

THE MOTHER CHURCH OF THE ANCIENT PARISH OF OLD ALRESFORD

by

VINCENT PEMBERTON.

When Old Alresford reached the finals of the Best Kept Village in Hampshire competition, one of the features which attracted the judges and without doubt influenced their decision, was the loving care devoted to the upkeep of the Churchyard and its surround. Quite rightly so, for this is one of the oldest religious sites in the County, and much credit must be given to those Parishioners who so willingly have given their time and labour to keep this hallowed place so well maintained.

Old Alresford church, which stands on high ground, like many of the old Saxon sites, is in the heart of the Hampshire countryside. It has little of architectural merit to commend it, but I do think it has a certain charm, and the view from the west door, particularly at sunset, is one of tranquility and peace.

The original church was built about the middle of the seventh century and local tradition has it that the Saxons, having heavily defeated the Danes, celebrated their victory by erecting a shrine to the Virgin Mary, but unfortunately there is no record of this. In later years there was mention of the church in the Domesday book.

Probably about the middle of the eleventh or twelfth century, two smaller churches, or chapelries as they were then called, were included in the Old Alresford Benefice, one at New Alresford and the other at Medstead. and this is why Old Alresford was known as the Mother Church. Both New Alresford and Medstead. by this time much larger structures, became separate parishes in the year 1850.

Old Alresford House, once the home of the Rodney family, on which I will comment later, adjoins the churchyard, and across the road is the Old rectory, now the Diocesan Retreat and Conference House. The village lies at the foot of the hill. and houses surround the village green, through which flows a small stream feeding into the River Arle.

At the entrance to the churchyard is the Lychgate. This was a gift from J.F Christy Esq., in 1893. and was designed and erected by W.H. Hunt. It was restored by Major Richardson of Hill House in 1973 in memory of his Mother. The Mausoleum at the south end of the churchyard was built by the Swerdt family who were of the Roman Catholic faith, and lived in Old Alresford House.

The present church was rebuilt in 1753 and was constructed of flint and brick with a tiled roof. I was most interested to find a note in the churchwardens account book for that year that the cost of rebuilding was £284.1s.5,d. The wooden tower was left in situ because of a shortage of money. and it was not until the year 1769 that it was rebuilt from bricks brought from the Duke of Bolton's Hunting Lodge at Abbotstone, which was then derelict. There is another note in the Churchwardens' account book which records that the cost of transporting the bricks was ^1/s.4d. The Church clock was given by Mr. Bulpitt in 1887 in honour of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee.

The old tower carried five bells, and I believe at one time only four, but when the new tower was built in 1769 a sixth was added. Below are details of the bells as recorded in the church.

Inscription

Tenor	10 cwt 3 qr 71b	Henry Bulpett Churchwarden. Fecit 1769
fifth	8 cwt. 2 qr 14lb)	
fourth	6 cwt. 2 qr 251b }	
third	5 cwt 3 qr 12lb)	Fecit

second 5 cwt 0 qr 19lb)

Treble 4 cwt 2 qr. 19lb James Rodney Esq., Henry Bulpett Churchwardens 1769

Old history has it that on one of the bells was an inscription SUM ROSA PULSATA MUNOI MARIA VOCATA which when translated meant I AM THE STRICKEN ROSE OF THE WORLO CALLEO MARY, but a recent inspection of the bells by the Captain of the Bell tower has failed to find any inscription of this nature. In 1956 a new bell frame was put in and a service of dedication, conducted by the Lord Bishop of Winchester and assisted by the Rector, the Rev. E.W. Selwyn, was held on the 28th January, 1956.

The interior of the church consists of a porch, leading in from two massive oak doors, another leads up to the bell tower and the clock, and one more giving access to the Nave, Chancel and Sanctuary. There was once a gallery at the rear of the Nave with a door into the bell chamber, but this was pulled down many years ago as it was declared unsafe. The door remains in situ.

The Church possesses a handsome stone font, octagonal in shape with a carved oak cover and dates about the early eighteenth century. The wrought iron bracket and pulley which enables the cover to be lifted, was presented by Mrs. Holloway of Fobdown in 1949. On the opposite side to the font is a clarionet, a reminder of the days when churches had their own orchestras. This instrument was given by a Mr. Padwick whose Grandfather played it in church until about the year 1850. Nearby is a small credence table given by Mrs. S. Isaac in memory of her son, Gordon.

There are many fine memorials inside the church and of particular interest is a splendid example of work in Italian marble to the memory of Jane, wife of George Bridges Rodney who died in 1792. There is a replica of this memorial in St. Paul's Cathedral. Others include one to Christopher Perin and his wife, Sarah, the Rt. Hon. Sir Francis Lindley, Ambassador, which ends, "and he was a friend to all men", Thomas Alderman Houghton J.P. of Armsworth, who was buried at Chester Mary Sumner, Founder of the Mothers Union, wife of Francis North, and many others.

