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Bicester Historian

The monthly newsletter for Bicester Local History Society

140 Years of a Valuable Source

140 years ago this month Rev. James Blomfield, then vicar of Launton, published the first volume of his History of the Deanery of Bicester, following in the footsteps of Rev. White Kennett and John Dunkin as some of our most valuable local historians.

On 31st March 1882 the Bicester Advertiser printed the following article to announce the publication:

"The first part of the most important contribution to the local history of this neighbourhood has just been issued from the press. As some of our readers may be aware, the Rev. J.C. Blomfield, rector of Launton, has long been engaged in looking up materials for the compilation of a history of that portion of Oxfordshire, ecclesiastically known as the Deanery of Bicester – an area over which Mr Blomfield ably presides as Rural Dean.

Judging from the first part of Mr Blomfield's work, which contains the early history of the Deanery, no local history of the neighbourhood of so great importance has appeared since the year 1695, when White Kennett published his Parochial Antiquities, if we except, however, the second edition of the same work which was issued in 1818, with additions from the author's manuscript notes, and edited by Dr Bandinel.

Dunkin's History of the Bullingdon and Ploughley Hundreds, in two volumes, containing accounts of about twenty parishes, was a

valuable contribution to local history, both as regards its letterpress and the number of valuable engravings which the volumes contain.

But the industrious White Kennett, vicar of Ambrosden, and afterwards Bishop of Peterborough, may be styled the father of the local historians of Oxfordshire, every subsequent writer in the same path being, either directly or indirectly, deeply indebted to the vast mine of archaeological wealth stored up in the Parochial Antiquities. It has been truly said that this "laborious compilation will be duly valued as long as ecclesiastical history bears any repute among us," and certainly those who take any interest in the past can never take up Kennett's two ponderous volumes without admiring the industry of its author. To outsiders, if we may so term them, Kennett's volumes are dry reading, as indeed nearly all local histories are, but when the subject matter relates to those familiar streets and fields which one every day treads, and to those who for centuries before have trodden them, a most kindly interest arises in the mind of the reader, and the labours of the local historian are then estimated at their true worth.

We hope the pages of Mr Blomfield's Bicester Deanery history may find readers in every village whose annals are concerned in it, as indeed, by some means or other, it should do in these days when the

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Dates For Your Diary

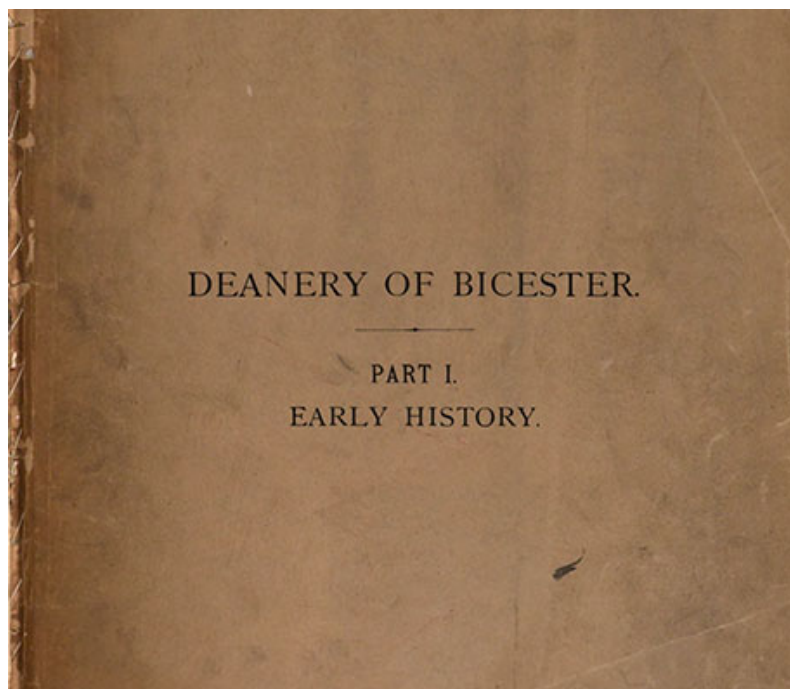
Bicester Advertiser Local History Article	14th March
April Newsletter Submission Deadline	15th April
Bicester Reflections Talk	25th April @ 7:30pm See pages 4 & 9
Bicester Advertiser Local History Article	5th May
May Newsletter Submission Deadline	8th May
Alchester Talk	16th May @ 7:30pm See page 4

lads of nearly every village are well grounded in the chief facts of our national growth and constitution.

