

Telma Dufton lived in Dorney during World War Two. She was in Dorney to escape the war, as they were living close to the railway line from London and the North Kent coast which the German bombers followed and which they also wished to destroy, so they were bombed. Her father was in the services, so her mother decided they should move right away from there and Dorney became home. Telma is in her late 80s and is a retired photojournalist. She lives near Sydney, Australia with her children and their families, has great affection for Dorney and wrote this series of articles for the Dorney History Group and those interested in the history of Dorney.

A child's view of Dorney Village during World War Two

By Telma Dufton

The first thing that came to mind when I turned my thoughts back seventy odd years, to Dorney as I knew it, was cows. Cows in the morning, ambling out to the common, and cows in the evening ambling back to the farm. Since the house where we were living faced onto the village road, even though it was screened by a tall hedge, the passing of the cows back and forth was regular as the rising and setting of the sun.

The small dairy farm [Lodge Farm] that was their home was in the heart of the village, right where a number of new houses now stand, almost opposite The Palmer Arms. So the village had its milk supply on one side of the road and equally ancient but stronger liquid on the other. A youngish woman called Nancy, or Nanc, was in charge of the cows, I had a great respect for Nancy's authority over those bovines; until you have tried to make a few cows go where they don't wish to go, you will not appreciate that. Nancy had been adopted by the dairy farmer and his wife, who were childless, to grow up to do the work that the missing son would have done; a not uncommon practice in those days, but more about Nancy later. We were living at Hither [Old] Dimmings and so had a front row view of the cows, if we cared to look. As they passed, an occasional cow would nip the hedge or give it a poke with her horn, so that the outside of the hedge had a rather ragged trim level with the cows' heads.

Hither Dimmings was actually not a very comfortable house to live in, it had more of history to offer than real comfort. The added plumbing was eccentric and made strange noises when upset, hot water was only available in quantity by stoking up a boiler, which was located below ground in a sort of stoke hole at the rear of the house. This arrangement was potentially dangerous, because the stoke hole used to fill with fumes from the coke, we did once actually have a small explosion down there. I didn't like to be alone in the house in the evenings, particularly in the winter. For as the house cooled, the massive, long beams which supported the upper floor creaked, beginning at one or other end of the house, creak, pause, creak, pause, creak, pause, exactly as if someone was up there, walking the length of the house.

It was outside the house where the real enchantment lay. Set in a sizeable piece of land and backed onto by extensive fields, it offered many hideaways and numerous scopes for adventure. In the grounds at the rear, there were what we had been told, were the wash houses belonging to the two old cottages that had been 'restored' and joined together to

make Hither Dimmings, by ingenious and gifted old Mr. Quarterman, the village builder. They contained all sorts of things like nets, to cover the fruit trees and bushes with and less appealing things like rabbit and mole traps. The raspberry, red and black currant and gooseberry bushes growing by the wash houses on The Palmer Arms side of the property, that were covered by the nets when in fruit, offered a secret hide out plus food supply for us during the summer. They are now all gone, replaced by a bright blue swimming pool; such a vast amount of readily available clean water situated at the rear of their dwellings, would have amazed, flabbergasted the country folk who long ago lived in the original two cottages. Between the wash houses and the house was a rose garden and a genuine well, the original water supply for the cottages, since the well was fairly deep and still contained water, it was strictly 'off limits' for us; roses and well are also now both gone.

Despite being warned by several 'off limits', my youngest brother managed to get into trouble. Just behind the fruit bushes and the wash house, in the adjacent field, there were a few trees one of which was half fallen and still bearing a large hollow branch. In the hollow branch was a colony of Hornets, yet another of the 'off limits'. My brother, age five, being who he was, didn't think that applied to him, so he went into the field with a stick and poked the stick into the hollow branch. Well the Hornets didn't like that and came out after him. Chasing him in an angry cloud, past the gooseberry bushes and wash house, past the apple tree, they raging and him hollering, into the kitchen where there was a downstairs toilet into which he shut himself. Unfortunately, by mistake, with one Hornet.

Between Hither Dimmings and the [Old] Post Office, where there is now a new house [New Dimmings], there was an extensive, somewhat neglected vegetable garden belonging to Hither Dimmings, in which was a vigorous, large old Yew; now sadly gone. This was another hide out, the tree was so large, that with the aid of a chain ladder, myself and two brothers could climb up and camp in its crown.

