

The Honourable

Dorothy Paget

1905 - 1960

Elsenham, Golden Miller, and Dorothy Paget

Elsenham is expanding rapidly and much thought has been given to the names of the new roads. It has been decided to name many of them after former residents who made the ultimate sacrifice during the Great War.

We already have de Mandeville named after Geoffrey de Mandeville who was lord of the manor during the Middle Ages and Oziers because it stands on land where willows were once grown.

But why Paget Court?

It is named after the Honourable Dorothy Paget, one of the most famous racehorse owners in this country during the last century.

She never lived in Elsenham but she owned Elsenham Stud and she owned Golden Miller, Golden Miller was one of the most famous and successful racehorses of the 20th century and is buried in Elsenham. The Honourable Dorothy Paget, Miss Paget as she was known, was at one time the richest unmarried woman in England.

Her wealth came from her entrepreneur father and her American heiress mother.

Dorothy was an eccentric, as were others in her family. Her great grandfather Field Marshall Henry William Paget is famous for remarking to the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo, "By God Sir I've lost my leg" to which Wellington replied, "By God Sir, so you have". A further remark when his leg was amputated above the knee without anaesthetic was "These knives appear somewhat blunt". English understatement at its best.

Henry was later created 1st Marquess of Anglesey, and a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath for his help in the rout of the French Army at Waterloo.

If you ever visit Anglesey and are lucky enough to visit beautiful Plas Newydd, the family home, you will be able to see his uniform and artificial leg, a part of the Waterloo Museum exhibits.

Dorothy was born at St George's, Hanover Sq. Middlesex on the 12th February 1905. She was the youngest of 2 daughters born to Almeric Paget and his 1st wife, Pauline Whitney.

By the time of her birth Almeric was fast becoming one of the richest men in the country. As a young man he had left England for America to make his fortune with only £5 pounds to his name.

He became a cowboy and a self made industrialist. He was made Baron Queensborough in 1918. During an illustrious career he was also an award winning yachtsman, a Conservative MP, the Founder of the Military Massage Service and the Cambridgeshire Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment and Treasurer of the League of Nations.

He resigned as Treasurer in 1936 when the Soviet Union was admitted to the League of Nations. During the 1930's he supported Franco and also Hitler as late as 1939.

Pauline his first wife, and Dorothy's mother, was born in New York City in 1874. Her family was the prominent Whitney family. Amongst other interests her father was a force in Street Railway affairs, and her husband Almeric joined Henry Melville Whitney in establishing the Dominion Coal Company and the Dominion Iron and Steel Company.

Almeric and Pauline were married in 1895 at St Thomas's Church, New York City.

The Pagets moved to England in 1901 due to Pauline's poor health and after the birth of their first daughter Olive Cecilia, born in 1899. Pauline's health was always delicate and she died at Esher in Surrey in 1921, she was buried at Hertingfordbury, Hertfordshire. Olive was married and divorced twice before marrying Sir Adrian William Maxwell Baillie in November 1931. They were divorced in 1944.

Their second daughter, Dorothy was born in 1905. Dorothy was a difficult child and almost unmanageable other than by her mother. She was expelled from six schools including Ascot's Heathfield. She did not enjoy a happy relationship with her father who possibly resented her for not being the son he had wanted.

On her coming of age in 1926 Dorothy came into a very large sum of money. At breakfast on the day of her birthday she opened an envelope which contained a cheque for £1 million pounds from her American Grandfather.

It has been said that the cheque ruined her. A year later accounts show that the annual interest on her investments alone was over £53,000 (nearly £3 million in today's money -2016/17).

She was given a Rolls Royce by her father who may have been hoping to mend a rift between them. Unfortunately this did not happen.

It was after her inheritance that Dorothy was able to indulge in her passion for speed be it on a horse or driving powerful fast cars of which she owned many including a V12 Lagonda, Mercedes Benz, a Bugatti and several Rolls. This love of speed led to many fines for exceeding the speed limit.

This love and her betting led her to become involved with a group known as "The Bentley Boys" a group of young men who raced cars fiercely and competitively at Brooklands in Surrey. It was said that they raced hard and partied hard.



“The Bentley Boys” included former fighter pilot Sir HRS “Tim” Birkin, Harley Street specialist JD “Benjy” Benjafield, racing journalist SCH “Sammy” Davis , “Born adventurer” Glen Kidston, Redby Woolf, “Babe” Barnato - all men of independent means. They lived life to the limit, hitting the headlines for their exploits off the racetrack as often as their performance on it. The most famous of these drivers was Sir Henry “Tim” Birkin, who was extremely charismatic and could be described as the James Hunt or Graham Hill of his day.