We wish Mr Blomfield every success in the laborious task which he has taken upon himself, and earnestly look forward to the pleasure of having the next part for perusal."

He would go on to publish a number of volumes over the following decade or so, covering Bicester and many of the surrounding villages. All of which are still extremely useful sources today, but none more so than the second volume, covering Bicester and the priory. Its extensive information on the priory includes a copy of all the old priory documents that are still held in the National Archives today, translated into English from the original Latin.

- Matthew Hathaway



Roll of Honour

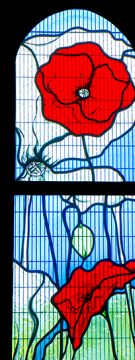
The following are the local men, and those buried locally, who died in the Second World War, 80 years ago.

Pilot Officer Gordon Frederick Keele, of Kingston, Canada.

Died: 13th March 1942 Aged: 24 Served in: Royal Canadian Air Force
(Died on service at RAF Upper Heyford, buried in Upper Heyford)

Pilot Officer Reginald Alfred Parker, of Wellington City, New Zealand.

Died: 13th March 1942 Aged: 25 Served in: Royal New Zealand Air Force
(Died on service at RAF Upper Heyford, buried in Upper Heyford)



Bicester's Boer War

Being the Journals and Reminiscences of

Lewis Turney

Onetime Rural Postman and Recruiting Sergeant of the above-named place, to which are appended contemporary Journalistic Reports published therein.

Stored safely away in one of the several copious strongrooms of the Oxfordshire History Centre is a small, unassuming, unremarkable at first sight, notebook. Just over a century ago it belonged to a diminutive rural postman based in the Bicester Post Office, then located in the Market Square, Lewis Turney. The pages of his notebook, his journal, are any local historian's dream. But it does not record the daily comings and goings of Bicester Post Office but describes matters much further afield.

Lewis Turney was not a local man, having been born in Winslow, Buckinghamshire, on 19th September 1871, the son of Joseph, an agricultural labourer, and his wife, Ann. The young Lewis was something of an athlete. The Buckingham Advertiser of 29th August 1885 lists him as a member of the Winslow Juniors Cricket XI easily defeating Great Horwood. Lewis was the last man in and was not out at the end of the innings, having contributed one run to the total. The Bucks Herald of 24th July 1886 records him coming third in the 250 yards handicap for boys under 16, winning five shillings for his efforts at the sports that were part of the twelfth annual Winslow Flower and Agricultural Society Show.

Lewis did not follow his father onto the land, and sometime before 16th November 1888 began working as a groom. It was on this date that he began his long association with the British Army when, at Winchester, he joined the 3rd Battalion of the Oxfordshire Light

Infantry. He was 18 years and 8 months old. From his attestation document we can build the following physical description of Lewis Turney. He stood just 5' 4½" tall (the minimum qualifying height for the yeomanry was 5' 3" tall), weighed 129 pounds, had a chest measurement of 34½", a fresh complexion, hazel eyes, brown hair and was a member of the Church of England. The form adds the detail that he had two small moles on the back of his right forearm. Having passed his physical examination, he became Private 9792 of the Rifle Brigade naming his mother as his next of kin, signing the necessary paperwork. He made a steady progress through the non-commissioned ranks of the British Army. On 1st September 1893 he earned his first stripe to become a Lance Corporal, advancing to Corporal on 24th January 1895. On 16th November of that year his military record shows that he was transferred to the Army Reserve, retaining his rank as a Corporal. There he would remain until his country had need of him again.

On 6th March 1896 Lewis contracted the first of his marriages, to Susan Alderman from Swanbourne in Buckinghamshire, at Watford Registry Office. Sadly, the marriage did not last long. Susan passed away in early 1906, aged just 34, the funeral taking place at St Edburg's on 12th February. At the time she and Lewis were living in the New Buildings (now North Street) in Bicester. The marriage would bring them two children: Sarah Jane and Cyril James, baptised at St Edburg's on 26th September 1897, aged 4 and 3 respectively in the 1901 Census, and both born in Bicester. The Census does not give a profession or occupation for Susan. It would be in this period that the events that now concern us occurred.

