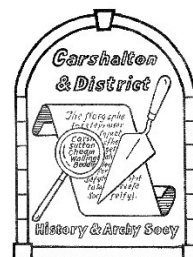


# Carshalton & District History & Archaeology Society

## Local History Note 16



### The man who fed Britain (John Donald Balfour Fergusson)

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In LHN15, we saw that John and Ethel Fergusson, who lived at *Dalnabreck*, Woodcote Road, Wallington, from 1911 to 1920, had four sons: John Donald Balfour, Edward Keith, Alec Everett, and Ian Victor Lyon. In this Note I shall concentrate on the eldest, John. He was born in Bebington, Cheshire, on 26 August 1891,<sup>1</sup> although his parents were recorded as living in Plumstead (then in Kent) in 1891, and John senior was minister of the Presbyterian Church there.<sup>2</sup> However, Ethel had been brought up in Bebington, and they had married nearby at Rock Ferry in 1890,<sup>3</sup> so it seems likely that Ethel went back to her family home for the birth. By 1901 all four sons had been born, and the family were living at a house called *Dalnabreck* in Prittlewell, Essex (near Southend-on-Sea).<sup>4</sup> They seem to have taken the name *Dalnabreck* with them as they moved from town to town.

John was educated at Berkhamsted School and Magdalen College, Oxford, where he gained first-class honours in modern history in 1914.<sup>5</sup> When WW1 began, he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the 5<sup>th</sup> Royal West Kent Regiment,<sup>6</sup> transferring to the 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshire Regiment, where he was recorded as a Captain in 1915.<sup>7</sup> He saw active service on the Somme in 1916 and at the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) in 1917.<sup>8</sup> He married Phyllis Mary Cleverly at St Mary Magdalen's, Ripley, Surrey (between Guildford and Woking), on 17 July 1918; she gave her address as Dunsborough, Ripley, but his was in Edinburgh.<sup>9</sup> Their first child, David Balfour, was born in the Guildford district on 23 November 1920,<sup>10</sup> they later had a daughter Mary (b. 1925)<sup>11</sup> and two more sons, Colin Cleverly (b. 1922)<sup>12</sup> and John Alastair (b. 1927).<sup>13</sup> By 1925 the family was living in *Upton House*, Ockham, a village quite close to Ripley,<sup>14</sup> where they stayed until at least 1929.<sup>15</sup>

After the War, John pursued a very successful career in the Civil Service. In 1919 he started work for the Treasury,<sup>16</sup> and by 1930 he has become Principal Private Secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowden.<sup>17</sup> He was a member of the delegation to the Imperial Economic Conference of 1932 in Ottawa,<sup>18</sup> which was held to discuss the Great Depression. In 1935 he was made a Companion of the Bath (C.B.),<sup>19</sup> and in 1936 was promoted to Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture.<sup>20</sup> A Permanent Secretary is the senior civil servant in a government department, so this was a very responsible post. He was made a Knight Commander of the Bath (K.C.B.) in 1937,<sup>21</sup> taking the title of Sir Donald Fergusson (dropping 'John' and 'Balfour'), so from here on he is referred to as Donald. British agricultural was in poor shape in the 1930s, making Britain very vulnerable in the event of a major war. Donald (with no doubt many others) was well aware of this, and instigated a programme to improve agricultural production. In 1938 he helped to set up War Agricultural Committees in each county,<sup>22</sup> and continued to prepare for the inevitable war, leading the Second Food-Production Campaign.<sup>23</sup> He seems to have quickly grasped the

intricacies of the agricultural industry, and the links and tensions between its various component industries (e.g., milk, cereals), for example the need to produce more cereals and the importance of ley farming (temporary grassland).<sup>24</sup> From 1941 he presided over the new Agricultural Improvement Committee.<sup>25</sup> He was famed for his quotation “It is much more important to teach children the value of drinking milk than to teach them algebra”, made in 1939.<sup>26</sup>