Bentley Boy Sir Henry “Tim” Birkin

It was Dorothy’s ownership of a fabulous supercharged Roller 31HC that became the reason for his interest in her and for her involvement with the team. Dorothy does however seem to have been captivated by his charm despite the fact that she was famous for saying that the sight of men made her sick.

In 1930 Dorothy invested £40,000 in Birkin’s team, the equivalent of £2.2 million in today’s money (2017). However at the end of that year, after the failure of the Bentley team, she withdrew her sponsorship, Dorothy was only ever interested in winning be it motor racing or horse racing. In 1931 the works closed down, Birkin continued to race until his untimely death following the Tripoli Grand Prix Meeting of 1933. His death may have been caused by a burn that turned septic or from malaria which he had contracted in Palestine during the 1st World War. He was 36 years old.

His death affected Dorothy badly as they had continued to remain good friends. It was following Birkin’s death that she began to gain weight. As a young woman she had been slim and an accomplished horse rider.

It would seem that Dorothy's wealth spoilt her. She answered to no-one and was demanding to anyone who came into contact with her. Her servants were called not by their names but by colours.

She smoked like a chimney, slept most of the day and was awake most of the night. It was during these hours that she played cards and made phone calls to her trainers which could last two hours. Not to mention eating enormous meals. One story that has been told, is when she was discussing the result of a horse race with Sir Gordon Richards, who was one of her trainers at the time, one wag suggested that she was sizing him up for one of her gargantuan meals.

Her politics were Conservative, the reason being that she did not want to be governed by "the lower orders"!!

Early in her life Dorothy Paget had spent time in Paris and had become closely involved with Russian emigres, members of the Russian Aristocracy who had fled Russia during the Revolution of 1917, "Olile" (Olga Mumm) became her life long companion. She purchased an old age home for Russian emigres at Chateau de la Cosonnerie, originally an 18th century farm. She also purchased the Saint-Genevieve-des Bois Russian Cemetery and it is here that Rudolph Nureyev is buried.

Throughout the years Dorothy's interest in horse racing continued to grow. In 1931 she bought a promising young National Hunt gelding named Golden Miller together with another good hurdler named Insurance.

Golden Miller was born in April 1927 in Patterstown County Meath, Ireland. His dam, Miller's Pride, had been left in the care of a smallholding farmer named Laurence Geraghty, grandfather of the famous jockey Barry Geraghty. She was left there by a money lender who quickly disappeared. Golden Miller was sired for a 5 guinea fee by Goldcourt. Goldcourt came from an illustrious line of male racehorses including an Ascot Gold Cup winner and two Triple Crown winners.

At his birth Golden Miller was a dark bay colt with large intelligent eyes and a white star on his forehead. The stable yard where he was born is still there today and his birth is commemorated by a plaque outside the foaling barn.

In 1930 Golden Miller was bought by Basil Briscoe on the recommendation of Captain Dick Farmer, a partner in a horse dealing business in Northamptonshire. On arrival in England "the Miller" was not in the best shape and Basil Briscoe wondered if he had done the right thing. Briscoe's head lad remarked "What a good name for a bad horse". Soon after he was bought by Philip Carr for £1000, although he continued to be trained by Basil Briscoe. Golden Miller after an unpromising start gained confidence and began to win races.

Unfortunately in 1931 Philip Carr passed away after a short illness. Philip Carr had asked Basil Briscoe to sell Golden Miller for him and a chance phone call from Dorothy Paget asking him if

he knew of any promising horses led to her buying him and another horse 'Insurance' for £12,000.

Eventually Golden Miller would become arguably one of the greatest jumpers of all time. He is the only horse ever to have won the Cheltenham Gold Cup in five successive years, 1932-1936 inclusive, and the only horse to have won the Cheltenham Gold Cup and the Grand National in the same year, 1934. Golden Miller was then described as "God on four legs". A far cry from "a bad horse with a good name".



Dorothy Paget Leading Golden Miller

Dorothy spent a fortune aiming to breed the best possible racehorses and increase the quality of her stock. She did not profit from her endeavours but she did have the privilege of owning two of the finest racehorses of the era in Golden Miller and Insurance.

At the races she became a familiar sight in her tweed coat which she believed to be lucky but she also believed that the colour green was unlucky.

In 1936 Dorothy acquired Elsenham Stud Farm from Sir Walter Gilbey and continued her breeding programme there. At its height, Elsenham Stud had over 100 horses. She also bought Elsenham Hall, Loppingdales and Home Farm.



