

# The “Downton Abbey” Effect

*Robin Shuckburgh*

Approached, from the south, over Tadpole Bridge, which spans the youthful river Thames with a gradient a bit like a bishop’s mitre, Bampton, in West Oxfordshire, is an extraordinary place. Largely stone built with a wide, triangular market



square, the requisite group of shops, including a national award-winning butcher, and a huge, architecturally eclectic church with a Norman arched door and a soaring spire, it has all the qualifications to be a serious Cotswold tourist attraction.

## *In fact it isn’t at all touristy: Yet.*

The settlement of Bampton in the Bush, as it used to be called, apparently to describe its remoteness, derived its wealth from the wool trade. In the sixteen hundreds it was not only a huge agricultural success, providing wool to the weaving

industry in Witney, famous for its blanket manufacturing until late last century, but its farmers also developed a unique system for tanning hide. They made leather working clothes which they exported to the continent. A mile and a bit from the village, across the flood-plain of the Thames, is Rushey Lock. An extremely remote step in the Thames which was Bampton’s “port”. From here their leather goods were taken down river to London and over the Channel to Normandy. There are several families named

Tanner in the village, many of whom are descendants of those innovative Bamptonians. In short, for centuries, the people of this village have been getting on with leading an independent, creative and adequately lucrative life, with little need of interference from outside.

## *Early 20th century revisited*

Now “Downton Abbey” has come to town. So rare is the un-spoilt beauty of the village that the producers of this block-buster television series chose to film their village scenes in the church square. The much-cherished 17th century grammar school, which actually houses, amongst other things, the village library, features as Downton’s cottage hospital, the church plays host to any of the more emotional scenes; marriages, funerals et al; and several of the smaller cottages are pubs, post-offices and so on. In other words, Bampton has become



spectacularly famous under a completely different name.

The first arrivals are the set builders. Every sign of the 20th century has to be removed from the square. Plastic drain pipes, post boxes, television aerials, road lines, even those horrid bins for dog poo have to be disguised. The artists who do all this are exceptional. A couple of them have been involved in making the work conceived by our most famous artistic names. (And you thought the Brit Art lot earned their millions by actually making their work. Often they never even touch it!) In between series one and two a stretch of stone wall about five meters long collapsed, probably of old age. The set team built a replica which they placed in front of the rubble which was completely convincing even to the naked eye.

When the film crew turns up with a fleet of trucks the village takes on an air of siege. Extremely polite men and women with orange jackets and walkie-talkies surround the area to keep the casual walkers and curious villagers at bay and the square slips quietly back a century. It is really extraordinary how clear an idea you get of what it must have been like before the modern world intruded.





*21st century enjoys the escapism of the 20th*

All of this is great fun for everyone. The local kids were allowed to play on the ancient helter skelter erected for the Downton Village fair, and, of course, the stellar cast wander the streets in full costume, tempting the local autograph hunters. What is going to be fascinating is what will

happen now? The Downton series has been sold to over a hundred countries including the USA, and the first episodes topped the number one program from the charts even in Australia. The power of television is such that this ancient West Oxfordshire village is now very likely to become an international tourist destination. There are already tours of the Downton sets being run by



enterprising local travel companies, and bewildered Americans are wandering the village looking for souvenirs which, so far, no-one has thought to provide. The truth is that Bamptonians were interested by and totally patient with the whole filming process but there will be a much more mixed reception for what now may be

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*1912, the year that Titanic went down, is the opening scenario of Downton Abbey, filmed in Robin's town of Bampton as well as Highclere Castle.*



a flood of tourists from around the world. There is an irony in the fact that the very thing that attracted the crew here in the first place may well be changed for ever by the success of Downton Abbey.



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