# Crayfisher
# People & Places

**Selected short articles published in**
***The Crayfisher* local church magazine.**


## Jerry Dowlen



**An eBook from Cray 150 Publications**

# Contents



*Cover photo: Scotney Castle, Lamberhurst, Kent.*

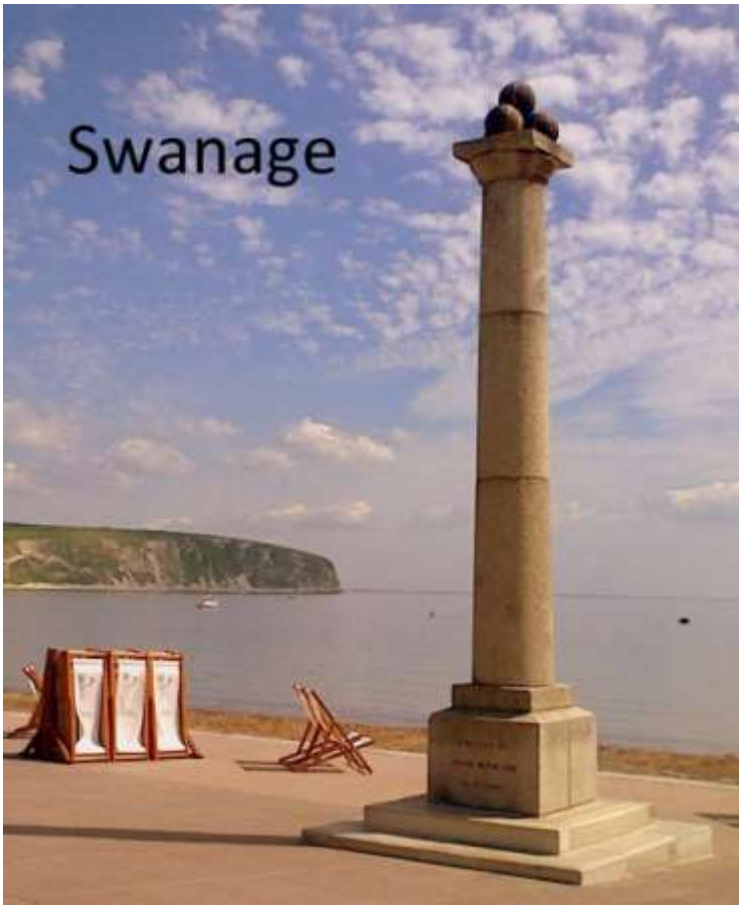
# Foreword


It has been a pleasure and privilege for me to write articles that have appeared in local interest magazines published in Orpington and the Crays.

Writing for *The Crayfisher* was a special experience because the editor Brenda Smith kindly allowed me a free rein to write on a wide range of topics. *The Crayfisher* was the monthly magazine of St Mary's Church in St Mary Cray. The church hall was one of the venues where the Croft Poetry Club held its meetings and in my role of founding and running the club from 2014 to 2019 I often mentioned poetry in *The Crayfisher*.

Here now in this little eBook *Crayfisher People and Places* is a small selection of articles to go with a companion eBook *Crayfisher Churches* also newly published this autumn. I hope you will enjoy reading (or re-reading) these articles.

**Jerry Dowlen**
**October 2025**




Erected in Swanage, Dorset in 1862 this monument celebrates King Alfred conquering the Danes in a naval battle in the year 877. (Page 13).

## Bodiam Castle, East Sussex

Imagine that you'd like to make some home improvements but it would be lovely if someone else would pay for them! Why not write to Buckingham Palace and ask the Crown?

This is effectively the story of Bodiam Castle in East Sussex. Experts will tell you it isn't really a castle it's a fortified manor house. In 1385 Sir Edward Dalyngrigge wanted to build a family home whereupon he offered to add fortifications to double it up as defence for the realm. The port of Rye was silting up and could no longer operate as a naval defence base. King Richard II was persuaded that strategically an inland castle could help block the threat of French invasion. So a wide moat was added; also 'keyholes' for gunfire through the reinforced cannon-proof outer walls.

As things turned out, Bodiam was never tested in warfare or conflict: it remained primarily a grand residence. The open green courtyard of today was packed with the lord's apartments, servants' quarters, store-rooms and kitchens. All in all, therefore, Bodiam Caste is something rare if not unique. In modern parlance it is an 'outsourced' strongpoint of national defence. How lucky we are that it survives today and we can visit it (National Trust) after Lord Curzon generously restored it during the early 20$^{th}$-century. Here is a description penned by Richard Humble in 1984:

'At one look it is everyone's dream of a medieval castle – compact, symmetrical, with towers and battlements of a stone which looks particularly beautiful in late afternoon or evening sunshine. Without the distraction of a bustling modern town on its doorstep, Bodiam seems timeless.'

