

DUNSMORE

People and happenings remembered



Second edition

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DUNSMORE

PEOPLE AND HAPPENINGS REMEMBERED

In Fiddler on the Roof, Tevye comments that people who pass through Anatevka hardly notice it. Not surprisingly perhaps, in view of its size and nature, the history books have behaved in much the same way in relation to Dunsmore.

A cluster of forty or so dwellings perched at the top of a steep Chiltern escarpment and approached by a single track road which rises more than one foot in seven from the East and more than one foot in five from the South-East, Dunsmore is a haven of tranquillity, set among eye-catching scenery in the Hundred, Wapentake, Stoke or Liberty of Aylesbury. Yet, London is close enough for the flames from the burning Crystal Palace to have been seen from the village in 1936. Remarkably, today from the right vantage points in clear winter sunlight, Canary Wharf can be seen with the naked eye.

THE NAME - DUNSMORE

The name Dunsmore appears on an estate map of 1620 and the census of 1841 referred to Dunsmore District. A field map prior to the Enclosure Act shows a solitary small field as Dunsmore Close and the name appeared on a map of 1891.

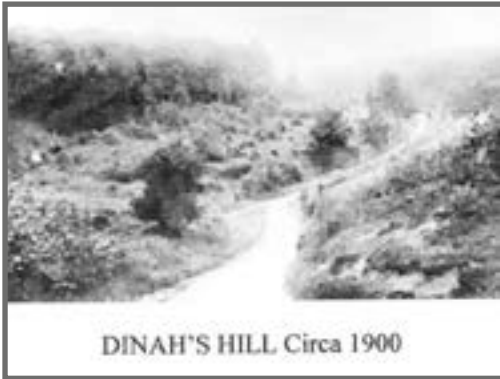
Despite this it seems evident that, until the 1900s, much or all of what is now called Dunsmore was commonly known as Scrubs or Scrubwood. As late as 1934, the postal addresses of *The Fox*, *Clematis* and *Old Ford Cottages* were Scrubwood. There is a reference then to *Scrubwood and the adjacent parish of Dunsmoor*.

The name *Scrubwood* is just as elusive, being shown in the 1700s as being applied to what is now *Low/High Scrubs* and on an 1890s map as being an uninhabited wood beyond the *Black Horse*. Scrubwood/Dunsmore seems to have a Brigadoon-like quality.

Where Dunsmore, or Dunsmoor, began and ended is not clear but an examination of maps spanning two hundred years suggests that Scrubwood was originally that part of the village that lies within the parish of Ellesborough and Dunsmore that which belongs to the parish of Wendover.

Villagers believe it was Alfred Morley, the occupant of Dunsmore House until 1941 and a parish councillor, who pressed for the change of name from Scrubwood because he thought it was undesirably similar to Wormwood Scrubs. However, an OS map of 1899 identified the village as

Dunsmore.



The late Reverend White thought the name may derive from the Celtic, from *Dinas Mere* and mean either *fortress on a hill* or alternatively *pond by the track*. The name of Dinah's Hill, at the Eastern approach which is possibly a corruption of *Dinas* reinforces this idea. Again, it has been suggested the Celtic *dun* is the word for fortress and that the British (Brythonic) word *mawr* meaning *great* is the proper

interpretation. There are Celtic associations in the neighbourhood - notably at Cymbeline's Castle near Ellesborough, (and Iron Age and Saxon ones also.)

The derivation of the name may be rather less romantic. The *dun* may describe open hill country and, bearing in mind the quantities of white heather which are remembered in the village in the 1930s, the variant *moor* is comprehensible.

The last word, although probably not the final one, is left to Professor Margaret Gelling of the University of Birmingham who is certain the name is not Welsh. She states that *mor* can derive from the Old English *mere* but the element *Duns* is very likely to be a personal name.

THE DISTANT PAST

A track which passes through the village is said to have been a packhorse route in Medieval times, used then to carry iron ore from the Midlands to the Thames Valley. Ore would not have been the only merchandise and the pack animals certainly would not have made the return journey unladen. Travellers and tinkers would have passed the same way, so that wayside cottagers would have had the opportunity for exchange and passing trade. The route, and the presence of water, may well be the reason the hamlet came into existence.

The only archaeological find unearthed at Dunsmore itself is a Roman silver ring in intaglio. (Intaglio means that the ring has a gem with a design engraved on it.) The design is of a standing woman. The exact find spot of the ring is unknown but the County museum records it as being at Dunsmore.

Slightly further afield there have been found: remains of a probable formal garden at Smalldean Farm - banks and ditches may represent former terraces; a prehistoric flint flake at High Scrubs, now in the museum; two late Iron Age coins of Andoco and Tasciovanus, also from High Scrubs; and a probable chalk well or *denehole* just west of High Scrubs.

