



NEWSLETTER

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'TRADITIONAL DACORUM' POP-UP EXHIBITION

We were proud to be involved in this county-wide 'Traditional Hertfordshire' project, in partnership with five other museums and archive services from across Hertfordshire. Our 'Traditional Dacorum' exhibition was inspired by some of our local heritage stories, which gave us an opportunity to showcase some of our traditionally rural artefacts.

Hertfordshire has a unique cultural heritage, and thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund and SHARE Museums East, this project will remind people of their shared history and encourage others to recreate a sense of local identity.

The free exhibition opened to the public on Saturday 27th May where we had fun dancing around a May

pole. DHT would like to thank the Marlowes Shopping Centre in Hemel Hempstead for letting us use one of the shop units; the location was excellent, which really did make our exhibition a great success.

The exhibition also featured artwork created at a workshop run by sign painter Hannah Matthews together with Berkhamsted Arts and Craft inspired by traditional narrow boat canal art.

During the exhibition artist Vanessa Stone demonstrated paper cutting techniques creating a traditional Green Man inspired design.

The Borough of Dacorum is steeped in ancient traditions and history that makes it unique. This was achieved by uncovering local legends, folklore, crafts and celebrations that brought our communities together for centuries. Our corner of south west Herts has been predominantly a rural agricultural area until quite recent times and the exhibition reflects that past.

There were a variety of family craft activities. This included an opportunity to try your hand at straw plaiting, an occupation which many of our ancestors would have been involved in as a cottage industry during the Victorian era. Visitors were invited to add their own ghost or paranormal experiences to our 'ghost map'. Many people enjoyed the games and making their own designs on canal jugs.

Images: Top – Cllr. David Collings (Mayor of Dacorum) cutting the bunting at our private viewing. **Bottom** – Cllr. David Collings (Mayor of Dacorum) and Nicola Minney (DHT's Collections Manager) with the canal art display. Images courtesy Steve Minney.



THE DACORUM HERITAGE TRUST LTD.

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On our second Saturday (3rd June) we had an enjoyable time learning not to get tied up in the coloured ribbons! The group Mike Ruff Music demonstrated and lead members of the



public dancing around the May Pole. While the artist Vanessa Stone demonstrated her cut paper artwork during our exhibition and created a beautifully intricate Green Man design, we used this as one of our colouring pictures.

WWI - 100 YEARS ON – CORPORAL FRANCIS VERCOE

A century ago another brave local hero was sadly killed in action on 4th June 1917 whilst serving with the British Expeditionary Force in Belgium. Gunner Vercoe's death was reported in the Gazette dated 23rd June 1917.

We regret to record that the name of Gunner F. Vercoe, D.C.M., R.G.A., has been added to the growing list of those brave men from this district who have laid down their lives for King and country. Gunner Vercoe, who is the son of Mrs. Vercoe, of West View-road, Hemel Hempstead, was the second Hempsteadian to win the D.C.M., Sergeant R. Evans, Herts Regiment, being the first.

The exploit for which Gunner Vercoe was awarded the coveted distinction was thus described in a letter dated January 2nd, 1916, received by his mother from a comrade:

"We were heavily shelled and gassed. He (Gunner Vercoe) rendered first aid to the wounded and then volunteered to go to the assistance of another battery about 200 yards away.

We could hear the moans of the wounded, and we knew they needed attention. Through a cloud of gas and bursting shell Gunner Vercoe proceeded on his errand of mercy. How he arrived is a mystery. The poor man he was dressing was killed by a shell, which burst inside the barn, and your son was blown out of the barn, badly bruised, burned and gassed. He did good work there and did not leave until all were attended to."

Gunner Vercoe received his well-merited reward on January 10th, 1916.

On February 14th last year Gunner Vercoe performed another stirring deed when he was again wounded. On this occasion his commanding officer wrote to his mother as follows:

"He received his wound performing an act of great gallantry. He and Lieutenant Murray went out from the shelter of their billet to the assistance of a wagon, which had been shelled and of which the drivers had been wounded whilst heavy shelling continued. Another shell came whilst they were cutting loose the horses, and both were wounded, the officer very severely. Gunner Vercoe carried his wounded officer a great part of the way back to his billet, until they met further assistance, and were helped back to the billet. Here Gunner Vercoe insisted upon assisting in the dressing of the officer's wounds before he would allow his own to be attended to although he must have been in considerable pain, and very weak at the time. As you know, he was recently awarded the D.C.M. for gallantry. I will do all in my power to obtain him further honour in recognition of his great gallantry.

"Allow me, madam, to offer you my most sincere sympathy, and at the same time to congratulate you upon having such a son, of whom you must be justly proud."

From the Gazette dated 21st July 1917 - **How Corporal Vercoe Died**

Mrs. Vercoe of West View-road, Hemel Hempstead, has received the following letter with reference to the death of her son, Corporal Vercoe, D.C.M. :



British Expeditionary Force. 4th July 1917.