Someone in the village told my mother, that in past times a fair or market had been held on the ground that was now covered by our vegetable garden. I think this area would have very likely also included the grounds of Further Dimmings at the rear and the Post Office house grounds next to it; the Yew tree would then have appropriately given shade for any market goers to sit, smoke a pipe and yarn in. I think it quite likely that fairs or markets would have been held there, because while we lived there, on one occasion when the ground was being dug for planting, a George the 1st copper coin was found and a little later, a well-used clay pipe head, beautifully carved (not cast) into the head of a gypsy wearing a head scarf; I only very recently passed this souvenir on to a nephew.

In the cottage the other side of the Post Office to us [Shepherds Close], lived The Baroness and her companion. She was a fairly small, slightly dumpy, lady with a fascinating accent, German as I learned later. I don't know why I visited her, but I did occasionally and was always kindly welcome; even on one occasion receiving three sweets! Sweets! Well of course that was something, there was a war on and by that time, food rationing was really beginning to bite; at one time, a week's cheese ration would not have made a decent sandwich for a working man. No sweets, the sugar ration went into cups of tea, jam and deserts. There was a savage war

going on and here were two German ladies living in the village. There was, I realised later, a level of polite ostracism toward these two women from the villagers, it was palpable, in no way nasty, but it was there. They were probably somewhat lonely, and this was what made visits from an unprejudiced child welcome and so was rewarded with sweets.

Sugar was not the only thing in short supply, there were no antibiotics at all at that time. We are so used to them we don't give their presence a second thought. To illustrate, the family that owned the house on the further side of The Palmer Arms Barn [Prior's Croft], acquired a house keeper, a rather crushed, quiet woman with a boy of about ten or twelve. She may have been a war widow, since she wore a black hat and coat. In those days she may well have been, but some villagers with a taste for gossip seemed to think that she'd never had a husband. Anyway, it seems that she had an infected tooth, either because she had no money to fix it, or she was too scared; dentistry in those days was a severe experience. The poor soul developed an abscess and subsequent blood poisoning, she was rushed to hospital and died within a week. The poor boy, I remember being horrified that he'd be sent to an orphanage and have his hair shaved off for hygiene's sake, we never knew what became of him.

On The Palmer Arms side next to Hither Dimmings, was the village bakery. Now that was something special that we did have, I could put my head out the bedroom window and smell fresh bread every morning. Bread with a divine crust, fetching the bread was an art, to snatch a bit off the fresh crust without mother noticing; I think she did, but she said nothing unless the missing crust was obvious. The bakery was at the back of the little house/shop where the baker lived. The bread was made from creamy, unbleached flour and baked in open tins. These were slid into, what I thought were frighteningly hot enough to singe your eyebrows, long, narrow ovens on long paddles and the small iron doors slammed shut. You can't get bread like that anymore. Yet another, to me, dreadful loss, is that of the walled garden belonging to Dorney Court. Where there is now an acre of gravel, there once flourished everything delightful to eat imaginable. I used to visit with the youngish woman who lived in the cottage, that is still there in the corner of the garden. Her husband was employed as a gardener by the Palmers but had been called up to fight in the war; I never knew if he returned home. The walls of the garden then, were covered in espaliered fruit trees, figs, plums, peaches and the like. The garden beds, laid out between regular paths, contained in season celery, young carrots, garden peas, asparagus, raspberries, tender pink rhubarb, strawberries - every mouthwatering thing you can think of, now all uprooted and gone. A magic garden, warm, enclosed, peaceful, a tiny paradise in a world at war.

'Old' Mr. Palmer, the father of the Mr. Palmer who I think was present while we were in Dorney, was referred to in hushed tones, he was considered by the villagers to be someone who it was better to stay out of the way of. He was known to be eccentric and had strange ideas, it was said that people at the big house had to get their water out of a well in the courtyard and that they had no electricity; the villagers of course were modern, they of course by that time, had tap water and wonderful electricity. This in a way was, well, sort of true. The little woman I knew, who lived in the cottage in the corner of Dorney Court's walled garden, drew all her water from a pump. Woe betide you if you didn't keep a kettle full of water in reserve in the winter. You would need a full kettle of boiling water to prime the pump the

following morning or be without water until it thawed. I also remember helping her clean the oil lamps that lit the cottage after dark. Nevertheless, despite the villagers' tut tutting, thanks to 'Old' Mr. Palmer's perceived eccentricities, that beautiful old house now stands restored in all its glory.

