

# A DAMERHAM FAMILY - THE COLBOURNES.



GRAHAM COLBOURNE

---

*"And yet time hath his revolution: there must be an end to all temporal things, an end to names and dignities. Where is Bohun, where's Mobray, where's Mortimer? Nay, which is more and most of all, where is Plantaganet? They are entombed in the urns and sepulchres of mortality".* These words of Sir Randulphe Crewe, a 17th century judge, describing the demise of England's leading families in the carnage of the Wars of the Roses, could equally describe what has happened to many rural communities, including Damerham, during the past century.

To appreciate what has occurred, simply substitute for the illustrious families mentioned, the rather humbler names of Ambrose, Marvel, Beach and Colbourne, all of whom, so prominent in the 19th century, have now all but disappeared from the village scene.

The 1851 census record shows there were at that time forty-nine members of the Colbourne family living in Damerham (the name may be spelt in any number of ways. Colborne, Coberne, Colburn, were common, but all were from the same family. The census takers, having to rely on verbal information from largely illiterate people made up their own

spellings.) Only the Ambrose family was more prolific. These families together made up possibly a quarter of the population of the village. Other families strongly represented in the mid 19th century included the Marvels, after whom Marvels Plot in the High Street is named, the Beachs, Vincents, and Blakes. However, not all of the longstanding families have disappeared. The Tillers and Jerrards are examples of those showing greater powers of survival.

A few years ago, I was approached by Mrs. Brenda Sherwood (nee Colbourne) who lives near Portsmouth. She was researching the history of the Colbourne side of her family and asked for my help with the Damerham branch. From here I obtained very useful information establishing that members of the Colbourne family had been present in Damerham since the mid-18th century, and probably much earlier. For my part, I was able to help her with some anecdotal evidence passed down from older members of the family. Some of this may be merely tradition or legend, but much probably contains at least a grain of truth. Whatever the case, it often makes a good story.

It seems that the Colbournes are an old Wiltshire family. Damerham was, of course, part of Wiltshire until 1895. Brenda Sherwood has traced her branch of the family back to 1533, with the birth of one Robert Colbourne at Lacock, the site of the famous abbey and home of the pioneer of photography, Fox-Talbot. Members of the family appear to have migrated south during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, drawn mainly by the seaports of Portsmouth and Poole. The family is now well established in both towns. It may be that en route to Poole

a son of the family visited Damerham, married and decided to settle here. We shall probably never know for certain.

However, we can be sure that by the middle of the 18th century, the Colbournes had settled in the village and within a hundred years had become one of the leading families. The earliest substantiated reference to the family comes with the marriage of William Colbourne to Mary Oates in 1775. William was probably born in 1750, the son of Thomas Colbourne and Mary Grey, but the connection is unproved.

Up to the middle of the 20th century the family remained relatively strong in the village. The majority of family members in the middle years of the present century were descendants of James Colbourne, who was born in 1813. By all accounts James was the dominant member of the family through the 19th century, and his line remained in Damerham well after the majority of the descendants of his seven brothers and sisters had gone. His photograph, taken late in life, shows a typical Victorian, reminiscent of an Old Testament patriarch, complete with large white beard.

James was the local butcher and lived at Crossways where the large Edwardian house now stands. It is said that each Christmas he supplied and roasted an ox on the verge outside his house for the poor of the village, although by the 1881 census he seems to have diversified and become a General Dealer. James's uncle Thomas was the local grocer in the first half of the 19th century so between them the Colbournes appear to have cornered the market in the provisions trade. Recent research shows that Thomas was living in the Chippenham area at the time of the calling of his banns of

marriage to Anne Sansom, a Rockbourne girl, in 1801. He may well have been serving an apprenticeship with a relative at the time, and this seems to reinforce the Wiltshire connection.

Surprisingly, at a time when Damerham would have been largely controlled by the Cootes, the Colbournes, a family largely of agricultural labourers and small tradesmen, held property some of which was let. James (born 1813) was certainly an owner occupier and landlord, and Thomas (born 1778) left property to his sons John and Phillip on his death in 1856. It was commonly said by older members of the family that there were Colbournes of considerable wealth in this period. One is said to have had sufficient gold sovereigns to cover his kitchen table, but regrettably for his descendants, he lost his fortune in drinking and gambling. There were also some scoundrels. One member of the family, possibly Phillip, aware that hens were fetching more than cockerels at market, trimmed a cock bird's comb and placed an egg in its pen to try to fool buyers.

