

TRAVELLERS THROUGH ALRESFORD

by

JOHN ADAMS

Prior to the construction of the Great Weir by Godfrey de Lucy at the end of the XIIIth century not many long distance travellers would have passed through this neighbourhood because of the extensive marshes. The route from Winchester to London kept to the high ground around Abbotstone. Once the weir and causeway were built, the land drained and the market established, New Alresford stood on one of the major routes from Southampton to London. The number of inns in the town are evidence that we had our fair share of travellers right through the coaching days when horses could be changed and passengers entertained at the Swan and the Running Horse.

The opening of the railway in 1865, with a station at New Alresford maintained our link with the great cities. In post war years the closure of the railway and curtailment of buses might have had an effect on the number of our visitors but the difficulty of finding a parking space proves that this is not so. The purpose of this paper is to examine who these travellers of the past were and what some of them thought of our town.

There were pilgrims passing to or from Canterbury, perhaps receiving shelter or succour at Godsfield. There were drovers bringing their cattle and sheep to our market or passing on to London. These men avoided the turnpike dues by following the route still marked on maps as the Alresford Drove to the Lunway and so on to the Ox Drove; their route being marked by yew trees as a guide in snow and Scots pines as an indication as to where overnight lodging and pasture could be had. They even had their own inn, The Bangor inn, a little to the west of Bugmore hill; now no longer standing. If Waterloo had not ended the Napoleonic wars, seafaring types might have been seen passing through Alresford after £200,000 had been raised to promote the Portsmouth, Southampton and London Junction canal, which would link the Wey and the Itchen and enable supplies to pass between the arsenals of Greenwich and Woolwich and the Channel Fleet without running the gauntlet of the French privateers in the Dover Straits. However the project came to nothing when peace was established in Europe.

But it is to the individual traveller that we must go for a description of our town. John Leland, who was made Henry VIII's Antiquary in 1533, passed through Alresford soon after his appointment. He writes 'The Course of Alresford Ryver. This ryver first beginnith of a great numbere of fair sylver springes a good mile above Alresford and these resorting to a botom make a great brode lake, comunely caulled Alsford Pond. Then it cummith into a narow botom and ranneth thorough a stone bridge at the ends of Alresford toun, leving it on the lefte hand or ripe. Thens to Hitchin Stok village a 3 miles wher is a litle bridge for horsemen and fote men.'

Celia Fiennes, a member of a famous Parliamentary family, recorded some remarkable rides which she made on the famous Banbury Cross horse. In her journal for 1702 'travelling from Winchester to Alresford on a good chaulky way made slippery after a little rain — I was thrown'. Luckily she was unhurt and her horse did not bolt so that she was able to remount and continue her journey to see a relation here — Mrs. Horne.

Daniel Defoe writing in the early eighteenth century records that Alresford was a flourishing market town and remarkable for this: — 'Though it had no great trade, and particularly very little, if any, manufactures, yet there was no collection in the town for the poor, nor any poor law enough to take alms of the parish, which is what I do not think can be said of any town in England besides'. Be that as it may, the problem of vagrants in the town had become so acute by 1835 that a workhouse had to be built on Tichborne Down to accommodate them. The inmates were tolerably treated at first but the increasing application of the Poor Law system made, as a deliberate policy, Tichborne Down House an unpleasant place in which to live and thus the inmates were encouraged to move on to the next Union. On this same visit, Defoe remarked 'that the town had suffered a sudden and surprising fire in which the church, market

house and most of the buildings had been completely destroyed'. He remarked that the town had been very handsomely rebuilt with the help of neighbouring gentlemen who sent in timber. Thus we have the first official account of the appearance of the town after the 1689 fire, which is how we see it today.

The Hon: John Byng (later 5th Viscount Torrington) kept a diary of his 'tours'. On Aug 24, 1782, travelling from Alton to Winchester he saw 'a promising looking Inn in Alresford called the Star (now the Running Horse)'. Although the weather looked threatening, he decided to press on to Winchester where, wet and tired, he found poor service for his horse, his dog and himself so that he wrote he was "heartily repenting of not stopping at Alresford, where I should have been respected and at my ease".

William Cobbett was here at least three times at the beginning of the XIXth century. He approved our beech woods and condemned the planting of Northington Down with 'unsuitable trees'. In particular he commented that Alresford, which is a nice little town in itself, presented a singularly beautiful view from the last little hill coming from Abbotstone'. It is still the best view to point out to visitors.

By 1830, the troubles of which Cobbett had warned the country — the Labourers rising — had reached the district. Late that autumn, an attempt to break up the threshing machines at Itchen Abbas was frustrated by the Duke of Buckingham sending the Rector with a hundred 'specials' to oppose them.

This rising had entailed the 5th Dragoon Guards (and subsequently The Scots Greys) being quartered at Alresford. This was not the first time that Alresford had seen the military. Soldiers of both sides in the Civil War had been quartered in the town on four occasions during the winter preceding the battle of Cheriton in 1643. When the battle was over, the fleeing Royalists set fire to the town and the Parliamentarians assisted the inhabitants to put it out.

During these troubles the ministers of the church suffered disgrace or worse if their sympathies lay with the wrong side. Peter Heylin, Rector of Old Alresford, was forced to run away because of his Royalist leanings, as were the majority of the incumbents of the parishes in the district. The Parliamentary London Regiment left a memento of their visit in the name of Little London, a hamlet between Cheriton and Bramdean. Alresford, however, had not seen the last of the Civil War, for in October, 1644 we find the King (in Salisbury) asking that "500 breasts, backs and pots" be sent by way of Farnham to Alresford, where he expected his foot regiments to join. In the same month Lord Essex billeted his men at Alresford in order to help hinder the King's intention of invading Sussex.

There are still extant photographs of the Australian troops marching through the town at the time of the 14-18 War, while during the last war, the American troops billeted here around D. Day left as a memento of their occupation the grave of their dog mascot, and a plaque in Broad Street.

Religious innovators had a less friendly welcome than the military. In the last century, The Rev. Daniel Griffiths with two companions of the non-conformist faith when attempting to 'evangelize' the population had the fire hoses played on them and were hooted out of town. In 1803, the Rev. Densham from Petersfield with his companions were stoned on entering Alresford and their horses' harness was cut so that they had to ride out using a halter. In spite of this, a Miss Goodwin and her brother came weekly to Alresford to conduct a Sunday school amid opposition. There is even a record of some Mormons appearing in Weild in 1850 in search of converts and being pelted with eggs by the local children.

As we move to the present day, it is worth noting from the files of the Hampshire Chronicle that 'Maria King was granted a licence for three months to have a portable theatre in the Dean and subsequently applied for a licence for a child to take part in stage plays at the Empire Theatre, The Dean. What we moderns miss !

And so, in the past, we have had interesting and varied travellers passing through Alresford. What about today ? It is Bank holiday as I write; the town is a solid block of cars from end to end; every possible parking space is filled with the vehicles of travellers on the Watercress Line or walkers to the Fulling Mill. There are at least 3 new guide books telling strangers what Alresford is all about and what to do here. We

can take them all as long as they will stop and stare and pass on. But give a thought for those that couldn't and are remembered in the Parish Registers:

1739. July 31st. Baptised. David, son of a poor wandering man and woman.

1749. Dec. 15th. This day was buried ye poor wandering woman that was found dead in the street but her name is uncertain.

1768. Oct. 26th. A stranger found in the river.

1789. Nov. 16th. An unknown man found dead in the stable at the Swan Inn.

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