AS OTHERS SAW US

We who live in Dorney have our own views about our surroundings. But what have people coming in from outside thought about Dorney over the years?

Being away from the main roads, a little isolated in our curve of the river, we have not had as many travellers passing through as other places. Those who have recorded their impressions paint a picture largely recognisable today.

A reporter in the Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press in 1885 wrote enthusiastically about Dorney. The common was a *"splendid piece of grazing ground"* and he admired the *"very agreeable landscape"* with the view of the Windsor Castle in the background, the Royal Standard floating *"in the breeze from the round tower".* On his way to visit Dorney Court and the church, he passed the *"neat"* village school and *"a collection of wooden buildings of antiquated date on one side, and some of a more modern character on the other".*

When the schoolteacher Miss Bennett later wrote down her recollections of arriving in Dorney in 1919 to take charge of the village school, she said: *"How different the old village was then. 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 day's 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 entrance to the village from the Common was spoilt by a rubbish dump on the piece of ground now used as a War Memorial, and the field on which the (Old) Post Office now stands was often a camping place for gipsy caravans.

In spite of these drawbacks Dorney was then as now a delightful village in which to live."

A newcomer to Ye Meads in Taplow in the 1920s was enchanted by the pretty countryside though she commented on the *"saffron coloured gravel lanes, often rutted and puddled"*. However, the Acton Gazette in 1926 noted that the character of the countryside was changing. *"A mere decade ago, much of this district was as rural as if it had been a hundred miles from London"* but the development of new homes for people working outside the village was encouraged by the increased use of motor cars and the establishment of Slough Trading Estate. *"Nevertheless, much of the rural charm of this district remains untouched".*

Country Life paid a visit to Dorney Court in 1924 and wrote about the area from the perspective of a former Eton schoolboy: *"The country round Eton and Slough is plain, not to condemn it as austere. And that particular road from Eton which leads to Dorney led from the haunt of amenities and beauty into a forbidding region overhung by the blights of ignorance….Beyond Arches the way to Dorney grew drearer. The sewage farm….lay close to the next village, and probably the least*

seductive hamlet in all the county. In Eton Wick it seemed that one had come to the uttermost confines of human habitation.

Yet immediately after, the road cheers up. You cross the sunny and shade streaked meadow of Dorney Common, with Windsor fantastically framed in huge elms. And then the huddled village at the common's edge. It is like a new world, an ocean, a desert, between you and known haunts. Here all is magical."

During the Second World War, among the temporary residents of Dorney was schoolgirl Telma Dufton, who in 2018 recorded her memories of that time. She wrote of the dairy farm opposite the Palmer Arms from where the cows were taken out to the common each morning and back again in the evening. Her overall verdict was that "*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".* The internationally known painter mentioned by Telma was professional artist Nora Cundell who lived at Further Dimmings, next to her sister and brother-in-law at Hither Dimmings.

Murray's 1948 Buckinghamshire Architectural Guide, of which John Betjeman was one of the editors, summarised Dorney succinctly: *"A preserved Thames Valley village among elm trees, with some seventeenth-century cottages, mostly restored as residences."* More effusive were the words of someone who was not actually an outsider – TWE Roche, who lived in Dorney Reach and was a prolific author among his many other activities. In the introduction to his book "A Pineapple for the King", published in 1971, he wrote of a final stretch of country before the Thames which was still rural England beyond the urban sprawl of Heathrow and Slough:

"The motorist on the M4 can just detect it, if he can take his eyes from the road long enough, but the most effective route to it lies past Eton College. Suddenly the bricks and mortar are left behind and ahead lies the broad sweep of Dorney Common where the cattle graze unhindered as their forebears have done since the 12th century. On the far side lies the village, still barely extended beyond its mediaeval shell: some of the houses are very old and even the petrol-pumps stand in front of a 16th century cottage!

One of the two inns, The Palmer Arms, stands in the Village Road, the greyhound and trefoils magnificently painted on its sign. At a curve in the road at the far end of the village is a junction, the major road bearing right past the secluded village to the outlying hamlet of Lake End, where the second inn stands. This is The Pineapple, a vivid picture of the fruit swinging before it. The left turn at the junction is Court Lane, pursuing a sinuous course under great chestnut trees with arable land on the right and the woods bordering the manor estate on the left.

The traveller rounds the sharpest curve of all and there, half-hidden from the lane, the gabled Tudor Dorney Court stands opposite the ancient church".

Who would not warm to this affectionate portrait of Dorney!

Virginia Silvester