

NEWSLETTER

Dunstable & District Local History Society
No. 50



August 2018

Chairman's Notes

The refurbishment of the war memorial in Priory Gardens has given the history society a challenging task over the past 12 months.

WAR CASUALTY NAMES UPDATED

We have undertaken to try to provide a more-complete list of local world war casualties whose names should be recorded there.

The society became involved after the death of Terry Oliver, who kept voluminous notes about the wars and provided the details used in the annual Dunstable Remembrance Sunday service booklets. The basis for his records was the information gathered by Dunstable Rotary Club when it initiated the building of the war memorial in 1952. Terry donated his files to the history society shortly before his death and committee member David Underwood, who has been collating the material, now writes the Remembrance Sunday article.

Terry was well aware that the original war memorial list was incomplete, and Michele Marcus at Dunstable Council had also been keeping a note of queries raised by local residents. Sharon Warboys, of the Don't Let Dunstable Die website, also contacted the history society about her relation Frederick Warboys, another name missing from the memorial.

WAR MEMORIAL RESTORATION

So, when we heard that Dunstable Council was planning to carry out restoration work on the memorial, we mentioned that it would be an appropriate time to look at the list again. It's expensive to recast the memorial plaques but, nevertheless, the council decided that this ought to be done. Subsequently, June Byrne, David Underwood, and myself have been spending an enormous amount of time checking through lists of names and trying to make sure that the new lists are as accurate as possible.

We can guess at numerous reasons why names were omitted from the original lists. Sometimes relatives did not bother to fill in a form, sometimes they wanted their grief to be private, sometimes Dunstable-born soldiers had moved to another town, sometimes village boundaries have changed and casualties are remembered elsewhere. The new lists do not duplicate names already on other local memorials but, nevertheless, Dunstable's refurbished memorial will include about 50 extra names.

POPPY APPEAL

This is an appropriate time to mention the enormous contribution that society members make towards the town's annual Poppy Appeal collection for the Royal British Legion. Last year, £39,632.28 was raised here in Dunstable. Alas, age is creeping up on some of our most



The presentation by the Mayor of Dunstable, Councillor Gloria Martin, of a certificate in recognition of services to the community. With the Mayor from left to right are John Buckledee, Ron Frith, Rita Swift, David Underwood and Joan Curran.

enthusiastic Poppy Appeal helpers, and it looks as though we will be short of volunteers this year. If you can help sell Poppies at one of the town's supermarkets, even for just a couple of hours, I would be delighted to hear from you. It is not too difficult a task...most supermarket customers seem delighted to see us and are very generous.

TRANSLATIONS OF THE ANNALS

A big event for local historians later this year will be the launch of the translation from the Latin of the medieval Annals of Dunstable. Elsewhere in this newsletter, Hugh Garrod writes about

all the efforts which have been made to ensure that the translation has been published. History society members will be involved in various talks and presentations to publicise the book.

OUTINGS

It was very disappointing to have to cancel our planned trip to the Palace House Museum and art galleries at Newmarket, particularly when the new venue has been so much in the news this summer. But only about 13 members had booked a ticket, so the financial loss to the society would have been too great. Happily, our other outing organised by Rita Swift to Weston Hall, near Towcester, was better supported and there have been glowing reports about the event. Clearly, our members prefer Edith Sitwell to Lester Piggott!

HISTORY DAY

Dunstable reverted to a History Day theme for its annual May event in Priory Gardens, featuring World War One with a series of displays which attracted quite a large crowd until the rain came down in the afternoon.

In our marquee, Joan Curran and Rita Swift provided an exhibition of World War posters and photos, and David Underwood brought along part of his collection of World War helmets and other, more lethal, souvenirs. An unexpected event there was the presentation by the Mayor of Dunstable, Councillor Gloria Martin, of a certificate awarded to the history society by the High Sheriff of Bedfordshire in recognition of our "Great and Valuable services to the Community". A section of the tent was partitioned off for a series of silent film shows, including some sobering newsreels of the Battle of the Somme. Dunstable Council, which arranged for the trees in Priory Gardens to be decorated with Poppies, also revived the World War One exhibition in Priory House, to which the history society helped provide text and photos in 2014. The full text about how the war affected Dunstable is still available to read on our website – look for First World War in the archives index.

John Buckledee

The First Local Post-War Bell Peal



Sunday, 11th November, 1918 marks the date of the armistice that ended the first world war.

