

The story of Dohill Park

Who said there are no ghosts? Well believe me when I say its maybe not so true. When I am out walking on our nature reserve I can often sence a weird presence, almost everywhere. In my mind's ear I hear the clanking on the cold stone floor of John de Praeres in his new suit of armour strutting his stuff, showing off to his covey of giggling housemaids. From another era I perceive the figure of a Scrooge-like tax collector, the wisened old man Horton, hunched over his big black ledger, as a rag-tag huddle of hired hands dig out a deep moat encircling his now substantial property, in the vain hope of protecting him from the angry gathering hordes. Over there, who's that? It must be Sir William Forester supervising the hiding of a rather large amount of gunpowder in the flower beds somewhere behind the great hall, a moment before the King's men arrive to take him to the Tower. Then there's the great unwashed of Wellington scattered along the banks of Tee Lake, like a drift of snowdrops, laughing and chattering in the sunshine as they watch the antics of the earnest boatmen down on the shimmering lake. A small herd of fallow deer runs skittishly across Spa meadow, spooked by an approaching fox as the barn owl sits patiently watching history play out, from his high perch in the Scots pine. The whole place is simply buzzing with ghosts from the near and distant past.



Having said that there is a ghastly ghost story connected to the Park. It goes like this. On the 13th of January 1870 a Thomas Bladen decided to go skating on Dohill Pool. Tragically the ice was too thin and he slipped through it into the freezing water below and subsequently drowned. His mother was completely bereft and never fully recovered from the accident and she wore her widows' weeds for the rest of her life. After her

death there were a number of credible reports made by some of the local folk of seeing the old lady wandering through the trees that skirt the pool, still in her weeds and calling out across the waters for her long lost son.

So what is the story of Dothill Park?

"We have seen Hemming de Dotrel attesting a Deed of Simon fitz Simon, Lord of Wellington, between 1178 and 1189."

Although included in the Domesday Book as an Anglo-Saxon settlement, the first indication that the building at Dothill had acquired some sort of manorial status was in 1248 when a local land owner, John de Praeres, took up residence there. John was enfeoffed one 'carucate' of land at Dothill by Giles of Erdington, Lord of Wellington, for his pledged services as a knight of the realm (a field of domain). Now a carucate is an interesting concept of land measurement, it was an area of land that one plough team of 8 oxen could till in a single season, which turns out to be about 120 acres. Coincidentally that is about the size of the nature reserve today.

To put this in an historical context, we are now living in feudal Britain, King John had been frogmarched to Runnymede and forced into signing the Magna Carta by his Barons. In another part of the world a certain Genghis Khan is turning Asia into a bloodbath; he has just about reached the border of Turkey and the Black Death waits patiently behind the door. The area immediately surrounding Dothill Park is extensively arable farmland and is dominated by three large estates, one ecclesiastical, at Lilleshall, and two royal estates - one at Wellington and the other at Wrockwardine.

Dothill is one of the five berwicks, probably boroughs in today's parlance, of the Wellington royal estate. Wellington has recently been granted its market town status and there are just 130 households in the entire estate. In 13th century England 90% of the population are working on the land. Working dawn till dusk they can just about eke out a subsistence living on their small strip of land only to then 'owe service' in the Lord's fields. Their daily diet is bread and potage, a thick stew of grains and vegetables with the occasional bit of bacon thrown in, but theirs is a far healthier diet than that of the gentry, theirs is exclusively meats. If you can avoid the terrible diseases prevalent at this time, you can probably live into your thirties, but if you're lucky you can be out of it a lot sooner. A quote from a different era but I think is apt:



Four o'clock on a hunting morning usually found Squire Forester preparing the inner man with a breakfast of underdone beef, with eggs beaten up in brandy; and thus fortified he was ready for a fifty mile run.

Following the de Praeres the next owners of the Park were the Hortons. Near the end of the 13th century Isabel, daughter and heir of John, son of John de Praeres married a Philip Horton. Now in the possession of the Hortons, Dothill is passed down the family from Philip to John Horton and it is documented that he was residing at Dothill in 1383. In 1381 John of Gaunt had introduced a 'poll tax' - a head tax levied as a fixed sum on every liable individual, without reference to income or resource. This proved to be an extremely unpopular tax throughout the land and widespread discontent eventually led to the rise of Wat Tyler and the Peasants' Revolt. Incidentally it still proved very unpopular some 600 years later when the 'iron lady', Margaret Thatcher, tried to pull off the same old sneaky trick.

With the Hortons being a local family, unpopular tax collectors at that time, it can be safely assumed that John Horton would most likely have been the man to have had the moat installed around his house. Moats were very much a fashion item for the aristocracy during medieval times but in the case of Dothill Park it probably had more than a symbolic purpose. The moat was slowly filled in over the succeeding years to create space for new building extensions; at one stage it was even incorporated as a garden feature. More filling in was then carried out a few years later and today the only surviving section of moat is the small pond just south of the children's play area at the bottom of Severn Drive. The spring that fed the moat is still running and occasionally manages to soak the path that runs up the west side of Charlton Pool. The ownership of the house then passed from John to his son Richard and so did the role of tax collecting. When Richard's daughter and heir Alice married a William Steventon, possession of the property passed neatly from one dynasty to the next.