THE 1800s

In the census of 1841 thirty or so of the village men were described as agricultural labourers. Three others were carters and there was a woodsman and a shopkeeper. Eleven women were described as lacemakers. None was listed as being a stone picker and no-one in the village was listed as being of independent means.

Forty years later, the census of 1881 listed 19 dwellings and showed farm labouring still to be the main employment for the Dunsmore men. No carter and no shopkeeper is recorded and a carpenter has replaced the woodsman. Two farmers appear on the records. David Norris had eighteen acres and employed two men. Presumably he was an ancestor of the Norris who had the village shop until the 1930s. The other farmer had forty acres. The roles of women had changed. No lacemakers are on the record. The advent of Nottingham Lace had taken its toll. Three females are in domestic service and five are described as straw plaiters. At this stage a major form of employment in the area was straw plait making. A sixty-eight year old widow was said to have been receiving Parish Relief.

In this period, formal education was completed early. Twelve-year-old Mary Ann Bowden is described as a straw plaitmaker and her eleven-year-old brother as a farm labourer. Their ten-year-old neighbour is described as a scholar.

The late George Bowden in 1995 told how a predecessor received a sharp clip round the ear for allowing himself to be distracted from his labours by his first sight of a horseless carriage passing along the Wendover Road down in the valley. Then the view was not obscured by trees as it largely is today. (Pity any poor youth who might be clipped around the ear for every vehicle which passes on the A413 now!)

Prior to the enactment of the enclosure act it is likely that most of the villagers would have been self supporting rather than wage earners. As cottagers they would have grown their own produce and had limited grazing rights to common land and the freedom to collect timber for fuel. Under the Inclosure Act 1803 the latter freedom was preserved to some extent at Dunsmore by an allotment of slightly more than 42 acres awarded to Robert Greenhill as Lord of the Manor, and others, as Trustees for *the use of the poor in respect of a right of cutting firewood on certain hills*. Robert Greenhill was later described as *Robert Greenhill Russell Esq., of Chequers, afterwards Baronet*.

(Harry Wells recalls how, in the thirties, Dunsmore villagers would cut their individual stacks of faggots in Low Scrubs and how the piles could be safely left without fear of being stolen until such time as their owners collected them in wooden trolleys).

In 1983 the Trustees sold the land in question to the National Trust and the income from the capital proceeds now services part of the Ellesborough Relief In Need Charity.

The access roads to the village *all of a width of 30 feet at least in every part thereof*, the two public bridle roads (twelve feet in width) and a private road were delineated under the Enclosure Act. The Lord of the Manor received a little over forty five acres of Dunsmore land in his own right. Ellesborough Churchwardens were the recipients of two acres. A Samuel Webb received just over one acre and three Bradleys each received a mere fraction of an acre. One of the Bradleys, Thomas, was the owner of The Fox at this time. Thus was Dunsmore parcelled up and handed out.

The impact of the Enclosure Act on cottagers generally was to impoverish them. That seems to have been the case in Dunsmore. A visiting vicar in 1837 found poverty to be particularly severe. Ten families were sadly neglected and their children unbaptised. He gave petticoats and shirts to 106 infants, petticoats to thirty six girls and pinafores to fifteen. The majority of these attended Dunsmore School and almost certainly many of them came from outside the actual village.

THE EARLY 1900S

In 1913, the village was described by Mary Deering (familiarily known as Polly) of The Fox in a letter to the press as *having ninety-eight souls all told, including the babies and regular week-enders. Beyond the two licensed houses there were twenty two domiciles in the village, including the tin houses, wooden houses, old railway carriages, thatched cottages and labourers dwellings....*

Polly Deering went on to say that thirty years earlier, the village had been occupied by farmers' men, their wives and children, but (by 1913) a Mr and Mrs Kingham of Kensington had bought up many of the cottages and converted the homes of the poor into country houses for Londoners who, of course, could pay better rents. Apparently the Kinghams owned nearly half the village at this time. Polly valued the whole village in 1913 as being worth £4,785. (How she would have marvelled at the property prices today.)

The description continued, *There is no traffic...neither carts, perambulators, bicycles or motor cars...and beyond my two cows,...there are no cattle; we are a mile from anything of the kind.* At the same time another press item commented, *this hamlet is visited by hundreds during the summer months.*

The event which had turned this rural backwater into a worthwhile investment for the Kinghams was the extension of the Metropolitan Railway Line to Aylesbury in 1894. The Railway Company laid the present access road from the A413 to the village, it previously having run alongside the Halfway House Pub (or Firecrest as it is currently known).

Jim Bowden, who lived in Old Ford Cottages, worked on the deep railway cutting below the village. The earthworks collapsed, crushing his legs and disabling him badly.

There were regular tours by horse-carriage from Great Missenden Station to the local countryside. The London well-to-do found the Arcadian delights of a primitive week-end cottage fashionable and irresistible.

