

SCANDAL IN DORNEY REACH

A hundred years ago, Dorney residents would have been shocked to find their quiet neighbourhood featuring in the national newspapers as the location of misconduct reported in a divorce case.

Dorney End was the first house built in Dorney Reach in 1902. It was a large house, with 10 rooms including the kitchen. In 1911, it was occupied by Herbert Woodfield and his wife Louisa, with one servant. Around 1916/7, Mrs Woodfield rented it out to a young lady called Mrs Stephens. There she was visited by Mr Julian Stephens. The neighbours, though there weren't many in Dorney Reach at that time, might have thought this was just a young couple renting a quiet house in a pleasant spot by the river. At the end of November 1918, however, some time after the Stephens had left, they would have become aware from detailed reports in the press that things were not as they seemed.

The papers were reporting the rescinding of a decree nisi which had been granted a year earlier to Mrs Olive Kitty Bainbridge against her husband Thomas Bainbridge on the grounds of cruelty. Thomas had challenged the decree, alleging that Olive had committed misconduct with Julian Stephens during 1916 and 1917, in a flat in London and at Dorney End.

In court, Olive explained that she had married Thomas in 1913, when she was only 17, but left him in September 1913 because of his cruelty. She then got a job in a teashop, where she met Fabian Stephens, and through him his brothers and sister. In February 1914, she left the teashop and went on the stage, using the stage name Olive Desmond. Christian Stephens, one of Fabian's brothers, had fallen in love with her, and promised to marry her if she got a divorce. He had suggested she should live at the flat in London with the four brothers to look after them. She had her own small room there, and lived with the men as their sister. She had left the stage in 1916, and for a period was supported by the Stephens brothers, but returned to acting again in 1917. At the brothers' suggestion, she had called herself Mrs Stephens to avoid any unpleasantness.

Julian Stephens had died some months before the court case, but his three brothers – Christian, Fabian and Lucian – all vehemently denied any misconduct between Julian and Olive, who did likewise. All three were actually on active service at the time, in the Royal Navy, but apparently visited the flat and Dorney End from time to time. Against this, the wife of the caretaker at the flat said that Olive referred to Julian's bedroom as "our room", and a former servant said she had seen Olive and Julian in bed together there. The judge decided that there must have been misconduct and overturned the decree nisi, remarking, "I was not born yesterday, you know".

I was intrigued by these colourful characters who had briefly drawn Dorney into the public eye, so I looked into their backgrounds. Julian Stephens and his brothers came from a prosperous middle class family of nine. There were servants in the family home when they were children, including a governess, and several of the boys went to boarding school. Their

father had died in 1899, when the youngest child was only three years old, and their mother died in 1904. In 1916, Julian was aged 32, Fabian 26, Lucian 24 and Christian 20. Physical descriptions for two of the boys depict them as tall, fair haired and blue eyed. But reports on their naval careers are lukewarm at best; at a time when the country was at war, they seemed disinclined to make much of an effort, and Fabian was recorded as having an alcohol problem. As a postscript, Christian did not marry Olive, but went on to become famous for inventing a dome method for training anti-aircraft gunners during the Second World War.

Olive proved more difficult to trace. She was Olive Kitty Parsons when she married Thomas Bainbridge early in 1913. The only definite sighting of Olive before that was in 1911, when she spent census night in a refuge for girls in Lisson Grove. She was described as a blouse maker, aged 18, which if true would have made her 19 or 20 when she married. The refuge operated as a home for unmarried mothers, but possibly also as a night shelter for homeless girls or those at risk from prostitution.

Olive's theatrical career has also proved elusive. There was an Olive Desmond appearing in music halls between 1892 and 1915, but she seems to have been an Irish girl, who then married. An actress called Olive Desmond then features in reports from 1918 to 1939; was this our Olive, taking the name of a popular performer who had retired from the stage? And could she be the same Olive Desmond named, as hosting opium and cocaine parties, during the inquest into the death of a young actress from drugs after the Victory Ball in London on 27 November 1918?

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