

## Eulogy for Vivienne Evans MBE

Tribute by Rev. Stephen Williams

To be interrogated by Vivienne Evans was no easy prospect. I was in my mid-30s and doubtless green behind the gills. It was 1987, and Vivienne had contacted me in Harlington, wanting permission for Lew to photograph the early —1929 — Bunyan Window in the church as an illustration for her forthcoming book *John Bunyan: His Life and Times*. I immediately earned Brownie-points because, having previously lived in Bedford, I knew exactly where the creek was where Bunyan was re-baptised when he fell in with the group from St John's Bedford. I don't mean he fell in the creek there: I mean he came under the influence of a new Christian group. Vivienne had developed a passion for pinning down these geographical places that illustrated the true John Bunyan. But more than my knowledge of local geography, really it was my theology and intellectual rigour she was testing that day that the two of them came over to take the photograph. I was all apologetic because having only arrived in Harlington a short while before, I had found that my predecessor had failed to repair the Pilgrim Window after vandalism, and now Lew was wanting to photograph it for a book. But my apologies were batted away with a series of questions that I knew full well were testing me who had found himself the curator of a Grade I Listed Building. Vivienne needed people she could trust, who would not distort or trivialise the knowledge she had built.

“Stephen, have you thought about how it felt to the lord of the Manor at the time? Have you placed it in the context of what was going on politically in London? What about the fact he would leave his wife and blind daughter unsupported financially?”

The then Bishop of Bedford David Farmbrough wrote a Foreword.

For the slightly revised 1995 edition, Terry Waite the Archbishop's Envoy, was pleased to write a Preface;

Autumn 1980 a small group working around a dining room table produced a paperback booklet with the help of Prontaprint, Luton: *A Brief History of Dunstable with the Priory*. “At the launch in December, said Vivienne, we had the pleasure of welcoming Paul Bowes who had recently opened The Book Castle”; Massively revised, it was reissued Oct 1994 as *Dunstable with the Priory, 1100-1550*. What a fortuitous coupling that was to become: historians, skilled writer, and a publisher!

But before then had been the 1982 monograph *The Dunstable Swan Jewel*. Vivienne was there that day 16<sup>th</sup> July 1965 when the Dunstable Swan Jewel – now in the British Museum – was found by her friend Maxine Miller when they were both on a dig with Manshead Archaeology. Vivienne revisited the topic just this last February at Tea Time Tales.

*History All Around Luton and Dunstable* 8 Aug 1984

*Book of Dunstable and Houghton Regis* 21 Oct 1985 by Vivienne Evans and Lewis Evans

Then came *John Bunyan: His Life and Times* Aug 1988 (revised June 1995). Whilst doing the revision of the book in December 1995, Vivienne received a phone call from me, needing advice, for Fortnum & Mason's amazing *Pilgrim's Progress* Christmas display had been offered to Bedfordshire. It was only with Vivienne's encouragement that we dared to accept their offer.

*Folk: Characters and Events in the History of Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire* Oct 1989

*Henry VIII's Dunstable* 1991

*Dunstable in Transition: 1550-1700* Sep 1998

*Proud Heritage: A Brief History of Dunstable, 1000-2000 AD* 24 Nov 1999

*Dunstable Down the Ages: An Outline History from Prehistoric to Modern Times* 4 May 2002

*Historic Inns of Dunstable* 4 May 2002

*Exploring History All Around* 4 May 2002 Oh! A book without Dunstable or Bunyan in the title! In all these one can detect the influence of Paul Bowes and The Book Castle. [Paul sold the shop in 2008, to the Independent Retail Group. Sadly, their wider organisation went under financially, taking the Dunstable shop with it<sup>1</sup>]

November 2003 *Elizabeth I in Dunstable & District* – to mark an Elizabethan anniversary but also one for the WEA for whom much of the work had been first undertaken.

She came and lectured for me on the Priors of Dunstable Lady Day Lecture 2004. By then she had chivvied Mid Bedfordshire District Council and South Beds Council into strengthening their TICS – tourist information centres – and helped form Bedfordshire Heartlands [tourism group 1999, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009]

At one stage she was delivering coachfuls of tourist groups interested in John Bunyan to Harlington every month, sometimes every fortnight. They came from Canada, the USA, frequently from Holland where there were more Dutch Protestants than we realised. There were WEA Groups, and U3A Groups, and all were inspired by Vivienne's clear voice enunciating a story that made sense, that was true to the facts, absolutely fair to the Anglicans as well as to the Baptists and Anabaptists and Bunyan Meeting folk.