Another contemporary commentator wrote, *Twenty years ago the place was unspoiled by huts and so-called bungalows and sheds. Now much of the beauty of the locality is destroyed by unsightly edifices into which visitors crowd. One end of Scrubwood is no longer a village but an eyesore.*



TEA AT THE FOX CIRCA 1900

Mary Anne Woodgate used to recall that around 1892 at the age of six or so she was given a banana by a gentleman (Presumably one of the genteel holiday-makers up from London). She had never seen a banana before and took it home carefully, adjuring the other children not to eat it *as it might be poisonous*.

In 1928 a serious fire in the village led to fifty of the villagers petitioning for furze which was growing close to houses to be cut and kept cut back.

THE DEVIL-DRINK

There had been licensed beer houses in the village since the middle of the 1800s. Owned by Messrs Wroughton and Co licenses were granted to John Cartwright at The Fox in 1832 and to Joseph Wells at The Black horse in 1852. However, The Black Horse was functioning as an ale house before 1741. It has been said that a third ale house, The Pheasant, was located at what is now Bildasbot Cottage but apart from a cellar on the premises no evidence has been found to support this.

Harry Wells was born at The Black horse in 1917, almost certainly delivered by Mrs Batson the village nurse and midwife who lived in Old Ford Cottages.

The Wells family were the publicans at The Black Horse for 70 years until 1932. Harry tells how customers came into the living room of the little cottage in which the family members might be taking their meal. Among others, the house was patronised by youths walking from Prestwood, attracted by the home made wine which the landlord sometimes dispensed free of charge. They occasionally stayed all night, being served with free bacon and eggs in the morning.

The eggs came from the pub's chickens which were kept in grand carriages in the pub grounds. The bacon came from the pub's pigs which were killed and cured twice a year.

The house had a large oven beside the fire to which villagers would bring their bread and joints of meat to be baked and roasted. The landlord earned his living in a variety of ways, selling in Wendover logs and firewood which he delivered by horse and cart, being part carter and part farmer as well as publican.



The Leather Bottle, about half a mile from Dunsmore, operating from before 1700, and previously known as The Plough, was a similarly small cottage in a secluded spot beneath the woods and accessible only by footpaths. There too, drink was served in the cottage parlour. *The inn only sold beer and lemonade so there was no fear of trouble developing.* John Chilton and Charles Parkins, publicans in 1753 and later, were chair-

makers. The cottage was demolished in the early 1950s.

John Woodgate frequented the Leather Bottle in the late 1800s, riding out regularly of an evening, attracted (according to his own daughter) by *'Em Langston and 'er two fine daughters*. On one occasion the horse came home without him - he fell out of the saddle and had an apocalyptic vision (*'e saw 'eaven and 'e saw 'ell*). He was so shaken by the experience that he became teetotal for several years afterwards.. Perhaps the beer at Dunsmore proper was rather stronger. One publican at the Black Horse, concerned that wives and children were shut out of their homes while the men slept off their over-indulgence, and that the families had no food as a consequence, established allotments in the grounds of the pub to provide the men with sober and productive occupation and the families with nourishment. Later, other allotments were established along the track towards Hamden Leaf Wood. In the late 1920s every village man was working a plot.

Before the advent of the horseless carriage, local employment for the men of Dunsmore was to be had on the estates of Chequers to the west, the Rothschilds to the north-west and the Libertys to the east.

The majority of village men toiled hard and from an early age. They walked to their places of work over the often muddy footpaths which still cobweb the surroundings of the village.

The public houses were the early equivalent of the job centre today. Over a pint, the gossip about work opportunities on the nearby farms could be picked up.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS

The impact of alcohol on the poor peasantry was part of the theme of a novel published in 1908 about the thinly disguised village. *The Church and Thisby Grey* was thought to have been written by Mary Murray Ford who lived at Capel Coombe (now Mollway House) and then at Dunsmore Leaf until about 1930. She wrote under the pen name of Mrs John Le Breton. In fact, her husband, Thomas was the author. The Fox Inn was known according to the map of 1880 as the *Bugle Horn*. In his book, Thomas named it *The Blue Boy (Little Boy Blue come blow your horn)*.

Thomas Murray Ford's novel was essentially a diatribe against the do-gooders of the village and was *intended to show how well-meaning people can do a lot of harm*.

Mary Murray Ford, who seems to have been something of a bohemian and associated with the Bloomsbury Set, was not universally popular in the locality. She seems to have been particularly at loggerheads with Polly Deering who built the row of cottages by the pond (now one house) called *Old Ford Cottages*. Polly so named them, not because there was ever a ford near the spot, but to establish an insult in perpetuity to *Old Mary Ford*. Mary would have been in her forties at the time.

On the other hand, Thomas Murray Ford's son believes that his father was the eponymous *Old Ford* in question. Who knows for sure?

In Thomas Murray Ford's book the village peasant women were employed in domestic service to the gentry or in picking flints from the surrounding fields and splitting the flints for road making. Left in their abundance the flints would blunt the ploughshares.

