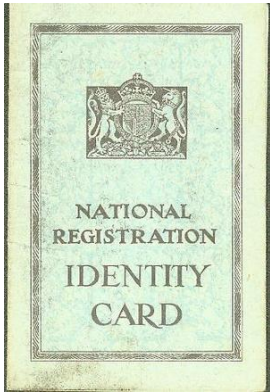


DORNEY IN SEPTEMBER 1939

Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939. Among the preparations, it was soon decided that the entire population needed to be recorded in a National Register so that identity cards and (later) ration books could be issued. Forms were issued to every home to register those living there on Friday 29 September. When the completed forms were collected, the ID cards were distributed, each individual identified by a unique code of four letters and two numbers. Although identity cards were abolished in 1952, the register continued to be used after the war. In fact, the National Health Service only stopped using it in 1991.



The register thus compiled included each person's name, address, date of birth and occupation. Details of occupation focussed on the skills an individual had and the sector in which they were working. This helped inform decisions by the authorities about the direction of labour and suitability for conscription in the armed forces. Notes were often added later, for example if someone was involved in specific war work, such as air raid precautions. Now, the register is available to view online, and although it can be rather difficult to read, it offers us a glimpse of our neighbourhood eighty years ago.

The register shows that Dorney village, together with Lake End and Dorney Common, was still very much a land-based economy. Many men and a few women earned their livings as farmers, farm labourers or market gardeners. These included carters and horsemen as well as tractor drivers, and dairying and pig farming were mentioned. One farm worker was a woman in the Women's Land Army, which had begun in June 1939 to recruit volunteers to work on farms with the aim of increasing production of home-grown food.

There was however an increasing diversity of occupations. These included two storekeepers at RAF Uxbridge; a few factory workers, probably on the newly developing Slough Trading Estate; a publicity manager; a patent agent; a chartered quantity surveyor; and a railwayman working on maintenance of the permanent way. Culture was represented by a musical composer, an artist, a pianist and an actress.

By contrast, Dorney Reach – which had grown rapidly in the previous two decades – was predominantly white collar in character. Many of the men held managerial positions in industry, retail or the City, or worked as accountants or civil servants. There was a sprinkling of draughtsmen and salesmen; a geologist, and a restorer of antique jewellery.

Few married women worked outside the home. Their occupation, like that of some unmarried women keeping house or helping with the chores, was often given as "unpaid domestic duties". This distinguished them from women engaged in paid domestic work. There were still quite a few households where servants were kept, from Dorney Court with its housemaids, kitchen maid, groom, chauffeur and gardeners, to smaller houses where a cook-general was the sole domestic help. A handful of women were described as daily domestics or children's nurses. Some of the younger women, single and married, were beginning to extend their horizons and were engaged as secretaries, shorthand typists, shop assistants or factory workers. There were a few nurses, a health visitor, and an inspector of day nurseries. Perhaps most notably, women (three of them widows) were in

charge of four of the main commercial outlets in the village – the two pubs, the post office, and the petrol station.

As well as their occupations, Dorney residents were acting in a voluntary capacity to help with the war effort. Many, including women, were listed as working in air raid precautions, in Eton and Burnham as well as in Dorney. ARP wardens at this time were involved mainly in enforcing the blackout, and issuing gas masks and air raid shelters, but they had to be ready to act if any air raids came by sounding the warning sirens, assisting any casualties, and reporting bomb damage. Some of those in Dorney were helping to organise the ARP service or provide telephone support. Other residents were special constables in the police force, emergency ambulance drivers, or provided nursing assistance through the Red Cross or the VAD.

Dorney also helped by providing accommodation for those evacuated to the country from urban areas at greater risk of bombing. Evacuation had started a few days before the declaration of war, implementing plans drawn up in the preceding months. In reception areas such as Dorney, billeting officers identified host families, who were paid a weekly sum for each child. In the history of Dorney School (on the History Group website), the headmistress noted that 54 children were evacuated to Dorney from schools in Westminster, Barnes and Stepney, along with a number of their teachers. A further 14 were privately evacuated or came with their mothers. This meant 68 extra pupils to be taught at Dorney School, then in the village, and initially this resulted in part time schooling, some in the morning and some in the afternoon, with the village hall pressed into service as a classroom.

Because relationships between household members were not included in the register, it is difficult to identify evacuees with certainty. The task is made harder because most entries for children have been redacted, to protect the privacy of those who might still be living. In the register, many households in Dorney included a child with a different surname to the family, usually aged between 9 and 11, and it seems likely that most of these were evacuees. Only one was identified as such – Anthony Brigdale, eight years old, staying in Dorney Reach in the house of a retired Indian Army officer. Typically, two child evacuees were housed together. Two women with children are also noted as evacuees, and at least some of the teachers who came with the London children can also be picked out. It is clear that many homes in Dorney were quite crowded at this time, providing safe housing for friends, family and workmates as well as official evacuees.

So, we can see that Dorney eighty years ago was still a farming community but was increasingly becoming a pleasant place to live while working elsewhere. All kinds of residents, however, were playing their part in preparing to cope with the war.

Virginia Silvester