To commemorate its centenary there will be a number of national events. This year, at 7pm on the evening of Remembrance Sunday, alongside the national lighting of beacons, the bells of many towns across Great Britain will also be rung. A nationwide recruitment drive called 'Ringing Remembers', will be launched to enlist up to 1,400 new bell ringers, the same number that were lost in the war. During the day, Dunstable Priory will be joining the nation's churches by sounding its bells.

THE DEFENCE OF THE REALM ACT

During the first world war the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA 1914) controlled public activities and behaviour. Besides introducing rationing, it also included the silencing of church bells. Church bells were only to be sounded as a warning of a possible invasion. Many churches suffered, as a number of experienced bellringers would have been called-up on active service.

THE FIRST LOCAL POST-WAR PEAL

Following the end of the war, it wasn't until 1920 that the first post-war peal was rung at Dunstable Priory. This is recorded on the peal board which hangs in the ringing room, proclaiming the first peal rung by LOCAL bell ringers. All the named ringers in the peal would have lived in Dunstable and been regular attendees at the Priory Church.

THE FIRST BELL

The first named ringer on the peal board is Frank Ramsay of Great Northern Road. He was the youngest ringer pulling the lightest bell, known as the treble, which weighs 6 hundredweight (cwt) 1 quarter (qtr) and 17 pounds (lb), or 335.2 kilogrammes (kg).

THE SECOND BELL

On the second bell was Robert Harris who was 20 years old and lived in 'Downs View', Borough Road.

THE THIRD BELL

Ringing the third bell was Charles Elson King who lived in High Street North.

THE FOURTH BELL

Canon William Wing Carew Baker rang the fourth bell. He had been ordained in Clare College, Cambridge, in 1884 and following his ordination he became the vicar to the rural Bedfordshire villages of Ridgmont and Milton Bryan. He was appointed Rector of Dunstable Priory in 1903, a position he held until 1924. Canon Baker was a founding member of the Bedfordshire County Association of Change Ringers. In 1913 he rang his first peal at Dunstable with other members of the Society. Canon Baker's portrait can still be seen in the ringing room at Dunstable. His eldest son, Charles Tanqueray Baker, was born in 1893 but died in the first world war, as commemorated on the town's war memorial.



The post-war peal board that hangs in the ringing room showing the names of the bell ringers

THE FIFTH BELL
Frederick William Baldock rang the fifth bell. He lived in Wellington Terrace and was an engineer for the printing trade, possibly Waterlows, as he later moved to Waterlow Road.

THE SIXTH BELL

George William Heley rang the sixth bell. At the turn of the century he lived in West Street. George had rung his first peal in 1913. He was partly responsible for the writing, making and mounting of the peal board along with V Field and W Webb.

THE SEVENTH BELL AND CONDUCTOR

Arthur Edwin Sharman rang the seventh bell and was the conductor of the peal. He was born in 1882. At the time of the peal he lived at 199 High Street North. His name appears in the bellringing room on 15 other peal boards. As each peal lasts 3 hours it represents a significant devotion of his time.

He was also Mayor of Dunstable between 1940 and 1943.

THE EIGHTH BELL

The heaviest bell, the eighth, also known as the tenor, was rung by W Horne. This bell weighs 23 cwt, 2 qtr and 17 lb which is 1200 kg, about the weight of a mini car today.

GRANDSIRE TRIPLES

The peal itself consisted of 5040 changes of Grandsire Triples (one of the standard methods of ringing church bells) which lasted 3 hours 17 minutes.

WORTHINGTON G SMITH CLIMBS THE BELL TOWER

Worthington G Smith visited the bell tower in 1912, in order to sketch the bells. He would have had to have been very persuasive for the Parish Clerk to allow him access to the bell chamber, probably on more than one occasion. This requires a precarious climb up a ladder from the ringing room, no small feat for a man of 77! The bell frame at the time was a wooden-beamed structure that Worthington G Smith would have had to climb over, straddling the beam as he perilously balanced between the wheels, ropes and pulleys controlling the movement of the heavy bells. He emerged with a sketch of the bells, but also noted that he had lost several pens and pencils, which fell into the black void where they remained.

