

APRIL 1939

Old newspapers provide a window into the past, a contemporary account of what life was like. This month, I'm taking a look back at what was in the news in and around Dorney eighty years ago.

In the spring of 1939, wealthy households kept alive the upstairs, downstairs era. When Lord Desborough's long-serving chauffeur died, his funeral was attended by Lord and Lady Desborough and their titled daughters and by his fellow servants from Taplow Court. Colonel Hanbury at Hitcham House was looking for a "smart lad" of 14 or 15 for indoor work; he would be part of a staff of eight, and would spend two and a half months of the year with the household in Scotland. Later that year, the school leaving age was due to be raised to 15. Many of the "situations vacant" were seeking a cook-general for a small family that already kept a house-parlourmaid. In Dorney, Pigeon House Farm advertised for a youth able to milk and work on the farm in his spare time.

Other employers were worried about losing staff to a possible future conflict, as conscription was being debated. The local newspapers reflected national concern over Hitler's intentions, and reported the Prime Minister's statement that Britain would support Poland if their independence was threatened. On 6 April, Great Britain and Poland signed a military pact, and the following day Italy invaded Albania. Adverts in the papers sought volunteers for what was described as National Service: special constables, ATS, Territorial Army, and RAF volunteer reserve. *"Civil Defence is the business of the citizen. It's up to you. Enrol now."*

Instructions to prepare for war had filtered down to local level, and action was underway. Exercises were held to test Air Raid Precautions; Reading brewery successfully practised getting all their staff out of the buildings and into dug-out shelters when the siren went off. Local councils were recruiting auxiliary firemen, setting up and equipping first aid posts, and calculating the number of beds available for potential evacuees. Private residents could buy air raid shelters for installation in their gardens from Timothy Whites in Maidenhead, Windsor or Slough. Gas masks had been issued, and respirators for small children were expected shortly.

Despite the shadow of war, there was plenty to enjoy in April 1939. Some warm sunny weather, including over the Easter weekend, may have encouraged some to take advantage of the cheap trips advertised on the (original) Great Western Railway - Weston-Super-Mare on Good Friday for 5/9 (i.e. 29p), Bournemouth for 4/9 (24p) on Easter Sunday. A walking group from London planned a ramble to Windsor and Dorney. The reviewer of a new guide to open-air spaces in London and the Green Belt observed that *"in this county [Bucks] we have valuable bits of the Green Belt which take pride of place amongst the many beautiful and interesting spots to be found in and around London"*, drawing attention to Windsor and Burnham Beeches.

The fine weather over Easter attracted the first boats of the season out onto the Thames, but a full and fast-flowing river made it too dangerous for many. Thames Conservancy watermen were positioned to warn boaters away from the flood waters gushing through the weirs.

Evening entertainment was well catered for. The Rialto Theatre in Maidenhead offered two films on Sunday evening, and variety entertainment (including Ivor Novello) two weeks later in aid of Maidenhead Hospital. The Theatre Royal in Windsor ran a play by Sir James Barrie for five nights, and held a Sunday concert by the Windsor Theatre Symphony Orchestra. At Maidenhead Bridge, Skindles hosted dinner dances on Easter Saturday, Sunday and Monday, price 8/6 (43p).

The success or otherwise of local sports teams was well covered in the papers. Reading had failed to win promotion from the Third Division (equivalent to League One today), and attendances were disappointingly low – some things don't change!

Spring fashions for ladies attracted good coverage. Two piece outfits seemed very popular, and each outfit needed an appropriate hat and gloves. The women's page emphasised the importance, for all girls and women, of a good foundation garment – in other words, a corset. An advert for "*foot comfort week*" asserted that well-fitting shoes could make a woman's face more beautiful.

Then as now, there was interest in the Royal Family, and it was reported that Princess Elizabeth (now our Queen) had chosen to spend the morning of her 13th birthday horse riding in Windsor Great Park with her father and sister after opening her presents. On St George's Day, boy scouts from all over the country took part in a rally at Windsor starting with a march past the King and Queen and the two princesses.

Motor cars were now commonplace, and Easter Monday saw high levels of road traffic through Maidenhead, especially from London. Traffic remained heavy right through the night, entailing continued use of a daytime one-way system via York Road. Aeroplanes were perhaps still sufficiently novel to cause some alarm. A pilot from Heston Airport (now partly under Heston motorway services) appeared at Burnham Police Court charged with low and dangerous flying over the Bath Road in Taplow. A passing motorist and a policeman both thought the plane was too low and was about to crash. The pilot asserted that he was flying at 600 to 900 feet, and was taking aerial photos of Mead's Garage. The case was dismissed.

So those are some of the things Dorney residents might have read about eighty years ago. Traffic through Maidenhead had already resulted in plans for a relief road, now the M4 where we are enduring a further enlargement. Aircraft flying over our area are still causing controversy, as RBWM seeks to challenge Heathrow's expansion. At least we can still take pleasure in our lovely countryside and the river, even if they're not quite as tranquil as they were then. And what, I wonder, would our forebears, facing the prospect of war breaking out again in Europe, have thought about our subsequent experiment with closer ties to our European neighbours, now about to reach its end?

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