The Officer Commanding desires me to express his deepest sympathy with you in your sad loss. During the whole of his service with the battery as gunner, bombardier, and corporal your son had the fullest confidence of officers and men, and was deservedly popular with all. Each one of us feel it as a deep personal grief that he is gone from us. Speaking as his section officer I may say that I have never known a man more fearless, more keen, and more devoted to duty. Nothing seemed to tire him; nothing discouraged him; nothing was ever too hard for him.



When he met his death he was off duty, sitting outside his dug-out, reading. There was a sudden burst of shelling in the wood, and one of the first shells struck him; he was killed instantly, and I am glad to think that at least he suffered no pain. His personal effects have been forwarded to D.A.G., and should reach you soon. This is the usual procedure, and must be adhered to in every case. His D.C.M. ribbon and bar, however, I kept, as I was afraid they might slip out and perhaps be lost; the watch, I am sorry to say, was smashed to atoms. He was buried in the battery position and a place which he had been in before when he was with siege, early in the war, and we have put a cross over his grave.

Again assuring you, dear Mrs. Vercoe, of my deepest sympathy.

I remain, Yours very sincerely, G. Cecil North, Siege Battery, Lieut. R.G.A., B.E.F.

Images: Top - Corporal Vercoe's medals: L to R - the DCM, 1914-15 Star, British Medal 1914-18 and Victory Medal. **Bottom** - Corporal Vercoe's pocket watch, showing damage possibly by the shrapnel which killed him. Both artefacts from the DHT collection.

HIGHWAY ROBBERY

The legendary highwayman was born in Hungerford, and christened James Blackman Snook, in August 1761. The fact that his name is commonly quoted as Robert Snooks is perhaps due to a corruption of "that Robber Snook".

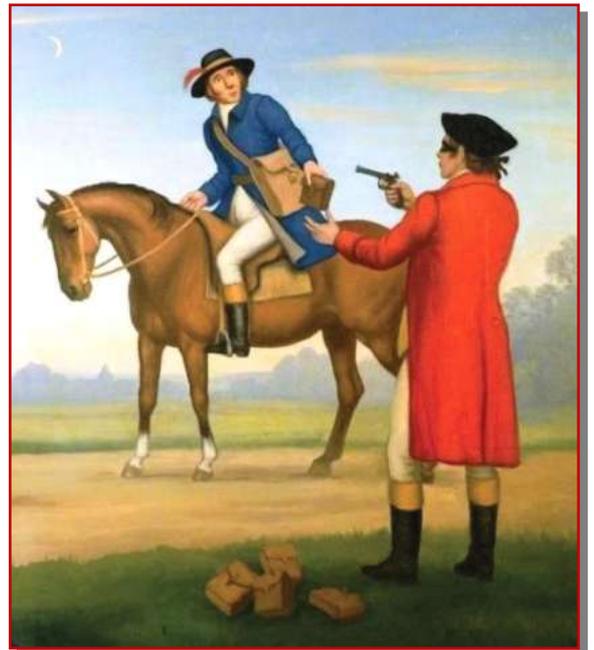
It is thought that earlier he worked as an ostler at the King's Arms, Berkhamsted, if so, his employer, John Page, was destined to meet him in an official capacity at his eventual execution. He was known to be living at Hemel Hempstead in 1800; consequently he would have had the opportunity to become familiar with movements of the post-boy, John Stevens as he crossed Box Moor Common.

On a suitably dark night, Snooks waylaid Stevens as he crossed the common, relieving him with relative ease of his six mailbags, which contained letters, bank and promissory notes - the bags were left scattered over the moor. It is unknown whether he chose that particular night or it was pure good fortune, but the bags contents were exceptionally heavy, one letter alone containing over £500.

The London Chronicle (May 1801) reported:

The post-boy conveying the mail from Tring to Hemel Hempstead, was stopped near Bourne End, in the Parish of Northchurch, about fifteen minutes past ten o'clock last night, by a single highwayman mounted on a dark-coloured horse, who took from him the following bags of letters for London, viz, Winslow, Wendover, Aylesbury, Tring and Berkhamsted.

There is great reason to suspect that one James Snooks committed the robbery. He is a native of Hungerford, where his father now resides, is between 30 and 40 years of age, 5 feet 10 or 11 inches high, has light brown hair cut short, is pitted with the small pox, has lived in and about Mary-le-bone, and is well known in the neighbourhood of Portland Place. He left his lodging in Woodstock Street, Mary-le-bone, early on Saturday morning, and was then dressed in a blue coat, with black velvet collar, marcella waistcoat, with blue and white stripes, velveteen breeches, and dark-coloured stockings. He was tried at the Old Bailey about a year ago, for horse stealing and acquitted. He is supposed to have in his possession several Bank of England notes, Aylesbury, High Wycombe, Uxbridge, Stoney Stratford, and Banbury notes.