It is clear that in the mid-19th century, the family had strong nonconformist connections. The Will of Thomas witnessed by the Rev. William Rhodes, the Baptist minister, and James, was almost certainly closely associated with the Methodists. In the 1870s, James, knowing that the Methodists were looking to move from their chapel at Mill End, exchanged land which he held in the High Street for the building, which he converted to a dwelling-house. The Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists were both represented in the parish, the Wesleyans at Crendell and the 'Prims' after 1870, in the High Street. In those days nonconformity ran hand in hand with radical

Liberalism, and this tradition survived into the 1960s. I well recall my father, George Ephraim (born 1907) deep in very civilised political controversy with Major Peter Woolley, our neighbour and local Conservative agent. Among a people who still held the Duke of Monmouth in affection, this was not surprising.

James Colbourne died in 1887, but was predeceased by his eldest son, Ephraim. It was traditional that the eldest sons of the family should include in their names either James or Ephraim. Thankfully, my mother put an end to this! My grandfather (born 1871) was the son of Ephraim, and naturally was named James. He was the youngest of four children, and the only boy. Two of his sisters left the village. Emma married a member of another old Damerham family, the Blakes, and moved to Ide, a village near Exeter. The reason is not clear, but there may well have been a family connection. Mrs. Sherwood has found that a Thomas Colbourne was buried at Ide in 1684, but this may merely be a coincidence.

Scandal surrounded another sister, Bessie, who eloped with a coachman called Wood and went to live in Lanark in Scotland. Many years later, her son Tom Wood appeared in Damerham much to the family's surprise and consternation. His accent was virtually unintelligible, but my father declared him a true Colbourne.

Over the years, the leading families appear to have sought dynastic alliances within the parish through marriage. The Colbournes are no exception in having blood ties with many of the well known Damerham families, past and present. One of the more exotic characters to add to the gene pool appears to have been William Napoleon Vincent, known as Billy. He

was probably born at the time of the Crimean War (1855) when the French Emperor Napoleon III was popular in England. His antecedents are shrouded in mystery. My father rather disparagingly referred to him as the man with "neither beginning nor ending of days" - a reference to the Old Testament character Melchisedec. His twin daughters, my great-aunts, insisted that he had Spanish blood. It may be that he was descended from Spanish gypsies. There were many of these in the villages of the South Wiltshire Downs in the mid 19th century, as described by W.H. Hudson in "A Shepherd's Life", based on a shepherd called Lawes, who lived at Tidpit.

Whatever the case, Billy Vincent married Annie White, a member of another well known local family. They had seven children, the eldest of which was Louisa Adelia (born 1880), my grandmother. She was twice married. Her first husband Harry Tiller was killed in action in 1918. She was remarried to Robert James Colborne (born 1887), known as Jim, who it now appears was descended from my great-great-grandfather's brother James. Unusually, my father married the daughter of the first marriage, Kathleen, while his youngest brother Ralph married the daughter of the second, Cynthia. On marriage, she merely added a 'u' to her surname.

After living at Lower Daggons my grandparents James and Agnes Colbourne (she was formerly a Thorne) returned to lived at "Resthaven" the converted chapel at Mill End, in 1929. Only a few of the three sons and four daughters lived at the family home, and even they moved away when the Second World War changed village life forever.

My father, George, who had married in 1942, departed for active service in France, Belgium and Holland; his brother Eric was posted to Gibraltar, and his sister Nellie served as a nurse in Durban, South Africa. After the war, only Nellie and Ralph remained at "Resthaven".

My father had acquired a cottage and land in the High Street on the break-up of the West Park Estate a short time before his marriage. The cost of the purchase was £210. There were frequent visits to my grandparents at Mill End, however. One of the great delights was to sample the cool, clear spring water at Tommy Bedford's watercress beds nearby. At the time, the bungalow had no electric supply and was lit by oil lamps. Grandfather's radio was powered by large accumulator batteries which regularly had to be carried to Messrs. Edwards and Smith's photograph shop in Fordingbridge, for recharging.