Towards the end of 1896 Lewis Turney began his long association with the Post Office. The London Gazette of 13th November recorded, in the "Civil Service Commission", section that "The following Candidates have been certified by the Civil Service Commissioners as qualified for the appointments set against their respective names ... Postmen ... Lewis Turney (Bicester)". His rural postal round was to Hethe.

By February 1899, Lewis Turney seems to have become well integrated into the small community at Bicester Post Office. The Bicester Herald of the 3rd of that month gives a lengthy account, running to a full column and a half of its broadsheet format, of the second annual dinner of the Bicester Branch of the Postmen's Federation, at Couling's Temperance Hotel the preceding Tuesday evening. Lewis is mentioned as one of the nine rural postmen: J. Barnes, J. Coles sen., J. Coles jun., T. Clifton, W. H. Hawkins, W. Harris, F. Kirtland and T. Stanford, based at Bicester. As was often the case at the time, the post-dinner entertainment was homemade; on this occasion: "Songs were sung by

Messrs L. Turney, E. Dagley, T. Clifton, W. Dagley, W. H. Hawkins...". The "happy gathering" is reported to have ended at eleven o'clock with the singing of the National Anthem.

Sadly, before the close of the nineteenth century, the clouds of war, albeit in a far-flung place, again gathered over this green and pleasant land, including rural Bicester. The Bicester Advertiser of Friday, 13th October, in a lengthy piece running to almost two columns of its broadsheet format describing the road to war included the following paragraph entitled "Reserves Called Out", that by the provisions laid out by the Reserve Forces Act 1882.

"Following a Privy Council held on Saturday at Balmoral a supplement to the London Gazette was issued at night containing a proclamation calling out the Army Reserve and continuing in Army service soldiers who by lapse of time might have become entitled to be transferred to the Reserve. From the War Office was issued an order mobilising an Army Corps for service in South Africa. Monday was appointed for the commencement of the mobilisation, while Army Reservists required to complete the field force to war establishment were ordered to re-join on or before the 17th inst. It was estimated that 25,000 reservists would at once join their respective regiments for service." Lewis Turney's recall happened on 13th November, but he was not immediately sent abroad. That being said, the Bicester Advertiser of 20th October informed its readers that a flotilla of 16 transports were due to leave the Thames docks and Southampton carrying some 20,000 men, of which 15,000 would be infantry, including battalions of the Grenadier and Coldstream Guards from Gibraltar, in addition to a large list of military equipment.

The first details that we have of Bicester men directly involved in South Africa possibly comes in the Bicester Herald of 3rd November where it publishes a short list of those in transit or already there: Stephen Joseph Swell, Scots Greys Reserves (landlord of the Rose and Crown, in the Causeway), Willie Collins, 2nd Royal Irish Fusiliers, Arthur East, Medical Staff Corps, and brothers George Shillingford, Coldstream Guards, and William Shillingford, 12th Royal Lancers. By this time both Bicester papers were devoting significant column inches to the progress of the War; be it in the form of despatches and reports from The Cape, or the more local response to meet the needs of the soldiers in some foreign field. Naturally these are upbeat in tone, emphasising the success of the British and the setbacks of the Boers.

Sadly, there was no way of hiding the worst of news that comes with any conflict. The Bicester Herald and The Bicester Advertiser of 17th November both reported the death of Brevet-Lieut-Col. C. E. Keith-Falconer, of the

Northumberland Fusiliers, the eldest brother of C. A. Keith-Falconer of The Garth. Both papers carried lengthy tributes to the fallen officer. He was "...buried at a pretty spot underneath a kopje overlooking the Orange River Camp, his resting place being marked by a cairn of white stones."

The Bicester Herald of 24th November gave a further list of men either in South Africa or on their way there, in addition to those previously listed: Lewis Turney, 4th Battalion Rifle Brigade, William Saunders, 2nd West Yorkshire Regiment, Frederick Parker, 1st Coldstream Guards, Herbert Frederick Reeves, 1st Welsh Regiment, William Harris, Army Service Corps Reserves. Lewis Turney did not leave Bicester to join his regiment at Gosport empty handed. The Herald goes on to report that he was presented with some tobacco and a pipe by Mr Dagley on the behalf of a few members of the postal staff "...who all wish for his safe and speedy return amongst them."

Lewis Turney did not depart for South Africa immediately with the rest of his Regiment on the "Majestic". The Herald of 15th December reported that he had been assigned to garrison duties in Dublin.

According to his military records, Lewis Turney's South African tour of duty did not begin until 7th March 1900 by which time, he had already completed 11 years and 111 days with the colours, his garrison duties in Dublin counting as Home Service.