The 300 acre estate at the time of the Steventons

It is difficult to say much about the Steventons because there is very little information about them on public record, in particular about the source of their wealth. What is known is that they originated from the Weald Moors where they were said to be landowners and they were subsequently described as a 'middling' family. At that time the Weald Moors were called Wyldemore and were substantially undrained marshland with a few 'islands' of habitation. It was part of a Royal forest called Vasta Regalis. What else is known is that they were in possession of Dothill Park between 1431 and 1659, it being passed down from generation to generation in the following sequence. Anybody with a short attention span should probably skip the next section.

WILLIAM STEVENTON (I) Son of Walter Steventon (II) married Alice Horton in 1431. William and Alice had one son.

WILLIAM STEVENTON (II) Inherited Dothill Park in 1473. He married four times, but only had children with his fourth wife Margaret. They had two daughters and one son.

RICHARD STEVENTON (I) Inherited Dothill in 1507. He married Eleanor Dodd. They had one son.

JOHN STEVENTON (I) Married Margery Bridgeman. They had four sons and a daughter.

RICHARD STEVENTON (II) Eldest son of John and Margery, inherited Dothill in 1560.

WILLIAM STEVENTON (III) Inherited Dothill and substantially rebuilt the house in 1626. He died in 1647 leaving the Park to his grandson.

RICHARD STEVENTON (III) Born in 1637, died in 1659 leaving the house to his mother Mary Forester.

After William Steventon had finished his toils what did the house look like? Well, if you stand beside the remains of the dovecote today and look west, this is what you would have seen. To your left was the south wing. This was a long low two-storey building of hand-made bricks that housed the servants; a house of this standing would probably have employed forty to fifty people to work in the house and grounds in those times. Directly in front of you stand three large bays fronted by an imposing two-storey entrance porch. To your right the north wing is represented by a large east-facing oriel, this is a multi-faceted bay window fronting the great hall, which at some stage had been open-roofed. Above it now is the solar room, a place where the immediate family would gather. On the gable end of the south wing is a large stone plaque with WS 1628 engraved on it.



An impression of Dothill Park taken from an estate map of 1626

The transition from Steventon to Forester is a little more convoluted than the previous transfer. Mary, the daughter of Sir Richard Newport, married John Steventon, the son of William Steventon, in 1635. Their son Richard was born in 1637 and John, her husband, died two years later. Meanwhile William Steventon was still head of the household. William eventually died in 1647, leaving his estate to his grandson Richard. Mary then married a Francis Forester, who moved from Watling Street to Dothill in 1649. Mary and Francis had a number of children, one of whom was William, later to become Sir William. At just 22 years of age Richard died, leaving his entire estate to his mother Mary Forester and his step-brother William Forester.

The Foresters were a powerful local family, they were hereditary foresters of the portion of the forest that included the Wrekin or Mount St Gilbert as the Normans had called it, named after a hermit who lived on it. The existence of the hermit is proven by the fact that Henry III, by his patent of September 17th 1267, granted to:

Nicolas de Denton Hermite of Mount Gilbert, six quarters of corn; to be paid him by the Sheriff of Shropshire to give the Hermite greater leisure for holy exercises, and support him during his life, as long as he shall be a Hermite on the aforesaid mountain.

This portion of the forest, a forest that at some time extended to 120 square miles, but by 1300 had been greatly reduced, was known as Wellington Hay, a name that is perpetuated to this day in the names Haygate and Haybridge. The estate had descended in the Forester male line probably since William the Conqueror, but the first direct ancestor to be recorded was a Hugh Forester who lived in the time of Henry II and died in 1200. It was under the Foresters' guardianship that the Park flourished into its pre-eminence, possibly becoming one of the finest country manors in the Midlands.

An impressive house, a prosperous farm, a number of ornamental pools, 7 ha of manicured gardens with walks and an elaborate arbour and a deer park to boot.

In its long history, Dothill Park has seen more than its share of colourful characters but by far the most interesting were Sir William Forester (II) (1655-1718) and his son William Forester (III) (1690-1758). As far back as reliable history goes the park had been passed from family to family through marriage from the de Praeres to the Hortons, to the Steventons until it came into the possession of Sir William Forester in 1675. This was the beginning of the glory years for Dothill Park.

