

The Discoverer

Downham Market & District Heritage Society Reg. Charity No. 1154267



(Photo from our archive, of Bridge Street taken over a century ago)



Contents

1.....	Editorial
2.....	Noticeboard
3.....	2021 Downham Calendars
4-5.....	Heritage Centre Update
6-7.....	Early memories of Downham
8-9.....	D is for Downham's Horticulture
10-11.....	Where we grew up
12-13.....	Water
14.....	Amazon Smile/Easy Fundraising

1.



Editorial

Welcome to the Autumn edition of the newsletter!

As you may be aware, it was decided to take the unfortunate step of keeping the centre closed to visitors and hirers, until at least January. The press release regarding this is included in this edition.

On a positive note, small groups of volunteers have started to return to the centre. They are working hard behind the scenes to catch up on jobs, to ensure the centre will be ready to welcome you all back once it reopens.

We recently asked for memories of life in Downham for our archive and have already received some lovely submissions, you can read excerpts of those submissions in this edition. They will also form part of a display in an exhibition of memories we are planning when we are able to re-open.

Our A-Z has reached 'D', where you can find out more about Downham's status as 'a centre of horticultural excellence in the nineteenth century'

We are busy planning future fundraising events for the centre, of which we will have more news soon. As part of our fundraising drive, 2021 calendars are available, which will make ideal gifts! Information on the calendars and how to purchase them are on page 3. On page 14 is a reminder that when you buy items online, you can choose to ensure a donation is made to DMDHS if you wish to do so.

As always, please do let us know if you have any feedback about this newsletter, or any ideas about what you would like to see in future editions.

Maria

Noticeboard

Annual General Meeting

This year's AGM will be on Wednesday 12th November, via Zoom. We are exploring the possibility of opening up the centre, so those who do not have zoom can watch it. This will of course depend on COVID restrictions and we will be monitoring the situation carefully.

In view of this, we will be contacting everyone a month before to ask who would like a zoom invitation and, if it's possible, who would like to attend at the centre.

Membership Secretary Vacancy/Deputy Treasurer Vacancy

Our Membership Secretary, Dave Flower, will be stepping down from the role at the AGM.

We are also looking for a deputy Treasurer, to work with our current Treasurer, Gerry Ryan.

If you are interested in taking on either of the above, or would like to find out more, please email us at info@discoverdownham.org.uk

Recipe Book submissions

Dave and Jess Flower are still looking for your favourite old recipes for their recipe book. If you have any you would like to submit, please email them directly to Dave at dandjflower35@gmail.com

Reminiscences Required

Don't forget to send us your memories of Downham and surrounding areas for our archives, we would love to hear from you. We are planning to hold an exhibition of memories, once we are able to re-open. Please email your submissions to info@discoverdownham.org.uk



Discover Downham 2021 FUNDRAISING CALENDAR



Support Downham Market Heritage Centre

- Buy now for Christmas
- Choice of 2 calendars
- Personalised message can be included if required
- We post for you

Only £6

including postage to any
UK address

Order online

www.discoverdownham.org.uk
or call 01366 384428



Discover Downham

The Old Fire Station, Priory Rd, Downham Market, PE38 9JS
Charity no. 1154267

4.

Heritage Centre Update

Due to the ongoing uncertain situation, it was decided not to re-open the centre to visitors or hirers until January. Below is information from the press release outlining the situation.

The Trustees of Discover Downham Heritage Centre have very reluctantly decided that it will not be open to Visitors, or for Room Hire, until January 2021 at the earliest.

It is all the more disappointing as since opening 3 years ago, the wonderful team of Volunteers have worked very hard, holding successful fund raisers and building up Room Hires to make sure the centre could be self-supporting in the future.

However as most of the volunteers are over 60 and many in their 70s & 80s, the Trustees felt they had to take a cautious approach. This coupled with the fact that, with low footfall, the income would be exceeded by the additional costs incurred and the Centre can ill afford to lose more money.

Having consulted with the Hirers, the Trustees have been very heartened by their complimentary remarks about the Centre and the warm welcome received from the Volunteers. It is very much hoped that when the building is able to re-open they will once again book with us...and indeed others will also wish to look at the Centre as a possible venue.

Work is going on in the background, responding to emails and producing the 3-monthly newsletter. A small 'bubble' of Volunteers have returned in a Working Party to continue accessioning and work on displays. Research can still be undertaken for a small fee.

At the same time Discover Downham is still collecting and archiving local people's memories and experiences of life in Downham and the surrounding villages of Clackclose Hundred and Downham Rural District Council area.

