

THE **R** **H** HISTORY GROUP  
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**LIFE IN LINGFIELD BEFORE  
THE FIRST WORLD WAR**



Lingfield Church from North Street c. 1900  
(the building on the right is now the Guest House Library)

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century transport was by train, horse and cart, pony and trap, or bicycle; motorised cars were only for the very rich. Communication was by post, telegraph, newspaper, billboards and word of mouth. Short wave radio links were the new-fangled technology.

Amusement for the majority was found at the village Institutes, Reading Rooms and Lending Libraries. Highlights of the summer months were the annual visits of Sanger's Circus and the Funfair, in the field behind Lingfield Hotel.



Sangers Circus troupe

In the weeks before November 5th the Lingfield Bonfire Boys planned firework displays, built bonfires and made effigies of Guy Fawkes and Robert Catesby.

Lingfield Racecourse attracted royalty and aristocracy; it also provided employment and trading opportunities for local farriers, saddlers, and stable lads.

Several young men belonged to the Territorial Force at the local Drill Hall. Young boys joined the new Boy Scouts Group or the Boys Brigade. Girls joined the Girl Scouts.

In 1913 the Cinema de Luxe opened in nearby East Grinstead; Charlie Chaplin was a great star attraction of the silent movies but tickets were too expensive for the pockets of many. Occasionally John Jupp showed lantern slides in his room behind Plaistow Hall. Concerts were performed by the Village Bands in various venues. Lingfield and Dormansland Brass Bands were justly proud of their success in competitions. Sportsmen joined or watched the local Football and Cricket Clubs.

The Church was important to this agricultural community. A new church was built at Dormansland in 1882 and dedicated two years later. In 1901, 70% of the population were "attached to the parish church". From Plough Sunday to Harvest the services punctuated the year.

Daily life revolved around the big estates and farms in this rural area of South-East Surrey. Most men and some women worked on the land or the allied agricultural trades: ploughing the fields, scattering seeds, weeding and gathering the harvest; looking after sheep, pigs and cattle, slaughtering animals for market, tanning their hides for leather saddles, boots and shoes; repairing hoes or cartwheels, and shoeing horses. Cycles of poverty or plenty depended on the weather and meat and grain prices.

During the bad times many of the labouring poor were encouraged to emigrate. The names of some remain in the records of Dormansland Baptist Church: William and Sarah Chart, Stephen Shoemith, Charlotte Kettle and James Akehurst had assisted passage to America in 1831. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century agricultural depression led to the



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emigration to Canada of many young men. Local schools actively encouraged young boys to emigrate rather than face unemployment. Young men from the local villages left their families to make a new life in Canada or Australia. Many enlisted in their adoptive countries to serve with the Allied Forces in WW1. Their families at home in Surrey recorded the names of several casualties on the Village war memorials.

The majority of women had very little leisure. They earned extra pennies for the home and family as seamstresses, domestic help, or on the land.

Ladies with the luxury of leisure time were involved in community help; running coal clubs and soup kitchens. Several ladies were actively involved in the fight for Women's Suffrage.

Few local people were in positions of power; one exception was Mr Herbert Henry Spender Clay of Ford Manor, Dormansland, who was the Unionist Member of Parliament for the Tunbridge division of Kent. The Women's Suffrage Movement was gaining local support and local branches of Women's Suffrage Society were gaining support. Mr Spender Clay presented the Petition of the Tunbridge Wells Branch to Parliament in 1910. Parliament resisted the clamour for Woman Suffrage. Suffragette sympathisers were blamed for the bomb explosion at Oxted Station on the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> April 1913.

Oxted Railway Station, c.1910







In 1894 it had seemed that Prince Albert's dream of a peaceful Europe, cemented by family ties, had become reality. Support for Queen Victoria was almost universal. Lingfield celebrated Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and raised a public subscription to build the Victoria Jubilee Institute in the High Street. The Queen died before the building was finished so the building became the Victoria Memorial Institute in 1901.

Pride of Empire was reinforced in all the local schools; Empire Day was celebrated on Queen Victoria's birthday, 24<sup>th</sup> May. In 1914 Empire Day celebrations took the entire day. Schoolchildren sang Rudyard Kipling's song: 'Land of our Birth, we pledge to thee, Our love and toil in the years to be... Forgiveness free of evil done, And Love to all men 'neath the sun!'. Every child saluted the Union flag, raised in the playground.

The British royal family came under increasing pressure to break their family ties with Germany after the outbreak of war. The King became increasingly sensitive to his German roots but not until **19<sup>th</sup> June 1917** did King George V decree that the royal surname was to change from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Windsor. Also in 1917, the King made the controversial decision to deny asylum in Britain to his cousin, Czar Nicholas II of Russia, and his family, after the Czar abdicated during the **Russian Revolution**. Czar Nicholas, his wife Alexandra and their children were subsequently arrested and later murdered by the Bolsheviks.

*References & Acknowledgements*

Dormansland Baptist Church records at Surrey History Centre: 2615/1/1

Hayward History Centre Photograph Archive

Photographs of Oxted Station courtesy of The East Surrey Museum, Caterham.

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