THE PARISH CLERK

It would have been Edward Franklin, who granted Smith access to the bell tower as he was the Parish Clerk between 1904 and 1920. The caption below a portrait in the ringing room describes him as a bell ringer of forty years. He was the Dunstable Mayor in 1911/12 and between 1916 and 1918 and can be seen wearing the ceremonial chain of office in the picture.

John Pratt

Silversmiths at Tingrith Manor

It has been estimated that in 1685 between 1200,000 and 1,000,000 Huguenot refugees fled France for fear of execution when Louis XIV revoked a law, the Edict of Nantes, affording them religious protection.

Amongst these Protestants were a vast number of skilled people. In particular, the legendary goldsmiths whose extraordinary legacies in the decorative arts forever changed the course of gold and silver craftsmanship in Britain and America.

DAVID WILLAUME I (1658-1741)

One of the leading 'gentlemen' goldsmiths during the late 17th and early 18th centuries was David Willaume. He was born on 7th June in Metz, France into a family of Huguenot goldsmiths (this term also covered silversmiths). He left France, for England in 1685 when the Edict of Nantes was revoked.

By 1696 he had established a shop in London near the Savoy Chapel. Because of the nature of their trade, goldsmiths and silversmiths had fortified premises to protect their stock, bullion and takings. Through their sales they received large sums of money and so had funds to lend. David became a gentleman goldsmith banker issuing cash notes to clients. These were receipts for taking in money or silver/gold jewellery so the goldsmith had to be a person of impeccable integrity. In 1698 he was promoted to the Livery of the Goldsmiths' Company and his first hallmark and address was registered about the same time at the sign of the Golden Ball, Pall Mall. By 1714 he had moved again to premises on the west side of St. James's Street, Mayfair, where the business remained until 1746.

From the latter part of the reign of William III (1688-1702) to the end of George I's reign (1714-1727) it is obvious from evidence of surviving pieces that David Willaume enjoyed the patronage of the wealthiest clients in England. His work was of the highest quality both in design and execution. Amongst his important works are a magnificent pair of wine coolers made for the Duke of Devonshire, a toilet service for Luton Hoo, a pair of ivory mounted vases which are in the British Museum and a punchbowl and cover in Trinity Hall, Cambridge.

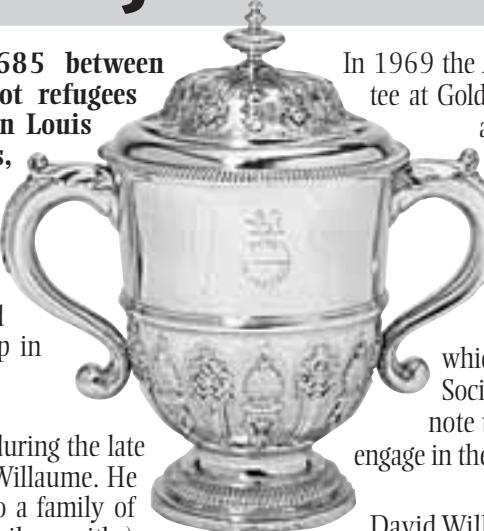
TINGRITH MANOR

David Willaume bought Tingrith Manor in 1730 from Sir Pynsent Chernock, a Tory MP who had lost his seat in 1715 and had been forced to mortgage and eventually sell the property to fund his election campaigns. David died in 1741 and was buried at St. Nicholas's Church, Tingrith. His daughter, Anne, and son, David, continued in the business. When David I died he left £105 in his will to be divided between Anne, his son-in-law David Tanqueray (a former pupil and fellow silversmith) and the poor of St. Martins-in-the-Fields. The remainder of his estate passed to his son, David.

Tingrith Manor was demolished in the late 1950s after the M1 had been built through the grounds and close to the building.

TAX EVASION

Between 1719 and 1758 a duty of 6d per ounce was levied on plate. For substantial presentation plate of considerable weight this was a large amount of money. Silversmiths went to great lengths to avoid paying this duty. One way of doing this was to remove the area stamped with the marks from a small item, such as a bowl or cream jug, and solder it into the base of a large, heavy vessel. This would then appear to be fully marked, implying that the correct duty had been paid. Since the inset marks are contemporary with the item in which they were soldered, these altered wares are quite difficult to detect.



The David Willaume Queen Anne silver cup and cover that had a false plate removed
Photo © V&A Museum

In 1969 the Antique Plate Committee at Goldsmiths' Hall had the false plate removed from a Queen Anne silver cup and cover which was on display at the V&A Museum. The committee has statutory powers to seize plate that contravenes the law, but on this occasion it allowed the cup to remain once the false plate was removed.

