Introduction

On 28th October 2015 local natural historian, Steve Woodward, gave a presentation to the Leicester Literary & Philosophical Society, Natural History Section, at Leicester New Walk Museum, entitled Pushing up the daisies - Churchyard wildlife in VC55. This was a summary and overview of the extensive work carried out by Steve Woodward and Helen Ikin to survey the range of wildlife in around 330 churchyards of Leicestershire and Rutland. At the parish church of St Luke’s in the small village of Laughton, near Market Harborough, Steve and Helen had noticed with interest a slate headstone memorial with the legend:

Dorothy Yvonne Kent Bovey, Botanical Artist, and her husband, Norman Henry Bovey, formerly of Killock House, Laughton

This paper outlines what I have since learnt about the life and work of Dorothy Bovey.

Background

Dorothy Yvonne Kent Williams was born in South Wales on 8th May 1923 in the small parish of Llanedy, Carmarthenshire. (1) She was the youngest of three sisters, and the family at the time lived in a very large house, known as Llwyngwern, which survives today as a residential care home for the elderly in the village of Hendy. Dorothy’s father, Henry Williams, was one of two brothers, the “sons” of Thos. Williams & Sons Ltd, a significant company at the time, with coal and steel interests in South Wales. The company was eventually absorbed into The Steel Company of Wales, and later British Steel.

Her two sisters were, according to Dorothy, every bit as talented if not more so than boys. One of the sisters was apparently a brilliant mathematician, but upper middle-class women in those days were simply not expected to “do” anything by way of pursuing a career. (2)

While Henry ran the family business his older brother, Dorothy’s uncle, who later became Sir Evan Williams, involved himself in public affairs and was the leader of the mine-owners during the General Strike in 1926. He was President of the Mining Association of Great Britain from 1919-44. He was at odds with miners’ leaders during this time as the miners sought a national wage agreement whereas the mine-owners, led by Sir Evan Williams, insisted on district-based agreements for wages and holidays.

Dorothy attended St James’ School, a girls’ independent school, since merged with two other schools and known as

Dorothy Bovey at work at home in Laughton, (undated). (By permission of Susan Ward, daughter of Dorothy Bovey.)
Malvern St James in Great Malvern. Her art teacher at the school, Miss Varley, remained a life-long friend and was probably a significant influence on her later decision to take up painting. (3)

Wartime and Post-war

Henry Williams died suddenly in 1936 when Dorothy was 13. It is understood that by the late 1930s the three sisters were based in the family’s flat at 60, Queens Gate, Kensington SW7. The oldest sister was a “deb”, but the outbreak of war probably denied a similar route for the two younger sisters. Dorothy joined the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and was based at RAF Bentley Priory, near Stanmore, Middlesex, a non-flying RAF Station, famous as the HQ of Fighter Command during the War, where she was ‘listening to informative German radio signals’. (4) It is thought that she was assisting with work on Ultra intelligence. In 1944 the sisters were bombed out of the family flat in Kensington by a V2 bomb attack. (5)

Dorothy met Norman Bovey on a “demob” course in 1946, and they were married soon afterwards on 21st December 1946 at St Michael’s Church in the parish of Cathedine, Breconshire. Dorothy’s address at the time was given as Cilwych, Bwlch, Breconshire, believed to have been the home of her eldest sister, Margaret, at the time, and Norman’s home address was 48, Melford Road, Dulwich, London. (6) Norman Bovey had a distinguished wartime career in the Royal Navy and was later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, a military decoration awarded for ‘gallantry during active operations against the enemy at sea’. The DSC was in recognition of his role in leading the second main wave of Barracuda dive bombers from 829 Naval Air Squadron in the attack on the German battleship Tirpitz in Operation Tungsten in Arctic Norway on 3rd April 1944. The Tirpitz was a major threat to the Russian Arctic Convoys, and the operation was one of a series of attacks designed to seriously disable or sink the German ship.