Sir William represented the constituency of Much Wenlock as a Whig for many years. To make some sense of his actions over the succeeding years we need to understand the political dynamic in operation during that period; it was a period dominated by the Exclusion Crisis. King Charles II of England, Scotland and Wales was on the throne and had no legitimate heirs. The King's brother, heir presumptive James Duke of York, had become a Roman Catholic and refused to take the oath prescribed by the 'Test Act'. The political powers were now split; those called the 'Country Party', which eventually became the Whigs, wished to exclude Catholics from inheriting the throne while the Tories were opposed to the exclusion. The Earl of Shaftesbury introduced the Exclusion Bill in the House of Commons on 15th May 1679. A fringe group that included Sir William began to support the claim to the throne of Charles' illegitimate son the Duke of Monmouth. When it seemed likely that the bill would pass through the House of Commons, Charles exercised his royal prerogative and dissolved Parliament. On 26th June 1680 Sir William joined Shaftesbury in presenting the Duke of York as a Papist to the Middlesex grand jury.

One long-lasting result we all benefit from the Exclusion Crisis was the codification of the writ of Habeas Corpus. Concerned that the King might move against them, the Whigs passed an act that ensured that no man could be incarcerated without receiving his day in court. Unblemished for centuries, that was until the British Government locked up suspected members of the IRA in the Maze prison and the American Government went on to create Guantanamo Bay.

Politics in those days was a much more serious business than it is today and William relished the rough and tumble of parliament life. You did not just run a dirty tricks campaign against your political opponents and blacken their names in those years, you took up arms against them and, if necessary, killed them. At one stage of his political career, after various accusations were made in the House of Commons, Sir William challenged and fought a duel with fellow MP Colonel Beaumont, who subsequently disarmed Forester. In a similar vein the Whigs were not about to sit on their hands while the power in the land slipped into the grasping hands of a Catholic monarchy directly under the influence of the Pope, thus the Rye House plot was hatched.

In 1683 a group of anti-papist, republican Whigs plotted to ambush and kill Charles and James on their way back from Newmarket horse races at a place called Rye House, which was owned by one of the plotters. Due to a fire the timing backfired and the plot was foiled. Some of the conspirators escaped to Holland but some of them were rounded up, confessions tortured out of them and then they were put to death. The King's troops were despatched to the countryside to root out some of the plotters' supporters and they visited Dothill Park, where they discovered 50 muskets, a quantity of pikes and a large amount of gunpowder hidden in the grounds. William was subsequently spared his life, probably because of his wealth, but received a hefty fine, which he financed by selling a large amount of valuable oak timber from off the slopes of the Wrekin.

Not discouraged by his close encounter with the hangman, William continued his crusade against the Crown and less than two years later was up to his neck in conspiratorial action again, this time, with the Monmouth rebels. Charles II had suddenly died of a stroke and his brother James had come to the throne. James was now very openly pushing a Catholic agenda. The Duke of Monmouth, the illegitimate son of Charles II, believed the English people, predominantly Protestant, would join him in rising up against his uncle James. William and a few of his colleagues had been running a whispering campaign promoting the Duke's claim to the throne but unfortunately for the Duke and his supporters the timing was terribly wrong.

James Scott, the 1st Duke of Monmouth, had quickly amassed an army of 4000 but received little or no support from the powerful Lords of the land. They were defeated at the battle of Sedgemoor by the royal army, in what would be the last pitched battle to be fought on English soil. Monmouth's forces were predominantly a rag-tag of farm labourers who were poorly led, poorly armed and easily slaughtered by a professional army, the rout at Sedgemoor would have been a more appropriate description. Monmouth himself, having fled the scene, was captured a few days later disguised as a peasant, hiding under a water wheel. He was subsequently executed on Tower Hill, with a blunt axe, and hundreds of his supporters suffered ferocious reprisals at the hands of the infamous Judge Jeffreys' Bloody Assizes. Again Sir William managed to elude the hangman but was eventually arrested and committed to the Tower of London for a spell on suspicion of "dangerous and treasonable practices".

After a brief spell in the Tower it would appear that he possibly bribed his way out or was helped by a Whig sympathiser, either way he fled to Holland with his wife. On 28th June 1685 a warrant was issued to apprehend one Edward Goldegay, "who wilfully suffered Forester to escape out of his custody". Once he and his wife had settled in he quickly became the intermediary between King James's enemies back in England and the Prince of Orange. In 1688 they landed at Brixham and the Glorious Revolution took place. Not a drop of blood was spilt and James II slipped silently away to Ireland. William was knighted the following year and given a place in the Royal Household, which necessitated residing in Whitehall, his second home. Sir William eventually retired and

was allowed, in consideration of his long service, "to keep his lodging at Whitehall for the rest of his life". He died the following year, leaving, besides his estates, stock in the Bank and the East India Company. He was just 62 years of age - what a life he'd lived! He was buried in Wellington on 22 February, 1718.