David Willaume was the maker of this cup, which had been presented to the Royal Archery Society by William IV as a prize. It is interesting to note that even such a prominent silversmith should engage in the dishonest practice of duty-dodging!

DAVID WILLAUME II (1693-1761)

David Willaume II was, at the age of 14, apprenticed to his father. He was promoted to the Livery of the Goldsmiths' Company in 1727 and took over the business in about 1728. In 1737 he was appointed High Sheriff of Bedfordshire and, as he became more involved in the affairs of the county, his connection with the family business decreased and his last hallmark was entered in 1739. David had been goldsmith to George II in 1744 and 1746. David Willaume II died in 1761 and was buried in Tingrith.

ANNE TANQUERAY NEE WILLAUME (1691-1733)

Anne married David Tanqueray in 1717. A workshop in St. James's, London, had been established by her husband and it is likely that she made items such as salt cellars and sauceboats bearing his mark. It's believed that David died about 1724 as that was when his name was struck through on the register and Anne's name recorded above. This is the only occurrence of this type of alteration to an entry. The usual practice was for a widow to be given a new entry in the correct chronological position in the register. She took over the business and objects produced after this time bear three marks: David's original stamp and two marks registered by Anne in 1724.

The output from the workshop was noted for its high level of excellence and in 1729 Anne was appointed Subordinate Goldsmith to George II. Anne died in 1733 and was buried in Tingrith on 25th July having continued a Huguenot legacy of excellence in silverwork during her lifetime.

Anne was the great great grandmother of Captain Charles Tanqueray Baker, who was killed in the First World War and the son of Canon Baker, the rector of Dunstable Priory Church from 1903 to 1924.

Sue Turner



A fete at Tingrith Manor in 1947



The Maid of Dunstable

In 2010 we were laying the foundations for celebrating the 800th anniversary of the dedication of Dunstable's Augustinian Priory.

I went on to the British Library website, typed in 'Dunstable' and 'Dunstaple' and printed off the results. In the early days I concentrated on items with a medieval content and made a mental note to investigate the rest later on. One such was a poem entitled the 'Maid of Dunstable', which I found in a book called 'Two-Part Songs' for female voices, with piano accompaniment. It was in the repertoire of the Dunstable Girls' Choir, and was performed in various places, including Ipswich and Luton, in the early 1960s.

The words are from a poem by Robert Bloomfield, a name familiar in this county. He was born on 3rd December 1766 into a poor family in Honington, Suffolk. He is described as a working class poet who wrote about rural life, much as John Clare did in later years. His mother ran the village school, which was the source of his elementary education. He was apprenticed as a farm labourer at 11 and later went to London to work as a shoe maker. One of his tasks there was to read to his fellow workers from various periodicals and this is how he developed his interest in poetry. His first published poem was 'The Village Girl' in 1786. He married Mary Ann Church in 1790 and had a book of poems published in 1800. These were subsequently translated into German, French, Italian and even Latin. By this time he had acquired a patron, the Duke of Grafton, and his work was admired by John Constable and Robert Southey.

In 1812 he was declared bankrupt and moved from London to Shefford. He died in poverty on 19th August 1823 and was buried at All Saints Church, Campton. The school in Shefford is named after him. The poem was set to music by Patrick Enfield in 'tempo comodo'. The book mentions Geoffrey Waters in connection with the Dunstable Girls' Choir, who was, presumably, the conductor. I would be pleased to have further details of Geoffrey and of the Choir. The second line of the poem refers to the chalk cutting at the north end of Dunstable.

*Where o'er the hills as white as snow
The channel'd road re-sounding lies
And curling from the vale below
The morning mists in columns rise
Blithe at their doors, where glanced the Sun
the busy maidens plied their trade
and Dunstable may boast of one
As fair as ever fancy made
A transient glance on her sweet face
Would bid the chaste bosom glow
But modesty's restless grace
'Tis hers to feel and hers to show.
Pure be the cup which thou mayst sip
May no false swain thy peace annoy
May prudence guard thy cherry lip
and virtue lead thy steps to joy.'* **Hugh Garrod**

Found in Translation

Much new and useful information was found when the medieval Annals of Dunstable were translated into modern English.