Harry Wells who as a young boy helped at this task, remembers that the women wore strong aprons in which they gathered the flints before depositing them in heaps for collection.

Mary Murray Ford was thought by some to be the English translator of the Rhubaiyat of Omar Khayyam on behalf of Edward Fitzgerald. This seems very unlikely since Fitzgerald based his version on a copy of the Bodleian version by Professor Cowell. It remains a pleasing thought that the verse:-

*Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse - and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness -
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.*

seems particularly appropriate to a hamlet which so effectively offers seclusion from the pressures of the outside world. Mary's husband seems to have shared this impression since, in his novel, he calls the village *Eden*.

(The seclusion of an Eden does not suit all temperaments. At one time a group of village wives is said to have approached breakdown in concert because of their isolation. Another wife, seeking sanctuary in Dunsmore from a breakdown brought on by the London blitz, returned to face the bombing in preference to the solitude of the village).

Thomas Murray Ford wrote a number of other books under his own name or as John or Thomas Le Breton, including *Unholy Matrimony*. The Chronicles of Choisy, and *Memoirs of a Poor Devil*. His wife, Mary (the second of three wives) wrote as Mrs John Le Breton, *The White Magic Book*.

THE BAPTIST MISSION CHAPEL

Kelly's directory of the early 1900s devotes seven words to this building - *There is also an iron Mission Hall*. Today the bungalow, Rowanbank, stands on the site.



In chapel life the most significant villager was Mrs Daphne Norris who had joined the Baptist Church in 1897. She was secretary and, later, treasurer of the chapel until 1939.

At the height of its activity in 1932 there were twelve members of the congregation, nine of whom stayed to communion. In 1933 Daphne reported no increase in membership and fresh competition for the Woman's Union from the Women's Institute which had just started in the village.

In 1933 Polly Deering of The Fox took legal action against Daphne and her son Martin for allegedly trespassing and cutting down some of her trees which formed the boundary between the chapel and her own land. The Norris's were acting in their capacity as chapel officials and, metaphorically, burned their fingers in providing fuel for the chapel stove. By 1935 the hall was having difficulty in meeting an annual financial commitment to pay £2.10/- to the parent church. The chapel's cash in hand was £1.8s 3d but there were optimistic plans for a jumble sale to raise money for an organ.

Daphne Norris' demise in 1939 signalled the death knell of the little chapel. Earlier in the year the pastor in Wendover, concerned at the size of the congregation planned a *campaign of visitation* to Dunsmore. This appears not to have been effective because in 1940 the Wendover Deacons noted, *as the cause at Dunsmore seems to have come to an end so far as religious work is concerned, it would appear that we have little further use for the building*.

Early in 1941 the hall was converted to a dwelling house and in 1944 the Mahler family moved in. They were Austrian refugees from Nazi persecution and related to Gustav Mahler the composer. Five months later the deacons agreed to lay on a water supply to the property. Although the hall

proved to be unsuitable as a dwelling house in severe winter months a Miss Baldwin was living there in the winter of 1949 at a rent of 5/- a week.

Plans to donate the building to Southcourt Baptist Church in Aylesbury as a school room came to naught when the corrugated iron proved to be in too poor a condition to dismantle. The best offer in respect of the sale of the property was £90. When actually sold in 1950 it realised £93.

THE VILLAGE SHOP

Up until the early 1970s the property which is now Bildasbot Cottage was a general store selling everything from paraffin and candles to meat and groceries. Daphne Norris was the shopkeeper for forty years. Her husband had stables by the black pond and carted flints for road making. The shop finally closed in the mid 1950s. The last proprietors were Ernest and Elsie Groves.



DEVELOPMENT OF THE VILLAGE

Virtually every dwelling in the village has been developed from its original size. The earliest cottages can still be discerned within the later extensions to The Black Horse, Snowdrop and Daffodil Cottages, The Old Fox and at Molloway House (formerly Capel Coombe and then Brambleberry). Muirton was originally a pair of back-to-back cottages. Bildasbot/ Chequers Cottage, Dunsmore House and Chequermate remain more or less unaltered externally. Well Cottage (formerly The Ramblers), thought to be 18th Century, was probably built as two dwellings each with one room up and one down. Field Place was originally two separate cottages and the original dwellings which constituted Old Ford Cottages have been converted into one large house. Greenhill was built on the former site of a pre-cast concrete bungalow and Springfield on the site of a modest brick-built one.



In a village where straw plaiting was a common occupation it is not surprising that The Black horse, Daffodil Cottage and a number of other properties were originally thatched. The thatch on The Black Horse caught fire on a number of occasions.



A photograph of *High Street* shows a thatched Daffodil Cottage and a thatched lych-gate at the entrance of Bildasbot Cottage. Today, none of the village properties is thatched.

The Beech Hut is the only remaining occupied corrugated iron dwelling. It was originally army officer's family quarters at Halton Camp during the first world war.



