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


Ms 1170, held in the Archives Collection, University of Reading Library Special Collections

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.

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. 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.
The diary contains a mixture of local happenings, gardening notes and Dodgson’s reflections on the war in general and as it affected Reading and the university.

During the night I heard planes and thought that in my sleep I felt a bump. It was a wonderfully clear moonlight night. The strange thing was that raids were not larger.

I went to the Univ. by the 8.44 bus, even that one was full but I did get a seat.

I told Maxted [lecturer in Chemistry] that I had had a letter from the Food Ministry and the gist of it. His comment was that he thought the hands of the Ministry had been forced and that they really did not wish to sell their whole meal.

Before lunch H.A.D. Neville [professor of Agricultural Chemistry] said to me, “Things were a bit noisy round your way last night!” I replied that I had not heard anything or any account of anything, then I remembered the dreamy idea of a bump. He told me that several bombs had been dropped and they fell on Suttons [Seeds] Trial grounds. This is not the first time. He also believed that some were unexploded yet.

At the same time as he wrote his diary Dodgson constructed an index, although this became very complicated and eventually ran to several sequences which were never collated. Some headings, for example ‘Woodley’, have hundreds of entries scattered through the books. Below a sample page can be seen and a detail of one of the ‘Woodley’ sequences.
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/]


Research Centre for Evacuees and War Child Studies (ResCEW) [http://www.extra.rdg.ac.uk/evacueesarchive]