Richard de Morins was Prior of Dunstable from 1202 until 1242 and it was he who started the keeping of the Annals. The last entry is for the year 1297.

800TH ANNIVERSARY OF DUNSTABLE PRIORY

On Tuesday 10th August 2010, Jean Yates and I were at an awards evening. She told me about her idea of getting the Dunstable Annals translated and published. I told her about the up-coming 800th anniversary of the Dedication of our Augustinian Priory in 2013. From this, the Medieval Dunstable project was born, with the translation as one of its main features. Later, at a meeting between myself, Jean and Stephen Williams, the vicar of Harlington, he showed us a copy of the Latin text he had been using for references to his parish.

TRANSLATING THE ANNALS

On Wednesday 2nd February 2011, Jean, Stephen and I travelled down to Muswell Hill to meet David Preest, a recently retired classics master, and we discussed the practicalities of translating the Annals and the part they could play in the Medieval Dunstable project.

Stephen had met David under rather strange circumstances. Stephen had long realised that the Annals contained references to his village of Harlington and had bought the printed version of the Latin text and attempt his own translation in order to find the references. In February 2010 he attended a conference in St Albans. Being cold, he decided to take his warmest scarf with him, which was that of his Monmouth School Rowing Colours. At lunch, someone said, 'I recognise that scarf!' It turned out to be David Preest! Apparently, he had left Monmouth School a few years before Stephen. It transpired they had both been taught by the same Latin master and David had subse-

quently taken up classics as a career. Stephen informed David about his attempts to translate the Harlington references in the Annals. Whereupon, hearing that the Annals had never been translated, David volunteered to take it on as a retirement project and this was how the three of us found ourselves, one year later, on our way to Muswell Hill. Later, we met at Priory House to discuss technicalities such as how detailed the notes which accompany the text should be and having to omit illustrations for reasons of cost. We discussed who in particular would buy this book. Besides local interest, we thought that each history department of universities in the western world would want access to the information contained in the Annals.

David subsequently told me that the Annals were comparatively easy to translate, even though they were written in medieval Latin rather than classical and contained many abbreviations. Jean successfully negotiated a Heritage Lottery Fund bid to finance the Medieval Dunstable project together with a book but they queried having the Annals translated. They relented, after Jean insisted that the translations were necessary to gain the vital information for a book. As a result, 'Medieval Dunstable' was published in time for the 800th anniversary celebrations in 2013.

BOOK LAUNCH

It was also hoped to have the Annals published in time for the event, but this proved not to be possible. Jean has subsequently spent much time working on the notes. Boydell and Brewer, the publishers of David's previous work, were identified as a suitable publisher. Now five years later, after wondering many times whether it would ever see the light of day, we are able to announce a book launch which is to be held on Saturday 24th November at Priory Church.

Finally, I am really looking forward to being able to read a copy of 'our' Annals in my hands.

Hugh Garrod

Trouble at Mill



Thomas Fisher's 1820 painting of 'Old Bridge before Mr Pierson's Mill, Eaton Bray'

When I first gave a talk about the artist Thomas Fisher, it included one of his watercolour paintings which was entitled, 'Old Bridge before Mr Pierson's Mill, Eaton Bray' dated 1820.

This had previously been identified as Doolittle Mill, because records show that Henry Pearson had left a mill called Horsamill to his wife Anne in 1769. Horsamill was the original name of the mill but was changed to Doolittle Mill by the Buckmaster family who bought it soon after from Anne Pearson. As is often the way with talks, it led to a discussion about the accuracy of the location because the painting showed a mill which bore little resemblance to the Doolittle Mill of today and no bridge whatsoever exists there. Therefore, not wishing to impart erroneous information, I thought I would investigate the matter further.

MOOR END MILL

I discovered that Moor End Mill which existed in Edlesborough was a more likely prospect. According to tax records dated 1798 this mill was owned by William Beckford (whose father had been a Lord Mayor of London) with William Pearson, the son of Henry and Anne Pearson, as the tenant. In 1811, his son, Wood Pearson took over the tenancy, living there with his wife Mary and their two sons, William and Thomas, and it was he that would have been the tenant at the time that Fisher produced his painting.

As this mill burnt down in 1924, I have had to rely on the description given in the Luton News report about the fire, to ascertain it is the one in the painting. But it is highly likely that the Wood Pearson of Moor End Mill is Thomas Fisher's 'Mr Pierson'.

