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Bowdon's Name - an alternative explanation
by Peter J. Kemp

Some ten years ago (Bowdon Sheaf No.33) our then chairman Marjorie Cox wrote a short article discussing a variation in the spelling Bowdon or Bowden in the 19th and 20th centuries, and asked for examples from different periods. The accepted authority on Cheshire place names, Prof. J. McN. Dodgson listed those he found over the ages :-

Bogedone	1086
Boudon	1189-99,1406
Bowedon	1345
Bothedun, Baw(e)don, Baudon	1455
Baw(e)den(e)	1537, 1546
Boodon	1549
Bowden	1438,1488, 1535, 1695
Bodon	1611
Bodun	1617

and said it may have originated as 'bogadun', a curved hill. This would appear to be an acceptance of the bow shape seen commonly in the other Bowdens throughout the country, but our Bowdon hill does not have an appearance of a bow from whatever angle one looks at it. If we reject an archery bow shape what can the origin be? Readers may prefer a better explanation derived from the earliest spelling by the Anglo-Saxon scribes employed by the Normans when compiling the Domesday Book in 1086, viz. Bogedone. A 'don' or 'dun' means a fortified hill and the 'Boge' element is probably the name of its owner in Anglo-Saxon days 'Beoda' or 'Beoga' who could have taken over a former Celtic earthworks on the site of the present Bowdon Parish Church. The present curved northern boundary of Bowdon churchyard may still continue to show a Celtic earthwork element present in several such churchyards today. The 'don' or 'dun' (as in Dunham, a homestead by the hill) is more certain than 'den'. Variations in spellings have occurred over the centuries due to dialect and accented pronunciation being interpreted by whoever wrote the sound down, uniform spelling being a relatively modern discipline. It is to be hoped that our Bowdon will continue to be written as Bowdon for evermore.

"Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight" and the Massey connection
by Peter Kemp

In the 14th century, although English was becoming spoken by everyone, French was still the ruling classes preference in speech and among those who could read and write. Latin and French were used for legal dealings and formal business. Towards the end of the century English began to gain ascendancy over French due to the patriotic fervour which grew from 1337 onwards in the Hundred Years War against the French. Also the realisation grew that it was essential to have better communication with the commoners, the labourers and husbandmen in particular, in view of the unrest following the devastation of the Black Death of 1349 (and subsequent recurrences) which had prompted the Statute of Labourers in 1351. English was not the language of the Law or Parliament until 1362, and even then it continued to be written down in Anglo-French. In Cheshire a turning point for English had been reached in 1358 when Ralph Higden, a Chester monk, after three journeys to Rome, obtained permission from the Pope for the Chester Mystery Plays to be performed in spoken English.

Here, in Cheshire, the de Mascys are associated with the classic medieval poem "Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight", a masterpiece told in 2530 lines and written in the North Midland dialect of Middle English. This wonderful romantic poem is not rhymed but uses the fashionable alliterative construction then in favour with a refrain occurring irregularly. It is an amazing survival of that chivalrous age yet the language is difficult to follow for present-day readers. It tells of a time when King Arthur and his knights were feasting when the door suddenly bursts open and this totally green knight appears — green skin, hair and armour (green being associated in the Celtic mind with death) — and lays down a challenge to a beheading game, and demonstrates by severing his own head and then replacing it. The whole concept of the Green Knight has been fashioned by the sorceress Morgan le Fay in her campaign of evil to cause as much hateful trouble in King Arthur's court as possible. The knights are fearfully reluctant but the senior knight of the Round Table, Sir Gawaine, accepts the challenge to find the Green Knight within the year and complete the ordeal. Whereupon the Green Knight disappears. Sir Gawaine spends the whole year searching throughout Cheshire, through the forests of Mara and Mondrum (Delamere) into the wild forest of Wirral, one of the more identifiable locations since that is where he completes his quest. The poem describes the Wirral as "the wildernesse of Wirral."

"The wilderness of Wirral:

few lived there

Who loved with a good heart

either God or man"

(a modern English quote)

The immensely powerful Randle (Ranulph) de Meschines (1120-29), Viscount of Bayeux, lord of large areas of Northern England and Earl of Carlisle and Chester, had afforested the Wirral for game and hunting, but in 1376 King Edward III had most of the trees felled because they had provided a haven for vagabonds and criminals.

The author of this wild story is still unknown as is its date of origin, though now generally accepted to be around 1350. Its dedication, and by some its authorship, is attributed to a Massey of Cheshire. Some writers say John Massey of Cotton, another a Hugh Massey, maybe of Tatton, and others to the Masseys of Dunham (but that principal line ceased with the death of Hamo VI in 1341). Other scholars have suggested that Hugh de Mascy wrote this great poem himself, but which Hugh?