Also now restored, polished, clean and tidy, is Dorney's church of St James the Less. I remember it as still, quiet and somewhat dusty, looking and feeling every bit as old as it really was. I have rung the bells in that church, even tolling the bell for a funeral a couple of times. Now that was something, the ropes for the bells hung in the vestry at the base of the tower, while the chimes were rung via a rack that was on one wall, the big bell rope hung free in the middle of the vestry. It had a loop at the bottom into which you placed your foot, to give you heave on the down stroke, but being only twelve to fourteen years old at the time, I didn't carry much weight and the bell did what it liked on the upswing and carried me with it; there used to be an old Music Hall song, with a refrain, "swing on the bell Nelly, swing on the bell" ... I came to be there and to ring the church bells, because my sister and I both had good voices. Since no local boys would join the choir, as it was considered sissy, we were asked if we would, so we did. I loved that little church with all my heart, here was a place where people had come for over a thousand years, for quiet and to ease their hearts, it was palpable if you were open to feel it. And there also in the church was Nancy, from the farm. Nancy was fairly tall, strong from all the farm work she did, with red hair and blue eyes. Somewhat uncommunicative, she might have seemed surly if you didn't know her and Nancy had a voice. A mezzo soprano with the force of a tenor, she sang in perfect pitch even though completely untrained. Sunday was her glory day and she sang. She sang in the choir stall opposite my sister and I felt that she almost confronted us when she sang. I felt that perhaps we were intruding into her one, special place. I felt so sad about that, Nancy, to whom life had not been very kind, who, if she had been born with her gift into different circumstances, may have become a professional singer and lived to be famous; I have always hoped that she inherited the farm, sold it and went off to make a life of her own.

The village had some notable characters, just as Nancy was, so was the Vicar of Dorney's tiny church. He came and went, I have no idea where he lived, he just appeared in time for service. He was young, married with two little girls. He and his wife were mildly eccentric for the times, but they would have fitted nicely into the 1960s Tower children, 'love is all' epoch. I remember one summer, meeting up with his young wife and two little girls, drifting barefoot across a field, all three decorated with flowers. I felt very slightly shocked, not quite what I expected from the Vicar's wife when I was thirteen. Dorney's inhabitants had flavour, they were completely themselves. I remember once being with my mother when she stopped to speak to a neighbour from across the road, Mrs - - who lived with her family in the cottage [The Old Cottage and Lilac Cottage], now painted lilac, obliquely across from Hither Dimmings (I had vague concerns about that cottage, it stood so close to the road I feared that if one day the front door were open, one of the cows on the way back to the farm might wander in!) Mrs - in the broad dialect once common in the county, "Ower Kath's gettin married", my mother; slightly surprised, "Oh really Mrs - - ? How nice", "Yers, moit az well, 'e cumz rownd 'ere evry noit". I think my mother must have been slightly surprised because by that time, every

available man had been called up and the would-be bride and groom must have been teenagers, though teenagers weren't known to be teenagers in Britain at that time.

Another important character was the Dorney Bus, our vital link with the outside world. Due to severe petrol rationing, many of the few cars that there were, were parked up on bricks in garages — Hither Dimmings had an American Cadillac up on bricks in its rickety garage. So the bus had status, more than its appearance might imply. It was a small, ancient bus, sporting rather worse for wear blue paint with white trim. It heaved, hissed and rattled but somehow got there. I am convinced that there must have been a brilliant hidden mechanic who kept it going against all odds. My younger brothers, luckily, actually started their education at Dorney Village School, but my sister and I were sent to a posh girl's school in Windsor and had to get up early to catch the first run into Windsor. There were three or four Windsor and back trips a day, depending on the health of the bus, unfortunately, the bus trip we took back to Dorney after school more often than not, stopped at Eton Wick. This meant a long walk back across the common, come rain, wind or shine - and the cows that I was nervous of. Sometimes we arrived home very cold and wet, but there was a war on.....