Whoever shall apprehend and convict, or cause to be apprehended and convicted, the person committed the said robbery, will be entitled to a reward of two hundred pounds, over and above the reward given by Act of Parliament for apprehending highwaymen: or if any person concerned therein will surrender himself, and make discovery, whereby the person who committed the robbery may be apprehended and brought to justice, such discoverer will be entitled to the said reward, and will also receive His Majesty's most gracious pardon. By command of his Majesty's Post-master General, Francis Keeling, Secretary.

The robbery was reported to High Constable John Page, of Berkhamsted, who posted 'Wanted – £300 Reward' notices for Snooks' capture (the Postmaster General offered £200 and £100 by Parliament). Aware of enquiries about his whereabouts, Snooks fled to Hungerford, subsequently he was spotted in the nearby Marlborough Forest, where he was captured and taken to Newgate Gaol, thence to Hertford Assizes for his trial.

Leaving for Southwark unrecognised, Snooks had achieved what he felt to be the perfect crime. Sometime after the robbery, feeling that the excitement had died down, he despatched a servant to purchase some cloth, charging her to bring him the change from a £5 note, in error he handed her a £50 note, which aroused great suspicion with the trader.

The London Chronicle, 11th March 1802.

James Snook the highwayman was indicted for feloniously assaulting on the King's Highway John Stevens the post-boy who was employed to convey the letters from Tring to Hemel Hempstead, putting him in fear of his life, and taking from him the said letter bags. A considerable number of witnesses were brought forward on the part of the prosecution, by whom several of the notes that were taken out of the letters in the bag, were traced up to the prisoner. It formed such a mass of circumstantial evidence that the Jury without hesitation found him guilty. Justice Heath in his address to the prisoner, previous to passing sentence on him, told him that his crime was so destructive to Society, that he must not flatter himself with a thought of pardon. James Snook was therefore sentenced to execution on the morrow, near the place where the robbery was committed.

He was sentenced to be hung in chains as close to the scene of the crime as possible, a site selected by Mr Page (High Constable of the Hundreds of Dacorum). However, after a petition by the residents; this was commuted to a straightforward execution.

11th March 1802, was declared a local holiday, crowds assembling from early morning. Stopping for a final drink en route to his execution at the former Swan Inn (corner of Box Lane), Snooks is reputed to have rebuked the crowds, telling them that "Don't hurry, don't hurry, there'll be no fun till I get there". Standing before the gallows it is said he offered his gold watch to anyone prepared to give him a decent burial. This bargain not being accepted, he was hung from one of a group of five horse chestnut trees. After he was cut down, a truss of straw divided, half being tossed into the grave. As the body was placed upon this, a disgraceful scene ensued as the executioner started to strip the clothes off the corpse claiming it to be his privilege. The High Constable, determined to preserve a sense of decency, prevented this, the remaining straw then being placed over the body and the grave filled in.

The following day, the local residents repented and subscribed to a plain wooden coffin. Snooks was exhumed and then re-interred in the coffin, at the same spot. He holds the macabre distinction of being the last highwayman in England to be hung at the scene of his crime.

In 1904, the Box Moor Trustees provided a small commemorate stone (pictured), inscribed only with his name and date of execution, and sited on Snook's Moor.



Legend tells that if anyone should dance around his grave twelve times at midnight on the anniversary of his execution this will summon Snooks to join them in the jig.

Text edited from Hungerford Virtual Museum.

Photo: Previous page - One of a series of paintings originally displayed in the Snooks bar at the Pavilion, Hemel Hempstead, (building since demolished), the paintings are now cared for by Dacorum Heritage Trust.

CURATOR'S CORNER

Armed Forces Day. Saturday 1st July 11.00 am. – 4.00 pm. in Gadebridge Park come along and visit us at this event.

Heritage Open Days 7th–10th September. An opportunity to visit many interesting places not normally open to the public and discover their hidden history, all for free. Check the website www.heritageopendays.org.uk from August.

Legacy Giving. Help us safeguard our collections for future generations by remembering Dacorum Heritage Trust in your will. For more information visit our website <http://www.dacorumheritage.org.uk/support-us/legacies/>

Please remember to include a bequest to The Dacorum Heritage Trust Ltd. when you make or revise your will.

The Museum Store is open by appointment only. Enquiries email Nicola our Collections Manager.

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		<p>EDITOR: Pam Gasking office@dacorumheritage.org.uk <i>Like us on Facebook.</i> <i>Follow us on Twitter @DacorumHeritage</i> Authors are responsible for content accuracy. <i>Deadline: for next issue is 1st August 2017.</i></p>	 <p>Funded by DACORUM BOROUGH COUNCIL</p>
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