He was involved in local as well as national issues. For example, in 1937 he opened a new lock and sluice at Dog-in-a-Doublet, the first stage of the River Nene Improvement Scheme,<sup>27</sup> and later that year he opened a pumping station at Goosetree, near March.<sup>28</sup> He seems to have had a regular round of visiting Agricultural Colleges, awarding diplomas and certificates and making speeches.<sup>29</sup> Phyllis (by then Lady Fergusson) played her part with a role in the Land Army from their home at Dummer Grange, south-west of Basingstoke.<sup>30</sup> It is no surprise that he was praised in the press as “The man who ploughed up Britain – the man who enabled the farmers to write their greatest chapter in the nation’s history”.<sup>31</sup>



**Sir Donald Fergusson in 1941.**

National Portrait Gallery (CCBY-NC-ND 3.0)

When the War ended, one might have expected Donald to have taken up a less onerous post, or even early retirement, but the election of a new (Labour) government in July 1945 led to a re-shuffle of permanent secretaries. Donald, shortly to be promoted to G.C.B. (Knight Grand Cross, the highest class of member of the Order of the Bath),<sup>32</sup> was moved to the Ministry of Fuel and Power,<sup>33</sup> which had only been created in 1942.<sup>34</sup> He had to run a new Ministry in the face of opposition from the coal, gas, petrol and electricity industries, and succeeded in nationalising both gas and electricity. Donald had to face three more crises in the rest of his career. The first came early in 1947, when extreme cold and very heavy snow exacerbated the problem of low stocks of coal. It became almost impossible to move coal to power stations; factories had to close, food rationing was cut to levels lower than in the War, and electricity was limited to 19 hours per day.<sup>35</sup> The situation eased when the weather improved in late March, but the economic consequences were severe and long-lasting.<sup>36</sup> The Minister of Fuel and Power, Manny Shinwell, resigned in October.<sup>37</sup> Donald kept his job.



**Winter 1947. Snowbound bus near Huddersfield.**

(CC BY-SA 2.0)

In 1951 Donald was closely involved in the Abadan oil crisis. This needs some back story. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) was founded in 1909 to search for oil in Khuzestan (south-west Iran) and started production in 1913. APOC built an oil refinery at Abadan, which was the largest in the world for the next 50 years. The British Government purchased 51% of APOC's shares in 1914, in view of the importance of its oil to the Royal Navy. There was much dissatisfaction in Iran with both the terms of the agreement with APOC and the conditions of the workers, throughout the 1930s and 1940s,<sup>38</sup> culminating in March 1951 when the Iranian Government nationalised the AIOC (the name had changed in 1935).<sup>39</sup> Donald was part of the delegation sent under Richard Stokes (Lord Privy

Seal) to negotiate,<sup>40</sup> presumably if rather ironically because of his experience in nationalising British industries. The negotiations failed, and in 1952 British sanctions crippled the Iranian economy. Finally, in 1953 the CIA and MI6 organised a coup which overthrew the elected government and established the Shah in power,<sup>41</sup> laying the foundations of the problems between USA/UK and Iran since 1979.



**Abadan oil refinery in 1951.**

(Public domain)

The final crisis of Donald's career was the North Sea Flood of January 1953, which killed over 300 people along the east coast from Lincolnshire to the Thames.<sup>42</sup> Donald was appointed as an expert to the subsequent enquiry (the Waverley Committee on coastal flooding).<sup>43</sup> The enquiry led (among other things) to the construction of the Thames Barrier, which became operational in 1982.<sup>44</sup>



**A breach at Erith after the North Sea Flood of 1953.**

(Public domain via Wikimedia Commons)

Donald and Phyllis had retired to the small village of Ebbesbourne Wake, near Salisbury, from where their youngest son, John Alastair, married Judith May in June 1952.<sup>45</sup> Donald died there in 1963<sup>46</sup> and Phyllis in 1971.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004); *Daily News (London)*, 29 Aug 1891, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> 1891 Census.