The church possesses some very fine silver, an Elizabethan chalice. dated 1553, a Paten on round foot, inscribed "The gift of Henry Caiger' of Harmsworth to the Parish of Old Alresford" and a handsome silver Flagon inscribed "Sarah Perin, Widdow, 1717". The Caiger family lived at Armsworth, worshipped at Old Alresford church and the family vault is in the churchyard. This silver has, from time to time, been on exhibition in Winchester Cathedral, and two of the pieces are mentioned in Sir George Jackson's book on antique silver.

In bygone days the affairs of the church and the parish were closely intermingled, and it is quite obvious this was so in Old Alresford. The Churchwardens account books which commenced in 1653. the last one being 1916, contain quite a lot of information concerning the church and the parish. The early books, although well preserved, are very difficult to read, but it is possible to decipher many of the items such as payment of rates for farmland. For example Widdow Budd paid 10/- for the Lanham farms, and there are many more similar levies, both at Old Alresford and Armsworth. Washing the church linen cost 2/-, glazing the church windows, 2/6d. payment for bread and wine for the Communion services, 2/-. Also such items as Sparrow heads, 3/7d, killing foxes. 4/-, polecats and other vermin, 2/-. and there is a very strange entry of money paid to Mr. Knot for putting Moll Andrews into the Spiritual Court. This unusual item aroused my curiosity and spurred me on to carry out some further research. I found that this referred to the old Consistory Court, and apparently in the year 1760, one Mary Andrews was taken before this august body of Clerics to be disciplined, for, to use the words of the Court, "the good of her soul". Obviously she had committed some misdemeanour either against the church or the parish. There is also a payment of 5/5d. for one iron chest and I will refer to this later. At the end of each year's accounts were notices of the election of Churchwardens.

In later years the writing was more legible and precise and included details of pew allotments, building of the church wall along the road at a cost of £65. 15s., the last payment for sparrow

heads and bell ringers salaries. Also mentioned was a voluntary levy of a church rate, payment for winding the church clock and church collections. It is significant that the largest collections were always at Matins.

. The Poor rate books commenced in 1654 and it was not until 1817 that they were discontinued. The inscription inside the first book reads "For the relief of the poore of ye parish of Old Alresford, Anno Christi, 1654." All I can say about these books is that they contain a list of money paid out to the poor of the parish, the money being raised by a rate levied on the inhabitants and paid monthly. Presumably this was collected by the Parish Overseers.

The first parish register was in 1540 but only for marriages, and it was not until 1556 that baptisms were recorded, and burials in 1562.

All these early Registers were written on parchment, but like the early churchwardens' books they are difficult to read, not only because of the quaintness of the writing, but fading over the years. Nevertheless they are in a good state of preservation. I have carefully studied the baptism entries but there are so many that it is difficult to pick out particular ones which are worthy of a mention, however I can give you one or two. In 1585, Mary, the daughter of* John Hame, was baptised on the 26th September, being the 27th yeare of the reigne of our Sovereign Lady, Elizabeth. In 1707 there was an entry which stated that William and Mary Hawkins, reputed Quakers, had a daughter in June, who they called Mary. It would seem that it was the practice in many cases, to also record the date of birth, but in later years this was discontinued.

The first marriage entry records that John Hollis and Alse Piddow were married ye 15th day of June. Another later one states that Edward Appleyard, Gent. and Elizabeth Snodham were married, also that Mr. Thomas Bonham was married to Miss Dorothy Perin of Old Alresford, August 18th, 1713.

The items in the burials registers are many and varied but there is one particular entry which is worth quoting - 1776. Memorandum. The Rev. John Halley, Rector of Old Alresford, Rector of St. Mary's Southampton, Master of St. Cross and Chancellor of the Diocese, died March 1776 and was buried in the Cathedral. In the register for 1813 - 1901, it is interesting to note that the number of burials each year was inserted, the highest being 22 in 1839 and the lowest, 2 in 1818. In this register there are also a number of burials entries where the abode is sewn as "Union".

At the end of the register for the year 1728 are extracts from the Statutes concerning rogues and vagabonds, and I quote one below:

"All High constables, other constables, tythingmen and other officers concerned, shall in their general respective limits, make privy search once every week and off nor if need be, in all houses, barns and other suspicious places, in ye night time forye finding out and apprehending of rogues, vagabonds, sturdy beggars, wandering, and all idle persons, and they shall also apprehend all such rogues who travel with forged and counterfeit papers in ye day time, and all such persons they shall apprehend in such search, or shall take wandering or begging or disordering themselves, ye constables or tyth ingmen assisted by the Minister and some of ye parish, shall cause them to be openly whipped till their bodies be bloody."