Bodiam Castle

## Charles Dickens

I would venture that the works of Charles Dickens fall into three categories. One – classic favourite novels like *A Christmas Carol, Great Expectations, David Copperfield, Nicholas Nickleby*, *Oliver Twist, Pickwick Papers* that have gained wide popularity from adaptations for theatre, cinema, radio or television. Two – a bunch of his lower profile novels like *Barnaby Rudge* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* that haven't been afforded the same visibility in theatre, cinema, etc. And three – a surprisingly large category, this: sundry short stories, essays, political tracts, travelogues and even poems that this prolific author penned during his famous lifetime.

I bet that many of our top actors and actresses have jumped at the offer to portray one of Dickens's popular fictional creations. In the early days of the Covid lockdown in 2020 there was a television re-run of the 1999 television series *David Copperfield*. Pure joy! The story abounds with wonderful Dickens characters with gloriously appropriate names. Mr Murdstone – a hard-hearted, cruel stepfather (Trevor Eve). Mr Creakle – an eccentric and dry-humoured schoolmaster (Ian McKellen). Mr Micawber – one of Dickens's most immortal characters (Bob Hoskins – with Imelda Staunton as the long-suffering but ever-trusting Mrs Micawber).

Mr Pickwick? – Ian McKellen has played him, too – and so have Harry Secombe and Nigel Stock. And here's just a small selection of on-screen Ebenezer Scrooges since the war: Basil Rathbone, Alastair Sim, Albert Finney, Christopher Plummer, Michael Caine, George C Scott and Bill Murray.

Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870) has many associations with Kent and London, especially the historic town of Rochester. In the photo dated 2023 Jerry Dowlen (left) walks with Cray 150 author Michael Gould past the Swiss Chalet relocated from Dickens's former home at Gad's Hill. Dickens penned many of his famous novels at Gad's Hill.

## Chief Seattle

At its meeting held at St Mary's Church Centre in April 2019 the Croft Poetry Club discussed the climate change protests that had been headline news from London. It is often perceived that poetry has a strong connection with nature and the environment. For example: John Clare the farmer's boy poet from rural Northamptonshire in the 18th century; William Wordsworth of the Lake District (*Daffodils*); Ted Hughes and his poems of the rugged Yorkshire landscape (*Crow*, and *Pike*).

Two of our members told us of their experiences in London taking part in peaceful marches. Paul Green took inspiration from the teachings of Chief Seattle (1786 – 1866) a leader of the Suquamish and Duwamish native American tribes in what is now the state of Washington. He campaigned for peaceful co-existence with the white settlers. He co-founded in 1853 the Town of Seattle where today a village named after him has become a large metropolis.

He wrote these words: 'The earth is precious to our God. To harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator. Only when the last tree has died and the last river has been poisoned and the last fish has been caught will we realize that we cannot eat money. We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors: we borrow it from our children. Every part of the earth is sacred to my people: every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clear and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.'


Chief Seattle Vera Lynn

## Dame Vera Lynn (1917 – 2020)

At age 103 Vera Lynn had outlived most of the generation that revered her as a national treasure and inspiration for togetherness in World War Two. Finding stardom at an early age in her twenties it was a brave decision by her to volunteer to be flown to long distance, hot and dangerous far-flung war zones such as Burma, Egypt and India to entertain the Allied troops between 1942 and 1944. She was awarded the Burma Star in 1985. Her last public singing performance was on VE Day 50th anniversary in May 1995.

Our parents and grandparents spoke largely of the 1939 – 1945 war mentioning the blitz, the blackout, doodlebugs, rationing and the threat of German invasion. Situated in Kent and London's 'bomb alley' the Crays were certainly in the thick of it all. But in both the World Wars many of the men of the Crays served bravely in hostile climates and faraway countries in the Far East, including Mesopotamia and the same places where the young Vera Lynn was credited for 'her courage and her contribution to morale'.

## Douglas Dunn – a "Moving" Poem

A poem can catch our attention and inspire us at any time. I can vividly remember my first sight of Douglas Dunn's poem *A Removal from Terry Street* in 1972. A student at Hull University, the Scottish-born poet had set his poem in the run-down outer area of that decaying industrial city: an area of mean streets where low-income families and students rented poor quality accommodation.