Lewis Turney appears to have returned to Bicester prior to him returning to Dublin and leaving for South Africa. The Bicester Herald of 2nd March ties this in with the spontaneous local celebrations of the relief of Ladysmith. These consisted of flags flying from windows, a "merry peal on the church bells" and a hastily arranged demonstration in the Market Square at which "some hundreds of persons assembled". The proceedings commenced with the singing of the National Anthem, with Mr F. Kemp accompanying on a pianoforte. The Chairman of the Urban Council, Mr T. Grimsley, then addressed the crowd, ... "He then made

a presentation to Corpl. Turney, consisting of tobacco and cigarettes, which the postmaster and the postmen had subscribed for their departing fellow-employee. Mr Turney was received with deafening cheers on mounting the van to accept the gifts. He said he had that day received a telegram to proceed to Dublin at once, to leave for the front on Saturday next. He did not know what ship he would sail in. He hoped when he got to the front, he would do his duty. This little response called forth a further outburst of applause, and Corpl. Turney retired to proceed to the railway station, some of his post-office friends accompanying him."

The Herald then proceeded to reassure its readers that, as far as they knew, there had been no casualties amongst the Bicester men serving in the various regiments.

It is on the 8th of March that his journal takes up the story. It records that at 4:30pm he left the Royal Albert Docks in London aboard the S.S. Sunda. After taking on coal and fresh water at Cape St Vincent she sailed south, arriving at Port Elizabeth (now renamed Gqeberha) at 11:00am on 4th April, before sailing on to Durban, arriving at 5:00pm on the 7th. It was during this voyage, on 1st April to be precise, that Turney received another promotion, to Acting Sergeant.

From Durban he travelled inland to Pietermaritzburg, and from there to join the rest of the battalion at the front at Sundays River reaching camp at 3:30pm on 12th April, moving on to the railway station at Elandslaagte. This had been the site of one of the earliest battles of the Second Boer War on 21st October 1899 and although considered a British victory, any advantage gained was squandered by the victors' retreat.

The Bicester Advertiser of 23rd March 1900 reminded its readers of the cost of the War. In an official statement, the War Office reported that to 17th March the total British casualties (including missing in action and prisoners) was 16,447, including 985 officers.

[To be continued.]

- Mark Lewandowski

Talks Update

Unless the situation changes again, these talks will all be held at the Clifton Centre, with appropriate safety measures in place. Recorded versions will then be available to view on our website afterwards.

The recording of our March talk will be available on the website in the next few days, until 30th April.

Monday 25th April

(One week later than usual) Matthew Hathaway takes us through the changing face of Bicester's streets as described in his recent book, **Bicester Reflections**.

Monday 16th May

Eberhard Sauer returns to give his long-awaited update on the findings of extensive works carried out at **Alchester**.

Monday 20th June

To be confirmed.

24th March 1882

SANGERS' CIRCUS

This immense travelling company was on Friday last located in a field near the station, where they gave two performances, one in the afternoon, which was patronised by a fashionable company, and one in the evening, which was witnessed by a large concourse of people from the town and neighbouring villages. The canvas covered a large plot of ground and nearly every space was occupied, the streets of the town presenting in the evening quite a desolate appearance.

Besides the usual equestrian feats, and such like, a tribe of wild beasts accompanies the circus, which adds further attraction. The procession took place at midday and was witnessed by large numbers. The dance music played by the band was also performed in a masterly manner.

23rd March 1917

REVIEW OF EIGHT MONTHS' WORK

As eight months have passed since the last report of the work of the Bicester Red Cross Depot was published, the committee have pleasure in again presenting an account of the work which has been completed since July 1916.

The following is a list of the various items which have been made and dispatched to Oxford, the Bicester V.A.D. Hospital, and elsewhere.

- 90 many tailed bandages
- 250 stump bandages
- 4,071 swabs, various kinds
- 1,021 roller bandages
- 30 lint pillows
- 8 cushions
- 56 capelines
- 4 washing shoes
- 604 cotton wool sponges
- 24 pneumonia jackets
- 1 pair of operation stockings
- 5 pillow cases
- 1 dressing gown
- 17 pyjama suits
- 28 bed jackets
- 12 pocket handkerchiefs
- 18 white shirts
- 1 night shirt
- 1 pair of bed socks
- 2 helpless case shirts
- 20 pairs of mittens
- 15 mufflers
- 7 pairs of slippers
- 24 slings

JOHN SANGER & SON'S, Monstre HIPPODROME, CIRCUS, and MENAGERIE.