My grandmother died in 1949, and grandfather left to live with his eldest daughter, Muriel at Alderholt. He died in 1953. On his death the family home was sold. Coincidentally it was acquired by Mrs. Binden, my mother's Aunt Nell on the Tiller's side.

My maternal grandmother, now a widow, lived opposite our cottage in the High Street. Her house was Rhodes Cottage, the home in the 19th century of the Rev. William Rhodes, founder of the Damerham Baptist church. It was still owned by the Church. My grandmother known generally as "Auntie Cis" kept a small shop selling mainly sweets and haberdashery from a bay window which looked out onto the street. As children we waited eagerly for sweet deliveries, since Mr. Bound, the deliveryman always allowed us a sample

from his boiled sweet jars. These jars served a dual purpose when empty. Grandmother used them to make butter. She seemed to sit for hours rocking the jar until the cream formed a pat of butter.

Shortly after the War my father kept a Jersey cow which provided some milk; but our requirements were mainly met by Mr. Charlie Pattle who delivered milk by pony and trap, and dispensed it direct from the churn. Home deliveries were common before the advent of Messrs. Tesco and Sainsbury. My grandmother, with whom we went to live in 1950, dealt with Messrs. King of Fordingbridge, and Mr. 'Dickie' Rogers, for her groceries. Representatives of these firms visited and took the week's orders, with grandmother, a formidable little woman, directing proceedings across the table. Representing Mr. Rogers was Herbie Nicklen, a great village character who delighted in, as we might say to-day, winding her up.

Like many villagers we kept pigs and poultry. It was always a great thrill to take the handcart to Rockbourne to collect the young pig from Mr. Bertie Vincent to be fattened up. The pig was eventually slaughtered on the premises by Mr. George Young, and the hams were salted and hung in a cupboard beside the fireplace. Meetings of the Pig Club, a type of co-operative, were held in the Baptist schoolroom.

Sanitation in those days was rudimentary, comprising chamber pot and privy. There was great joy when grandmother had an Elsan chemical toilet installed. Things further improved when the family moved into a new house, "Holmleigh" in 1953. We had a septic tank and flush toilets. "Holmleigh", now the

Hooper residence, was built by Mr. Nelson Bush, who was married to a cousin of my father. My father personally made the bricks, since he was working at Reads of Sandealth at the time. Shortly after, his brother Ralph had a new house erected on the adjoining plot.

For many village families like the Colbournes, life was probably not radically different in the 1940s from how it had been for the past century. As children our World seemed triangular, bounded by the Chapels, the C. of E. School, and the Cricket Field.

Although my family were closely connected with the Baptists, we also attended the Methodist Sunday School, where the Superintendent was Josh Tiller, village postmaster and raconteur. Sunday always meant chapel, usually four times a day. If grandmother had anything to do with it, the spare time was filled with reading uplifting literature.

The Village School when I started to attend in 1948 catered for all ages from four to fifteen. There were two schoolrooms with a Hall between them. Classes were divided into 'standards'. Miss Nellie Tiller took the infants up to the age of eight, while the Head, Miss McKenzie, later Mrs. Wilding, taught the older pupils. From time to time, the Vicar, the Rev. Henry Moule, came in to promote religious instruction. The school had a deeply religious ethos and we attended at the Parish Church regularly. Ascension Day was particularly welcome, since we attended Church in the morning, and then had a half day's holiday. The Moule connection lasted in Damerham for a considerable period. Henry Moule was succeeded by his son George, after a period

when the Rev. Arthur Phillips was incumbent, and his widow lived in West Park Lane until she was over 100 years old.

School in those days meant hard work, but the more trivial things come more readily to mind. A serious controversy broke out on one occasion over the relative merits of the Fordson Major and Ferguson tractors. I was in a quandary. My uncle drove a Fordson, but my particular friend at the time, Brian "Harris" Penny's grandfather had acquired a new "Fergie". For once blood proved thinner than water. The Ferguson won. Ice Cream also became a major issue. Our experience was confined to a rather watery product manufactured by Major Melville at Sandealth. Then Douglas Morrison came to the village and alleged that something called Walls was far superior. He was rolled in the mud for his pains, but in retrospect he was probably right.