THE BEECH HUT

The core of Jubilee Cottage was built at the time of the jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary in 1935. The dwelling was known as Greenlawns until the first edition of this history was published and has since been extended beyond recognition.

Dunsmore is seen as an area of outstanding natural beauty and, in theory, no further residential development is now permitted. In 2008 Snowdrop Cottage was demolished with a view to rebuilding.



SNOWDROP COTTAGE
BEING DEMOLISHED FEB 2008

Compared with today the village was once virtually treeless. The church stood on a bare hilltop by a pond with a solitary beech. (See front cover). Seemingly, neglect during the 1939-45 world war led to the arboreal encroachment.

PUBLIC UTILITIES

The village does not have the benefit of mains drainage and, in the 1920s, the horse-drawn cart which brought supplies of milk and other provisions also took away the containers of *night soil*. Whether this was Mr Brill or Mr Hill, two competing milkmen in the late 20s, is unclear. Because of the steepness of the climb the coalman had to hitch on a second horse in order to make his deliveries.

Mains water was supplied to the village in 1935. The pressure needed to bring the supply to 700 feet above sea level fills tap water with masses of tiny air bubbles giving a glass of water a milky appearance which rapidly clears from the bottom upwards. Numerous wells in the village are a legacy of earlier times and in some properties there remain underground rainwater storage tanks capable of holding several thousand gallons. These are bottle-shaped, beautifully constructed, hand dug and brick built with their interiors rendered with smooth cement.

During a water shortage in January of 1934 Old Ford Cottages were reported to have been completely without water and to have permission to take water from the church well. However, M Soley at Clematis wrote to the press to say that although the cottagers were taking the nearest water to hand, as they had shared in the cost of providing the water tank at Clematis, they had every right to use that store of water when needed. ...*The people of the locality are very well prepared against spells of drought*, he claimed.

Sir James Berry gave a similar undertaking on another occasion but the late George Bowden recalled having to draw drinking water at times from the White Pond and from other ponds along the track past The Black Horse.

Harry Wells recalled that his grandmother used the church well for her water. He eerily and vividly remembered that six weeks after she died, when he was about six years old, he saw her figure drawing water there. When he approached the church fence the figure disappeared.

The White Pond and nearby Black Pond are probably natural dew ponds contained by the clay cap over the chalk. At one time carters used to water their horses and back their carts into the Black pond to wash the thick mud from their wheels in much the same way as illustrated in Constable's *Hay Wain*.

In about 1877, Sarah Woodgate aged four and her sister, Maria aged two drowned in the White Pond. Possibly they were skating on thin ice.

The White Pond might have disappeared altogether when, in the late 1980s, a dredger used to clean it sank out of control into the clay. After the equipment was rescued it took the best efforts of the fire brigade (then located on the site of the present Wendover Health Centre) and the contents of the wells in the church grounds and at Muirton, as well as the contents of the Black Pond to replenish it.

PERSONALITIES

Thomas Murray Ford, author, built Capel Coombe (now Molloway House) in 1903. He established Mary (or May) Harte-Potts there as his mistress. His wife was in a sanatorium dying slowly from alcoholism - the theme of *Unholy Matrimony*. He promised marriage to Mary when his wife died but made the same promise to Mary-Anne Woodgate, his housemaid whom he had set up in a flat in London. When the first Mrs Murray Ford died, Mary-Anne came to Dunsmore with Thomas's first child by her, only to find the wedding breakfast laid out for the other Mary.



Because of a threat of bankruptcy, shortly after his marriage to Mary Harte-Potts, Thomas unwisely made over the Capel Coombe estate to her. Before the war

he generally spent his week-days in London with Mary-Anne and his week-ends with Mary in Dunsmore. He and Mary became estranged and separated during the Great War when he volunteered for service at the age of sixty, making a deliberate mistake about his age. When they divorced and he married the mother of his three children, Mary seems to have sold Capel Coombe to Sir James Berry and to have built Dunsmore Leaf.

Sir James was a Harley Street medical practitioner. His was the first house in the village to have electricity, provided from a generator driven by a Lister petrol engine. He gave Christmas parties for everyone in the village, young and old.

The Donat family came to live in Dunsmore in 1937. After Sir James, Robert Donat was the owner of Capel Coombe, which was then known as Brambleberry (now Molloway House) until 1959. The actor, the late Michael Denison (who often walked his dog in the village) informed the author that he had tried to persuade Robert and his wife to set up home in Essex where he had his own home at the time. The Essex climate did not suit Robert's vulnerability to bronchial problems and so he moved to Dunsmore which had a reputation as a location beneficial to the bronchitic. He had recently completed 'Knight without Armour' with Marlene Dietrich, and was about to star in 'The Citadel' with Ralph Richardson, followed by 'Goodbye Mr Chips' with Greer Garson for which he won the Oscar for best actor in 1939. His wife, Ella, took their three children to America in 1940 to avoid the war but Robert stayed behind to do what he could for the war effort. He said he failed his medical due to flat feet. The family returned to Dunsmore after the war but Robert had left to set up home with the actress, Renee Asherson, co-star with Laurence Olivier of 'Henry V.'