There have been some wonderful memories so far and once the Centre has re-opened, a new exhibition featuring some of the memories will be displayed and combined with archived photographs and artefacts already

5.

stored in the Centre. So please get in touch with the Centre if you have memories you would like to share.

The finished work can either be emailed to info@discoverdownham.org.uk or posted/delivered to us at Discover Downham, 28-30 Priory Road, Downham Market, PE38 9JS

Here is a photo of our lovely Tuesday morning volunteers undertaking important work behind the scenes. A second small group of volunteers will shortly be returning on Tuesday afternoons. Both groups are catching up with important jobs to ensure the centre is ready for visitors when the centre re-opens.



6.

Early Memories of Downham – Sandra Harris



I was born in November 1945 in a cottage off Railway Road, but moved as a baby to a flat in Stoke Ferry Hall, then as a toddler to Stone Cross Estate, which was emergency post war council housing in the Nissen huts of the war time airfield.

Memories before five are patchy but a few things are quite vivid. People always ask small children to draw their house so, of course, mine always had a round roof not a triangular one.

They were good solid houses, but my mother didn't appreciate the problem of the tarred roof melting in the heat and transferring to her children's clothes and shoes.

It was surrounded by a wire fence that my brother and I used to escape from, once on my part to join the Salvation Army band, because it was "a very funny wireless".

A modern 5-year old would not be allowed to do what I did, and would probably be taken into care now. A gang of small children would roam all over the airfield, armed with sticks to poke dead rats full of maggots. I sometimes pushed my baby brother in his pram, though not too far.

One of the huts, some distance from ours, was a shop, and I used to go on errands there. One time I bought a lovely crusty loaf, and on the way home picked at the crust and ate it. My mother asked what on earth had happened and whether they had sold it like that. I said yes, and probably rats had chewed it. My mother went steaming down to the shop, and when she returned with the truth, I was sent to my room for a long time. In those days, children were either Good or Bad, and I knew then I was Very Bad.

The threshold for Bad was quite low. I remember trying to climb one of the old yew trees in the school playground (not very competently I imagine), and being ordered down and told I was Bad, especially as my father was on the Council.

I went on my own on the school bus, rather nervous and jostled, but that's what you did. In school, in the infants, I remember so clearly the morning ritual of getting out your handkerchief and waving it to show you had one.

7.

Public humiliation if you hadn't! In fact, in those not very child-centred days, life was constant dodging of humiliation. I was not very keen on queuing up for toilet paper from the teacher and estimating how many sheets you needed.

Real pleasures from early primary school were learning to read and Nature Study with Mr Sewell. I can smell those linen covered readers with shiny pages and a diphthong heading each chapter: ai, au, ou. There was the feeling you were on the threshold of a wonderful new world of stories and adventures that you could enter at will.

Wandering round the lanes and fields round the school, unbuilt on then, picking up leaves and creatures was really enjoyable, especially as the creatures could be relied on to escape and create diversions in the classroom.

Sometimes the cry would go up, "We're going to have a FILUM!" Off we would file to the "cinema" to sit on benches in front of the projector screen. The film was always David Livingstone's missionary travels through Africa. A treat that would not impress my grandchildren I think.

Living standards were frugal for ordinary people - a roast chicken at Christmas a special treat. My father liked to buy and cook a pig's head, telling the butcher, he said, to leave the eyes in "to see us through the week". My mother cooked Pig in a Blanket, which I think was a Norfolk speciality, consisting of a rectangle of suet pastry sprinkled with small bits of bacon and onions, then rolled up and steamed.



8.

D is for...Downham's Horticultural History



Downham was once renowned for the excellence of its private gardens - perhaps a consequence of all the successful nurseries. The following piece formed part of an exhibition previously held at the centre.

Downham Market has been described as “a centre of horticultural excellence in the nineteenth century”

It was home to the American Nursery owned by a leading horticulturist, James Bird. The town was noted for the relatively high number of large well-planted private pleasure grounds and gardens with an increasing number of ornamental public open spaces. Sadly, the late twentieth century saw the destruction of most of them.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the gardens of the town were supplied by Thomas Lancaster (florist), John Balding (gardener), Zacariah Stebbing (nurseryman) and Joseph Harrison (nurseryman) They were followed, in the second half of the century, by the renowned James Bird.

Joseph Harrison's nursery occupied land in Lynn Road, opposite the present day War Memorial Playing Field. Harrison was a well-known figure in the world of Horticulture and editor of the specialist magazine “*The Floricultural Cabinet*” (See photo at the top of this article, taken from our archive)

Zacariah Stebbing established his nursery on six acres of ground at the end of Snape Lane. James Bird took over Stebbing's well established nursery sometime in the 1860's and acquired an additional six acres lying between the original nursery and the railway line, opened 20 years earlier.

