

What is the DNA of Dorney, and Why Must We Protect It?

In June 2019, an enlightening article in Dorney Parish News, penned by Jill Dax, Parish Councillor and current (2024) Chair of Dorney Parish Council, addressed these two fundamental questions:

- What constitutes the DNA of Dorney, and
- Why is it imperative to protect it?

Every community boasts a distinct character expressed through its architectural features, street layouts, open spaces, its unique personality, and the collective spirit of its residents, evolving over countless years. It is fitting to liken each village, town, or city to a living entity, possessing its own genetic code, akin to DNA.

This 'DNA' encapsulates a place's identity and purpose, encompassing attributes that define it, the underlying principles that animate it, or conversely, hold it back, and the inner workings that govern it. In Dorney's case, this genetic composition encompasses a tapestry of historical and geographical elements, the influence of landowners and inhabitants throughout the centuries, cherished traditions, an intangible ambiance, a distinctive aesthetic, and more. The core identity of a place is the nucleus from which all its experiences and narratives emanate.

Dorney is a composite of four unique historical communities - Boveney, Dorney Reach, Dorney Village (inc. Dorney Common), and Lake End - each having undergone significant transformation over the past half-millennium. Nestled as a rural sanctuary between Maidenhead, Burnham, and Slough, Dorney has been shielded from undesirable development by, partly, its geography sitting alongside the River Thames, partly our Lords of the Manor, partly by Common Land and more recently by new infrastructure – the M4 and Jubilee River. In the 1930s, the protection of this sanctuary was further crafted by astute visionaries, the Provost and Fellows of Eton College, in conjunction with Sir Charles Palmer, then Lord of the Manor.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, these guardians recognised the potential threats posed by Slough's expansion to the rural communities of Eton, Eton Wick, and Dorney. They negotiated an agreement between them where Eton College acquired substantial tracts of land, ensuring a green belt around Dorney and Eton Wick. Most of the land was bought from the Palmer estate, other land from around 17 other landowners, and this constituted the original "Eton/Dorney Green Belt" that has assisted in safeguarding Dorney's 'rural oasis' for nearly the last century.

This tranquil haven has faced intermittent disruptions, primarily from the rise of Heathrow as London's major airport in 1946 and the construction of the M4 in the 1960s. These factors continue to leave their environmental marks on what is often described as 'the first village west of London.' However, it is the protection of land owned by the Palmer family and Eton College that remains the paramount driving force behind our 'rural oasis.'

Dorney Court Estate and Dorney & Lake End Commons are professionally managed by the

Palmer family, ensuring the preservation and sustainable maintenance of a substantial part of our environment. The creation of Dorney Lake by Eton College and the Jubilee River by the Environment Agency, while generating some debate during their construction, have undeniably added to the beauty and recreation opportunities within Dorney's genetic structure.

A treasure trove of 43 listed buildings embellishes our modest area, a significant facet of our DNA. The pressure on planners to sanction developments in Dorney is a constant challenge, but commendation is due to the Bucks Council Planning Department and Planning Committee, which has, to date, consistently exercised judicious scrutiny of the stringent criteria of the Green Belt and Conservation Areas of Dorney Village and Boveney.

Regrettably, some facets of our DNA may be fading away. There are few active beekeepers in Dorney, and homegrown pineapples are not common sights at the Dorney Horticultural Society's Annual Show (!). However, the presence of horses in our fields and free-roaming cattle on Dorney Common is still a heartening reminder of our rural heritage.

As guardians of the communities we hold dear, we are entrusted with the care and preservation of our abodes and the well-being of our neighbourhoods during our relatively brief stewardship. A custodian's role, after all, is to protect and nurture what has been passed down to us. In this light, it becomes our collective responsibility as residents to safeguard the heritage of Boveney, Dorney Reach, Dorney Village, and Lake End, not only for our children and grandchildren but for all future inhabitants.

Recognising and honouring the splendid Dorney DNA that previous generations have cherished is our link to history. Yet, securing our future requires unwavering vigilance and a shared commitment from residents and businesses to protect and enrich this delicate genetic composition. The Dorney DNA, you see, is a fragile treasure, reliant on our perpetual support.