A greatly admired fellow pupil was Denis Turner, a gypsy boy who attended school only infrequently. His lunch arrangements impressed us all. He simply went to the allotments opposite the School, pulled up a swede, knocked off the earth, and cut off chunks with his penknife. Sadly Denis later joined the Army, but was frequently in trouble, and was discharged. He died several years ago, at an early age.

We played cricket morning, noon and night, in season and out of season, and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. On our own initiative we arranged matches with Rockbourne Boys, and also a team from Bishop Wordsworth School. The star player was Paul Nicklen, whose father opened for the village team. Besides the three

Colbourne brothers, there were a number of useful players including Malcolm `Tich` Baverstock, David Roberts, and Peter Michaels. Chris Baverstock was of a slightly older age group, but often joined us. The important step was graduating to the village team. This happened normally when an older player scratched. We all knew that Mr. Arthur Jerrard worked shifts, and quite frequently had to withdraw at short notice, so opportunities often arose. Mine occurred in 1956 when I was drafted in against Wimborne. I survived one delivery and was saved from total humiliation when Brian Ray, the last man out, was bowled with the first ball of the next over.

Now they are all gone. The descendants of James Colbourne have joined the Marvels, Beachs, Blakes and Vincents, and many others who no longer have a place in Damerham. Mrs. Mary Colborne, the wife of Charles Colborne, brother of my mother`s step-father, is the last remaining resident of that name. The decisive year was 1968 when my father died, two sons married and left the village, and the youngest son went to college not to return.

Sir Andrew Crickett records that he first went to Damerham in 1857 at the age of eleven and stayed as a pupil of the Rev. Richard Allnutt for three years. Fifty years on, he was able to refer to "those far-off days at Damerham on which I look back across the sands of time with mingled pleasure and regret." I suspect that many from the old village families now scattered abroad could say the same. Pleasure in remembrance of friendships made in the security of the extended family of the village: regret that the pressures of modern life have broken the continuity which had existed for generations.

## THE CHURCH OF ST. GEORGE'S



TO THE TUNE OF THE MOUNTAINS OF MOURNE.

COMPOSED BY DON HIBBERD 1970

---

The village of Damerham is a wonderful place  
And we would not be singing if it were not the case.  
Happenings and characters are the life of this place,  
And we'll tell you about some if you give us a space.  
There's a Herby, a Percy and a Daisy or two  
There are Baverstocks and Watermans and Tillers not a few;  
The village of Damerham is a wonderful place  
And we wouldn't be singing if it were not the case.

Tonight we look back on the year that is past  
With such happy memories we know they will last,  
From the vicarage in February a Moule disappeared  
Though many were left in the garden we feared.  
When came cold March winds the vicarage did glow,  
Paint pots and brushes were all on the go.  
The vicarage of Damerham's a wonderful place  
And we wouldn't be singing if it were not the case.

One grey day in April the Bishop did come  
To see round the parish and meet everyone  
The ladies were handing out all the spread  
While the Dean and the Bishop measured each other's head.  
The Bishop pressed curate to play his guitar  
But without all the strings he couldn't get very far  
The Church of St. George's is a wonderful place,  
And we wouldn't be singing if it were not the case.

The fourth of July was a wonderful day  
Stalls and Teas in the garden made everything gay.  
But cakes in the sun was our biggest mistake,  
The table was dripping with cream from the cake.  
Now the thing that proved such a splendid success  
Was a look at the village in the days of Aunt Bess.  
The Village of Damerham's a wonderful place,  
And we wouldn't be singing if it were not the case.

The season of cricket got off to a start  
When first asked to play the curate hadn't the heart  
But a little persuasion got him to play  
And they ever after regretted the day.  
His batting was bad but one memorable match  
He woke to discover he'd made a good catch.  
O the cricket is good in this wonderful place  
And we wouldn't be singing if it were a disgrace!

And now we have come to the end of our song,  
And these things you will see on the screen before long.  
We've sung about Bishop, cricket, party and stall,  
And suggested many things we might like to recall,  
There are still many things about which we could tell,  
But the details of which we don't know very well.  
The village of Damerham is a wonderful place  
And we would not be singing if it were not the case.