There is an interesting side-story set in Sir William's household at Dothill in connection with one of his offspring and a George Downing. Well actually, this side-story has its own side-story, as follows. Pretty soon after the Friends of Dothill were established they were completing some structural changes to the footpaths and bridges and were naming them. A lady contacted them and asked if they were aware that there had been an eminent resident at the house at Dothill, *the* Sir George Downing of the street name and should they not honour him by naming something on the Reserve after him? At the following committee meeting it was agreed that they should name one of the bridges 'Downing Bridge'. Well, they should have done their due diligence because it wasn't long into researching into the history of Dothill Park that it was established that it wasn't *the* George Downing who had been the famous resident but the significantly lesser figure of his grandson. With regard to *the* George Downing, infamous would probably be a better description. Downing Street was not so named in his honour, it was simply because he owned the land on which it was built. Among other governmental positions he had been the Ambassador to Holland but is probably best remembered for being described as a perfidious rogue in Samuel Pepys' diary.

Back to the original side-story. The grandson had lost his mother and was sent by his father, Sir William's nephew, to live at Dothill Park. In 1700 Sir William made arrangements for the marriage of his eldest daughter Mary to George Downing, no doubt with one eye on the Downing fortune. At the time of the marriage George Downing was 15 and Mary was just 13 years old. After just a short time Downing went on his travels and Mary, who was remarkably pretty, had been offered the position of maid of honour to the Queen Anne's court. Mr Downing forbade the move, but she took up the offer against his will. After three years abroad Downing returned and declared his "fixed resolution never to perfect the marriage". After a further ten years Mary was forced to petition the House of Lords in order to dissolve the contract. The case was heard in 1715, and unfortunately for both parties, was rejected by 48 for to 50 against. It was in consequence of this decision that in 1717 George Downing devised his estates to the foundation of a College in Cambridge that bears his name to this day.

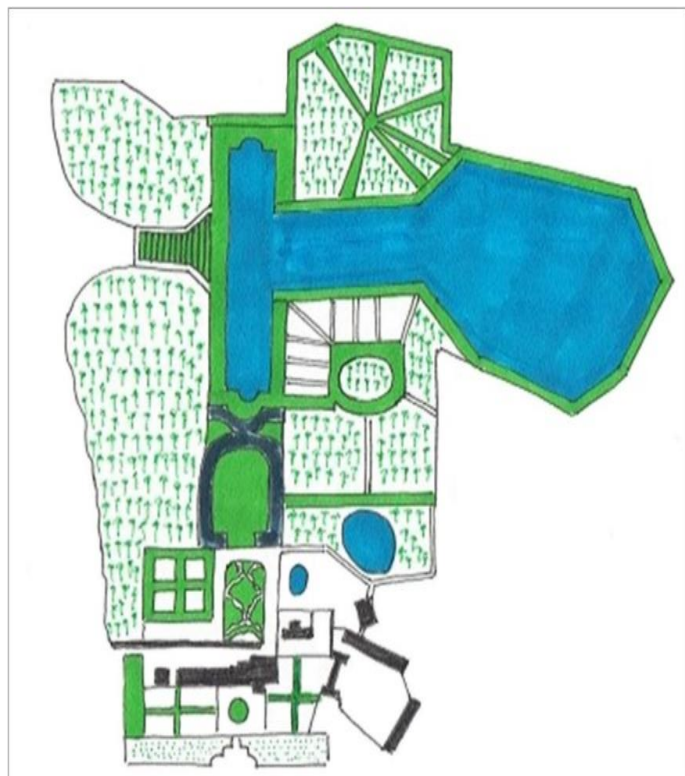
On Sir William's death his son, also William, inherited Dothill Park. Although he was also the MP for Much Wenlock his ambitions and energies were not to be consumed in the political machinations in London. There was no possibility that he could ever compete with his father's undoubted contributions to the evolving history of the nation, so his energies turned towards Dothill Park and his ambition of turning it into one of the finest country residences in the Midlands. When Sir William had inherited the Park from his half-brother Richard Steventon, it was basically a manor house attached to a large farm and it remained so during Sir William's long tenure. Well, things were about to change, young William was about to make his name and he soon got to work.

There was no shortage of money for William and his pet projects. Firstly he had made an advantageous marriage to Catherine, the daughter of William Brooke of St John's Square and then there was the Darby effect. The Foresters owned vast tracts of land south of the Wrekin. Abraham Darby had just started his factory in Coalbrookdale and needed lots of coal and iron ore to feed his hungry furnaces and that's what the Foresters were literally sitting on. The money soon started rolling in and William's ambitions grew. In order to export his abundant resources to the likes of Worcester, Gloucester and Bristol they would have to be loaded into barges below the rapids at Jackfield. To achieve this, William had a three-mile tramway constructed from Coalbrookdale to Coalport and it was later estimated that they eventually moved over 100,000 tons along it.