The pioneering long-distance aviator, Captain Bill Lancaster lived on the outskirts of the village in an asbestos bungalow on the site of the present property, Hampden Way. The captain died after his plane crashed in the Sahara Desert in 1933. His partially mummified body was found twenty-nine years later. His ill-fated venture had been an attempt to beat Amy Mollison's record breaking solo flight from England to Cape Town. He had hoped to rebuild his reputation after standing trial in the USA for the murder of Haden Clarke, the man who had usurped his position in the heart and bed of his lover, Jessie "Chubbie" Miller. Although exonerated, the prevailing opinion in the UK was that Captain Lancaster was guilty.



"CHUBBIE" MILLER WITH
CAPTAIN LANCASTER

Otherwise, the village seems to have been favoured by relatives of the famous rather than by the notables themselves. Erasmus Barlow, a great grandson of Charles Darwin built the property called Wychet. His next-door neighbour, at Woodside, was Professor Gip Wells, a zoologist and world-wide authority on the lugworm. He was the son of H. G. Wells. Gip hated his given name, seeing it as more appropriate for a dog than for a person.

The sister-in-law of George Bernard Shaw was said to have lived at Apple Tree Cottage and to have worked at her stained glass in the adjoining studio which is now Beechwood, a private house.

Anna Neagle, the film actress was a regular visitor to the village and Paul Robeson, the famous baritone, once visited Muirton. Eileen Morton, stage name Beldon, lived at Muirton. Her entry in *Who's Who of Acting* was longer than that of her neighbour, Robert Donat. Her husband, Morty, was a flier and on at least one occasion landed a light aircraft in the field behind his home at the top of Dinah's Hill.

Wild Bill Davidson, said to be the greatest white horn player, and who was on Al Capone's payroll in his youth, was a regular guest at Dunsmore Leaf.

Robert Louis Stevenson is known to have visited The Fox and, during the second world war, Winston Churchill's detectives whiled away their time there when the Prime Minister was at nearby Chequers.

CHARACTERS

A ploughboy is said to have been killed by lightning at some time in the past and his ghost now haunts the village.

Until the late 1970s a Victorian Pullman railway carriage stood on the plot known as The Hut, behind Snowdrop and Daffodil Cottages. The carriage, with a brick chimney, was occupied by a man and his mother. When the mother died, the son refused to acknowledge the fact and the visiting vicar found the old lady seated in her rocking chair three days after her passing. Today, the carriage is at Quainton Railway Museum near Aylesbury but the brick chimney still stands as a memorial to the unconventional home.

Down the valley towards Wendover near the Leather Bottle inn, Tam Black, a schoolteacher, used to live for part of the time in a small wooden hut without any modern amenities. The hut is now derelict. Tam is said to have driven a motorised lawn mower to his place of work, a boarding school in Crowthorne, Berkshire. He was an enthusiastic member of the Wendover Fire Brigade in the 1930s when the fireman had first to catch the horses before they could get the manual fire engine to the blaze. Tam's adventures during the blitz were dramatised by his brother and filmed as *The Bells Ring Down* with Tommy Trinder playing the part of Tam.

Ted Fox, an American by birth, was the licensee of The Fox from 1954 until 1988 had been chief editor for Paramount Pictures and was responsible for the first continental film to be dubbed into English - *The Golem*.

Ted claimed in his time to have served drinks to every Prime Minister apart from Harold Wilson. Under Ted, The Fox earned a national reputation as a rendezvous for homosexuals.

With Ted, his wife, Georgie was the main breeder of prize dachshunds. The dogs won five Crufts' championships and were sought after by the rich and famous, including the Astors and the Maharajah of Bhavnagar. The bar walls were covered with kennel club certificates. Georgie had previously made costume jewellery, some of which had been worn by Carmen Miranda.



TED FOX OUTSIDE THE FOX

Ted and Georgie kept a donkey, Lucifer Sam Ambrose, who was partial to apricot brandy. They also had a Mynah bird which barked because it lived with dogs all the time.

WILDLIFE

The Glis-Glis, or edible dormouse, is the most singular animal in the locality. Larger than a native dormouse, it is not unlike a small squirrel with large appealing eyes. It is a protected species which can gnaw its way through electrical wiring and timberwork. No less than fifty of the creatures were trapped and removed from the loft of one property during a single summer. Like the muntjac deer, it was introduced to the neighbourhood from the collection of the Second Baron Rothschild when in 1902 he released them in Tring Park. Known to the Germans as Sieben Schlafer, or seven sleeper, it sleeps intermittently for the seven months from October to May - often in the cavity walls of houses - being noisily active at night.