The imaginary family in this poem can easily be pictured by us in the modern-day context of so-called 'Benefits Street' living: food banks; unemployment; shortage of affordable housing.

***A Removal from Terry Street***

*On a squeaking cart, they push the usual stuff,*
*A mattress, bed ends, cups, carpets, chairs,*
*Four paperback westerns. Two whistling youths*
*In surplus US Army battle-jackets*
*Remove their sister's goods. Her husband*
*Follows, carrying on his shoulders the son*
*Whose mischief we are glad to see removed,*
*And pushing, of all things, a lawnmower.*
*There is no grass in Terry Street. The worms*
*Come up cracks in concrete yards in moonlight.*
*That man, I wish him well. I wish him grass.*

This poem made a great impact on me, and always still does, because the scene - so poignantly described - is so beautifully rounded off by the unexpectedly uplifting last line.

Anyone who is feeling downcast will surely be raised in spirit after reading this poem. Daisy Goodwin for the *Sunday Times* has hailed the poem as a favourite of hers 'because it shows how hope and optimism sustain us through life … it is a wonderful snapshot of a moment of transition.'

## Geoffrey Chaucer

The Croft Poetry Club held its annual meeting at St Paul's Cray branch library in March 2017 with London the chosen theme for poetry, music and song. Our programme took us through the centuries, starting with Geoffrey Chaucer, the first occupant of Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey.

Chaucer was born in Thames Street, near the site of the present-day Cannon Street railway station, in 1341. His father was a wine importer. At the age of six he was sent

away from London to train as a page at the court of Edward III in Westminster.

Yes – I do mean sent away from London! – for 'London' then was really only the walled City of London, the square mile of Roman *Londinium.* Westminster was a separate place and you crossed open fields and land to reach it.

French was the official language of our royal court. Chaucer travelled as a royal envoy to Europe and it was there that he gathered many of the folk-tales and fictional legends that he weaved into his epic *Canterbury Tales*, written in 1388. Returning later to the City of London he took the prestigious post of Controller of Wool at the Port of London, and became rich enough to buy a house in Westminster where he died in 1400.

Chaucer became the first occupant of Poets' Corner when that special area of Westminster Abbey was inaugurated in 1556. His body was already buried at the Abbey, by right of his being a Westminster resident. A marble memorial to him was added.

Peter Ackroyd says: 'Chaucer was the first master of the English language, raising its status and rescuing it from its lowly role as the vernacular of a conquered race.'

## King Alfred the Great

In the seaside town of Swanage a monument to King Alfred has become a temporary shrine where residents and visitors can thank the NHS for the Covid effort. The steps to the monument are filled with beach pebbles painted in bright colours and decorated with messages of community gratitude and fortitude.

The stone column was erected in 1862 in tribute to Alfred defeating the Danes in a sea battle off the Dorset coast in 877. Historians suggest that the Viking fleet actually perished in a storm, but Alfred was none the less a heroic king – our only one ever to be called 'Great'. He defended Wessex and kept the Danes out after their raiders had conquered everywhere else in England. The word 'burh' meaning borough is associated with Alfred who was instrumental in promoting walled towns as the safest and most efficient places for people to live and trade instead of villages.

Another inaccuracy of the monument is the cannon balls on top! There were no such weapons in the ninth century. The ones on the monument are relics of the Crimean War and were brought to Swanage from one of the wooden battleships that returned from Russia to Portsmouth circa 1856.

## Fifty Years of the Liverpool Poets

The poet Roger McGough will be 80 years old in November this year [2018]. He is one of our most popular, enduring and endearing poets. Only he could ask: 'Is a dartboard an *objet d'art*?' He marks the onset of old age with more of his characteristic wit and word-catchery:

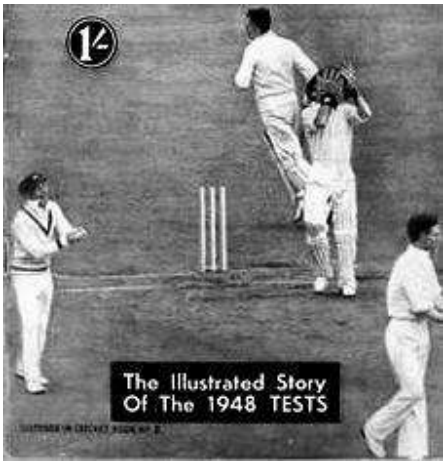
*I used to scintillate.*
*Now I sin till ten past three.*

It was in the autumn of 1967 that the so-called Liverpool Poets (Adrian Henri, Roger McGough [Photo] and Brian Patten) were first published by Penguin. Although mocked in highbrow circles as 'a three-legged pantomime horse' these young poets proved to have wide appeal, especially in the art of 'performance poetry' when they would recite their verse to live audiences, sometimes with musical accompaniment. *The Mersey Sound* proved to be an exceptionally big-selling poetry anthology.