THE FIRE

The story of the fire itself makes fascinating reading, which I have summarised. The mill, which was owned at the time by Albert Bunker, was struck by lightning during a thunderstorm on the evening of Sunday, 18th May, 1824. Mr. Bunker's house, which was next to the mill, was only saved by prompt action on the part of the firemen.

Torrential rain which accompanied the storm caused flooding in front of the mill and Mr. Bunker tried to prevent the water from entering the mill, while his son, Lawrence, was using a fork to clear a drain to allow the water to run into the mill stream.

The worst of the storm seemed to have passed, when a flash of lightning struck the mill, wrenching the fork from Lawrence Bunker's hand, leaving him shaken, but not injured. The

report states that a number of tiles were hurled from the roof of the engine house at the base of the 50 feet high chimney stack (the chimney stack can clearly be seen in Fisher's painting). Both men entered the building to ascertain what damage had resulted, and found a large heap of empty sacks on fire in a store room on the second floor.

THE FIRE BRIGADE ARE CALLED

Realising the fire was beyond their control they called the fire brigade. The Leighton Fire Brigade received the call, but initially declined to turn out as they had no arrangements with the Edlesborough parish council. After a few minutes delay, they did receive instructions to turn out, but at Stanbridge and again at Eaton Bray the roads were flooded and the progress was irritatingly slow.

The Luton Fire Brigade were also called out but fared little better. Their fire engine made good time to Dunstable but at Church Street bridge a car had become stuck in the flood and had to be removed before they could pass (does this sound familiar?).

In the meantime, the situation at the mill had become desperate. Assisted by a breeze, the flames spread rapidly through the mill and with many tons of grain ablaze the heat was intense, while the smoke was suffocating. When the roof collapsed and the upper floor gave way, flames shot up as high as the chimney stack. When the Luton Fire Brigade arrived they were greeted with loud cheers from the crowd of villagers who had turned out to witness the scene. Water was available from the mill stream, and within minutes, three hoses were being employed.

A few minutes later the Leighton Buzzard Fire Brigade arrived and by midnight the flames were well under control so the Luton Fire Brigade was able to leave. The Leighton Buzzard Fire Brigade remained until daybreak, and throughout the whole of Monday masses of charred corn, offal and sacks continued to smoulder.

Today all that remains of the mill is a water feature, utilising the mill stream, marking the spot where the water wheel once stood. Albert Bunker's house, which stood close to the mill and narrowly avoided being destroyed by the fire, still exists.



Photograph of the bridge today, taken from a garden opposite Moor End House

What remains of the bridge that featured in Thomas Fisher's painting is now in the garden of the property opposite, though how much of it dates from that time is open to conjecture.

To read the 1924 Luton News report of the fire in full go to: <http://bedsarchives.bedford.gov.uk/CommunityArchives/EatonBray/MoorEndMillEatonBray.aspx>

David Turner

Major B S Benning

There is a memorial in the Priory's Lady Chapel to Ellen Benning, wife of Charles Crichton Stuart Benning (CCS Benning was Dunstable Town Clerk from 1892 to 1924 and Priory Church warden from 1899 until 1924).

The memorial also commemorates Brian Stuart Benning, their third son, who was killed in an aeroplane accident on March 28 1935.

His illustrious career and the tragic manner of his death is recorded in his obituary which is reproduced here together with a photograph of him.

OBITUARY

Major B. S. Benning, an engineer of the Aircraft Department of the Marconi Company, was struck by the airscrew of an aeroplane when starting the engine at Croydon Aerodrome on Thursday. He died the same night in Croydon Hospital from injuries to his left arm and side.

Brian Stuart Benning, who was 42 years of age, was the only surviving son of the late Mr. Charles Crichton Stuart Benning,



Major Brian Stuart Benning

of Dunstable. He was an experienced pilot as well as a wireless engineer, having served in the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Air Force during the War. In 1915 he was an instructor in free ballooning and kite balloons. He commanded No. 2 Kite Balloon Section at the Dardanelles and kite balloon sections attached to the Dover Patrol and the Grand Fleet. He was also well known during the War as an aeroplane pilot, being an instructor in aeroplane flying at Cranwell during 1916 and 1917. Early in 1918 he served in France with No. 57 Squadron, RAF From May, 1918, until the autumn of 1919 he commanded No. 49 Squadron in France. He joined the Marconi

Company in 1912 and played an important part in the development of wireless communications in many parts of the world, including Chile, Mexico, India and Greece. For seven years, from 1925 to 1932, he was the special representative of the company in Japan, where he was responsible for the installation of a number of broadcasting stations in the principal towns.