The cast-iron deer fence which runs along a large part of the path, known as Birdcage Walk, which leads from Dunsmore to Coombe Hill was erected in 1902. It was manufactured at the Chiltern ironworks in Wendover where the Health Centre now is. The holes in the upright of the fence were punched by a hand operated press utilising the power produced from the weight of a bucket of water. Although referred to in a public enquiry as being, a unique local feature worthy of preservation, the fence is rusting away today.

Brigit Barlow, the wife of Charles Darwin's great Grandson, (and Tam Black's sister) recalls how the fence presented a challenge in her childhood when the grounds behind were a mass of white heather. Later, as a young grandmother, she demonstrated to a grandchild how she climbed the fence and was caught in the act by the then owner, a Colonel Tetley. Fancifully it might be said that, several generations removed, The Origin of Species was confronted by the origin of the teabag.

VILLAGE HALL

Dunsmore Village Hall was built in 1849. An inscription on a tablet set into the wall says the building was given by Langford Lovell, Esquire of Wendover Dean, *for a school and for lectures according to the articles of the Church of England in their plain and literal sense.* Annual talks, known as the Langford Lovell Lectures are now a feature of the Village Hall programme.



A surprising thirty-eight infant children attended the school or were on the roll in 1869. In 1875 the total expenditure for the year was £16. This included the teacher's salary of £13.

The school was closed in 1892 because there were very few children and no suitable mistress could be found. Two years later a Mrs Tubbs of Mayertone Manor funded its reopening for five years. A mistress, trained under the kindergarten system, was appointed and two years later the school had an average attendance of twenty-five, with forty-one on the register. Miss Brown's annual salary was £77.10s and her assistant earned £12. The school closed finally in 1904.

George Bowden and Harry Wells, as children in the 1920s, walked to Ellesborough School at the foot of Coombe Hill. What parent today would countenance their four-and-a-half year old child walking so far to school and, particularly, making the return climb home on a winter afternoon? George said that he did not always actually walk down Coombe Hill. The trick was to toboggan down on a sheet of metal, scooting across the traffic-free main road below!

The old school building in Dunsmore remained a centre for village activities, much of which was connected with the church. The Scrubwood Band of Hope met there, celebrating its first anniversary with a picnic and, *most successful entertainment* at which May Deering gave a prize-winning recitation of *Laddie*. She and Emma, Ethel and Doris Bowden earned *Never Absent Medals*.

The Band of Hope instilled the children with the virtues of temperance while some of their fathers gave them practical demonstrations of the evils of intemperance in the village public houses. Harry Wells, whose home was The Black horse, remembers signing the pledge as a child.

During the 1914-18 war the Local Defence Volunteers mustered at the hall to drill with dummy wooden rifles.

By 1932 the Band of Hope and the Mothers' Union were widening the horizons of their members with outings to far flung places like St Albans, Reading and Whipsnade. The mothers seemed to be fitted with homing devices which led them straight to the Woolworths stores on these occasions for an orgy of shopping before they took tea in the local tearooms.

In 1941 the Dunsmore Players entertained the Butlers Cross Women Evacuees during a social afternoon. In February 1945 the Scrubwood Mothers Meeting was still meeting fortnightly and sending clothing to the Church army for the benefit of poor children. The Sunday School children were sending toys to sick and incurable children at the same time. Compared with a hundred years earlier when the village children were given clothing by the visiting vicar, the village was enjoying relative prosperity.

The Dunsmore Women's Institute was formed in 1931 and an early president was Mrs Robert Donat. The chapter's banner was made by Mrs Piercy in 1951.

When the village hall was severely damaged by fire in 1967 it was being used almost exclusively by the Women's Institute. The press report described the building as being the property of St Mary's Church, Wendover. This was not so. No legal title proved to be in existence. There existed two financial endowments loosely attached to the building of which the vicar of Wendover was trustee. This had led to the erroneous idea of ownership by the church. The proposal by the church to sell off the building triggered the villagers into seeking title to the property and this was established in 1990. An active Village Hall Association now has possessive title to the building with the committee as charity trustees. Grants from various sources have enabled considerable refurbishment to be carried out.

Villagers are encouraged to pay an annual family membership fee to the Association and are entitled to free use of the hall for (virtually) any purpose and to free admission to social functions which take place there. The Association's activities are imaginative and frequent and culminate in the annual Dunsmore Village Ball, a posh frock and dinner jacket affair.

CHURCH OF THE RESURRECTION

The Church of the resurrection was built in 1897 chiefly by Lady Sutton as a chapel of ease to the parish church of St Peter and Paul at Ellesborough. Lady Sutton was the wife of the Rector of Ellesborough. When the little church building was consecrated by the Bishop of Reading the congregation overflowed and some had to listen through the open windows to his sermon on the subject of the widow's mite.

The significance of the church to the village has waxed and waned over the years.

