

## DINDER and THE LEGEND OF THE DRAGON

Dinder is a small village to the east of Wells set in the valley below the A371. Its name means 'the house in the valley' and running beside the main street is the river Sheppey. The estate formed part of the early endowment of the bishopric of Wells. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century it had been granted to William Fitzjohn and by 1327 the manor was held by Richard de Rodney and his family until the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was then sold to Richard Hickes and the Hickes heiress bought it for her husband George Somerville who died in 1776. His son Rev William Somerville built the present Dinder house in 1801, on the site of the former manor house. On the death of William's widow in 1801, the estate passed to his nephew, James Somerville Fownes, who took the surname Somerville, and saved it from extinction in Dinder. The end of the family connection with Dinder House was brought about by the death of Admiral of the Fleet, Sir James Somerville in 1949. The house was bought by Michael and Rosalie Fiennes in 1994 and after extensive restoration work it became the headquarters of the Shoon business in 1995.

In 1881 the population of the village of Dinder was 207, rising to 240 in 1891 but then falling to 157 by 1981. Compared to many other Mendip Villages it appears to be quite an affluent village in so far as the main occupation was service. 26 servants were employed at Dinder House, Shalford House and the Rectory and also on the three farms namely Crapnell, Lower and Middle. The land was arable and pasture and there were also limestone quarries in the area. 12 people were employed on the farms, including a dairyman and a shepherd and six were employed as stone masons. Other manual workers included two agricultural workers, eight gardeners, five general labourers and a railway labourer. Edward Lovell was a County Magistrate and there was also a bailiff, a solicitor's clerk, two undergraduates and two governesses in the village. In addition there was also a baker and a shopkeeper. There were 67 children under the age of 13 and those of school age went to the mixed National School (opposite the stream) which had been built in 1851.

In 1883 the two main landowners were AF Somerville and E Lovell and they were both JPs. Miss Ellen Hewett was the school teacher and the average attendance was 41. According to Kelly's Directory there was also a beer retailer in the village by the name of Blinham or Blinman but on the 1881 census his occupation is given as mason. Apparently there was no pub in the village but beer was sold from the house next to the school and

opposite the stream. There is a metal sign hanging outside the house which looks like a pub sign but is in fact the crest of the Somerville family - consisting of a dragon and a ship's wheel. The beer retailer had been there since 1866. A Working Men's Club was opened in 1897.

In 1889 there is mention of another large house, Sharcombe House, inhabited by JF Hall, but this was destroyed by fire in 1923 when it was under the ownership of James Galloway. This was later rebuilt. In 1901 there were 45 houses in the village and the total population was 218 - 116 males and 102 females. A Post Office was opened in 1902 and the sub postmaster was W Hall, but the nearest telegraph office was still Wells. Previously there had only been a pillar box adjacent to the church. It became a telegraphic and telephonic office in 1910. The school now took 56 children (it had been enlarged in 1884) and the teacher was Miss M Wakeham. It was enlarged again in 1907 to take 70 children, the teacher then was Miss Aimee Fox. There is no longer a school in Dinder but the building is still there and it is now a private house.



**Dinder School by the leat**



**Dinder School as it is today**

Although Dinder is only a very small village it has a very unusual ancient legend about a Dragon associated with it. The story goes that the people of Dinder, Dulcote and North Wootton were plagued by a dragon. It began with eating the children but it was not until it started eating the stock that they got really worried. Bishop Jocelyn of Wells was called upon to save the villagers and he rode out with his men at arms but in the end he slaughtered the dragon single-handed around the year 1240. Apparently the story is well documented in ancient papers held at Eton College, after being retrieved from Somerset Monasteries. The legend has come down that the event has to be celebrated every 50 years to prevent the dragon from coming back to life. The last time the re-enactment took place was in November 2001. The villagers made a dragon out of withies, bamboo and masking tape and it was paraded through Dinder before being stabbed to death.

The symbol of the dragon can be seen in various places around the village. In the church of St Michael and all Angels there is a two headed stone dragon above the south chapel window, behind the Rector's stall. This was found in three pieces built into the chancel walls when alterations were being made to the church in 1872. It dates back to Norman times and it suggests that the original church of Dinder was built around this time. There are also some dragon heads to be found on the apex of roofs of some of the houses by the leat and as previously mentioned in the crest of the Somerville family.



**The crest of the Somerville Family outside the beer retailer's house**

When the last enactment took place in 2001 the children of the schools in and around Wells made a mosaic depicting the story of the dragon. This can be found in the grass alongside the path that goes around the moat outside the Bishop's Palace.



The Mosaic



Like many other Mendip villages Dinder did its part during WW11 and helped Somerset to become the second largest resistance organisation in the country. There was an Auxiliary Unit at Dinder based on Dulcote Hill, above the old railway where the quarrymen used to load stone. There were eight men in the Unit and they used to train after work as they had to be unseen and unrecognised. In 1940 The Green Line (Home Defence) was set up through the Mendips. An anti tank ditch was dug round Wells and Dinder circling Maesbury Ring. Bent railway lines were stuck into slots in the road to stop armoured vehicles and some of these slots still survive in Dinder. Clusters of concrete blocks were cast on the spot at Sharcombe Park and they kept the enemy tanks where the defenders could see and hit them.

### **Sources of Information**

- 1 Census Returns
- 2 Kelly's Directory
- 3 Mendip - A New Study by Robin Atthill
- 4 Mendip Country by Jillian Powell and Julia Davey
- 5 Somerset v Hitler by Donald Brown
- 6 The Somerset Village Book by Somerset Federation of Women's Institutes
- 7 GenUKI website
- 8 BBC website
- 9 Black and white photo from the Francis Frith Collection
- 10 Other photos my own

**Jean Birks 2009**