THE MIGHTY MONARCH of the ROAD
Will visit Bicester, Friday, March 17th, 1882.

The Greatest of all Circuses Under the Sun.
Five times Larger than any other Exhibition that ever travelled.

AMERICAN, ENGLISH, & RUSSIAN ARTISTES
No precedent in the world for NOVELTY.
IMMENSITY, SUPERIORITY, & ORIGINALITY.

THE GRAND FREE NOVELTY,
PROCESSION AT ONE O'CLOCK.
A Gorgeous Living Panorama of Moving Splendour,

Which is given so that the public may form a partial idea of the brilliancy and unequalled proportions of this Gigantic Establishment, the perfection of which defies all effort at description. Here you will see

SILVER AND GOLD ORNAMENTED TABLEUX CARS,
Beautifully Dressed Costumes,
Jewelled & Silver Armour, Equine Trappings, Beautiful Females. Regiment of Men and Children.

200 HORSES AND PONIES! ELEPHANTS, CAMELS, ZEBRAS, MONKEYS, DOGS, &c., &c., and FORTY HORSES IN HAND

Will be driven by the great AMERICAN WHIP MR. E. BURKE.

Worth a Hundred Miles Journey to Witness.

To prove it is no vain boast respecting this being the Largest, Grandest, and most Magnificent Menagerie and Circus in existence, Messrs. JOHN SANGER and SON invite the whole Inhabitants of this town and surrounding districts to witness the entire Stud of Horses, Elephants, Camels, &c., **FREE OF CHARGE.** The whole to be seen at the Encampment on the Ground previous to **GRAND PROCESSION.**

Reserved Seats (carpeted and Select), 3s. First Class Seats (carpeted), 2s. Second Class, 1s. Area Gd.) Children under ten years of age Half-price to Reserved Seats and First Class Seats only. Liberal arrangements made with Schools.

TWO PERFORMANCES each day at 2.30 & 7.30

Agent in Advance: MR. J. TWIGG.

Sole Proprietors and Directors: JOHN SANGER & SON.

- 16 vests
- 5 pairs of pants
- 38 calico bags
- 10 pillow slips

A great deal of other work has been done, such as remodelling and knitting, and the mending for the

Bicester Hospital is now regularly undertaken.

The committee desire to thank all workers, and also those who have kindly helped in various ways, they would like at the same time to emphasise the fact that the comforts supplied by the Depot are needed in greater quantities than ever, so that those who are made to come and work there, may greatly help by sending in subscriptions, however small.

The committee also thankfully acknowledge gifts in kind from Mrs Harris, mittens; Mrs Scrivener, pyjama girdles and buttons; Miss Welford, a muffler; Mrs Palmer, Rose Cottage, material.

The committee consists of Mrs Tubb, Mrs Gosling (treasurer), Mrs Phillips, Mrs Slater-Harrison, Mrs Dewar-Harrison, Mrs Keith-Falconer, and Mrs Walter Heape.

14th March 1941

GEORGE MEDAL FOR AIRMAN

The George Medal has been awarded to Pilot Officer Gerard Ryder, husband of Mrs Ryder, of 40 King's End, Bicester.

Pilot Officer Ryder was born at Barrow-in-Furness in 1911. He enlisted in the RAF in 1926, became a sergeant air observer and was commissioned in June 1940. He was mentioned in despatches on 1st January 1941.

The official announcement of the award states that one night in December Flight Lt. D.C. Smythe (who also receives the George Medal), Pilot Officer Ryder and a sergeant comprised the crew of an aircraft which crashed and caught fire shortly after taking off. Flight Lieutenant Smythe and Pilot Officer Ryder managed to extricate themselves from the wreckage but the sergeant was trapped in his cockpit. In spite of the fire and exploding incendiaries, and knowing that there were bombs which had not exploded, the two officers immediately re-entered the crashed aircraft and succeeded in extricating the trapped airman.

Both these officers displayed great courage and a complete disregard for their personal safety.

24th March 1989

'CARVE UP' THAT HAS HAD ITS BENEFITS

"What a carve up!" is a sentiment often muttered in the town over the developments that have taken place in recent years at Bicester House.

