and broken the window!

“To us, Miss Dales was a rather severe character and a very old lady, and sometimes she must have been fed up with five children in her house. But she was very fond of my brother and me, and when she died she left enough money to my parents to put down a deposit on a house ‘for those boys’.

“She had a large Samoyed dog called Zuzu, who we all loved.

“In 1949, when I was seven, we left Tower House and Dunstable to live in Leagrave until 1955 when we emigrated to Australia. Returning in 1968, I went to have a look at Dunstable, to find a petrol station where Tower House had been. However, part of the garden was still there and I was able to wander round it. It was not the same though.”

CAN ANYONE HELP?

Dia Walsh, who was born and bred in Dunstable, is seeking photographs of the prefabs in Meadway and at the bottom of Blow’s Downs, where she lived as a child. Her grandparents came to Dunstable to live in the 1930s. Can anyone help? And Daniel Hinchliffe is seeking information about Allan Larking who worked for the Parks Department in Dunstable and then set up as a nurseryman with Mr Barker, his father-in-law. Allan had previously worked at Blenheim Palace as a gardener and served with the Royal Army Medical Corps in the First World War, winning the Military Medal at the Battle of Cambrai. Does anyone remember the Barker-Larking nursery?

BERNARD’S MEMORIES

Often, with queries like those mentioned above, I would contact Bernard Stevens who was a fount of knowledge about the Dunstable of what, for him, were recent times.

Over the years I assembled a collection of his memories. So here is what he told me about local market gardeners:

“Dunstable had many nurseries specialising in tomatoes, cucumbers and chrysanthemums. There was W.H. Seamons in West Street, Sidney Aish in Borough Road, the two Birches in Downs Road, Norman Howlett in Great Northern Road, Fred Robinson in Princes Street, Headey’s in Chiltern Road, Mr Morgan in Church Street, just beyond Priory Road, then Mr Learmonth, then H. Baker. A Dutchman had a nursery in Houghton Road where Northfields School (All Saints Academy) is now. Pettits, later Learmonth, had a nursery on the corner of Priory Road and Church Street. Mr Bliss kept bees on Luton Road near Joe Parkin’s house, just past the Carter’s salvage yard. There were greenhouses in Kirby Road and Frank Bowden grew produce in Chiltern Road. And, of course, the biggest employer of all was the Wallace carnation business at Eaton Bray.”

The reference to Headey’s in Chiltern Road is to what is now called Cottage Garden Nursery, which began in 1898 and is still run by the same family. It’s the oldest business in town if you discount the Dunstable Gazette, which began in 1865 and is now owned by the Johnston Press.

PHOTOS AND POEMS

George Gurney was once a familiar figure in Dunstable and Luton. He was a staff photographer for the Dunstable Gazette and the Luton News in the days when there was less traffic, easier parking, and the papers could get to every local event. On a Saturday, he would manage, amazingly, to cope with a hectic schedule which could include two or three weddings, a children’s party, an old folk’s bazaar, a dinner-dance and the first 15 minutes of Luton Town’s football match at Kenilworth Road.

Now his son Robert has published a volume of poems, illustrated by a few of George’s photos, which hark back to those days.

It’s an unusual bilingual book, useful for language students, with an English version of the poems on one page and a Spanish translation on the other. It intrigues those of us with collections of old photographs of the area. There is, for instance, a famous picture of an ox drawing a cart down Hog Lane (now Chapel Street) in Luton. Is this how Luton used to be? Robert suggests that it is, in fact, a photo of a publicity parade from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show? And did John Bunyan really glimpse Paradise in the Cross Keys at Totternhoe?

Here’s an excerpt from Robert’s poem about orange rolling at Dunstable Downs, which gives you an idea of his style:

*On many hills
they used to roll eggs down hills
on Good Friday*

*Some say that it was in memory
of the stone that was rolled away
from the entrance to the tomb
where Jesus lay.*

*Here, in Dunstable, above Pascombe Pit,
they threw oranges.*

*Shopkeepers arrived
on top of the Downs
on their horse-drawn carts.*

*Children stood in a line
at the bottom*

Then the rolling started.

You had to be quick to avoid the missiles.

*Many a child was struck hard,
many a black eye, thick ear or bruise received.*

The Dragonfly and Other Poems costs £9.99 plus £2.01 p&p from bob@verpress.com.

ARGYLL TERRACE

We now have an answer for Peter McHugh and his neighbours in Edward Street who wanted to know the name of the terrace there between number 20 and 30, the lettering on which has weathered away. Curiously, it is not mentioned in street directories, but Joan Curran and Rita Swift were looking through old maps kept at the research room at Priory House and noticed the address marked on one of these: Argyle Terrace.

Quite why Dunstable should have an Argyll connection is still unclear, although Queen Victoria’s daughter, Louise married the Duke of Argyll and all the streets in the area are named after royalty. The research room is a treasure trove of unexpected information. Rita had been seeking the early address of the Salvation Army in Dunstable and noticed an otherwise unremarkable photo of shops in High Street North where the name “Salvation Army” was just visible. In recent years the particular shop has been the base for a bookmaker – Cube Bets – and is now empty.

John Buckledee