Hugh Garrod



Memories of old Dunstable

John Buckledee continues to assemble items of interest about Dunstable. Here is his latest selection.

A ROAD ACCIDENT IN DUNSTABLE

We have been trying very hard to discover more about a road accident in Dunstable during the Second World War in which a number of soldiers were killed or injured. It is mentioned very briefly in the book Dunstable At War but without any verifiable detail.

John Rushton remembers the event very vividly. He says that about 20 soldiers based in the old Bennett's brewery on the corner of Chiltern Road were marching in formation down High Street North towards the old drill hall which was near the corner of Tavistock Street. This was in darkness at about 10 pm and because of the war-time blackout there was, of course, no street lighting. A number seven bus, on its way from Great Northern Road to Houghton Regis, ran into the back of the troops and, says Mr Rushton, "there was carnage".

He says three soldiers were killed and many others were injured. Mr Rushton, who lived nearby in Westfield Road, came to the accident soon afterwards. He says he was warned officially, very strictly, not to talk about what he had seen. As a teenager he was serving in the Home Guard at the time, before joining the Royal Navy.

WORLD WAR CASUALTIES

David Underwood, who (with myself and June Byrne) has been searching through lists of World War casualties to provide information for the refurbishment of the war memorial in Priory Gardens, found that three soldiers from the 6th Battalion, Beds and Herts Regiment, based in Dunstable, had all been killed on the same day, January 13, 1942. They were L/Cpl Arthur George Brown, of Bedford, Private William John Busby of Birmingham, and Private Frederick Walter Pratt, of Dunstable. The 6th was not a front-line

battalion so it seemed at first that the mystery of the Dunstable accident had been solved, particularly as a hunt through the files of the Dunstable Gazette revealed a detailed report, complete with lists of mourners and wreaths, on the funeral of Pte Pratt, aged 20, of West Street, Dunstable, who had "met his death while on active service". But the Birmingham Mail's report at about the same time said that Pte Busby had been "killed by enemy action", which contradicted our theory about a road accident.

Strict censorship of newspapers was in force during the war but, nevertheless, it seemed extraordinary that no hint of a coroner's inquest could be found. We asked for help from Nigel Lutt, formerly of the county records office and an expert on our local regiment, and he undertook a search of documents held at Bedford. He discovered that the three soldiers had all died, not in Dunstable, but during an air raid on January 13 at Lowestoft, where they had been on home defence duties. A further search of available police records, looking for a Dunstable high street fatality, proved fruitless.

So, even after that huge amount of research, we are no wiser about a local accident involving a number seven bus. Do any of our members have any information?

ADMIRAL LORD NELSON IN DUNSTABLE

Nigel Hughes is member of a naval history research group looking into the stopping places used by Admiral Lord Nelson during his noted tour of England and Wales in 1802, when he was accompanied (famously and scandalously) by Emma Hamilton and her husband. Examination of accounts of bills paid for coach drivers and servants shows that they had a stop-over in Dunstable, probably at one of the town's inns.

continued overleaf

Memories of old Dunstable continued



Nigel's group aims to hold celebratory dinners at each of the hotels on Nelson's tour, and the question is: Where did they stay in Dunstable? Admiral Nelson, who had commanded the ships which destroyed the French fleet in the Battle of the Nile (1798), was greeted in 1802 by ecstatic crowds wherever he stopped, and events during the earlier weeks of his triumphal progress were reported in great detail in the newspapers. But the story was perhaps becoming rather stale by the time he reached Dunstable, and so far we can find no reports of his time here. Strange, though, that neither Dunno's Originals or the Dunstablelogia, the old histories of Dunstable which record the tiniest details of local life, don't mention such a great event. He would most likely have stopped at either the Sugar Loaf or the Red Lion, which were the inns which catered for the nobility during coaching times, but that remains a guess.

