

John Wallis Dodgson, *The War and us*, manuscript diary, 1939-1950

Special Collections featured item for February 2005 by Gil Skidmore, former Research Collections Co-ordinator

John Wallis Dodgson, 1869-1950. *The War and us*, manuscript diary, 1939-1950. 17 volumes with indexes.

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John Wallis Dodgson (seen *right* in a photograph taken at Woodley Airfield in the 1930s) was born in Reading in 1869, the son of John Dodgson, a cigar manufacturer from Liverpool. While studying for an external London B.Sc. Dodgson worked as a Demonstrator in the Chemistry and Physics department of the newly established University Extension College at Reading from 1892-1895. At the same time, from 1893-1896, he lectured in Chemistry at the Catholic school, St Mary's College, in nearby Woolhampton. In 1903 Dodgson was given a Reading University degree by association and in 1904 he was appointed as lecturer in Inorganic Chemistry.

Dodgson's lucid lectures and patient teaching endeared him to his students and he took a great interest in their welfare. He was particularly concerned with 'non-resident' students and became Warden of St. David's Hall when it was set up for their benefit in 1920, remaining until his retirement in 1934. (He is pictured below, *front 3rd from right*, with staff and students of St David's in about 1930)





He shared his knowledge of the architecture and archaeology of Berkshire and of places abroad he had visited and photographed on holiday, often through showing lantern-slides that he had made himself. Throughout his university career and to the end of his life he was an enthusiastic member of the Old Students Association, keeping up an extensive correspondence with those he had taught.

Dodgson retired in 1934 and was married the following year to Phyllis Mottershall, a teacher 30 years his junior. The couple lived quietly in Woodley, on the outskirts of Reading, in a house called St Davids in Reading Road, gardening and doing voluntary work in their community. When the Second World War broke out Dodgson began to keep a diary, recording local and national events and his own feelings about them, which he continued for the rest of his life.

Dodgson started his diary (*see below*) on September 1st 1939, calling it *The War and us, a daily record*. He later added to this first volume a cutting from the Sunday Observer of January 7th 1940 which probably expressed his reasons for writing.



If there ever was a time to start a diary it is in January 1940, and it is well to find that over ten million have been published for the year. A lot is going to happen before December 31, and, in addition to the narratives of the professional historians, a personal one of these exciting times will always be an interesting volume to dip into. Indeed, it will almost be a duty to one's grandchildren to leave a record as to how it struck us at the time.

Woodley had begun to change from a quiet rural village to a suburb of Reading some years before the war. Woodley airfield opened in 1929 and soon afterwards a factory making Miles aircraft was established. In 1938 Miles secured a large contract to produce Magister trainer aircraft and a major expansion of the factory led to an unprecedented growth in housing in the surrounding area to accommodate the workforce. In addition, the evacuation of London and other major cities began just before war was declared in September 1939 and Reading was expected to play host to more than twenty two thousand extra people, mainly mothers with children. Dodgson and his wife were most concerned with the effect of the evacuation on Woodley but had no choice but to take in two evacuees, Mrs Thorne from Battersea and her two year old son Leslie, the youngest of her six sons.

8
 the about she of course could do nothing but get rid of her charges. The Ministry of Health knows nothing of the health of Woodley or behaves as though it was of no moment. The population due to the coming of the aerodrome is, without further influx, more than the land can bear without a proper drainage system, during the winter the level of the water is within a foot of the surface and during wet weather sewage is often floating about in the gardens of houses not far from here due to overflowing of cess-pools. Already the Wokingham R D C have been fined £50 for offence caused by sewage & were threatened with an action by the Thames Conservancy for polluting the river Loddon. However Mrs Thorne seems a very decent sort of woman. She comes from Battersea where she lives in a six-roomed Council-Flat. She has six sons, two are at work

Phyllis put before [the billeting officer] the danger to Woodley in this reception of refugees, the sanitation is already strained to the utmost. She of course could do nothing but get rid of her charges. The Ministry of Health knows nothing of the health of Woodley or behaves as though it was of no moment. The population due to the coming of the aerodrome is, without further influx, more than the land can bear without a proper drainage system, during the winter the level of water is within a foot of the surface and during wet weather sewage is often floating about in the gardens of houses not far from here owing to overflowing of cess-pools. Already the Wokingham RDC have been fined £50 for offence caused by sewage and were threatened with an action by the Thames Conservancy for polluting the River Loddon.



This photograph of his first evacuees was taken by Dodgson in his garden. (Detail on right) Mrs Thorne is carrying her gas mask in a box and is seen with the push-chair she bought in order to transport her shopping and belongings as well as Leslie.

