

Early History

Contributed by Administrator
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A brief summary of Thames Ditton's early history.

"In Kingston Hundred, Wadard holds Thames Ditton from the Bishop. Leogfar held it from Harald... and when he died he divided this land between three sons before 1066". These words in the Domesday Book are probably the first written record of Thames Ditton, then only a tiny settlement nestling by the River Thames, with "6 hides, land for 2 ploughs, 4 smallholders and 4 slaves". The Normans after the Conquest gave the land to the monks of Merton Priory, who planned to build a church and in 1179 one William became the first recorded Vicar.

Life in the Middle Ages revolved around the church and the village remained isolated and cut off from the politics and intrigue of the court down the river at Whitehall. The coming of the Tudors brought great changes, when Hampton Court Palace was built by Wolsey and then taken by Henry VIII. The country prospered and with it the village. Erasmus Forde, a wealthy wool merchant, came to live here and described himself "of Ditton upon Tamys, gent". He was buried in the Lady Chapel and left a splendid monument showing his wife and their 18 offspring. Important officials from the Palace lived here across the river from the bustle of the Court, and the church flourished, with 6 bells being installed in 1552 and the Doom pictures being painted in 1570. In the following centuries houses were built for the nobility and other famous people. Colonel Godolphin, who was Father of the House of Commons when he died in 1732, had bought the Forde estate and Henry Bridges became Lord of the Manor of Imber and left money in his will in 1720, for the building of the almshouses in Station Road.

In 1784 Mrs. Charlotte Boyle Walsingham bought Fordes Farm, but didn't like the building and so pulled it down and built the present-day Boyle Farm. Hampton Court Bridge had been built by then and her daughter Charlotte Boyle wrote "this made it so much easier for my dear friend Horace Walpole to come over and visit me". Other famous visitors attracted to the beauty of Thames Ditton were Thomas Gray, Charles Lamb and Thomas Macaulay, who completed his History of England while living at Ditton Marsh.

Churchyards are the key to much of local history and no tomb is more exotic than that of La Belle Pamela, supposedly the daughter of Louis XIV's cousin the Duc d'Orleans and wife to Lord Edward Fitzgerald, an ardent supporter of both the French Revolution and the Irish revolutionaries. He was betrayed in Ireland, captured and died of his wounds. Exiled to France. Lady Pamela died in Montmartre and her body was brought by admirers to be buried in Thames Ditton, where her brother-in-law. Lord Henry Fitzgerald, lived in Boyle Farm.

While great men lived and visited here, the poor, as always, found life hard. The district suffered from highwaymen, prompting in the 1790's an early version of a protest march to the Harrow to demand that a police force be formed- no bobbies on the beat. then as now!

The history of Thames Ditton is full of characters, such as William Scott and Peter Pratt who hit the headlines of the day in 1784 when they were caught body snatching in the churchyard. This was not so unusual in those days when bodies were in great demand for medical dissection, but what was perhaps exceptional was that the two men were using their inside knowledge, since they were both Churchwardens of St Nicholas!

The Rev. George Harvest has his place in history as the vicar whose absentmindedness became legendary. Not once but twice he forgot to turn up for his own wedding, including to the daughter of the Bishop of London, which obviously didn't do much for his career since he remained in Thames Ditton for 40 years. What he lost in preferment he gained in the high opinion of his parishioners, when they recorded on his tomb the "regard and affection which they retain for the memory of their late pastor."

Another local worthy was the splendidly named Hannibal Speer, Lord of the Manor of Weston, who was a great benefactor at the end of the 19th century, responsible for the founding of the old village hall and cottage hospital, granting a 100 year lease for the Tennis Club and of course remembered in the naming of Speer Road. A plaque with his name can be seen in the vestibule of the Vera Fletcher Hall.

The 19th century saw the building of the school, in Church Walk by the Anglican National Society (now converted into cottages). The school records are still extant and give a vivid picture of life in the mid 19th century. The villagers were poor and death and illness were frequent visitors - "School closed till next Monday, the Rev. E.H.Rogers thinking it advisable on account of so many being ill today". "Heard of the death of Mary Welch, who was at school last week and only ill 5 days. Scarlet fever".

In 1849 an event occurred which was to transform life in the village - the arrival of the railway (originally horse-drawn from Surbiton). New houses were built, and the old closed life of the village, based on a hierarchical society, was changing forever. The old aristocracy remained, such as Lord St. Leonards, Lord Chancellor of England, in his house in Boyle Farm, but industry in the Bronze Factory and easy access to London, brought new people and new developments.

Marie Lloyd sang at the Albany Music Hall down by the river, George Bernard Shaw took delivery of his new AC car, Thames Ditton boats helped at Dunkirk and the Milk Marketing Board was built- and then pulled down to make room for yet more houses.

Since the War, Thames Ditton has been increasingly under threat from developers, with every piece of land and every back garden open to speculative building. By and large, the line has been held fairly successfully, thanks to the vigilance of local councillors and the willingness to fight appeals. Positive developments have been the restoration of the old village hall and its transformation into the Vera Fletcher Hall. with its state of the art lighting, modern facilities and its programme of plays, opera, musicals, childrens? performances and its use as a community and Age Concern centre. We lost our cottage hospital but eventually gained a new NHS wing in the Emberbrook Health Centre on Giggs Hill Green. We have kept our attractive old pubs- even if some of them have changed their names to new silly and trendy ones. We even have our own Web-site, where we can find out what is happening in the village and vote on whether we like our nice new road humps.

The story of Thames Ditton has been inextricably linked with the church and the river. While both remain much as they were, much else has changed but a walk round the village will soon show our roots in the past, with the tiny Tudor clapboard cottages, splendid Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian houses, narrow paths and the views across the river to Hampton Court Home Park. There has always been a sense of community in the village, built on our history, and let us hope that this remains in the 21st century as in the past 1000 years.

John Lyon

1769 reads to 6/6/2006