What an exciting time it was to be a Liverpudlian. Beatlemania was at its height. In football, Liverpool won the F.A. Cup in 1965 and Everton in 1966. The late Adrian Henri wrote two lines that surely captured a perfect essence of his city during that colourful 1967 'Summer of Love':

*There are flowers at the bottom of my garden,*
*And ferries at the bottom of my street.*

## London in 1948




Born in 1947 myself, I confess an addiction to books that give eye-witness accounts of English life that I might have observed from my pram! One enthralling read for me is Jack Fingleton's account of the 1948 Australian cricket tour of England. Having last toured in 1938 the visitors arriving by boat had a sobering first view of London after a ten-year absence. Tilbury and the London docks evidenced 'pitiful remnants of bombed-out buildings and homes'. Later the visitors were amazed to see that amidst the acres of buildings razed to the ground in central London, wild flowers and even trees were growing in profusion.

But even though saddened by such sights, the Australians were cheered to find that many famous buildings were still proudly erect, even if battered by shrapnel from the Blitz. And they had discovered something that is as true today in 2018 as it was in 1948! – 'The top deck of a London bus is a magnificent way to see the city when you're back in Blighty.'

Jack Fingleton wrote: 'Down in the streets below were the same taxis, as Cockney as their owners; here and there a proud Chelsea warrior of the Old Brigade in his scarlet coat

and beribboned chest; and a bank messenger top-hatted and tail-frocked and dignified as a duke. In the bus were the same old and varied London types – a little frayed in dress, perhaps, a little tired-looking, some of the girls a little prematurely grey, but still the same old lovable London types.

'"Old tight, luvs," said the Cockney bus-girl and away we chugged up Fleet Street. London had been battered and purged but it was still pulsating in resilient manner.'

## Middleham

For a town of less than 900 residents, Middleham in Wensleydale, Yorkshire has a lot to offer the visitor. It is a centre for horse racing stables. These first were established by the monks of Jervaulx Abbey. Gallops on the moors were built up in Georgian times and brought great prosperity to Middleham. The town has sent out three winners of the Grand National. In the main square the grand inn commemorates Dante, winner of the 1945 Derby.

Middleham enchants with its elegant spick-and-span array of Georgian houses and hostelries. It is surprisingly unspoiled. The only visible modernity is the blue and yellow bunting that identifies the cycling route of the annual Tour de Yorkshire. A medieval relic is the Swine Cross, from the old livestock market a.k.a. the Swine Market. Victorian architecture

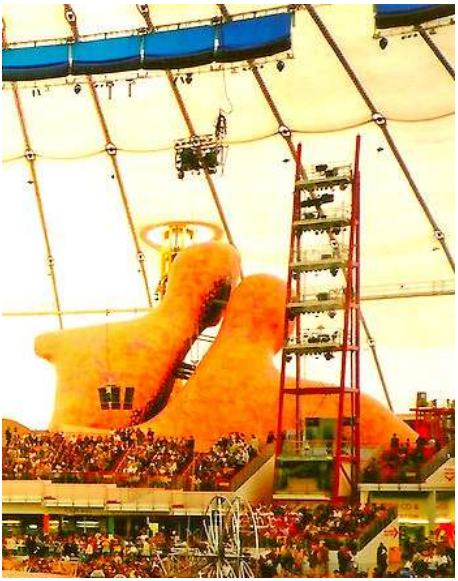
includes the Old School, a Gothic structure from 1869, fronted by a stone fountain built in 1897 for the Queen Victoria Jubilee [Photo, page 18]. The church of St Mary & St Alkelda has 14th century features, taken from Jervaulx Abbey. Most unusually it has three gravestones serving as lintels above windows on the north wall.

The giant ruins of Middleham Castle dominate the skyline [Photo, below]. This was the home of the Nevill family and in 1459 was occupied by 'Warwick the Kingmaker'. The castle's history is entwined with the War of the Roses. The future King Richard III spent his childhood in Middleham where he married Anne Neville in 1472. His ascension to the throne in 1483 was joyously celebrated in the town. His death at Bosworth Field in 1485 was greatly mourned. A requiem mass is still said in Middleham Church each year on the anniversary of his death.