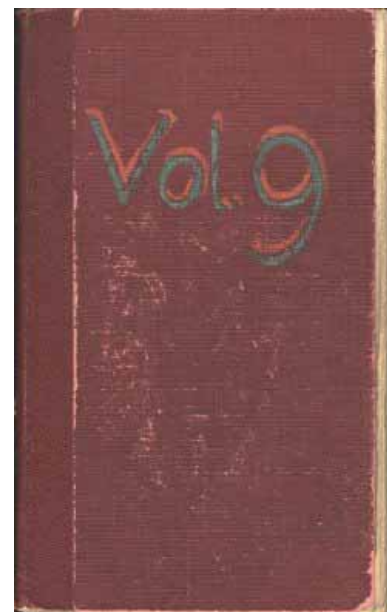


Dodgson was much concerned about the evacuation policy and made extensive notes in his diary of both facts and anecdotes related to the subject. Although they stayed with the Dodgsons for only a short time Mrs Thorne and Leslie, the first of a series of evacuees, made a great impression and showed them a different approach to life.

Our wireless is out of order, and we can get no news. Actually it has been out of order for some time and we used it so little, for few of the programmes broadcast are of any interest, most cheap and rather offensive humour or else jazz-like dance music, that we have almost decided to do without it... The fact remains however that we have no wireless and must get the set put in order if we are to receive news. The government appears to expect us to have wireless. Mrs Thorne said they had a radiogram. I don't know how these luxuries can be afforded by any one, to us expense on such is just a waste of money. I am afraid she will find life with us very dull for we are both busy and like quiet things.

At the beginning of the war Dodgson had volunteered to serve as a Voluntary Food Organiser, noting what supplies were available and from whom in his local district. However, when younger lecturers began to join the armed forces he was asked to return to the university, which he did from 1941-1945.

By 1941 Dodgson had reached volume 9 of his diary (see right). Each lined notebook was labelled on the front and extra sheets of paper were often sewn in. Dodgson purchased a date stamp and headed each entry with the day written by hand and the date stamped, the whole then underlined.



" played (Wootley) + ARP. XI 143.
 Drainage etc. XI 141.
 * WOODLEY, absence of dom; help XI 771
 XI 369 " " Parochial C Council XI 776
 " " Fete for Hospital XI 795, 796
 " " Parish Church Patronal. XI 1.9.
 " " flying accident wire XI 3.23.
 " " car accident. XI 271
 " " Wings for Victory. XI 16.
 " " Baby Show
 " " A wealthy place XI 27
 " " Planes over XI 100, 104
 " " resident prisoners of war in Italy. His story XI 101, 103
 XI 163. " Fete for Organ Fund XI 110, 112
 " " A.R.P practice XI 116, 149, 252
 106 153, 155 " " German plane fired at. XI 124, 136
 " " Nursing " Nurse Parker XI 131
 " " Accident in Reading R. XI 177, XI 156. }
 " " Engaged man had cover XI 204
 Woman in " South Cole district XI 87.
 strange language
 WILSON. R.H. death. XI 242, 243.
 WANTAGE HALL. R.R.F. at. XI 232.

162
 I think he is a bit...
 There is much talk some of special of resumed
 price control. The idea is that at the time of the...
 (The food and chairman) told the view just that some little
 while ago the Board of Trade officials had told him that control
 would be shortly lifted and that Committee could be disbanded.
 This means the lower business and all abnormal corporate
 prices. Now there is little probability of freedom, that relation
 would be with the government, for once we have taken from production
 industry to production making.
 And the new year books is very bad again, the United
 Nations some chiefly American, have had serious reverses.
 This had had to retreat upon to some degree of...
 behind them, while the American troops are disorganised, cut
 off & were able to supply themselves but this could be the
 kind of situation in regard to...
 Several with...
 I went on to the Club where I had tea and
 toast, sat reading papers till nearly 6
 o'clock when I caught the 6.15 bus.
 Our roads are dangerous, blinded by
 motor car lights, I fell into a ditch close to
 the old Manor. Fortunately the ditch was
 dry. I managed to get out and had no
 injury.
 SATURDAY

After his second retirement in 1945
 Dodgson retained his links with the
 university, regularly lunching in the
 Senior Common Room, and
 continued to write his daily diary
 methodically, ending each entry
 with the stamped date for the next
 day.

On 3rd November 1950 he writes,

I went on to the Club where I had tea and
 toast, sat reading papers till nearly 6
 o'clock when I caught the 6.15 bus.

Our roads are dangerous, blinded by
 motor car lights, I fell into a ditch close to
 the old Manor. Fortunately the ditch was
 dry. I managed to get out and had no
 injury.

Unfortunately the fall had been more of a shock than Dodgson realised. He became ill and, unable to write in the diary again, died of heart failure on 5th November at the age of 81.

His funeral was attended by his family, a young man who had been one of the evacuees taken in by the Dodgsons and, as his wife noted, 'the Vice Chancellor and staff of the University of Reading in their academic caps and gowns.'

References

Holt, J.C., *The University of Reading, the first fifty years*, 1977

Museum of Berkshire aviation [<http://home.comcast.net/~aero51/html/>]

Phillips, Daphne, *The story of Reading including Caversham, Tilehurst, Calcot, Earley and Woodley*, revised ed., 1990

Research Centre for Evacuees and War Child Studies (ResCEW)

[<http://www.extra.rdg.ac.uk/evacueesarchive>]