

THE 1920s

The year 2020 has been quite extraordinary by anyone's standards. Leaving the European Union and enduring a major pandemic are not everyday occurrences, while Dorney is also coping with the work to convert the M4 into a smart motorway. Given this start, it's hard to imagine what the rest of the decade might bring. It set me wondering, what was going on in Dorney in the 1920s? Let's take a look back...

The 1921 census counted just under 300 people living in Dorney, in 73 households. Like the rest of the country, the village was settling down into a period of peace, following the end of the First World War and the subsequent flu pandemic. Five men who died during the war were commemorated on a litany desk in the church. Dorney was still a predominantly agricultural community, served by a wheelwright and a blacksmith. In the village were a school, post office, separate bakers/grocers shop, and the Palmer Arms, with the Pineapple beer house in Lake End.

The reminiscences of Miss Bennett, who had arrived as headmistress of the school in 1919, can be found on the Dorney History Group website and paint a lively picture of the village at this time. She wrote:

"The water supply only wells and pumps. No street lighting, only oil lamps and candles in houses and church. No public transport, so it was bicycle or walk to shop in Windsor. Motor cars were still a novelty and horses were used on the farms and by tradesmen delivering goods.

There was a village smithy where horses were shod, and one of the sights I liked best was the return of teams of horses ambling up the village after a hard days ploughing, their weary teamsters sitting side saddle on their backs.

The roads were in poor repair after the war years. We could never have competed in a tidy village competition for the wooden garden fences were old and untidy. There were no proper side paths and no curbs. Drainage was very primitive so water lay about in the gutters."

The blacksmith, Albert Climo, carried on his trade under a spreading yew tree. The gate to the common was opened and shut to traffic by Mr Tugwood, the gate keeper, who *"dressed in the Sunday clothes worn fifty or sixty years before: a black cut-away coat, much washed, tightfitting corduroy breeches, cloth gaiters, with red handkerchief and billycock hat."* Dorney women took in washing for Eton College, and Miss Bennett recalled one of these called Granny Burrows, an *"old lady with the black bonnet and shawl, sitting on a cross seat of the donkey cart, surrounded by bundles of laundry, which she took to the college two or three times a week"*.

One of the most significant changes in Dorney during the 1920s was in its housing stock. Many of the old houses in Dorney village were carefully restored to the appearance we know today by Thomas Quarterman, the village's resident builder. In some cases, two or three cottages were combined to form a single house. Some of the old buildings were in a very poor state of repair, such as Halfway Cottage, originally three small cottages. Meanwhile, the new settlement at Dorney Reach was significantly expanded. Developers acquired the farmland to the east of the original eleven large houses by the river and began building along the south side of what later became Harcourt Road, which itself was extended from the junction with what is now Meadow Way to Marsh Lane. In total, 38 new houses were built in Dorney Reach in the 1920s, including three more beside the river. The number of houses in Dorney parish increased by a third during the decade.

The development of Dorney Reach changed the social mix of Dorney residents. The initial phase of building beside the river had mainly attracted people looking for a second home or a place to rent in summer. The new houses were aimed at those who wanted to live in the country, where they could have a tennis court or keep chickens in the back garden, but with ready access to London via the train from Taplow. Dorney Reach was advertised as *"only 30*

minutes from Town; fare 1s 1d a day". Quite a few of the houses had garages, indicating that their owners had motor cars. The backgrounds and occupations of the newcomers were varied, but there were many men who had been educated at boarding school, had served as officers in the war, and now held white collar jobs, often in London. They tended to name their new homes after places that were important to them. A young couple from Cumberland called their house Lingmell after a place in the Lake District; another couple, who travelled frequently to Brazil for work and had married in Rio de Janeiro, gave their house the name Boa Vista. Many of these new residents remained for only a few years, but they left the house names behind them.

Four of the new houses in Dorney Reach were aimed at a different group of people. The restoration of cottages in the village meant fewer homes for farm workers. Oak Stubbs Cottages were built by Eton College towards the end of the decade, a terrace of four cottages in Marsh Lane. Three of the four families moved straight in from the village. Nationally, there was a severe housing shortage and a lot of concern about the quality of pre-war housing. This resulted in a boom in local authority house building. "*Homes fit for heroes*" were intended to provide good quality houses with bathrooms and gardens, at affordable rents. Eton Rural District Council was tendering to build 6 houses in Dorney as early as June 1921, but it doesn't appear these plans came to fruition.

Another national initiative involved county councils establishing smallholdings for ex-servicemen. In Dorney in 1921, Bucks CC leased 16 acres of Lodge Farm for this purpose. It's not clear how the smallholding scheme worked in Dorney. Albert Climo had moved into a new bungalow at Elm View and set up as a dairyman. In 1928 he was renting 16 acres of Lodge Farm land; was this the area leased by the council? At the same time, Arthur Woodley, previously landlord of the Palmer Arms, had taken on a smallholding at Elm Farm on the common. He won awards in competitions for smallholders run by Bucks CC, and a prize for his pigs at Slough Cattle Show. I have found no evidence that either man had served in the armed forces during the war.

A short-lived group of newcomers was the Children's Home sited in the village between 1923 and 1928. This provided a refuge for some 40 orphans and illegitimate children, who lived in a house in Dorney and attended the village school. Little is known for certain about this home. It has been suggested that it was funded by a Major James Walker, of the Scotch whisky family, and his wife Violet; and that the matron was Mary K Ferguson. Mary King Ferguson may have been the matron, but in 1928 she was living at Dorney House, not at the home where the only adult seems to have been Annie Olive Minnie Stacey. The families of those who were children at the home have sought in vain more details about its operation.

Gradually, the area was changing. In 1925, a local newspaper wrote of a "*constant stream of traffic*" along the Bath Road and complained that "*Slough is advancing daily*" in terms of new building. The following year, a motoring correspondent described the area as "*passing through an evolutionary stage. A mere decade ago much of this district was as rural as if it had been a hundred miles from London, but the steady growth of motoring and the tendency of City men to find homes outside the suburban area tends greatly to change the character of this countryside.... Nevertheless, much of the rural charm of this neighbourhood remains untouched....*". The traffic census showed that the weight of traffic through Dorney, between Eton and Taplow, more than trebled between 1920 and 1926. By 1931 there were nearly 400 people living in Dorney, up by a third in 10 years.

So, the 1920s was a decade of quiet but significant change for Dorney as it adjusted to post-war life. Who knows if the 2020s will have a similar lasting impact on our neighbourhood?

Virginia Silvester

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