THE TOWN'S SILVER BAND

The history society was particularly pleased to reply to a website query from ex-Dunstablian Carol Sykes, whose father Reginald Williams was in the town's silver band. Her grandson in Australia is learning to play the trumpet and Carole was wondering if we had a photo of the band which she could show him. A quick look through Tony Ward's book *Strike Up The Band* revealed a picture not just of the band but also of Reginald Williams in his band uniform!

"Wow, that is amazing," said Carole.

BRICK PIERS QUERY

We were also able to provide an answer for Peter Anderson who asked our website for information about the brick piers in the fenced enclosure on the trackway above the Knolls car park in Totternhoe. Totternhoe councillor Tim Linney says that these once supported a reservoir tank provided by the water company in the late 1960s to boost the water supply to the village. Up until that time the village had suffered from low water pressure. The reservoir was filled by a water pipe from Castle Hill Road which was laid along the lane. The reservoir was taken out of commission in the 1980s after the water company relaid the water main through the village.

THE CHEZ JEROME RESTAURANT

Lina Dehoux, of the Chez Jerome restaurant in Church Street, asked us for details of the history of the building. A proper reply would require a book, but briefly (for the record) the building dates to the 16th century. At the time of the Second World War it was known as Mentmore House, and was then the home of the Harry Rixson antiques business, one of the best-remembered shops in the town. Mr Rixson also owned an antiques store further up the road in the town's old drill hall, which later became the Book Castle shop and is now Leveloff Foods, the Romanian grocery store. Mr Rixson's brother, William, also owned another antiques shop in High Street South, roughly where Cash Convertors is now. Harry Rixson was captured by the Germans during the war and his adventures have been recorded in an earlier edition of this newsletter.

His shop in Church Street had been owned by the Rixson family at least as far back as 1906. It was one of a number on that side of the road which was earmarked for redevelopment in the 1970s. There was a considerable local campaign to save the building and the Environment Secretary in 1979 refused to allow the building to be pulled down.

The campaign to save the building led to the formation of the Dunstable Museum Trust which in turn has led to the Dunstable and District Local History Society.

After the success of the campaign to save the building, it was renovated and converted into an Italian restaurant called Il Millefiori.

BROOKLYN VILLA

With all the society's newsletters available to read on our website, even articles written years ago are prompting interest.

Ms C. O'Connell, of Hutton, near Brentwood, traced a photo of her old family home in our newsletter of February 2008. She recognised it as Ivydene House, in Bedford Road, Houghton Regis (opposite the church). We were wrongly informed that it had been demolished in 1973 but it still stands!

The house which we said had disappeared was next door, opposite the old vicarage, separated from its neighbour by a large grassed plot. It was called 'Brooklyn' or 'Brooklyn Vill'. Ms O'Connell remembers that it was set high up and back from the road, with a brick wall and steps leading up to the front door, with a large arch to the left, big enough for a carriage to enter. There was a cobbler's workshop and outbuildings situated there. The site is now used for old people's accommodation.



Ivydene House, Bedford Road, Houghton Regis

THE DUNSTABLE HUNT

History society member John Hockey came across a reference to the Dunstable Hunt when researching with his heraldry group in Woburn Abbey.

In the abbey's Breakfast Room is a portrait by Joshua Reynolds of the 4th Duke of Bedford's son, the Marquess of Tavistock, wearing the habit of the Dunstable Hunt – a white coat, blue-cuffed, with a blue waistcoat. The Marquess had apparently founded the Hunt, which ceased after his death (in a hunting accident at Houghton Park) in 1767.

Not very much more has been discovered about the local activities of the Hunt, but there is a very intriguing reference to it at Leighton Buzzard, where a clock at All Saints Church once played a tune called The Dunstable Hunt to mark the passing hour.

THE CHIMES AT LEIGHTON BUZZARD CHURCH

In December 1898, when the clock chimes were being repaired, the Leighton Buzzard Observer mentioned that they dated back nearly 100 years and they were possibly made by a local man, Mr William Drage. They had been repaired in 1851 when the church had been struck by lightning. This prompted a letter saying that when the chimes were done up, one of the tunes supposed to be on the old chimes barrel was called "The Dunstable Hunt" but no-one could be found who knew the music. There was a puzzle about how the makers could have got hold of what was evidently a local tune, but the story about Mr Drage's local connection was suggested as an explanation.

We've been in touch with Leighton Buzzard Archaeological and Historical Society and with the church historian but so far no other references have been traced. The church was badly damaged by a fire in 1985.

John Buckledee