After the war Dorothy and Norman lived at 9, Kensington Gate, London W8, where they had the whole house. They had four children born between 1948-1956: three sons, Philip, Andrew and William, and a daughter, Susan. Dorothy at this time was interested in art and architecture and regularly took the children to the National Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum, where she explained the paintings to the children. On a similar “art appreciation” theme in 1956 the family visited Santiago de Compostela in Spain and then up into France, visiting the Palaeolithic cave paintings at Lascaux in the Dordogne, and also Chartres and Mont St Michel. (7)

Laughton, 1961-2003

In 1961 the Bovey family moved out of London to South Leicestershire. (8) They settled in Laughton, a village just off the old Welford Road, 13 miles south of Leicester, in the hill country close to the Northamptonshire border. Laughton now has a population of less than 100. There were no known previous connections with Leicestershire, and Dorothy’s son Philip Bovey speculates that the move may have been driven by his mother “from a wish to get back to the country”. They moved into Killock House, mentioned in Pevsner and described in the Victoria County History of Leicestershire as one of three large houses to the east of Main Street, ‘a two-storied brick building dating from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century’. (9) It is a Grade II listed building. Norman Bovey bought the house in 1961. (10)

Soon after the move to Laughton, the youngest of the children, William, went away to school. With the older children also away at boarding school, Dorothy took up flower painting. She had no formal training in either art or botany, but she ‘always wanted to have a go at it’. (11) Initially Dorothy sold her paintings to friends and then progressed to showing them at Royal Horticultural Society shows in Westminster and Chelsea and the Game Fair at Harrogate. According to Philip Bovey her outgoing
personality and ability to engage people was a factor in her developing a reasonably lucrative business.

By 1974, William, the youngest child, was 18 and had left home. Later that year, aged 51, Dorothy successfully applied to become a member of the Zaire River Expedition, organised by the Scientific Exploration Society (S.E.S.) and led by Major John Blashford-Snell, one of the Society’s founder members. She later told the *Sunday Telegraph* Magazine in October 1977 that she had found ‘a better way of being a grandmother than sitting round in hotels in Torquay’. (12) Philip believes that she failed the fitness test for the trip ‘but talked her way into the expedition anyway, claiming exemption on the ground that she was older than anyone else’. (13) The aim of the expedition was to navigate the length of the Zaire River (formerly the River Congo) and carry out a programme of medical and scientific research. (14) The expedition arrived in Zaire on 4th October 1974 and returned to Britain on 26th January 1975. Dorothy was the official botanical artist on the expedition and spent around seven weeks with the team, returning to Britain in mid-November. Botanist, Andrew Paterson, made an extensive collection of specimens for the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, and Dorothy Bovey was to paint or draw many of them. (15) The two of them subsequently won the gold medal of the RHS for their exhibition of plants and paintings at the Society’s annual show in April 1975.

Over the next few years Dorothy Bovey travelled extensively, often on her own, sometimes with organised groups. She visited North Africa several times, Iran and Turkey for the architecture, China and Vietnam, Mexico and Canada, and the Australian outback for the botany. Norman Bovey normally stayed at home but supported Dorothy in her ventures. A serious leg infection contracted on another S.E.S. trip to Indonesia probably dissuaded her from future expeditions, although she remained in close touch with many former colleagues from the earlier ventures. (16)

After Zaire she was invited by the Sultan of Oman to paint some of the flowers found in the highlands of Northern Oman. This was part of an Omani Government education programme to study and appreciate the natural resources of the country, and a short book was published by Bartholomew in 1978: *Wild Flowers of Northern Oman*, illustrated in colour by Dorothy Bovey, text by James Mandaville Jr. Almost all the paintings in the book were drawn from living specimens, which were then pressed and forwarded to the Natural History Museum to confirm identification by Dorothy Hillcoat, specialist in Arabian flora at the Museum. The plants chosen for illustration were either those of a particular visual interest or those which are major components of the dominant vegetation and therefore important in understanding the regional ecology. Many of the specimens were painted for the first time, and the book achieved its aim ‘to provide….a means for the student and non-specialist visitor to identify those flowers of northern Oman that are commonly encountered’. (17)

