

The hens scratch happily around, unaware that they are in the midst of the Orchard smallpox hospital. Picture taken after 1904 — but not much after.

than: 'the Farm continues to supply all the mutton, pork, milk, eggs, poultry and vegetables required for the needs of the hospital' so scrutiny of the farm performance may not have been too exacting. Several disastrous years seem to have passed by without adverse comment from the Guildhall. Take 1938. 'The period ended the 31st December 1938 proved to be the worst year for farming in this district that any farmer of long residence can recall to memory. During the first six months of the year the rainfall was only 5.63 inches. The only crop that was satisfactory was the corn crop.' A reminder that Dartford is in a low rainfall area and noteworthy that they had a rain gauge, but regrettably the site and records of the gauge have not been located.

Wartime inevitably brought changes due to rationing, but one welcome bonus came in 1943 when the MS reported that 58 geese were available, 'consequently a most satisfactory Christmas dinner was supplied to both patients and staff'. Presumably geese did not count as part of the meat ration, unlike pork.

The farm was sold in the 1950s after the NHS took over in 1948, but happily to Dartford Council, who have converted it to a working farm open to the public and much appreciated by a wide range of visitors. A few gnarled old fruit trees on the hillside are all that remain of the orchard that in 1939, only a year after the disaster of 1938, produced a record apple crop. Extra hands from staff and wives were called in to gather the crop but no patients . . . they might have tried to jump off the ladders!

Finally, the Burroughs Wellcome Materia Medica Farm (BW) operated from 1904 to 1947 and was devoted to the growing of various medicinal plants both on its own land near Temple Hill and by contracting out to farmers in the neighbourhood. At some time or other five different herbs were cultivated: henbane, belladonna, thornapple, foxglove and aconite. Little evidence of these now remains except belladonna (deadly nightshade) which is quite common on waste land nearby, and thornapple (*Datura stramonium*) has occasionally appeared, for its seeds can survive years in the ground.

The only herb now grown commercially is foxglove (Digitalis lanata) which is not native to England and all trace of it has disappeared from around BW's works at

Temple Hill, but it is still grown commercially for BW in Holland, to whose climate it is better suited. Now most of the farm land is built on and the drugs, except digitalis (digoxin), made synthetically; but for over forty years this unique farm flourished near Dartford and was perhaps the most unusual of the cluster of institutional farms in the district.

But it was with our native purple foxglove (*D. purpurea*) that the modern story began as Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's grandfather, put it poetically in 1785:

'The foxglove leaves, with caution given
Another proof of favouring heaven
Will happily display,
The rapid pulse it can ablate,
The hectic flush can moderate
And, blest by Him whose will is fate,
May give a lengthened day.'

Note: Acknowledgements to Gordon Rundall for valued help with the section on the Materia Medica Farm of Burroughs, Wellcome & Co. and to the Library Staff at Joyce Green Hospital for much appreciated assistance. The author's more detailed article on Joyce Green Hospital Farm was published in 'Bygone Kent' Vol. 13 No. 2.

## THE RACING COUNT The Life of Louis Zborowski of Higham

By P.G. Elgar

On 19th October 1924 the villagers of Bridge were stunned to hear of the death of one of their most prominent residents. Count Louis Zborowski, legendary racing driver and one of the most colourful characters of his generation, had been competing in the Italian Grand Prix at Monza. His supercharged Mercedes left the track and hit a tree. He was four months short of his 30th birthday.

The Zborowski family's connection with Bridge began many years earlier. Louis' father, Count Eliot Zborowski, a Polish aristocrat, became a naturalized British subject. He married an American millionairess, granddaughter of wealthy John Jacob Astor the First. Her family owned much property in Manhattan and elsewhere. The Zborowskis had a family seat at Burton Lazars, Leicestershire, and a London house. Louis Vorow was born on 20th February 1895.



Bridge Hill House, formerly a home of the Zborowski family.

Count Eliot was killed when his Mercedes hit a wall during the La Turbie Hill Climb near Nice on 1st April 1903. One story said he had been unnerved by a fortune-teller's premonition. Another stated that a cufflink had jammed the hand throttle open. Some believed Louis was wearing them when he was killed.

Bridge Hill House, some four miles from Canterbury, was the home of the widowed Countess and her son. He attended Price's School, Broadstairs, before entering Eton in summer 1908. He had a flair for languages and artistic talent. The latter was suppressed as too effeminate. His position in Form Three was described as low for a boy of thirteen. He left Eton after about one year.