Both of my brothers remember the village school with affection, but both 'picked up' a few things there that my mother didn't approve of. One really bad affair, which brought down the wrath of mother and sisters alike was this. Some local boys, apparently, thought it hilarious to insert a straw into the rear end of frogs that they caught, then to blow them up till they burst. Our boys were caught in one of the old wash houses at the back of the house, trying to imitate this. There is no sentimentality about real life in the country, beautiful it may be, but it is also brutal. From time to time we would hear a pack of dogs barking in the back fields and a couple of times even in 'our' field at the back of the House. It was 'boys' or rather youths from Eton College with their hounds, hunting Hares. I hated them, to set half a dozen dogs on a defenceless animal just for the excitement of killing something, I felt was quite despicable. I also remember that there was once quite a stir in the village, some local youths had disturbed a Cob that was guarding its nest of Cygnets, it had retaliated as they do, rearing up with wings spread, and they had beaten and stoned it to death. Folks were outraged as much because it was a crime, swans are Royal property, as they were against such a vile act.

Children were not noticeably present in Dorney village itself, but when winter came and the frosts with it, then the ponds on the common would freeze over including the one nearest the village. Then, from 'out of the woodwork' or bushes, boys would appear to skate on our pond; I suspect they came mainly from Eton Wick. We didn't like them, they shouted, shoved and pushed and were uncouth. The skating was done in our shoes and boots, the idea was to produce a long polished 'slide', this could be very polished indeed and quite dangerous. One winter actually I starred on the ice, whizzing down a long slide, I lost my balance at the end and fell backward. My head hit the ice with a loud crack and left a perfectly beautiful star in the ice, about two foot across. We didn't get much in the way of snow, but we got good frosts, due to the proximity of the river. In certain conditions, the river steamed like a hot bath and low-lying mists would form overnight, if there was a sudden cold snap at the same time, we would get beautiful frosts. One of the most beautiful I ever saw anywhere was close to one Christmas time, we woke up to find literally everything frosted white, not just a fuzz on the

grass. We walked down to the river which was covered in a blanket of steam and the nearby bushes were covered in exquisite two inch long fragile ice feathers. As we returned to the village, we clapped and shouted under the big trees which were suddenly in leaf again with thousands of frost feathers, the sharp sound dislodged them and they showered down all over us like snow.

When Christmas arrived, my sister and I went carol singing around the village, properly. Each house got two complete carols from a selection of English, Latin or French before we knocked, if they were keen and generous, they got a third; on one of these ventures we were mistaken for boys from Eton College Chapel Choir, which was a considerable Wow! On another occasion we collected several pounds sterling, which we split fifty fifty with the Red Cross under my mother's careful eye, it was to go towards something or other special for the soldiers fighting in the war, I wasn't sure what.

During the war there was very little of everything, including entertainment, particularly if you were a bit isolated, Television hadn't been heard of and the nearest cinema from us was in Windsor. Someone in Dorney had the idea that there should be a Christmas Concert held in the Village Hall and that the villagers themselves should be the stars! Surprisingly, the villagers responded with enthusiasm and the most unexpected people volunteered, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. My mother was one of them.

She, and my youngest brother were commandeered to act in a skit, thus. Rows of assorted kitchen chairs were lined up on stage to represent the interior of a bus, with various characters seated on them. My youngest brother, with a saucepan over his head, supposedly jammed there and irremovable, my mother as the child's parent. The skit consisted of advice from the bus passengers on how to remove the saucepan etc.etc, it was supposed to be funny and the audience did laugh; I sat embarrassed at the back of the Village Hall in the dark, that my mother would 'let her hair down' in public in that way! Not so my older sister, she was in it up to her ears too. She, because she could sing, sang, "In my sweet little Alice Blue gown, as I just wandered out around the town I was both proud and shy, as I caught every eye" and so on, rustling back and forth across the stage, dressed in blue crepe paper, "shy" she wasn't. She had nagged and bullied me for weeks, to be equally shameless, so that we could be a duo as with the Christmas carols, she on one side of the stage and me on the other, swanning around in crepe paper. It wasn't going to happen, it didn't and I was very unpopular for yet more weeks.

Dorney was slightly scruffy, because it was a working village, but beautiful just the same. It contained a remarkable diversity of people among its inhabitants, almost a stationary Canterbury Tales.... 'old' family with roots going back centuries, with the ancient traditional relationship with their staff, a sprinkling of theatre people, an internationally known painter, a real master baker, one or two city people who had retired there, a farm and all that went with it, a charming and eccentric parson indeed a long list of diverse characters.

Dorney today could never be called scruffy, rather, quiet and well cared for, but I knew a different place. From the milling cows in the farmyard to the quiet stillness of a working artist's studio, the flavourful and unexpected diversity I knew three quarters of a century ago is sadly gone.