



News and events

- **Our next meeting** will be on **Wednesday 17 January 2024**. Kris Lockyear will give a talk ***A Roman Palace at Verulamium? and other stories***. Kris will present the latest findings from the geophysical surveys at the Roman city of Verulamium. These include a series of enigmatic structures including a possible palace.
- The **Arc & Arc programme of talks** from now to February 2024 is available on their website. Talks are at the Methodist Church in St Albans, on Zoom, or both.
<https://tinyurl.com/5n7j7uty>

William Beach Thomas

William Beach Thomas KBE (1868-1957), English author and journalist, lived at Place Farm in Station Road from 1923 until 1932 when the family moved to High Trees in Gustard Wood to escape the smells generated by the Murphy Chemical Company. He lived there until his death and is buried in St Helen's churchyard. "Tall and



lean, with thin weather-beaten features and a moustache, he was a man of considerable charm and humour", reports the Oxford Dictionary of Biography.

Son of the village rector at Hamerton, Huntingdonshire, Beach Thomas was educated at Shrewsbury School and Christchurch College, Oxford, where he

excelled at sports, representing the university in athletics, but gained only a third class degree.

After graduation in 1891 he took up a teaching job at Dulwich College in 1897 where he taught P.G. Wodehouse, encouraging his involvement in the school magazine. Finding teaching uncongenial and preferring writing, he left Dulwich to pursue a career in freelance journalism, contributing to several magazines and journals, including *The Globe*. When he left *The Globe* in 1903, P.G. Wodehouse took over his column "*By the Way*".

Another Wheathampstead inhabitant, Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe), owner of *The Daily Mail*, gave Beach Thomas his first real break as a newspaper journalist, employing him as a countryside correspondent.

It was *The Daily Mail* that sent Beach Thomas to France as a war correspondent during World War One. However, Lord Kitchener didn't want

journalists telling those at home the truth about the war and set up a Press Bureau to censor all reports.

Beach Thomas complained that "the censors would not publish any article if it indicated that the writer had seen what he wrote of. He must write what he thought was true, not what he knew to be true". In fact, his stories (published under the name "Teech Bomas") were concocted from information fed to war correspondents by the authorities at headquarters behind the lines.

He later regretted his wartime reports of the Battle of the Somme, saying "I was thoroughly and deeply ashamed of what I had written for the good reason that it was untrue. The vulgarity of erroneous headlines and the enormity of one's own name did not lessen the shame."

Peter Stothard, editor of *The Times* between 1992 and 2002, described Beach Thomas as "a quietly successful countryside columnist and literary gent who became a calamitous Daily Mail war correspondent". He believes that Beach Thomas may have been the inspiration for the character of William Boot in Evelyn Waugh's novel "*Scoop*".

Beach Thomas wrote on gardening and country life for *The Observer* from 1923 until 1956 and for *The Spectator* for 30 years, surrendering his column there to H.E. Bates during the years 1935-1941. He was a prolific writer and author, producing more than 18 titles in his lifetime.

Doubtless, Wheathampstead gave Beach Thomas his happier years, offering a welcome respite from the horrors of war. He wrote in his book "*A Countryman's Creed*" (1946), "The English village has been as good a social unit as is found anywhere in the world. The chief virtue of England before the era of cheap, imported grain was its local self-sufficiency, typified in many places by the watermills and windmills."

What would he think if he could see us now?