The bunting that decorates the stone fountain in the centre of Middleham commemorates the Tour de Yorkshire cycle race that has become an annual event after its first staging in 2015.

## Millennium Experience 2000

Did you visit the Millennium Dome in 2000? It opened its doors on the 1st January that year and closed exactly twelve months later. I am so glad that I went to see it – taking my ten year old daughter with intention that when she was older she would look back on it as a landmark memory of a landmark date in the calendar. Britain's right wing press – no friend of Tony Blair and his still new administration – had fed the public a relentless diet of scorn about the Millennium Experience, condemning the attractions and exhibits as amateurish and shoddy. They complained that the project had exceeded budget and that the visitor numbers were pitifully small. But for me, adopting the motto 'I shall speak as I find', it was a once in a lifetime stunning treat to go there. That too was the general verdict of the nearly seven million visitors that made it Britain's most popular tourist attraction of 2000, ahead of the also-new London Eye at Westminster and the third-placed Alton Towers that had been top in 1999.



What has survived most in my memory of the exhibits inside the Dome is the walk-through of the human body.

This innovative and instructive experience stays with me these twenty years later in 2020. I also can readily recall a series of eye-catching zones on the theme of Faith including the history of Christianity; and the spectacular and mind-boggling trapeze show to the accompaniment of Peter Gabriel's mind-blowing musical soundtrack.

Arguably the most impressive feature of all was the Dome itself. It is an architectural phenomenon that has become an indelible icon of the modern-day London skyline. I have never been back inside it – never a member of the audience at the O2 Arena as it became in 2005. My photograph of it in 2017 was taken from the vantage point of the Trinity Buoy lighthouse directly opposite on the Essex side where the River Lea meets the Thames as it curves in a U-shape past the Dome. The German-style oompah band afterwards used my photo in their publicity material and I hold that the Millennium Dome deservedly now ranks alongside Big Ben, St Paul's Cathedral, Tower Bridge and other of London's most instantly recognisable and defining photogenic locations.

# National Trust Gardens

**National Trust Gardens Reopen!**

After the Covid lockdown started on 23rd March 2020 it was very striking that we had week after week of warm, sunny weather with glorious blue skies. It was soon apparent from our house windows or from permitted short walks and car journeys that flowers and shrubs everywhere were bursting into colour. The experts opined that our natural world of animals, birds, insects, flora & fauna was flourishing in the good weather and the unusually clean air. The lack of rain was a challenge for the gardeners but wherever you looked it seemed that a fairy with green fingers had been roaming everywhere with her magic wand to make All Things Bright and Beautiful.

It was frustrating, of course, that showpiece public parks and gardens were closed. Shortly before the shutdown Nancy and I had squeezed in a National Trust trolley-dash in early March. A long weekend in Rye saw us visit Lamb House, Smallhythe Place and Sissinghurst (garden only) in cold weather.

Creatively for the lockdown many museums, parks and stately homes set up on-line virtual tours for customers to log in and see. All well and good but alas no substitute for the real thing. Hence the stampede to book timed entries when some of the NT gardens re-opened their gates in June. Nancy and I managed quickly to bag tickets for Emmetts Garden (Ide Hill) and Scotney Castle (Lamberhurst). But had the floral horse already bolted from the stable? Luckily, no – we were still in time to enjoy glorious azaleas, hydrangeas,

rhododendrons and above all roses. (Has there ever been a year with such a rich profusion of early summer roses?). The safety measures of pre-booked staggered arrival times and one-way walking circuits were efficient and were politely observed by most NT members that we saw. One wonders indeed if these measures could become a permanent feature to advantage.

## Prefab Museum

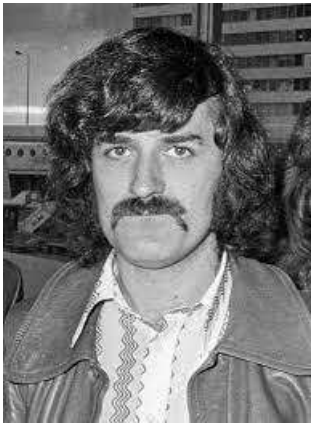
I see in the local news [winter, 2021] that the village of Otford in Kent is losing its last surviving prefab. The tea room attached to the Hospice of Hope charity shop is a prefab that was relocated during the 1970s from its original site in Lewisham. Due to wear and tear it is now being replaced by a new building.