<sup>3</sup> *The Queen*, 4 Oct 1890, p.46; *Daily News (London)*, 27 Sep 1890, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> 1901 Census.

<sup>5</sup> 1911 Census; *ODNB*.

<sup>6</sup> TNA WO372/7/48202 via Forces War Records; UK, British Army World War 1 Medal Roll Index Cards, 1914-1920.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald\\_Fergusson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Fergusson)

<sup>9</sup> Surrey, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1754-1937.

<sup>10</sup> England and Wales Civil Registration Birth Index, 1916-2005; 1939 Registration.

<sup>11</sup> Killingbeck family tree, Ancestry.

<sup>12</sup> England and Wales Civil Registration Birth Index, 1916-2005.

<sup>13</sup> England and Wales, Death Index, 1989-2021; Killingbeck family tree, Ancestry.

<sup>14</sup> Surrey, England, Electoral Registers.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Op cit* note 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 Oct 1936, p.7.

<sup>18</sup> UK and Ireland, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878-1960.

<sup>19</sup> *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 3 Jun 1935, p.7.

<sup>20</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 Oct 1936, p.7.

<sup>21</sup> *The Scotsman*, 11 May 1937, p.7.

<sup>22</sup> *Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser*, 19 Feb 1943, p.5.

<sup>23</sup> *Op cit* note 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 15 Dec 1939, p.11; *Western Morning News*, 6 Apr 1943, p.6; *Western Daily Press*, p.4.

<sup>25</sup> *The Scotsman*, 19 Jun 1941, p.8.

<sup>26</sup> *North Wilts Herald*, 18 Aug 1939, p.9; *Lincolnshire Standard and Boston Guardian*, 19 Aug 1939, p.8.

<sup>27</sup> *Peterborough Standard*, 30 Jul 1937, p.9, 31 Dec 1937, p.6; *Northampton Mercury*, 30 Jul 1937, p.7; *Lynn Advertiser*, 30 Jul 1937, p.5.

<sup>28</sup> *Yarmouth Independent*, 31 Jul 1937, p.2

<sup>29</sup> I have not listed all such occasions, but see for example *Market Harborough Advertiser and Midland Mail*, 23 Jul 1937, p.6; *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 1 Aug 1939, pp.9, 13.

<sup>30</sup> 1939 Registration.

<sup>31</sup> *Daily News (London)*, 25 Aug 1945, p.3.

<sup>32</sup> *Daily News (London)*, 13 Jun 1946, p.4.

<sup>33</sup> *The Scotsman*, 15 May 1945, p.4.

<sup>34</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry\\_of\\_Power\\_\(United\\_Kingdom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Power_(United_Kingdom)).

<sup>35</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter\\_of\\_1946-47\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_of_1946-47_in_the_United_Kingdom).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Persian\\_Oil\\_Company](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Persian_Oil_Company).

<sup>39</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_the\\_Abadan\\_Crisis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_Abadan_Crisis).

<sup>40</sup> *Bradford Observer*, 3 Aug 1951, p.1; *Western Mail*, 4 Aug 1951, p.1; *Dundee Courier*, 4 Aug 1951, p.3; 7 Aug 1951, p.2; *Northern Whig*, 7 Aug 1951, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Op cit* note 39.

<sup>42</sup> [www.environmentandsociety.org/arcadia/north-sea-flood-1953](http://www.environmentandsociety.org/arcadia/north-sea-flood-1953).

<sup>43</sup> *Daily Herald*, 24 Mar 1953, p.2.

<sup>44</sup> [www.gov.uk/guidance/the-thames-barrier](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/the-thames-barrier).

<sup>45</sup> *Kensington Post*, 20 Jun 1952, p.8; England and Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1916-2005.

<sup>46</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 16 Mar 1963, p.32; *op cit* note 47.

<sup>47</sup> England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1966.