

Downley Common Newsletter

Quarterly Newsletter of the Downley Common Preservation Society Issue 26. August 2005

Web: <http://www.downleycommon.org.uk>. Email bill.thompson@rotherwood.co.uk

Forthcoming Meetings

- There will be a Member's meeting in the Village Hall on Thursday 1 September at 8.00pm. An agenda will be posted on notice boards shortly.
- The AGM will be held on Thursday 6 October at 8pm also at the Village Hall. If you would like to get more involved in the running of the Preservation Society either of these meetings would be a good time to come along and join the Committee. There will also be an illustrated talk on the subject of Ponds to complement all the recent pond clearing activity.
- The Chiltern Commons Network is being revived by the Chilterns Conservation Board and another Commons Day is planned for 8 October 2005 to start at 10:00am. It will take place at Downley Village Hall and there will be a programme of talks on local issues relevant to Commons in the morning, a lunch provided by the Network and a guided walk around the Common in the afternoon.
- Another pond clearing day – this time the overgrown pond in the grounds of the Downley School on 8 October at 10:00am. Volunteers wanted.
- Apple Juicing Day is happening at the Downley Community Orchard on 15 Oct at 2:00pm. Turn your own apples into juice. Please bring sterilised bottles. 2 carrier bags of apples will make about 2 litres of juice.
- Bonfire & Torchlight Procession. This annual event takes place on a Saturday this year. Regardless of all the other local events on in the area, come and support your local bonfire. In the run-up to the day, members can help by noting any flytippers dumping rubbish before 15 October or at night. Please note the vehicle registration or any other details and inform the Bucks hotline on 0845 330 1856.

Diary		
1 Sept 2005, 8.00pm	Member's Meeting	Village Hall
4 Sept 2005, 10.00am	Working Party.	Bus turning Circle
2 Oct 2005. 10:00am	Working Party.	Bus turning Circle
6 Oct 2005, 8.00pm	Member's Meeting	Village Hall
8 Oct 2005, 10.00pm	Pond Clearing	Downley School
9 Oct 2005, 10.00am	Working Party	Bonfire site
15 Oct 2005. 2:00pm	Apple Juicing Day	Community Orchard
16 Oct 2005, 10.00am	Working Party	Bonfire site
23 Oct 2005, 10.00am	Working Party	Bonfire site
30 Oct 2005, 10.00am	Working Party	Bonfire site
5 Nov 2005. 6:30pm	Bonfire & Torchlight Procession	Commonside

The Don Le Code

I have often wondered what were the historical events that led to the origin of the village of Downley. After all, it was not an old-established village as most English villages are; it was not mentioned in the Domesday Book and there are no obvious geographical features that might lead to its formation. So what reasons could there be for this small village to be established?

My first thought to investigate the earliest known occupants of the area and this led straight to Moor Cottage at the junction of Moor Lane (originally called Silver Street) and Plomer Green Lane which was reputedly built in 1553. How, I wondered did it get its name and was there any connection with the origin of Silver Street?

“Moor” is supposed to be derived from the heathland that surrounds it, although in those days of course it would have been wooded and not a “moor” at all. In fact back in the late 16th century, the word “Moor” was better known as a dark-skinned inhabitant of Spain. The most significant event of that time was the Spanish Armada in which 130 of King Philip’s finest ships set off to conquer England.

After some extensive research in the British Museum and selected sources from Madrid, I have pieced together the following intriguing accounts of how this Spanish Moor probably ended up in Silver Street. In 1588, after the fireships were sent in to the Spanish anchorage at Calais, the Armada was defeated at the battle of Gravelines on the 8th August and scattered by a great storm. Most of the Spanish fleet was blown into the North Sea and up toward Scotland. However, there is one fragmentary record of a third rate flat-bottomed galleon of very shallow draft by the name of “Don Le Cordova” that inexplicably entered the mouth of the Thames and under cover of darkness and a howling gale was blown on a spring tide far up river. Historical documents discovered in Maidenhead record the passing of a strange ship in the night, damaging the bridge as it passed. Finally, recent excavations during the redevelopment of Wycombe Marsh have uncovered an old ship’s anchor with the inscription “Don Le” with the rest being indecipherable.

Details of the ship’s manifest recorded in the National Maritime Archive in Madrid reveal that the Don Le Cordova was present in the Armada to carry the vast quantity of silver required to pay the army in the Spanish Netherlands. From the evidence presented here, there can be little doubt that this ship ended up at the foot of the hill near Wycombe and that the sailors and soldiers on board would have made immediately for the nearest high ground to establish a defensive position and wait for the arrival of the Spanish army. They had no reason to doubt that the invasion would be successful. They would have stripped the ship of anything valuable (the silver) and useful and set up camp to be named after their ship. In time, of course, Don Le Cordova became corrupted to Downley.

This evidence has clearly become known to certain sections of the local population as witnessed by the evidence of treasure hunters digging in the dells and in other places on the Common. More evidence that recently emerged was the discovery of the topmast and crow’s nest from the old galleon close to Moor Cottage and now pressed into use as the beacon on Commonsides.

One last intriguing point is that *Damasonium alisma* (Starfruit), while rare in this country, is extremely common in its native Cordova in Catalonia. Could it be that this is yet another link back to that stormy night in 1588?

We believe that the archaeology project that is currently searching for the remains of the old brick kiln on the Common should be refocusing their search onto the events of 1588. If there is any remaining of the substantial hoard of silver bullion that brought ashore that night, then a magnetometer survey of Silver Street ought to pick it up. Unless of the course, the kiln wasn’t there to make bricks at all, but to refashion the coins and bars of silver, hallmarked with the imprint of Philip of Spain, into a form that could be more easily traded with the locals? There is still so much to discover!