This quote is only a small part of the whole, but nevertheless it does give some idea of the pattern of life in those far off days. There are of course, people who would say these documents are as dry as dust, but I do think, and I am sure many will agree with me that were it not for the care and attention which has been given in the past to their preservation, a very valuable and irreplaceable part of Church and Parish history would have been lost for ever, which leads me to an incident which occurred at Old Alresford church some five years ago.

All the church records, registers and documents were kept in the Vestry in a very old chest, rather a handsome piece, the lock being in the lid. The key, which was about seven inches was securely hidden. I strongly suspect this was the same chest that was purchased by the churchwardens at a cost of 5/5d. and mentioned earlier in this article. Due to the increase in vandalism and break-ins in churches in the area, it was decided to place all the registers etc., into the care of the County Records Office at Winchester. Some weeks later thieves broke into the vestry and probably under the impression that the chest, which was extremely heavy, and would require two men to lift it, contained the church silver, took it away together with a small safe which had been given by a parishioner. Both were completely empty and have never been recovered.

The first Record of a Rector is that of Godfrey de Tostes in the year 1225, and inside the church is a list of Rectors from that date onwards. A glance at this list reveals some quite notable names of Rectors who afterwards held important church posts, and I quote some of these.

	Later to become
1525 Roger Stokesley	Warden of All Souls, Oxford
1576 John Watson	Bishop of Winchester
1737 John Hoadley	Chancellor of Winchester
1797 Francis North	Prebendary of Winchester
1851 Earl of Guildford, George Sumner	Bishop of Guildford
1936 Edward Morgan	Bishop of Southampton, then Bishop of Truro In the year

In the year 1633, Dr. Peter Heylyn, having by command of King Charles the first, exchanged livings, came to Old Alresford. He was already a man of letters, and it is recorded by his Son in-law. Dr. John Barnard, that between the years 1616 and 1661, he wrote forty one books on various themes, including such subjects as the Peerage of Bishops. History of Liturgies, Life of King Charles the First, and books on History and Geography. In addition to being Chaplain to King Charles, he was a Sub Dean of Westminster and examining Chaplain to Archbishop Laud.

He was a very high churchman and intolerant of anything savouring of Puritanism. In the book written by his Son in-law it is stated that one of the first things Dr. Heylyn did was to remove the Communion Table from the centre of the church and have it decently railed about to prevent base and profane usage. This table which bears the date 1620, was at some time removed from the church but was later recovered, and now stands at the top of the Nave on the left hand side. He was responsible for various alterations and additions to the Rectory, including the erection of a high tower of glass at the top of the stairs, which is there to this day. He also planned the gardens with pleasant walks and arbors, and caused a high wooden bridge to be built across the road from the grounds to the churchyard, in order to avoid the common way, which at times was almost impassable.

No doubt Dr. Heylyn's decision to move the Altar and other changes he made in Divine Worship, grievously offended some of his more puritan minded neighbours, amongst them, and probably the most notable at the time being Col. Richard (Idle Dick) Norton, a large land owner living in the Manor House adjacent to the church. Col. Norton took part in the Civil War and following the battle of Cheriton in 1644 and the defeat of the King's forces, it soon became apparent that because of his staunch royalist feelings, coupled with other factors already mentioned. Dr. Heylyn was high on the list of Clergy to be deprived of their benefices. A troop of horse was sent out to take him prisoner, but word of this reached him secretly and with his wife and family, he fled to Oxford. Accordingly, all his goods and chattels were sequestrated and he was declared a delinquent. He returned to Old Alresford in 1661 and was reinstated as Rector, but he was a very sick man and died on Holy Thursday, 1663. He was buried under his Sub Dean's seat and his monument was erected on the north side of Westminster Abbey with a very moving epitaph by Dr. Earl, Dean of

Westminster which I feel is worth quoting. The original is in Latin but I give the English translation below:

DEPOSITUM MORTALE

A monument of mortality of Peter Leylyn D.D. Prebendary and Sub Dean of this church. A man truly worthy of remembrance. Endowed with excellent parts. Of sharp and pregnant wit. A solid and clear judgement. A memory tenacious to a miracle. Whereunto he added an incredible patience in study and therein still persisted when his eyesight ceased. He writ many books upon various subjects (that are now in men's hands) containing in them nothing that's vulgar either for style or argument. On all occasions he was a constant asserter of the churches right and the Kings prerogative as well in their afflicted as prosperous estate. Also he was a severe and vigorous opposer of rebels and schismatics A despler of envy and a man of undaunted spirit. While he was seriously intent on these and many more like studies death commanded him to be silent but could not silence his name.

OBIT ANNO ETAT 63.