As the work and physical effort involved in exhibiting gradually took its toll Dorothy turned more to the teaching of flower painting. She taught courses at Flatford Mill Learning Centre in Suffolk and also West Dean College near Chichester for many years. At some stage she must have been asked to produce another book, this time based on her teaching course material. This was never published for whatever reason, and the complete typescript and illustrations only came to light when the family were clearing out the house after their parents’ deaths. (18)
Illustrations of flowers found in Northern Oman made for the Sultan of Oman by Dorothy Bovey and published by Bartholomew Books in 1978 in Wild Flowers of Northern Oman. (Illustrations reproduced by permission of the Diwan of the Royal Court, Sultanate of Oman.)
A later interest, alongside the painting, was photography. Dorothy’s approach to photography contrasted with her painting method. Her son Philip, and husband Norman, were also photographers: ‘Her style was very different from ours. Both of us would take ages over a single picture. Although she was meticulous in her painting, taking great care over the exact paper surface, brush size, colour and every detail - she would only paint in daylight - she would take hundreds of photographs and hope that one or two would be good. Her method probably produced as many good ones as ours!’ (19) Her subjects were mainly flowers, landscapes, architecture and people. She used the material to lecture extensively to local groups and still continued to hold smaller-scale displays of her paintings.

Dorothy also used and developed the large garden of Killock House to produce subject material for her painting and had changing passions for subject material: ‘For example she became very interested in rare irises and imported them from all over the world. A few years later she moved on to something else and they all went.’ (20) She had some commercial success producing sets of melamine place mats and coasters through the Medici Gallery, London. Although she made some attempts to sell her paintings in West End galleries she had more success at exhibitions, where she was able to personally engage with people and where the pictures were more affordably priced than at the galleries.

Although Dorothy remained active her painting ability was eventually affected by deteriorating vision. She had an appointment to discuss possible cataract removal on the day she suffered the stroke, which eventually caused her death. (21) Norman Bovey was very active in the local community and was churchwarden for many years. At this stage of his life he described himself as a ‘builder (retired)’, and he took charge of maintaining the extensive and historic mud wall on the north and west sides of the churchyard. Dorothy was less involved in local affairs, but she retained many contacts and friendships from her earlier travels and her painting career. Dorothy Bovey died on 6th April 2003 in Leicester Royal Infirmary, aged 79. (22) She had lived more than half her life in Laughton. The memorial headstone in Laughton churchyard was personally selected by her husband from a quarry in the Lake District. Norman died on 13th October 2005 aged 83. (23) Both he and Dorothy had remained living in Killock House until just a few days before their respective deaths. Their two youngest sons, William and Andrew, died in 2012 and 2014, aged 55 and 61 respectively and are also buried in Laughton churchyard. Norman Bovey was proud of what his wife had achieved, and it was his decision to inscribe the legend ‘Botanical Artist’ on the headstone at Laughton. (24)

References:
1. Death Certificate, Dorothy Bovey.
2. Letter to the author from Philip Bovey, 5th January 2017.
3. ibid.
5. Letter to the author from Philip Bovey, 5th January 2017.
7. Letter to the author from Philip Bovey, 5th January 2017.
8. ibid.
10. E-mail to the author from Philip Bovey, 19th February 2017.
12. ibid.
15. ibid.
16. Letter to the author from Philip Bovey, 5th January 2017.
18. Letter to the author from Philip Bovey, 5th January 2017.
19. ibid.
20. ibid.
21. ibid.
22. Death Certificate, Dorothy Bovey.
23. Death Certificate, Norman Bovey.
24. Letter to the author from Philip Bovey, 5th January 2017

Memorial to Dorothy and Norman Bovey, Laughton, St Luke’s churchyard.