In 1900 a beautiful chalice and paten of silver in a compact and handsome chest was donated, completing a set of vessels for Holy Communion. The donor was a Miss Cooper of Ellesborough, a powerful figure in Dunsmore and in activities associated with the church. The lady was godmother to nearly all the village children at the time. (She is easily identifiable as a major character in Thomas Murray Ford's novel).

At that time the harmonium was presenting problems. Albert Brackley, who played it, found the long tramp from Ellesborough too much. His successor, a Miss Rance, took on the responsibility of training *a little choir of eager children*. Miss Rance seems not to have continued for long because the Rector himself *had to inflict himself on the congregation* as organist that year.

The cost of the instrument too was a cause for anxiety. The Rector had spent no less than fifteen guineas for a *Vocalion* which had been removed because of the damp. The replacement harmonium was purchased by instalments and the outstanding eight payments of three guineas were a worry. The churchwardens kindly allowed the collections on the last Sunday of each month to go towards clearing the debt. The record shows that, *one shilling was collected from Scrubwood for this object*. It was just as well that some benefactors came up with substantial donations of several guineas apiece.

The building was graced with a slim steeple which failed to stand the test of time and weather. The timber framed structure deteriorated and in 1933 needed urgent repairs, particularly to the roof and to two windows which were falling to pieces. The cost of the work was estimated to be £14 and a garden party was organised to fund the restoration. However, Dunsmore church people had raised nearly £13 beforehand so that a grand total of £38 was raised in all.



Four years later, more extensive repairs were needed at a cost of over £90 and by 1938 a new altar and lectern were in place in the renovated building.

The size of the congregation fluctuated considerably. In 1933, the Reverend Lake complained, *the attendance at Dunsmore services has of late been so poor that I find it difficult to take their spiritual needs seriously...I have had the little church repaired and it looks very pretty. All that remains is for the people to use it*. In 1935 he suggested, *Dunsmore might be at the North pole for all they (most of the parish) know about it*.

The next incumbent, The Reverend White, seemed to have a particular affection for Dunsmore and the villagers appear to have responded to him. There were seventy people present at harvest festival in 1936, supported by the Ellesborough choir. There was much the same attendance in 1938.

In 1941, during the war, services were held every Sunday and there was a need for additional seating when the Bishop of Buckingham preached at an afternoon service. When the church was again in need of repair in 1949 there was a suggestion that a new one might be built in its place.

This optimistic outlook had changed by 1976 when regular services were no longer being held and the Reverend Horner announced that Dunsmore folk were welcome at Ellesborough Church. This was the first faint sign of the writing on the wall. Then in January 1977 he wrote about Dunsmore, *One doesn't want to abandon a church unless the whole situation is quite hopeless... To use a church one needs Christians...Having been present for part of your (Dunsmore's) harvest supper I am left with the question.. has Dunsmore got many Christians?... Out of this, given God's Spirit, something will arise.... probably a more informal, more shared worship.*

The last comment proved to be prophetic. By the 1980s, the history of the old Baptist Mission Hall threatened to repeat itself. Ellesborough Parochial Church Council had had the Dunsmore Church registered in its name and had declared the building to be both redundant and unsafe. The need for a chapel of ease to save villagers from having to trudge several miles to worship no longer existed. The building was advertised for sale.

The village, divided as it is by District Council boundaries, became united in the same way as it had done in relation to the village hall to oppose the disposal. Beneath the *For Sale* notice on the church another was posted informing potential buyers of the villagers' objections. A banner was erected by the pond. Dunsmore demonstrated but also negotiated with the PCC. Terms of a lease were agreed and villager trustees were appointed.

Extensive repair work was carried out, largely by three of the trustees, David Marshall, the late Robbie Robinson and the late Tony Wood, and the building re-wired and pendant lights donated by the late Nobbie Furlonger. Substantial other donations were made by anonymous villagers towards the cost of repairs.



So, for the time being, the little church has been reprieved. Services are mainly Anglican but those of other denominations take place from time to time to reflect the church's ecumenical nature. Most are led by residents of the village. Several special services are held throughout the year and the tradition of summer festivals has been continued.

THE VILLAGE TODAY

The village, without thatched properties, is less picturesque than it once was, its characters less colourful and its institutions more formalised. Its public houses are now private houses. The press comment in 1913 that this hamlet draws hundreds of people in the Summer months remains true. Coombe Hill lures walkers, mountain bikers and motorists to and through Dunsmore. Horse riders enjoy the network of bridle paths which radiate from the village through unspoiled woodlands. Picnickers by the pond share their sandwiches with any ducks which have sustained a precarious existence despite the predatory foxes and fast cars. Visiting worshippers join with villagers at church services and call in at the festivals.

Brigadoon-like? An Eden? Arcadian? The original significance of the village name may still be obscure but to the people who choose to live there, Dunsmore has a clear meaning - a very special place.