Such an accurate writer: not just what she said but what she didn't say. She would never get unnecessarily drawn into conjecture. In her humility she may have been content to concentrate on *local* history, but she read widely, as the Bibliographies and Appendices in the back of her books indicated, and she would never get drawn into the pitfalls of inaccuracy that bedevil the genre. Only May 2014 Vivienne couldn't walk far and remained

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Bowes to SJDW chatting at Vivienne's funeral, at which he, JYV and SJDW spoke.

patiently while her group went off on a field walk and I stayed with her chatting. She was still quizzing me, making sure I understood dating in the Dunstable Annals.

We could say she 'held court' in Priory House on Thursdays, but if that sounds imperious, that was not at all true. Her need to be placed somewhere was due to pain and disability in those latter years, herself constantly humbled by her growing ill health.

But there in Priory House, so many of us know the experience of having Vivienne pat a chair and say "sit down here" to chat things through.

It will happen again, but not before our Lord himself has done the same to Vivienne, patting a chair and saying to her, "sit down here!"

Tribute by Jean Yates

I met **Vivienne** early in 1999 when I became town centre manager in Dunstable. Later that year, one of Vivienne's contacts at the BBC, rang and offered to publicise any history events we organised that coincided with Simon Schama's history of Britain programmes. Vivienne called a meeting at her house, our working partnership began, and the first Tudor Festival was born. Subsequent Tudor festivals won two tourism association awards, as we built our visitor numbers year on year, and Vivienne's BBC contacts gave us hours and hours of airtime. We took our Dunstable stand to the tourism fairs in London and Birmingham; Vivienne's battle cry was always Marketing!!

The Tudor success led to summer local history weeks. At every festival Vivienne advertised that she would lead Town Walks, and at times the number of people who wanted to go on those walks was overwhelming. A frantic radio message from Lew one year resulted in a police escort to get a huge group safely across the A5. The result of this success was the birth of the Dunstable Town Guides. Vivienne was of course in charge of training, and our volunteers were lectured both by her and outside speakers on local history and the art of guiding. Eventually they, and I, were considered by Vivienne to be good enough to be let loose on the general public. Over the years we have recruited, and Vivienne has trained, many more volunteer town guides. A number of them are here today wearing their red sashes, all of them having benefited from Vivienne's vast knowledge, enthusiasm and patience.

If it hadn't been for Vivienne suggesting we borrowed Priory House for a Tudor festival one year, we would not own it now. Whilst putting together our lottery bid to purchase what was going to be Dunstable's Heritage Centre, Vivienne said, I will do Tea Time Tales. They will bring in money to help support the house. No one has done more than Vivienne to support Priory House since it opened. Tea time tales are a sell-out every week, usually with a waiting list for any returned tickets. Vivienne hardly missed one in all the years they have

been running. She was always there to introduce the speaker and frequently was the speaker herself.

In amongst all of this came Dunstable at War, a reminiscence project again in conjunction with the BBC. Volunteer story gatherers, including Vivienne, all trained at the British Library and between them collected more than a hundred local WWII stories. Vivienne worked with her WEA students mapping the town's wartime retailers and recording their stories for future generations.

In 2010 many of us interested in the town's history began the Medieval Dunstable project. For three years I spoke to Vivienne either in person or on the phone, almost every day. The project became much much bigger than any of us had ever anticipated and because of the lottery deadlines it consumed our lives. When heritage lottery gave us the green light to begin the project, we had just over two years to complete the research, publish a book, and a website, and all in time for the priory 800th anniversary in September 2013.

We did it, with a dedicated group of historians, and with Vivienne constantly answering our questions and consulting her own notes and library. As well as writing her own chapter on Bedfordshire she frequently prompted me to follow up a reference, suggesting a visit to a university library, or a record office, and of course she was always right. She knew just where to look. The project has put the town firmly on the medieval tourism map, always one of Vivienne's aims, and it still continues, with more research, a recent award for the physic garden and the imminent publication of the Dunstable Annals.

For some years Priory House on a Thursday seemed to belong to Vivienne. Everyone knew that if you wanted to speak to her, she could be found there, frequently with a queue.

18 years is not the longest of partnerships, but for me one that has brought much pleasure. Vivienne was extremely generous to all of us who knew her, and worked with her, not only with her knowledge but also her time. Many of us here will miss our regular history chats, our Priory House lunches and her many words of encouragement.

In 2012 Vivienne was awarded an MBE. The citation reads, 'For services to the community in Dunstable.' Those seven words say everything.

What a lady and what a legacy.