Many townspeople have watched in dismay as more and more land has disappeared under bricks and mortar on a large green site in the middle of the town. The large mansion house and its formal gardens, plus a long stretch of tree-planted grassland known as Upper Home Close has been regarded by many as a valuable asset to the landscape of the town that ought to have been preserved.

Coupled with the "what a carve up" remarks there have been dark mutterings of people "making a bomb"



through modern housing development. But are these just false sentiments, and what are the facts? And how many people realise that one of the biggest carvers-up of Bicester House land was the Labour government of Clem Attlee?

Bicester House, as we all know and love, was the 17th century manor built on the site of the Manor House of the Nuns of Markyate, from whom it was bought in 1584 by John Coker. The Coker family, as Lords of the King's End Manor, lived at a Bicester House continuously except for a period of 70 years after 1849. The original 17th century house has been much altered but remains basically a Georgian residence and contains William and Mary panelling and fireplaces. It includes seven bedrooms and four bathrooms.

Bicester house property – within the grey stone boundary wall – also included two cottages in the grounds, Bicester House Cottage and the chauffeur's cottage, sometimes known as Foy's Cottage after the late Mr Dick Foy, who was driver for Mrs Margaret (Margo) Coker. There was also a coach house and a walled kitchen garden, plus the expanse known as Upper Home Close, now the site of the modern Hunt Close housing estate.

In addition and outside the boundary wall was a field on which has been built Hanover Gardens old people's flats.

Newcomers to the town may not realise that Bicester House had a substantial farm as well. This was Home Farm with fields stretching southwards down the Oxford Road and westwards over what is now the King's End estate and at least as far as Kennedy Road and Danes Road.

All that is really left of Home Farm is the farmhouse, which is the large white painted house opposite the present front gate of Bicester House and on the corner of Coker Close where Bicester Health Centre was built in the mid-1970s.

The "carve up" of Bicester House land, or Coker land, run by a small group of trustees, has been going on for many years. Between the two world wars, Major Aubrey Coker, Mrs Margo Coker's husband, sold off Home Farm land for the building of what is now Bicester Community Hospital and Bicester Sports Club. The sports club itself



is governed by trustees of Bicester Sports Association, the umbrella organisation for rugby, football, hockey, cricket and rifle clubs.

The Second World War was a watershed for all and none more so than for Bicester House. The labour party that was swept into power became one of the prime carvers-up of Coker land when, through Oxfordshire County Council, the government compulsorily brought a large area of Home Farm land to provide council houses to create the present King's End estate, providing homes for workers imported from the north of England and Scotland to be employed at Bicester Ordnance Depot. There were also private plots made available for individuals to build their own homes.

Another change came in the 1950s when the then Ploughley Rural District Council – amalgamated into Cherwell District Council in 1974 – tried to buy Bicester House to put its offices scattered around the town under one roof. Talks fell through, but the council did buy land from the Cokers to build the present Waverley House in Queen's Avenue, which is now the local office of Cherwell District Council and the magistrates' courthouse and register's office.

As well as Waverley House, the town's police, fire and ambulance stations were built on Coker land. One stipulation of the sale of land to Ploughley Council was that it should build a cottage within the grounds of Bicester House to replace a gardener's cottage on the

Queen's Avenue site. This is Foy's Cottage.

By the time Mrs Margo Coker (pictured opposite) died while on a shopping expedition to Selfridges in Oxford Street, London, in 1978, aged 80, most of the Bicester House land outside the landholding seen in the town centre today had been mostly sold. When Major Coker died, Bicester House and land was inherited by a niece, Denise, Lady Kilmarnock and another relative. But Mrs Margo Coker was given a life tenancy, in other words she was able to live there for the rest of her days.

About the time of Mrs Coker's death, the trustees of the Coker Trust sold just over two acres of field to the Hanover Housing Association. This was the field between the boundary wall of Bicester House and Manorsfield Road. Hanover built 69 flats for old people and their development is called Hanover Gardens (shown below).

The price Hanover paid for the land has been described as being "reasonable" and "peanuts" or at least below the market value. The sale to Hanover was seen by the trustees as allowing a suitable development on the edge of Bicester House and gardens. It has certainly benefited the community at large as Cherwell District Council have the right to nominate a fair proportion of the tenants.

Mrs Coker left a will of £252,000, which included £1,000 to be distributed among her servants. Following her death, the pace at which buildings and land was disposed of increased.

