

SCENE FROM ABOVE

A funny thing happened recently. Two young men who live up the road called round to say that their drone had gone AWOL and their control unit indicated it was in our garden. And there it was, marked by a little red light twinkling high up in a tree. The errant drone was retrieved with the aid of a long pole and departed for new adventures.

These days, drones are commonly used to achieve a bird's eye view of the world around us. Drone photography is a key element of films and documentaries. But aerial photography has actually been around for a long time. The first such images were captured by a French photographer from a balloon as early as 1858. Photographing the land from planes became widespread in the 20th century. Increasingly, old aerial photographs are being made available online, and these allow us to view Dorney as it was in the middle of the last century, before the arrival of the motorway, the Jubilee River and Dorney Lake.

The website historicengland.org.uk hosts a growing collection of images which can be accessed using their Aerial Photo Explorer. Zoom in to Dorney on the map and you will find various symbols covering our local area. The rectangular shapes are a series of photos taken by the RAF in 1945. A sequence of three images shows Dorney village and Dorney Reach, north being at the bottom. Clearly visible is the anti-aircraft battery on the edge of the common beside Eton Wick.



We can see the village before the post-war infilling, when Southfield Close was still a field. In Dorney Reach, there were few houses on the north side of Harcourt Road or in Meadow Way; there was no school and no Harcourt Close. A separate photo (north at the top this time!) shows the northern part of Dorney Reach. Pre-motorway, several houses were grouped where Marsh Lane (now Old Marsh Lane and Oak Stubbs Lane) intersected with Meadow Way. Several of these houses lay in the route of the new road and were demolished when it was built, the remainder divided on each side of the

motorway. The foundations for the bridge over the river can be clearly seen, as construction had started before the war.

The purple stars on the map lead to additional sets of photos. Some taken in 1949 show in greater detail the houses in Dorney Reach which were due to disappear under the motorway. Another set of shots picture the flooding close to the river in the winter of 1947, in Dorney Reach and Boveney. These floods resulted from snow thawing onto frozen ground. There is even one earlier image of flooding in Dorney in January 1936. The 1936 floods were caused by prolonged heavy rain and the Thames rose 4 feet 6 inches above normal at Windsor bridge, inundating much of the area between Maidenhead and Runnymede. The council provided a temporary footbridge for pedestrians between Eton Wick to Dorney, which would otherwise have been cut off. The newspapers published



aerial photographs of the flooding, around Windsor Castle, on the racecourse and in Marlow. We have a lot to be grateful for to the Jubilee River!

Finally, the red dots on the map are linked to more recent photos, taken in part to show crop marks used to reveal archaeological remains. One of these images is of the field

where the rewilding project is underway. Earlier aerial photographs for Bucks Historic Environment Records had already shown indications of a Neolithic causewayed enclosure in the field, and fieldwalking revealed large quantities of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age flintwork, evidence of people in Dorney between 10,000 BC and 701 BC. The photographs also showed what were thought to be late prehistoric to Roman field systems in the field. Most of the aerial photos taken for Bucks Historic Environment Records are not available online, but their website, <https://heritageportal.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/map>, does include a base layer of aerial photography, of recent date.

Many of the photographs on the Historic England website can also be seen on www.britainfromabove.org.uk but this also includes a series of photos taken in 1936, probably in connection with the planned motorway route. One of these, EPW052025, shows Dorney Reach in its entirety, viewed from the Bray side of the Thames.

These old images are fascinating to look at and to compare with the satellite view on Google Maps of Dorney as it is today. You may be able to spot your house in the photos, or the place where it was later built. For those of us who don't have a drone, chances to look at our world from above are rare – a glimpse from a flight returning to Heathrow, perhaps. And in 2015, I remember, we had the rare privilege of being able to look down from the top of Dorney church tower. The view was fairly limited but nonetheless offered a different perspective – just like aerial photography.

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