It was under William Forester and his wife Catherine's tenure that the gardens flourished. The Foresters were well connected to the court of Queen Anne, whose gardener was a Charles Bridgeman. A close examination of the estate map of 1734 indicates his direct influence if not authorship in the finished gardens. It was said of Bridgeman's garden designs:

His approach to landscaping can be summarised in three terms: formal, transitional and progressive. His landscapes displayed formal elements such as parterres, avenues, geometrically shaped lakes and pools, and kitchen gardens. Transitional elements in his designs included lawns, amphitheatres, garden buildings and statues, winding paths through wooded areas to viewing points and the use of ha-has; these features are some of the progressive ideas he helped bring into favour.

The 7 hectares of gardens at Dothill Park illustrate many of the described features. To the south of the house an ornamental lake was cut, with a grassed amphitheatre beyond. Tee Lake was developed into what today would be recognised as a theme park with manicured walkways and viewpoints. Frequent water sport events were held there, including sculling, swimming competitions and water jousting. A large boathouse and amphitheatre constructed at the south end of the lake and earth mounds were built up on each side so that the park workers and locals could enjoy the



spectacle below. Although most of the funding for his grand project came from exploiting the abundance of natural resources that lay beneath his extensive lands it was not the only source, we also need to be aware of the South Sea effect.

At that time the incoming Whig Chancellor did something that had never been attempted before; he consolidated the government debt. The country had been fighting in many wars and the debt was eye-wateringly massive, so he came up with a cunning plan. The East India Company, a joint stock company trading out of London, was a great success, earning lots of money and creating many happy shareholders, so members of his inner circle created another joint stock company called the South Sea Company. Then with the deft hand of a magician he pulled off his master stroke; he sold the government debt to it. The South Sea Company in due course issued shares to all its creditors to the value of its debt to them, offering dividends from the future earnings plus a fixed contribution from the government. There was immediate interest in trading; recognising an obvious gift horse they began to issue more shares and they even gave people loans so they could buy more shares. In 1720 it was granted a monopoly of trade with the South Americas, notably the trade in slaves. But, and there is always a but in government affairs, there was a big hole in the plan. Unfortunately for the many ardent speculators, all the ports in South America were owned by the Spanish and England was at war with Spain, but that fact slipped by the greedy hordes who had quickly jumped on board the latest fashionable gravy train.

A small group of insiders, mostly Whig politicians aware of the company's financial predicament, began to quietly offload their shares, yielding great profit. Eventually word must have got out and an avalanche of sales soon followed and the bubble spectacularly burst. The chosen few made a quick killing and departed the scene but for the majority, debt and bankruptcies followed up and down the land with the inevitable suicides, even the King wasn't spared the carnage. They had all been duped by what was effectively a massive 'Ponzi scheme', so named after an Italian conman. The Bank of England was eventually forced to step in and set about buying up all the worthless shares still in circulation in order to prevent the whole country's financial system collapsing. The government, or more precisely the British taxpayer, was eventually left with a massive debt that incidentally we are still paying off to this day. George Osborne repaid a large sum back in 2015.

What has the South Sea Bubble got to do with the manicured gardens of Dothill? Well, William Forester would certainly have been one of the Whigs 'in the know'; how many shares he had possessed and possibly sold at a tidy profit prior to meltdown is unknown. At the time of the collapse he was found to be still in possession of £1000 worth of company stock. He was investigated by the authorities but deemed to have not acted illegally. How was he in the know? Well, his father-in-law, William Brooke, had been a Director of the company at the time of its debacle. On his death, William Brooke left

Brooke Forester £80,000 (about £5,000,000 in today's money) which was spent largely "on the beautification of the property".

In 1734 Brooke Forester, Williams eldest son, had married Elizabeth Weld "A young lady of great merit and fortune". The marriage brought together the two most powerful families in the county. In 1758 on George Weld's death Brooke took overall control of all affairs at Willey Park. In 1753 Elizabeth died, then in 1758 Brooke's father William also died, so the widower decided to move back to Dothill. It was around 1764 that Brooke commissioned major changes to the house. An extension in brick was added to the north side of the original house; according to the account book of William Haycock who built it, this had five bays and three storeys. In 1771 Brooke Forester died at Dothill.



An impression of Brooke's Five Bay Extension of Dothill Park

Soon after Brooke's death the fastidiously manicured gardens were no more, back to grass. So what had happened? Well firstly George Forester who had inherited all the Forester estates from his father, including Dothill, had decided he wanted to stay at Willey Park, rather than move to the family seat at Dothill. George then decided to give sanctuary at Dothill Park to a group of French priests who had escaped the French Revolution. In 1806 a Roman Catholic chapel was established at Dothill lodge by a priest called Stephen LeMaitre.

In 1811 when George Forester died, unmarried, he left his estates including Dothill to his cousin Cecil Weld Forester, son of Brooke's brother. Cecil was ennobled 1st Lord Forester of Willey in 1821. On becoming the owner of Dothill Park he immediately started to reduce it in size to save on running costs and the material was removed to

Wiley and used to extend the house there. Dothill was then let on a life tenancy to his younger brother George Townsend Forester until his death in 1845. After his death the park was then rented to the land agent William Wyley.