Lady Kilmarnock, doubtless following advice, broadly divided up the property into two: Bicester House and several acres of formal gardens, plus Bicester House Cottage, coach house, and walled kitchen garden in one lot; the other was Upper Home Close extending to about seven acres and including Foy's Cottage.

Bicester House and the other land and properties were sold for about £110,000 to a Mr Michael Barker, of Souldern, in early 1979. Within a fortnight, Bicester House and gardens were back on the market, but Mr Barker sub-divided the rest of what he had bought. Bicester House and gardens were sold for a reputed £89,000 to Mr and Mrs Michael Smith.

Mr Barker told the Bicester Advertiser that the reason Bicester House and most of the gardens were put back on the market so quickly was because "the house was



bought by a company of which I am chairman and a partner of mine was going to live there. He has sold a house in Hampshire. But he decided that the house was too far away from his business in Hampshire to commute and because of these changed circumstances the house has been re-sold." This was to Mr and Mrs Smith.

Mr Barker sold Bicester House Cottage to Mr John Brown, now a town and district councillor, for about £36,000. He converted into a house, the coach house which was sold to Mr Terry McShane. Mr Brown and Mr McShane have since moved to Bucknell Road, Bicester, and Launton respectively. Mr Brown sold to Mr and Mrs Smith, who have since moved to Adderbury.



The walled kitchen garden was sold by Mr Barker to Leyward Development Company of Kidlington, who sold it on to a development company in Oxford called MCM. They were the builders of the three large detached Georgian-style houses (shown above) that now stand just off Queen's Avenue. Meanwhile, Mr and Mrs Smith extended their land holding by buying a piece of land called the "wild garden" from Mr Barker for a reputed £4,000.

Lady Kilmarnock then put up for auction Upper Home Close, extending to about seven acres, including Foy's Cottage. The auction by estate agents Messenger's, who had been managing agents to the Coker Trust for many years, was in November 1979. A garage owner, Mr Peter Brewer, paid £114,000 for Upper Home Close and Foy's Cottage. His business was Brewer's, of Nuneham Courtenay, south of Oxford, and he lived at Long Wittenham. Mr Brewer subsequently moved to a house in West End, Launton, and tried to develop Upper Home Close for housing.

In February 1981 he won an appeal to the Department of the Environment against Cherwell District Council's refusal of planning permission to build up to 22 houses on Upper Home Close. Mr Arthur Cockburn, the department's inspector, who conducted the appeal, had heard views from townspeople that the Coker family had not wanted Upper Home Close developed for housing and had deliberately planted it with trees in an attempt to preserve the land. But in his report Mr Cockburn said he did not think the

development would affect unreasonably Bicester House, a Grade 2 listed building, as Mr Brewer had agreed to build a 7ft stone boundary wall. Mr Cockburn said the public enjoyed no rights of access over the land and that tree preservation orders would be put on many of the trees. Others could be thinned out and re-planted elsewhere on the site.

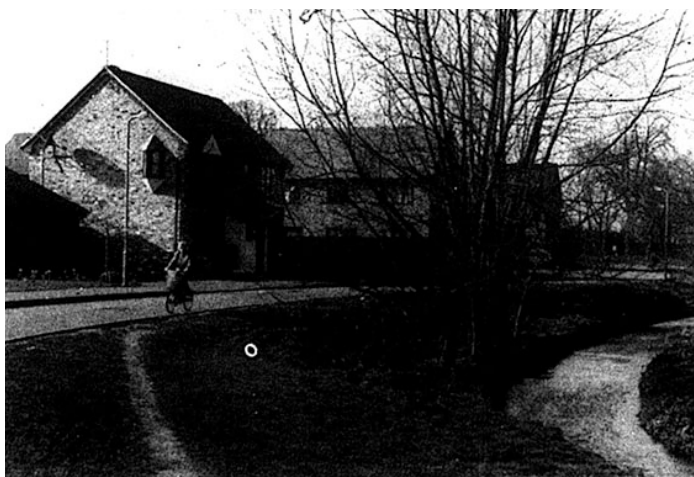
So with planning approval, Mr Brewer tried to develop the site but was thwarted in talks with the district council over the price Cherwell District Council wanted him to pay to gain vehicle access from Upper Home Close on to Manorsfield Road.

Eventually Mr Brewer pulled out of talks and sold Upper Home Close to Bovis Homes who developed what is now Hunt Close (shown below), which also gave the public footpath access from Queen's Avenue through the housing estate to Manorsfield Road. Subsequent problems Hunt Close residents have had over the footpath and parking are not within the scope of this article.