9.

In the 1870s James Bird's American Nurseries was advertised as unsurpassed in the Eastern Counties, and easily reached by rail from London. Stock could be sent to any point of the Kingdom from the railway halt and loading platform constructed specifically for the nursery.

By this time James Bird was recognised as a foremost expert on trees. He advised on the planting of Wymondham Cemetery when the burial board experienced problems. King's Lynn Council called on him to produce a comprehensive report on the problems of the Walks Avenues. By 1887 a further 17 acres of land were added between Short Drove and Cock Drove.

Although in 1902 the name of the business changed to Bird and Vallance, the American Nurseries continued to be a local showpiece into the twentieth century.

However, by 1922 the firm was listed as seed growers only, and there was no reference to it all in the business directories of 1929, although it is still marked as the American Nurseries on the ordnance survey map of 1958-59.

No photographs have been found of these renowned gardens or their creator James Bird. If you know of any which could be copied for Downham's Archive, please contact the Heritage Society.

Below is a list of the lost gardens on Downham Market

Crow Hall – Crow Hall Estate, Denver Hill

White House – Sixth Form Centre

The Rectory – Tesco

The Union Workhouse – High Haven & Court Gardens

Dr. Wales House – Wales Court & Iceland car park

Clackclose House – Clackclose Estate

The Retreat – Retreat Estate and Civray Avenue

The Firs – The Firs Housing Estate

10.

Where we grew up - Selwyn and Patrick Richardson



What luck: - we grew up on a farm. This was down in The Fens, in Stow Bridge, two and a half miles in a straight line north west of the clock in the centre of Downham Market.

It was named Hill Farm because the OS map shows it at 2m above mean sea level whereas the surrounding land is between -1 and -2m below mean sea level.

The single straight road is typical of Fenland villages. It runs through the village along the top of a roddon which is the dried-up bed of a former Fenland river. The parish of Stow Bardolph was drained in the second half of the 17th century and as the peat surface fell on de-watering and oxidation the silty bed of the river dried up and remained in place, leaving the ridge of high ground on which the main buildings in the village, including Hill Farm, are located.

Because of the serious risk of inundation by the sea, the surrounding high quality agricultural land is kept very efficiently drained to a low level by the Crabb's Abbey Pumping Station at Magdalen and the Common Lode Drain Pumping Station at Stow Bridge, both with enormously powerful pumping capacity into the river Great Ouse.

The large farmhouse, which had three flights of stairs, and the associated, extensive, neatly designed complex of farm buildings were built in 1847 as one of the satellite farms for the Lord of the Manor. There was stabling for a large number of heavy farm horses.

However, in 1903 it was ruled that county councils should purchase land to let as smallholdings to try to stem the exodus from the countryside and in 1904 Norfolk CC made its first purchase of 91 acres at Nordelph. In 1919 Hill farm was compulsorily purchased from Sir Thomas Hare of the Stow Estate and the buildings and land were divided up among six main tenants.

Father had originally been a lorry driver but after military service he successfully obtained a Norfolk County Council smallholding and we moved into Hill Farm in October 1949. Our family of seven; mother (Ivy, nee Turner), father (Leslie), Colin, Peter, Michael, Selwyn and Patrick, had the front part of the farmhouse with the biggest rooms.

11.

This part also had the entrance drive sweeping up to the large, heavy front door with its beautifully decorated leaded glass and which opened into the hall and the main flight of wide stairs. These stairs lead up to four bedrooms, although the smallest had been converted to a bathroom by our time, with the two at the front of the house being enormous in our eyes.

A family of six occupied the rear which included two flights of stairs and the servants' quarters. There was plenty of room for thirteen to live comfortably in the original house. Our part included the pantry with rows of shelves which was down several steps in the middle of the house and always cool inside. There was no refrigerator of course but this is where the meat safe was kept, which had hundreds of tiny holes in the door to allow cool air in and to keep flies out.

The servants' stairs also joined on to the roof space of the eastern range of the farm buildings and that is where the mice came into the house. We often heard then squeaking and scuttling around between floor boards, or up in the roof. During winter months if we set a trap with a piece of bread or cheese on the floor in the cupboard where we kept our clothes, we could catch a mouse on most nights.

Because there were seven of us and with four doing a lot of hard, physical work, we needed a large table to eat our very substantial meals from. It was made of thick oak planks, wide and heavy, and could be extended with more thick planks so we could play table tennis on it.

Outside, adjoining the rear of the house, was an orchard which would have been the site of the original orchard supplying the farmhouse and all who lived and worked there. In total there were about fourteen large apple trees, mostly of different varieties, but by our time it was fenced down the middle, split between us and the family next door.