In the south Transept are three stained glass windows, one to the memory of George Wither, Poet, another to Henry Perin, both bearing the same crest. Wither being related to the Perin family by marriage, and the third in memory of Betty Bonham, wife and widow of Edward Hopkins and afterwards wife of John Dunn.

Wither was born at Bentworth, a few miles from Alresford. He wrote some hymns and is the reputed author of the first English hymnal. His main vocation however, was poetry and some of the verses he wrote described local scenes. I give below some examples

Two pretty streams do meet
and meeting make
Within our valley a large
silver lake
It is the same that we by
transposition
Name the ford of Arle and
Out of which along a
chalky marle
That river runs whose waters
wash the fort.
In which brave Arthur kept
his royal Court.
Shall I wasting in despair
Die because a womans fair
Or make pale my cheeks
with care
Because anothers rosy are
Be she fairer than the day
Or the flowery meads in May
If she be not fair to me
what care I how fair she
be.

Obviously the words in the first poem allude to Alresford Pond and also to that ancient legend which connects Winchester with the story of King Arthur and his Knights.

Henry Perin lived at the Weir House, a very imposing Elizabethan mansion set in delightful surroundings, with the River Arle running through the grounds. He died before his brother Christopher, who in accordance with the terms of his will founded the Henry Perin Grammar School in Alresford for the education of nineteen poor boys from the surrounding villages.

In the middle of the eighteenth century the Rodney family came to Old Alresford. and in 1752 Rodney built a large mansion on the site of the old Manor House, and the private entrance to the churchyard is there to this day. It was in the year 1782 that Vice Admiral Rodney won great distinction on the West Indian seas and was created a Baron. He died in 1792 and the following entry appears in the Parish register;

Rodney. 1792. The Rt. Hon. Lord
Bridges Rodney died at London May
21st. 1792 aged 73 and was buried
in this church. June 1st. 1792.

His wife, Jane, died many years before on January 29th, 1757. Although there are several vaults and tombstones belonging to the Rodney family at the back of the east end of the church, there is not one for either Jane or George Rodney, and whilst looking at some old records in Winchester, I came across a very interesting piece of information. Apparently in January 1757, George Bridges Rodney applied for a faculty for a vault to be constructed under his pews on the north side of the church. The vault was to be 8 feet in depth, 9 feet three inches in length, under the passage or alley leading to the Pulpit, and made even with the floor. There is no evidence that this faculty was taken up, but the very fact that there was no vault outside and that both the Burial register and the wording on the Memorial for Admiral Rodney specifically state, "Buried in this church" leads one to the conclusion that this vault was actually constructed and used. One can only conjecture.

Further up the road is a large mansion known as Upton Park which was built for James Rodney, brother of Lord Rodney, in the year 1768. James Rodney was a churchwarden and took a great interest in the affairs of the parish.

A milestone in the history of Old Alresford was in 1851 when the Rev. George Sumner accepted the Living, and took up residence at the Rectory. Soon after their arrival the Sumners reached certain decisions in regard to the church, and over a period of years, alterations and additions were made. The wooden window frames were taken out and replaced with stone ones in the Gothic style. A vestry and south Transept were added and a door, now blocked in, gave access from the Transept to the churchyard. I am told this was the private entrance of the Sumners. A one manual organ, still in use today, was installed, and a Lectern and Pulpit placed in position, the gift of Mary Sumner in memory of her parents. Later on, the seating which consisted of the high backed wooden pews, were not considered suitable for public worship, and were replaced by the present seating. I understand that the old pews were somewhat similar to those still in use at Avington.

Both George and Mary Sumner took a deep and personal interest in the life and welfare of the village folk and were much loved and respected. An important event which made Old Alresford church and Old Alresford Place centres of pilgrimage, even to this day, was the formation of the Mothers Union in 1876 by Mary Sumner. This vast organisation, which commenced from such small beginnings, is now world wide, and in 1976 during the centenary year, many visitors from all over the world, came to Old Alresford to pay tribute to the work carried out by this wonderful lady.

Very few changes have been made in the church since the Sumners left the village a11 those years ago, and it can truthfully be said that the edifice is much the same today as it was in their time.

This is the end of my little article on Old Alresford church and I think it would be fitting if I quote a short poem composed by my wife which speaks of the country scene and emphasises the feelings of peace which is so much a part of the picture from the West door.

Clothed in a mantle of
simplicity
The village green, the
dawdling brook Tall lime trees, firs and
beech
Enhance her cloak of quiet serenity.
The church stands high on
gentle hill
The waters tumble by the
mill
Birds take wing from
furrowed field
And nature's charm is then
revealed.

As man seeks refuge from the
City's stress
He breathes the clean fresh
country air
God's own House blends with
cottage thatch
And here he finds true
peacefulness.

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