Back to grass

There had also been a shift in the national consciousness. While William had been pruning his roses under the arbours of the Dothill estate an agricultural revolution had been happening. George III had come to the throne. The industrial revolution was in full flow, the population was rapidly expanding and George, or Farmer George as he was affectionately nicknamed, was keen to ensure the citizens of his Kingdom were well fed. He had researched and embraced the new developments in the science of agriculture and went out to his major landholders and encouraged them to 'get on board'. Unfortunately for George his contributions to the arts, science and agriculture have been overshadowed by an incident in 1787 when the King was seen addressing an oak tree; this was followed by further bouts of madness.

There were three major developments which would revolutionise farming practices in not just England but the whole western world. Firstly there was Jethro Tull, a Berkshire farmer. Each year, when sowing time came, he instructed his farm hands on how he wanted them to sow the seeds carefully and in single lines and each year they reverted to the time-honoured method of scattering the seed to the winds. In utter desperation he sat down one day and invented the seed drill, which once in operation substantially increased the yield of sown cereals.

As far back as history goes the farming community had followed the practice of fallowing, which meant a third of all the farming land was unproductive every year. The Dutch had recently discovered what became to be known as the 4-field rotation

system. Wheat, turnips, barley and clover were planted in 4 fields in one year and the next year they were all rotated. This was a win-win situation; firstly it meant an increase in all the productive farmable area by a third but it also meant that farmers had enough fodder to feed their livestock throughout the winter and did not have to slaughter them each year.

The third breakthrough was in animal husbandry. Thomas Coke, Earl of Leicester, had inherited his father's estate. Thomas was more of a scientist than a farmer and he brought scientific disciplines to the knotty problems of animal rearing. Up until then farmers had practised an open field system, more than often over-stocked, allowing animals to more or less do their own thing. Thomas introduced the practice of enclosures which made it possible to experiment. He tried out different feeds and also experimented with selective breeding. He promoted cocksfoot and lucerne as grass and feed respectively and crossed the Norfolk Horn with the English Leicester. By 1793 he had 2,400 sheep at Holkham; there had been just 700 when he inherited it. His practices spread far and wide, even as far as Dothill Park.

Although still owned by the Foresters, Dothill Park was now completely in the hands of tenant farmers. It is recorded that at this time Apley, an adjacent estate, had invested approximately 20% of its land over to agricultural use and 80% was kept as parkland. Dothill on the other hand was now 100% agriculture and the agricultural records demonstrate that the new farming methods were in full operation there.

The next person of note to become part of Dothill Park's rich tapestry was one Richard Groom. R.G. Groom, Richard's father, had by 1835 established a thriving timber merchant business in New Street, Wellington. RG had had two sons, Thomas and Richard, and in the 1850s the sons succeeded their father and began to immediately grow their business. Their timing couldn't have been better. The railway had just arrived from Birmingham and had catapulted Wellington into the Industrial Revolution. John Dickinson, a local entrepreneur, had established a railway carriage building shop on Bridge Road, next to the new railway line, but he had overstretched himself and went bankrupt. Seizing their opportunity the Grooms moved into the vacant premises and by 1870 the company Richard & Thomas Groom & Sons was operating out of the newly commissioned 'Shropshire Works'.

Boasting 79,000 square feet of covered workshops at the Bridge Road site, the firm described itself as the largest timber buyers in England. They produced everything from clothes pegs and spade handles up to large civil engineering products for the War Office and the Admiralty. Richard was an extraordinary man with boundless energy; as well as running the Shropshire works he was Chairman of the newly established Haybridge Ironworks and in his spare time he managed to become a Magistrate, County Councillor, Improvement Commissioner and Guardian of the Wellington Union Workhouse. The Groom family were leading members of Wellington's Methodist community and in this capacity Richard used his power, influence and often his own