The Countess befriended the wife of William Gay, owner of nearby Higham House. She set her heart on buying the property. Built in 1768, it stood in 22 acres of landscaped gardens. It had a 50-foot lily pond, tennis court and rose garden. There were forty bedrooms, ballroom and cocktail lounge. The Countess sadly died of influenza as finishing touches to her dream house were nearing completion in 1911.

At sixteen the young Count was heir to a fortune of £11 million. He already showed signs of remarkable inborn mechanical ability and a love of speed. He rode motor-cycles with abandon through the estate and surrounding country-side. He turned to cars, exhibiting all the driving skills his father had possessed.

He established large workshops at Higham, directed by William Martin, whose brother Len was chief mechanic. A fleet of over thirty cars was maintained, including examples of most of the famous makes of the time such as Mercedes, Hispano-Suiza, Bugatti, Ballot and Salmson.

Construction began on a series of aero-engined monsters, the famous 'Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bangs', nicknamed on account of the noise made starting up. Louis obtained Maybach engines of the type which had powered German Gotha



Highland Court, originally Higham, home of Count Louis Zborowski and birthplace of the great 'Chitty' cars.

bombers and Zeppelins from the War Disposals Board. The first was fitted into a Mercedes chassis, with lightweight body built by Bligh Brothers, a famous Canterbury firm in which the Count had a large financial interest. They had an excellent reputation, having exported carriages worldwide since 1812, including, it is said, some without wheels to Russia for use as sledges.

Chitty 1 made a sensational first appearance at Brooklands on Easter Monday, 28th March 1921, winning the first race at an average speed of 100.75 m.p.h. She was driven regularly from Bridge on Bligh Brothers trade-plates, with 'Shuggar' Cooper, Clive Gallop (chief engineer), and other racing friends to 'take the cement'. They wore large loud-check caps specially imported from Palm Beach. Seven hundredweight of sand was carried in the back to even up weight distribution. Chitty was started with an aeroplane half-axle threaded over the starting handle. The 23-litre engine was pulled over by many willing hands while the magneto was wound — an extraordinary sight for the locals. Bridge landlords were said to have removed their best glassware when the car was idling nearby!

Louis married Violet Ethel Leicester, well known actress and Gaiety Girl. The social scene at Higham was exciting, with legendary parties. The cream of society were invited, including film stars, novelists, artists and musicians. Mr C.F. Hogben of Bridge well remembers those days. His brother Leslie worked at Higham and married a cook. The large staff included about eight gardeners. Zborowski's return after race meetings was always an event. Local boys would wait excitedly for their hero's arrival. He took the corners in the drive so rapidly that the ballast which covered it was thrown in to the fields. It had to be periodically collected in barrows. An annual ball for village tradesmen was held. Wines and spirits arrived by the lorryload and huge cleaning-up operations were required.



Count and Countess Zborowski in their magnificent garden at Higham.



A happy house party group at Higham.

Zborowski (nicknamed 'Zbo' or 'Lou' by his friends), was an irrepressible ball of fire and extremely generous. Several boys wanted to start a football club. They collected two shillings from residents. They visited Higham and found a mechanic who took their request to the Count. He produced £1, enough to purchase a good football.

He became interested in railways, spending £8,000 on a 15-inch gauge system in the grounds to transport visitors around the estate. Lady guests were tied up on the rails and had to be 'rescued'. He delighted in organising other slightly malicious set-pieces and practical jokes at the expense of people who took life too seriously. One was sent to the swimming pool on an errand while guests watched from indoors. As he stood by the water Louis produced a long-handled dynamo exploder, detonating a home-made depth charge. The water rose in a tall column before descending on the victim.

There is little doubt that unofficial road racing occurred. Guests were invited to select a car, drive somewhere and see who could arrive back first. Frustrated local police tried to catch them as they sped up the hill from Bridge.

In 1920 Louis heard that the local fire officer felt that his elderly horse-drawn appliance was too slow. He offered him a racing chassis and engine and had a suitable body built at Bligh's. This 75 horse-power engine could reach 60 m.p.h. — probably the fastest in the country. The Brigade bestowed on Louis the title Captain which he proudly retained until his death.

He owned an aeroplane at Bekesbourne Aerodrome, a motor-boat at Faversham and is believed to have acquired the first wireless in Kent. He could not always buy what he wanted. Mr William Pierce, veterinary-surgeon to the estate, owned a dog called Prince who had retrieved well for the Count. He asked him to name his price but was told Prince was not for sale.

At Brooklands Count Louis met Captain John Howey who shared his railway interests. Louis first had the idea of building a miniature public railway of good length, with double-track, stations, signalling and passengers. Together they planned to buy the Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway in the Lake District but the scheme fell through. The dream was eventually realised by Captain Howey when he established the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway.