(with information extracted from the book 'Fenland Memories' by Arthur Randell)

Here I am on Saturday the 15th of August 2020 having to stay indoors as this is the first time for many days that we have had rain, just a sprinkling really but it just spurred me on to write this article

For many years up to the 1960's Downham Market was blessed with a water pump in what was then known as the 'Market Place'. This provided a supply of clean clear pure water to the population of the time. Some households were lucky and had their own wells, but they were limited and closely protected. Many of the local villages around the town were not so lucky.

In the village of Tottenhill there used to be many springs rising from the gravelly soil, it was always icy cold and crystal clear and even in prolonged long periods of drought it never ceased to run.

There used to be a man living there who had a cart bearing a large metal tank which he filled with the spring water, he would visit villages in the area that didn't have a regular water supply. This clear, clean water was sold at a halfpenny for a small pail or a penny for a large bucket full. This water was only used as drinking water.

One such village was Magdalen, which is about three miles from Tottenhiill and did not get piped water until 1927. Before this the village was dependent on water from the Great Ouse river, although some houses did have cisterns in which they stored rainwater from the roof downpipes.

In times of drought they also had to use the river water, which they first tested to see if it was palatable. They would then fill barrels, buckets and baths. This would then be filtered through charcoal to remove any silt or reduce the salt content from the water that came in from the Wash. River water was generally good enough to use for washing.

The water seller used to visit Magdalen twice a day and his arrival was always eagerly awaited. When the water was piped to the village gangs of men would be digging trenches for the pipes and the children would have been jumping over them until being scolded by their parents for doing so.

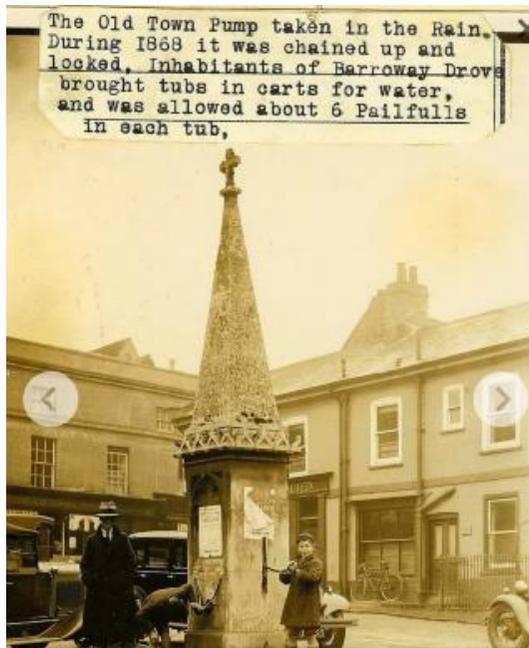
In the early days after the pipes were laid there were water bursts about once a week leaving wet muddy patches on the road these became soft and anyone

13.

walking over them would find their feet sinking in up to the ankles. Unfortunately, the springs in Tottenhill are no more due to the gravel extraction taking place in the area around the village which has seriously affected the water table. How lucky we are today with fresh clean clear water on tap in our homes.

To get drinking water for the cattle they would dig holes in the bed of the dykes and using a tool called a *jet*, (a bowl shaped scoop on a 12 foot handle) they would dip it into the water collected which would have been black and thick with silt as well as very smelly. For all of this though the cattle would drink it without any hesitation. This mucky water was also given to the other livestock with no apparent ill effects.

Now we think nothing of turning on a tap and getting fresh, clean pure water in our homes. Thank goodness we no longer have to go to the river to collect our washing water or wait for the 'water man' to appear with his cart!!



(photo of water pump from our archive)

Amazon Smile

If you would like to purchase items online and ensure a donation is made to Discover Downham, please consider these two websites.



Amazon Smile is operated by Amazon and contains the same products you'll find on the main site, but with the bonus of being able to donate 0.5% of the purchase price to charity. Look for 'Downham Market & District Heritage Society' on the list of charities.

Android phone users can add the Amazon smile app, log on and follow the instructions, however this option is not currently available to iOS users. If you are using a PC/Laptop, log on to www.smile.amazon.co.uk and click on the 'get started' button.

Easy Fundraising

Another way to shop and donate at the same time is by using Easy Fundraising, which is linked to a network of retailers.

To purchase an item and donate, log on to the website/download the app, then choose your charity, and find the retailer you want to purchase from.

Once you've purchased through your retailer of choice, a donation will go to the charity of your choice on their list. 'Downham Market and District Heritage Society' is one of their listed charities.

We are very grateful for any donations generated.