Clearly this early medieval poem of supernatural fantasy had great appeal and affinity with the Massey's love of combat and feasting in those chivalrous times. The development of the English language at that time was slowly assuming the Midland vernacular as standard and Chaucer's London and southern dialect of Middle English was being superseded, paving the way for the English we speak and write today. It is evident that, some 280 years after their arrival in Cheshire, the Norman-French de Mascys had finally abandoned their original tongue, and were now committed Englishmen fully appreciative of and speaking the developing English language to the extent of having a major romantic poem dedicated to one of their number.

As an afterthought, readers may care to speculate whether some repetition of history occurred another six hundred years on when perhaps an ingrained love of English and its spoken word inspired a member of the Canadian branch of the Cheshire Masseys and his family to excel in the acting profession on stage and in films and television. He was the distinguished actor Raymond Massey (1896- 1983) who was drawn to star in the fantasy science-fiction film "Things to Come" (1936) and also the romantic never-never land of "The Prisoner of Zenda" (1937), whose son Daniel (1933-1998) was also an actor of some note and daughter Anna Massey, CBE, today still a well-known accomplished actress.

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Dunham Massey American Army & British Prisoner-of-War Camp
by David Miller

At the start of World War II there were only two Prisoner-of-War camps in Britain but eventually the number reached around 450 holding over 400,000 prisoners. Because of the large numbers and for security, after interrogation and classification, many of the prisoners-of-war were sent to Canada.

Barry Sullivan's book *Threshholds of Peace* gives a substantial account of prisoners-of-war (POWs) in Britain generally. Interrogation started in several Home Counties camps before prisoners moved on to other camps. POWs included Schutzstaffel (SS), part of the Wehrmacht, who had a reputation for prowess in the field of battle and for atrocities. They could be distinguished by a tattoo of their blood group on the upper left arm.

On 2 October 1942 the War Office inspected the New Park section of the Dunham Massey estate and declared it ideal for an American Army Camp. Troops arrived in October 1943. Charles Frame, an American soldier, was billeted at Dunham for just four months from January 1944. He remembers arriving in Glasgow, the train journey to Altrincham and the march to Dunham. Charles met local girl Jean Bunnell at a dance at Altrincham Stamford Hall and they married in May 1944.

The American troops left at short notice for the Normandy invasion in May 1944. On the 18 October 1944 Lord Stamford was informed that the empty camp was to become a POW camp for 3,500 Germans.

The first prisoners-of-war, Italians captured in North Africa, were brought to Dunham in the first week of November 1944. When Italy did a U-turn during the war and joined the Allies, the Italian POWs were reclassified as co-operators and were released to work, mainly on farms where they proved to be hard working and very popular. They were greatly missed after they returned home at the end of the war. The Italians hated the Germans and were always kept separate from each other in the camp.

In 1944 sixteen year old Mike Arron started working for the Northern Press Photo Agency from their offices on Ashley Road, Hale. The agency had a contract with the Ministry of War to photograph four thousand POWs at Dunham Park Camp. After a while they decided that Mike could be trusted with the work on his own and he used to cycle to the camp regularly and later had tea with the POWs after the photography sessions.

The prisoners were guarded by Polish soldiers; British troops were mainly concerned with administrative duties. There were regular random searches of the huts and POWs were counted two or three times a day. Six thousand were housed in the camp by 1945.

The Germans constructed a substantial model Bavarian castle about six feet high which stood quite close to the bend in the Chester Road opposite to Denzell. In their spare time they used their skills to produce craft work including 'pokerwork' done with a red-hot poker. At Christmas they produced high-quality Christmas cards printed from home-made woodcuts. A theatre had been built by the Americans and the POWs put on several concerts there including excerpts from *The Magic Flute* on 16 April 1945.

It is alleged that the Germans held unofficial court marshals for hard- line Nazis and dealt with petty offences such as stealing.

Early in the war Colonel Buckmaster, while reorganising the Intelligence Services, commandeered Dunham House, a large country house adjacent to the prisoner-of-war camp, as a training centre for Allied agents operating in occupied territory. Odette Churchill and Violette Szabo, both of whom were awarded the George Cross for bravery, were trained here.

Agents used the RAF base at Ringway both for training and operational purposes. An enemy agent once penetrated Dunham House but was apprehended. The matter was kept secret at the time and little reference to it has been made since.

Towards the end of the war many prisoners were found to be disillusioned and fearful that the Russians might take over Germany if Britain did not gain a strong position there first. Some were prepared to bring an early end to hostilities by cooperating with the Allies. These soldiers were named 'Bonzos' and trained to rejoin their army and spread disinformation, but the operation came too late to be of much assistance as the German Army surrendered before the plan could be very effective. A group of Bonzos was sent to retrieve Hitler's hoard of art work taken from galleries, museums and private collections in Europe.