It was at Elsenham that Straight Deal, who went on to win the Derby in 1943, was born in 1940. She rarely visited Elsenham and was only very occasionally seen driving her car in the village.



Dorothy Paget with Straight Deal

Golden Miller finally retired in 1939 and spent the rest of his days at the Elsenham Stud together with his close companion Insurance. Insurance himself, was a Champion Hurdler having won the coveted Cheltenham Festival Champion Hurdle on two occasions, 1932 and 1933.

Together they enjoyed a long and happy retirement. Later they were joined by a donkey nicknamed Aggie bought on a whim by Dorothy to keep them company.



Barrow Used in Golden Miller's Stable

Percy Purcell who came originally from Ireland and had worked for Dorothy at Newmarket together with his son Mick, nephew Leslie, and Jack Bateman moved to Elsenham and continued to look after the horses.



Jack Bateman with Golden Miller 1942

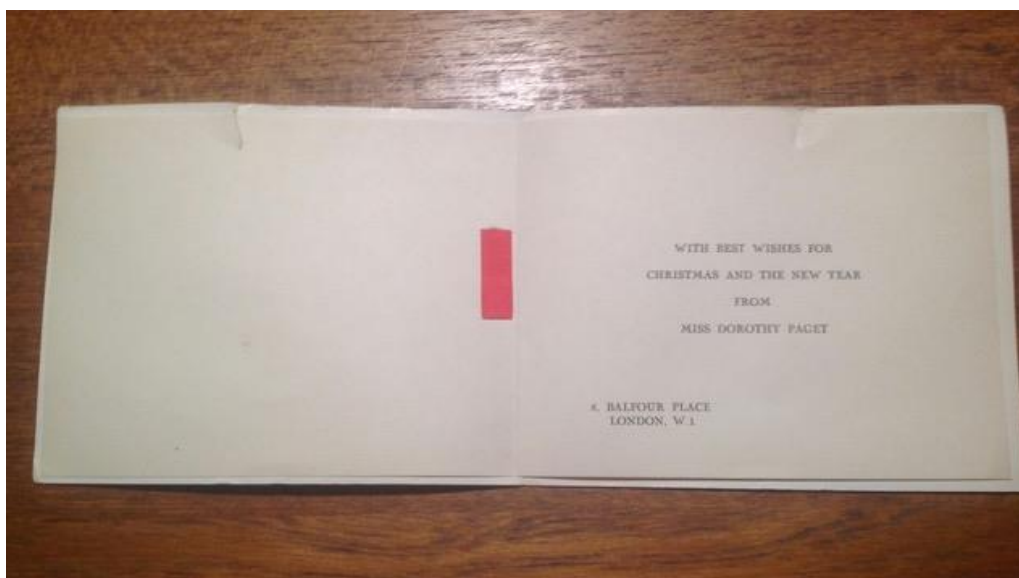
When Mick was ten years old in 1932 Dorothy gave him a watch “for being a good boy”. The watch was an Eterna Silver Plated lugg watch, so called because it had a lugg either side to which a strap could be attached. The watch which is still in good working order is now owned by Vic Dowsett and his wife Pauline, Mick’s daughter.



Watch Given to Ten Year Old Mick Purcell by Dorothy Paget



*A Christmas Card Addressed to Mr. Michael Purcell
Christmas 1939
From Miss Dorothy Paget
Balfour Place
London W.1*



It was a cold, frosty morning in January 1957 that Mick entered Golden Miller's box only to find him lying on his side barely able to raise his head. Mr Wakely the vet from Bishop's Stortford was called. Sadly there was nothing that could be done for him. He was just 3 months shy of his 30th birthday. Mick together with Jack Powter and Cliff Steer buried him at the Stud. Insurance died not long afterwards, many believing that he missed his companion too much. A statue of Golden Miller was erected near the parade ring at Cheltenham Racecourse.

At the 1950 International Horse Show Golden Miller and Insurance had made their final public appearance. Dorothy never saw them again. Some of her interest had now turned from the race course to the show jumping ring.

Once again Dorothy set down certain rules, one of these was that her horses were not allowed to leave the show ground without her permission. She acquired a number of horses including the wonderfully named Eforegit (pronounced E for eejit) who, ridden by Curley Beard, won the jump off at the Horse of the Year Show in October 1951. When Curley stood by Dorothy's table he was ignored. Finally she asked him what he wanted and he said that she could at least give him a drink.

To which she replied "Silly man go away, I'm exhausted. I've been jumping up and down all the time".