Three other Chittys were constructed at Higham. No. 2 was built more as an exciting road car, with narrow four-seater body, mudguards, lighting, hood and windscreen. It was driven across France and after a memorable stay in Nice was taken to Algeria. They drove some 250 miles to the fringe of the Sahara.

Chitty 3, usually known as 'The White Mercedes', was built with a 14.7 litre engine as used in German fighters (obtainable at the time for £60 unused, £30 reconditioned). The fourth Chitty, built in 1924, was the 'Higham Special', with a 27-litre Liberty engine and Bligh two-seater body. The Count seems to have planned an attempt on the Land Speed Record. It was purchased from the estate and modified. Nicknamed 'Babs', it was driven by Parry Thomas, who raised the Land Speed Record to over 170 m.p.h. at Pendine in 1927. He crashed fatally making a further attempt.



Boating with a friend — unusual transport for the speed-loving Count.

Louis acquired an interest in the recently formed Aston Martin Company, into which he put £10,270, becoming a director. He drove their cars in the French Grand Prix at Strasbourg in 1922 and at Barcelona in 1923. In the USA he raced a Bugatti at Indianapolis and competed in the Isle of Man 1,500 c.c. Trophy Race. On 21st June 1924 he appeared at the Kent Automobile Club speed trials on Herne Bay promenade, driving a Hispano-Suiza and the Mercedes in which he was killed four months later. Clive Gallop had the sad task of returning his friend's remains to Higham. The coffin was borne from Dover on the Mercedes truck which had transported cars overseas. It is said to have expired in the drive with a seized-up steering column.

Count Zborowski left an estate valued at £805,000. His widow received £23,000 and enough interest from the residuary estate for an income of £8,450 per annum. He left two years' wages to each servant amounting to £3,000. Solicitors argued that this did not include the garage workers. This was contested on the grounds that the garage was not operated for profit and they were estate employees. Eventually the legacies were paid. Mr R.J. Styles, formerly employed by Bligh Brothers, remembers helping the managing director collect £3,000 (in cash!) from Barclay's Bank and paying each worker's share.

Higham was sold on 31st July 1928 for £17,500 to Mr Walter Whigham and renamed Highland Court because, it is believed, he did not wish to be known as 'Mr Whigham of Higham'. The Countess later married Paris Singer, an heir of the famous manufacturing company.

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## MAIDSTONE RURAL DISTRICT FIRE BRIGADE (Part Four)

By N.D. Rider

Towards the end of 1940 the Regional Commissioner, an official appointed under the Defence Regulations, requested Maidstone Rural District Council 'to appoint someone to co-ordinate fire-fighting measures to ensure the utmost efficiency in extinguishing fires started by enemy action, often to provide pilots of enemy planes markers for bombing raids.' Coming after the Battle of Britain and the London Blitz the request would appear to have been shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted! The Council asked the Deputy Clerk, Mr G. Letchford, to undertake the responsibility. He attended a meeting arranged to co-ordinate local brigades, AFS and other services at the Commissioner's office in Tunbridge Wells on 3rd January 1941.

Afterwards, Mr Letchford called meetings of Parish Councils, ARP and AFS personnel in every parish regarding setting up fire watching groups. The response was good. In mid-February he informed the Committee that the whole District was adequately covered by 2,335 volunteer fire watchers sharing 341

stirrup pumps.

Meanwhile the Brigade dealt with several fires including a blaze in hopper huts at Gallants Farm, East Farleigh, during a heavy snowstorm when the roads were snow-bound, and a burning Army lorry on Loose Hill. This fire was caused by the camouflage netting coming into contact with the exhaust pipe.

Chief Officer Hanson now asked the Committee to provide a drill tower. It would, he explained, enable the firemen to practise ladder and rescue work on taller buildings with the hook ladders loaned by Colonel Balston; it could be used as an observation post, and it would provide a site for a siren as well as

giving the Brigade hose drying facilities.

The three hook ladders and seven Pompier belts recently loaned by Colonel Balston were of French origin and had probably been purchased for use by the Springfield Paper Mill Brigade. They were designed to obtain access to the upper floors of taller buildings from narrow streets and alleys where it was not possible to use conventional ladders. The strong, iron-toothed hooks bolted to the top of the ladders could be smashed through windows and hung over sills so that they hung flat against the building. A fireman wearing one of the Pompier belts was then able to climb vertically to reach the first-floor window. He clipped the belt onto a rung to hold himself steady, leaving both hands free