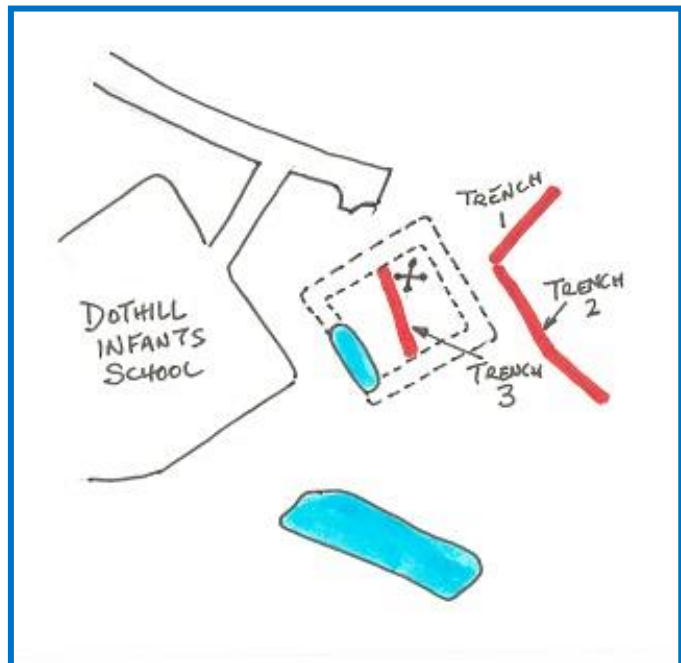
money in improving the town's public services and amenities. By 1876 Richard Groom had established himself as the new tenant of Dothill Park, a fit and proper reward for one of the new breed of affluent suburbanites who were rapidly filling the old discarded boots of the landed gentry. Although Richard lived at Dothill Park he never got to own it, he was always just a tenant and died there in 1893. It was only when the Foresters divested themselves of a number of properties around 1920 that Richard's son Ernie became the owner of the property. Ernie Groom, a confirmed bachelor, died of a heart attack at the Shropshire works in 1944, aged 84.

The Littles were a well-known local family who lived in the gardener's cottage at the south end of Dothill Pool, at the back of the infants' school, between the wars. It seems Billy, the father, worked on the estate in the roles of gardener, chauffeur and also the gamekeeper; according to one story he nearly set off some cartridges in his pocket with a still smoking pipe deposited there. When he died, almost in the same month as Ernie Groom, his eldest daughter May took over his role as gardener. The little sisters, May and Phyllis, were fine seamstresses and appeared in the local paper almost every Christmas feeding the Dothill swans.

After many generations of regal stability the old hall, like some magnificent ageing ocean-going liner, entered choppy waters. In 1944 Ronnie Murphy bought the estate and rented out the farm to his brother-in-law John Sherwin. By 1949 Ronnie had sold the estate to a Canadian businessman called Harry Hodgson, who owned two other farms at Ellerdine. Hodgson rented the farm out to a Welshman called, interestingly, Jock Jones. By this time the old hall was in a terrible state, evidenced by the testimony of one of the then farm hands; "We used to let the pigs have the free run of the old house". In 1956 Hodgson sold the estate to Wellington Urban District Council who allegedly housed people on the council waiting list, while they were awaiting their new homes. Within a very short space of time the poor old house was in such an

appalling condition that the council had to have it pulled down. Just a few years later 'Jock's Farm' burnt down in a final act of fading glory.

In 1989 an archaeological evaluation was carried out on the site of the old house by Birmingham University Field Archaeological unit. The evaluation was conducted at the request of the landowner, the Wrekin Council, prior to a large-scale development project in the vicinity. Two trenches were dug in the area now under Haycocks Close and one across the area assumed to be within the medieval moat, now under the children's play area. In the first trench they discovered a rubbish pit, discerned to be 17th/18th century by examination of its



contents, and two wall footings made of hand-made bricks. The second trench yielded a stone roof tile, some medieval pottery and an 18th century revetted wall that was interpreted as a ha-ha. In the third trench shards of medieval pottery were found, a ditch of cobbles that related to the 17th century garden layout and a length of wall foundation that represented part of the post-medieval west wing. In summary the evaluation recommended further exploration and on-site presentation of the site through publications, displays, permanent information panels relating to the excavations and the general historical background.

A further archaeological study was carried out in 1995. This time seven small trenches were dug in the area now covered by Harley Close, followed by a watching brief carried out as a series of house plot footings were constructed. Elements of the post-medieval agricultural usage of the site were recorded. No remains pre-dating the structures of the early 17th century were found.

In 2015 Dothill park was designated a nature reserve. Dothill Local Nature Reserve consists of 140 acres of mixed habitat; although it might not be accurate we like to think of it as 1/3 water, 1/3 wood and 1/3 meadow or grassland. We have identified about 1600 different species of flora and fauna on the reserve. This might sound impressive, but to put it into context the RSPB reserve at Minsmere, on the Suffolk coast, have identified nearly 5000 different species on their reserve, so we have a way to go yet.

So what do we have? We have identified over a hundred species of birds on the reserve. The largest proportion of these are resident but these are added to when

more arrive in the winter and some in the summer. 22 of these birds are on the red list; that is birds whose populations have severely declined in Britain or because they are considered under threat of global extinction. We have made and installed over 70 bird boxes including owl and falcon boxes, which we monitor during the breeding season. We also carry out a monthly transect, that is we walk the same route and record the type and number of birds we encounter and also the weather conditions.

We have identified 20 species of mammal on the reserve. The larger mammals are represented by badger, fox and otter and the smaller by the voles, shrews and mice, and we also have 6 species of bat. To support the mammals we have made and put up a number of bat boxes. We've created several brush piles in the woodlands and carried out hedge-laying and made dead-hedges in order to help small mammals move around undetected. We have also made a few hog houses that we have placed in the woods and with the help of the Dothill Primary School children created a number of what are called hibernacula. These are pits dug into the soil then filled with brush and brick ends. An entrance is created with a piece of pipe and then the pit is covered with a mound of soil. We have a number of small mammal traps which we periodically put out and record our findings and we also have camera traps which track the movement of the larger mammals during breeding times.