Happily sometime after this humiliation Curley was able to get his own back. As the Italians say, "Revenge is a dish best eaten cold" Unfortunately this was not the case for the world famous showjumper Pat Smythe after she had crossed swords with Dorothy. When Pat won the Richmond Trophy she was not allowed to keep the Silver Salver. Dorothy kept it for herself.

In spite of these stories Dorothy could show a more generous side. On one occasion after a successful competition she sent a note saying that all the staff who had looked after the horses were to be given a bottle of champagne. They duly called at the house asking for one case of champagne. Somehow the message was misunderstood and they were given a case each.

Her interest in show jumping continued until the end of her life and she gained as much pleasure from show jumping as she did from horse racing.

Dorothy's vast fortune enabled her to indulge in her passion for gambling. She was believed to be the heaviest gambler that the world of horse racing had ever seen. Geoffrey Hamlyn writing in the "Sporting Life" observed that Dorothy Paget lost more money on the British Turf than any man or woman before or since.

Her legal advisors sent letters strongly advising her to curb her betting. The amounts in any year could total many thousands of pounds. Unsurprisingly she seems to have been completely out of touch with reality as her economising amounted to telling her staff, "From tomorrow we will do without grapefruit for breakfast".

On the racecourse she was a superstitious punter. If someone rang her up on the day of a big race she would make a note of their telephone number and that would be the amount she would bet on her horses. It could be thousands of pounds.

As the years passed Dorothy's weight and her eccentricities, continued to grow. She seems to have been mainly rude and demanding and then quite unexpectedly generous.

One insight into her private life was written by Nancy Spain, a well known columnist at the time. "She had exquisite little hands-no rings-she shuffled cards like a master. Her intimate staff were never less than eight in number. They rose in time to serve their mistress. They went to bed when she did. Sometimes they were on their feet for thirty hours or expected to go on sleeping for twenty four. The house was run on a system of dictated memoranda."

Another person remarked that she had a lovely speaking voice.

Although Dorothy had a house in Balfour Place, London she spent her final years at Hermits Wood in Chalfont St Giles, Buckinghamshire. The house itself was quite ordinary for such a rich person.

In September 1958 Dorothy entered St Mary's Hospital, Paddington for an operation. During 1958 and 1959 her interest in racing dwindled. On February 8th 1960 in spite of complaining of feeling unwell she ordered one of her enormous meals. During the evening she rang Gordon Richards who delighted her by reporting that she had some promising yearlings and at 4.30 the following morning she was reading through the racing calendar. An hour or so later her maid found that Dorothy had died in her sleep.

The funeral took place at St Mary's Church, Hertingfordbury on the twelfth February which would have been her fifty fifth birthday. Her cousin Jack Whitney, the American Ambassador, together with her trainers and jockeys attended but not her sister Lady Baillie. Her coffin was draped in blue satin with yellow daffodils lying on top, these were her racing colours. There were also wreaths in blue and yellow. The largest wreath, three foot high, was from the Russian Home and the Russian Orthodox Bishop of Sergieve assisted the vicar. She was buried in a simple grave close to her father and mother. In recent years when Gordon Barker visited the grave he found it totally uncared for.



Dorothy's Grave at Hertingfordbury

Dorothy died intestate, a will was never found despite a desperate search of her property. Her lawyers had unsuccessfully urged her to make a will. After death duties the residue of her huge fortune of £3,500,000 (£73 million in 2017) before death duties was left to her sister Lady Baillie. There was one arrangement that she had made and that was to leave the five gold cups won by Golden Miller to Cheltenham Racecourse.

Sir Peter O’Sullivan wrote of her “Without doubt she was a very curious woman, but even when she died there was no outpouring of grief. For many people it was almost a relief that she was gone. In fact it is probably to people’s credit that in death she was not suddenly made into this wonderful character”.

Finally, when you are next passing the Memorial Gardens look up to the top of the Elsenham sign and you will see a horseshoe and a likeness of Golden Miller. Close by is Paget Court named after his famous owner.



With thanks to Gordon and Heather Barker for the photographs of Golden Miller’s Wheelbarrow, The Home Farm sign, John (Jack) Bateman with Golden Miller, and for their information on Golden Miller and Insurance’s life at the Elsenham Stud.

With thanks also to Victor (Vic) Dowsett for permission to photograph and for the information on his father-in law Mick Purcell’s watch, and to Pauline Dowsett (nee Purcell) for all the valuable information on the Purcell family history.

Jean Beeston Elsenham Village History Society January 2018