In the aftermath of World War Two many families were placed in these fast-build shoe-box shape constructions. In October 1944 our local newspaper reported a bid by the Council to bring 100 temporary 'portal' houses to the Blacksmith's Lane area of St Mary Cray. The idea was catching on fast and a case was being made for the village of Downe also to be allocated a quota of the new prefabs.

The Prefab Museum is an on-line archive where you can learn about the history of prefabs and you can read the illustrated memoirs of families that lived in one. One posting refers to a prefab in Robin Way on the post-war St Paul's

Cray estate. I would imagine that many of us knew families that lived in a prefab. Perhaps some of their children went to school with us. The actor Michael Caine grew up in one, in Walworth, south London. The years 1944 to 1951 saw an estimated 155,000 prefabs built in Britain. They were intended to last for ten years but there were still a good many standing at the start of the 21st century. It was reported in 2019 that an estate of prefabs in Catford, Kent was the last of its kind in all of Europe to be listed for demolition.

## Remembering a Moody Blue



The very first week of this year (4th January 2018) brought news of the death of Ray Thomas, composer and performer of many songs by the pop group the Moody Blues.

A recurring theme in his songs was restless searching: what is the meaning of life … the universe … why are we here? What is it all about? For example, one of the Moody Blues albums was entitled *In Search of the Lost Chord* (1968).

In one song he pondered finding the answer in the sky: 'Gazing past the planets, looking for total view.' In another he wanted to 'fly his astral plane'. He wrote also the song *Visions of Paradise*.

Searching on planet Earth, with clever, rhyming lyrics and a catchy tune: 'Doctor Livingstone, I presume; stepping out of the jungle gloom; into the midday sun. What did you find there? Did you stand awhile and stare? Did you meet anyone?' [He replies]: 'I've seen butterflies galore; I've seen people big and small; *I've still not found what I'm looking for*.' Some of us look for answers – or *the* answer? – in our Faith. It can be a very personal thing, to decide or try and decide why, ultimately, we are here? Ray Thomas gifted us wonderful music that was enjoyed by millions. His obituary did not record whether, at age 76 or earlier, he had *found what he was looking for*.

## Stand and Stare

At our monthly meeting in August 2019 the Croft Poetry Club was very much on theme with the Parish Letter in which our Reverend Jesse extolled August as 'the slow month'. Yes indeed on rather lazy summer days there comes a priceless opportunity to try Jesse's suggestion that we stop and look at things properly and we appreciate them fully. W.H. Davies the Victorian poet said as much with his famous and often-quoted lines: 'A poor life this, if full of care we have no time to stand and stare.'

Our members decided to discuss whether a countryside 'ramble', by definition, is a slow walk which duly allows time for stop and stare? In the end it was decided best to lose one letter and thereby ensure a very slow walking pace, by instead calling it an 'amble'!

## Tracing your Family History

Church of England parish registers were first kept in 1538. But experts warn that it's difficult to trace your family history that far back. Records unfortunately were lost or destroyed during the Civil War and the Commonwealth. Unless you belong to the nobility your tree will likely start, at best, from the reign of Charles II (1660 – 1685).

In that case my Aunt Dorothy did remarkably well in the pre-internet 1970s to research my family as far back as 1638. She traced the Dowlens to be dwelling in mid-Sussex by the River Adur that runs 22 miles inland from Shoreham-on-Sea towards Burgess Hill and Ditchling. For many years I assumed that these Anglo-Saxon ancestors of mine lived off the land in agricultural or farming occupations. But now that I delve a little deeper I learn that the Sussex Weald wasn't simply farmsteads. There was chalk-quarrying (to make lime for builders); there were forges and furnaces (especially pig-iron); there were trades in brick, charcoal, timber and glass. So maybe my ancestors earned their living in one or more of those occupations.

The River Adur was an important commercial conduit. Steyning was a large Saxon port. So my ancestors might have been shipbuilders? - or were employed loading cargoes on and off boats? Unless I can book a ride with Doctor Who for time travel in the Tardis my questions will never be answered!

Ribbons on the railings at Rochester Cathedral in April 2021: remembering the victims of the Covid pandemic.

Cray 150 Publications aims to publish local interest books and to organise or support local events relating to the art and heritage of Orpington and the Crays. This eBook *Crayfisher Churches* is our latest product. You can find out more from our website or by enquiry at the Croft Tea Room at 263 High Street, St Mary Cray. Our website is regularly updated with local interest articles that you may enjoy reading.



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