Land of about an acre around Foy's Cottage sold to Mr Brewer was sold off and eventually Banner Homes and now Beazer/Lansdown are proposing to build flats or cottages for elderly people on the site.

Before disappearing from the local scene, Lady Kilmarnock did carry on the Coker tradition of selling land to the community by allowing Bicester Sports Association to buy 12 acres of farmland at a reasonable price for a new sports ground, next to their first sports field. A large portion of this sports land has now been sold to developers Charterhouse McGregor for a Tesco superstore and other retail outlets. The price paid to the association is a reputed £2 million. But while the association may be sad to have "made a bomb", this money is being ploughed back into a new sports club complex at Chesterton.

Lady Kilmarnock died while on holiday in Africa a few weeks ago. A society hostess and director of a public relations firm, she was involved in fund-raising charity events in London and among the causes she supported was the Red Cross, one of Margo Coker's favourite charities. Lady Kilmarnock's funeral was at St Edburg's



Church, Bicester, and she was interred in her husband's grave in the local cemetery.

Mr and Mrs Smith, as owners of Bicester House, gave the public generous access to the gardens. They allowed several charitable fetes to be held in the grounds and their front gate was never closed. However, as prices generally rose, the value of Bicester House naturally increased too, but sadly the ancient mansion was crumbling. Several development companies, McCarthy and Stone among them, approached the Smiths over the purchase of Bicester House and gardens for the building of old people's flats. McCarthy and Stone were the purchasers of another famed property in the town, Bicester Hall, or the old Grammar School, on the corner of London and Launton Roads. They extended the property and it is now Hometree House and the old house has not look so fine for decades.

Before moving to Adderbury the Smiths sold to Bovis Retirement Homes, who declared they would spend about £500,000 renovating Bicester House while

converting it to flats and building retirement cottages.

Bovis Retirement Homes have applied to Cherwell District Council to build more flats or cottages in the "wild garden" where Mrs Smith was recently fined by Bicester magistrates for felling protected trees. Apart from that issue, which may go to a planning appeal, Bovis have been given permission to alter the front gate arrangements of Bicester House. The present gates will be moved slightly to the left of their site and new double-sized gates installed to the right, avoiding the felling of any more lime trees in the King's End verge outside Bicester House. The limes are known as Captain's Walk. The original gates will be locked and become ornamental and both sets of gates will be separated by railings.

Doubtless there are more chapters to be written about Bicester House. But one point must not be lost among sentiment: the town, the community, the public at large has done reasonably well out of the Coker land in one way or another.

Bicester Reflections Book

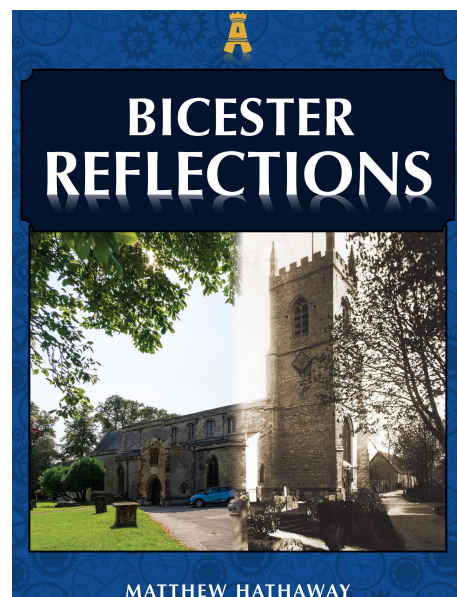
My new book, Bicester Reflections, is out now. In it I have used a collection of merged old and new photographs, to show how parts of Bicester have changed a lot whilst other parts have remained largely untouched, all with a bit of local history thrown in for good measure.

It is available locally from Coles Books, but is also available to order online from Amazon and most major bookshops, or directly from the publisher at www.amberley-books.com/bicester-reflections.html.

It is part of a new series with titles already available covering Bideford, Birkenhead, Chester, Cork City, Greenwich, Leith and Wolverhampton. As well as Barrow-in-Furness, Belfast, Colchester, Preston and Walworth all coming soon. Details of those can be found on the publisher's website.

I'll also be giving a talk, based on the book, to the society in April and we plan to have some copies available to purchase then too, at a special members-only price of £10.

- Matthew Hathaway



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