

## VILLAGE ECHOES

### The Curious Life of Harry Dadswell

Halfway through two months of combined cataract surgery for my husband and I, my recovering eyes ironically fell on reminiscences in the Goudhurst Coronation Book about Blind Harry Dadswell. I was to discover that he wasn't called Harry and his surname wasn't Dadswell but that was what he was known as in Goudhurst. Because of his affliction since birth, he had fine-tuned his other faculties and was able to find his way around the locality without any help. A neighbour recounted that if you saw him coming and stood still in the road, he would still know you were there and walk round you. Likewise, if there was a pile of stones in his way, he would somehow be able to avoid them. He could distinguish between various traction engines and tell you the owner. He could tell the colour of a horse or dog by its feel.

Inevitably people tried to catch him out, often unsuccessfully, by altering the pattern of their footsteps to avoid recognition. Or offering half a crown (2/6d) instead of a florin (£1.1s), perhaps easier to understand. He was quite comfortable walking about the dark country lanes at night and on one occasion had walked two miles from his home at Summerhill Farm to the Vine to get some brandy for his brother who was unwell. Such was his heightened sense of direction that for many years until his death, he managed to hold down a job selling tea and coffee house to house, for an organisation called The Blind Tea Agency. This seems to have been set up specifically to allow blind people to earn a living, despite involving travel covering many miles to take orders, deliver the goods and receive payment.



His family at Summerhill Farm were— Robert, a farmer, his mother, two brothers and two sisters. One sister, Kate, was a teacher at Winchet Hill School. However, a trawl through the census records tells a different story. In 1861, he was described as a visitor in the household but in 1871 he was called a foster son. There seems to be some uncertainty of where he was born, Goudhurst or Tunbridge Wells. But it was stated that he had been totally blind since his birth in 1853. Ten years later, in 1881, he was recorded as a boarder. In 1891 he was simply categorised as a son of Robert Dadswell but had gained the middle name of Watson. Both his 'father' and 'mother' died in 1896, whilst living at the Woolpack, but in 1901 Henry (Harry) was still living with his siblings Alfred, Ada, Gertrude and Hugh on Ballards Hill. Likewise in 1911, when he is stated as being the step brother of Ada Fullegar, who was the illegitimate daughter of Caroline Fullegar, the second wife of Robert Dadswell. And so who was he really?

On 15th June 1852 a little girl called Emily Watson was baptised in St Mary's, the child of a Martha Watson but there was a blank space where the father's name should have been. She was sadly buried on 30<sup>th</sup> of that month. At the beginning of September 1853 Martha just aged 23 joined her daughter in the graveyard. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of that month Harriett Watson aged three was also buried. A sad tale indeed. However, on 7th September 1854 her son Henry was baptised with illegitimate written in the blank space in the father's column. Someone had obviously taken the child to be baptised after Martha's death, no explanation was given in the register. Was this Robert Dadswell, was he the father? We will probably never know but Harry Dadswell, as he became, lived a very good life, despite his affliction and was buried at the age of 68 on 13th May 1921. The entry in the parish burial records show that Henry Watson (alias Dadswell), living at Finchurst Cottage, shared a burial plot with two other people of no obvious relationship all buried on different dates. This usually happened to spread the cost for people of limited means because at the very last he was denied a burial with other members of the Dadswell family.

See [www.goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org](http://www.goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org) for details of our upcoming talks starting on 4<sup>th</sup> March at the Goudhurst Club