We have identified over 700 species of invertebrate. The highlights of these are 21 species of bee, 36 beetles, 22 butterflies, 10 dragonflies, 16 ladybirds, 310 moths and - enough to give my wife a sleepless night - 41 different types of spider. Around the meadows we have built a number of 'bug hotels'. These are stacks of pallets filled with straw, branches, cones, anything we can think of that might entice the little beasties in to stay for the night or even longer. We have also made little insect houses that we have put up on the trees in the wooded areas. We have an annual moth survey that is carried out by the Shropshire Moth Group and a couple of our volunteers survey the meadows when the butterflies start flying.

We have eight representatives from the amphibian/reptile world and six species of fish in the pools. We carry out water testing on all the water bodies each month. We test the pH and ammonia levels, temperature and turbidity and if we find any anomalies i.e. pollution incidents, we inform the Environment Agency. Over the past few years we have done quite a bit of work in support of our slippery water friends. We have created and maintain a number of 'ephemeral pools'. These are small bodies of water that dry out in the summer so they cannot support fish life. They are essential for breeding frogs and newts as fish would predate the young; the fish don't touch toad tadpoles, I understand they taste disgusting. Talking of toads, the UK toad population is in a bit of a crisis. A nationwide study is being carried out by scientists from the University of Wolverhampton and we are one of the prime sites for their research. The pools are regularly tested for Great Crested Newt DNA. We are not well represented by reptiles so we have designated an area close to Donnerville that we have called the 'snake field'

where scrapes and south-facing 'basking banks' have been created and we have planted a small copse of Scots Pine nearby. It's the closest we have to heathland, the habitat of the adder.

500 million years ago a group of carbon atoms surrounded and captured a magnesium atom and chlorophyll was born, the earth then began greening. Vascular plants have wide representation on the reserve from the lowly blades of grass on Spa meadow right up to the fine oak tree in Donnerville Spinney; to date we have identified about 400 species. Flower meadows are the 'supermarkets' of a nature reserve, supporting a vast pyramid of animals with the highest predator sat at the top. The reserve sits on old farmland so the grasslands are basically improved pastures, seeded with perennial rye and clover, great for a Swaledale but hopeless for a wild flower. To improve the meadows we take the following actions. In late summer, before seeding, the meadows are cut and the material removed; we are trying to deplete the nutrients in the soil. The meadow is then scarified and yellow rattle seeds are sown. The yellow rattle plant parasites on grass roots and suppresses the rye grass growth; this allows the seeds of other grasses and wild flowers which have escaped to the edges of the pasture to blow in and colonise. Are our actions working? Each year we do an orchid count on the three meadows and yes, there are more each year.

We have identified 65 tree species, 32 of which are native trees and we have a slow programme of introducing the 18 other native species not yet represented on the reserve. To celebrate Telford's fiftieth birthday we were able to create a 3.4 mile trail that visits and identifies 50 of the trees; maps can be provided and this has proved very popular. The jewel of the 50 Tree Trail is the Wellingtonia Ring.

We have been able to identify 29 different fungi on the reserve, not a very good number I'm afraid if you consider that mycologists estimate that there could be as many as 4 million species.

So who are the Friends? Wellington Town Council commissioned a conservation study of the designated area, the result being a 10-year management plan. A key element of that plan was the formation of a group of volunteers to implement the plan's recommendations and was to be called The Friends of Dothill Local Nature Reserve.

A small group of Wellington Town Councillors arranged an open meeting and called for volunteers and a number of enthusiasts stepped forward, a committee was created and work on the plan then commenced. What do we do? Active members, numbering about 25, meet every Tuesday morning and with a variety of tools & equipment, purchased with council funding, carry out a number of conservation/maintenance duties on the reserve. These can include; litter picking, path clearing, scrub clearance, general repairs, coppicing, hedge-laying and Himalayan balsam and reed mace removal. With the aid of grants obtained from local organisations the Friends have also been able to carry out significant infrastructure improvements and additions. We have created new

footpaths, installed a floating island, a kingfisher nest box, new seating, built a jetty and an interesting meeting/focal point. One important project we have recently undertaken was to create a tree nursery and plant over 600 saplings. These will be used to replace the hundreds of ash trees on the reserve that are slowly dying of the terrible disease chalara (ash dieback). We have done a lot of work with the children at Dothill Primary School and they now have an active junior Friends group. We have organised bat, history, fungi, and tree identification walks for the local community.



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If you are interested in volunteering on the Nature Reserve, please go to <https://www.dothillnaturereserve-friends.com/aboutus>

or email us at fdlnr.membership@gmail.com