Hostilities ended on 2 September 1945 and arrangements for the repatriation of POWs were put into place. In 1945 over 3,700,000 Germans and other nationalities were in British hands in several countries but of these only 500,000 were detained and the rest released in time for the 1945 harvest.

POW Bert Trautmann, who was to be goalkeeper for Manchester City Football Club from 1949 to 1964, was temporarily stationed at the Northwich POW camp. At the end of the war he took part in a public football match between German POWs and a Manchester team, held on a pitch constructed by the POWs in a natural hollow in the Dunham camp.

In early 1946 a quarter of the agricultural force in Britain was made up of POWs. By December 1946 they were allowed to visit private homes, walk within five miles of the camp, and accept small gifts such as sweets and tobacco.

After the war repatriation of POWs was urgent because of the cost to the public purse: £90,000 per day. The repatriation rate was quickly stepped up from 2,000 to 15,000 per month with the object of returning all POWs by the end of 1948. They were interviewed to assess their Nazi loyalty and given a re-education programme. They returned to Germany from 1946 but those who remained loyal to the Nazi cause remained captive as late as 1949 in some camps. About 25,000 elected to stay in Britain.

At least twenty ex-POWs and Polish guards stayed in the Altrincham area or kept close links. Many became gardeners. Alfred Paeserack, a POW at Dunham between 1945 and 1948 left the area but kept links with several families for over 50 years. He wrote his memoirs in 1995, which are held in Trafford Local Studies and include sketches of POW camps in Cheshire produced by a Dunham prisoner, and several photographs of himself and a Dunham girl he befriended.

Alfred said rations were small. Breakfast consisted of one slice of bread and one third of a bowl of porridge. In the afternoon soup was served on a flat tin plate with a thin slice of bread. For the first few months only cabbage soup was available. Supper was a cup of tea and two slices of bread with a very thin layer of spread. Showers were allowed on Friday or Saturday when clothes were washed as part of the process.

There were 50 men in a hut which had tables and chairs in the middle. The blanket, kitbag and towel had to be kept folded on the mattress with plates etc on top. Rooms were checked constantly. No photographs were allowed and sleeping was forbidden in the daytime. There were three roll-calls per day with the POWs in columns of five. Eventually prisoners built flower beds and grass areas around the huts, the paths were improved and the huts painted white. The POWs offered courses in languages, business studies, engineering, history, etc. A theatre group was formed and there were performances with proper sets and costumes. One was of the operetta *Gluckliche Reise*, with a railway station set, wagons and good costumes.

A pastor and a priest were given rooms for church activities and were soon allowed to go to local churches without a guard. Later prisoners were also allowed to attend churches. In 1946 ten Germans went out of the camp to work as a trial and soon POWs were working for farmers, companies, road builders, market gardeners such as Clibrans and Caldwells, and for Cheshire County Council. Before long all POWs were working. Alfred's job was as a pipe layer with nine other POWs and ten locals.

An ex-POW who remained in the area after the war was Arno Scholz from Leipzig, East Germany. In 1936 he worked in the Olympic Village in Berlin and saw the games. From 1936 to 1939 he was in the Spanish Civil War and later served on the Bismarck. In August 1944 he was captured by the Americans and transferred to Dunham. He worked at Dunham Hall in the rose garden where he met Florence Shakeshaft and they married later. His old POW hut was brought from the Dunham camp to Larkhill, Thorley Lane, Timperley where it and another was used as a Red Cross club house. The huts were demolished in 1999 to build the new community centre.

Other POW names known include Heinrich Nadig, Ottomar Cruise, August Schmitt, Andy Kisbert, William Feik, and Gerhard Hasenkrug. An ex-POW guard who remained in Altrincham was a Polish man Waclaw Piekarski (his forename is pronounced Vatswaf). He married an Altrincham girl and their sons Roman and Maz who run Cuckoo Land at Tabley own over 600 antique cuckoo clocks, the largest collection in the world. Waclaw became a professional musician, playing many wind instruments and led his own band with his two brothers in Poland. He was sent to the Dunham Massey camp in 1944 to guard German POWs. Polish soldiers worshipped at St. Vincent's Roman Catholic Church, where Waclaw met Teresa Dalton and they married there in 1948. Waclaw, who led the Dunham Woodhouses Band which met at The Downs Hotel in Altrincham, became a naturalised Briton.

Today part of New Park near Denzell has two large underground reservoirs and much of the rest is now the Dunham Forest Golf & Country Club. Some hut foundations can still be seen at the camp site, and the football ground hollow with its natural terraces is still there.

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