

ALRESFORD HOUSE, OLD ALRESFORD

By

Vincent Pemberton

The County of Hampshire is well endowed with Mansions and large country houses, many of which are open to the Public and provide a constant source of pleasure and interest to the many people who visit them. Quite a number of these old houses were built in the Georgian period and each one has its own individual characteristics; but of particular interest to me, is a mansion, standing in its own grounds, lying close to the parish church of St. Mary the Virgin, Old Alresford. It is called Alresford House and was for many years the home of the Rodney family. It was built on the site of the old Manor House, owned by the Norton family, who also had property at East Tisted, another branch lived at Rotherfield. According to the parish registers of Old Alresford, Richard Norton, father of Col. Richard (Idle Dick) Norton, one of Oliver Cromwell's right hand men, was christened in the church in 1561, which probably dated the Manor House to the time of Henry the Eighth, or even earlier.

1749 saw the commencement of the building of Alresford House and it was completed in 1752, the cost being met out of prize money which accrued to Captain Rodney during the wars of the Austrian succession. His Godfather, George Bridges, of whom more will be said later, was responsible for overseeing the financial arrangements connected with the project, and the Clerk of Works was a local man named Atkinson. The Architect was William Jones, noted for his skills in designing, and the marble fireplaces were the work of a well-known sculptor, Sir Henry Cheere.

It is recorded that before the house was finished, George Bridges, who was in his 72nd year, suffered an untimely death by drowning in an attempt to rescue a favourite dog, and under the terms of his will, his Avington Estates reverted to his cousin, the Duke of Chandos, other leasehold and freehold property being left to his widow, after her death to Captain George Bridges Rodney and his heirs, then to his brother James and his heirs. Mrs. Bridges died in 1763, but left a considerable sum of money to James, at that time living at Hambledon, and he built a large house which he named Upton Park in the Hamlet of Upton, only a short distance from Alresford House. This bequest by Mrs. Bridges caused much unhappiness and resulted in a family feud, particularly as Captain Rodney had always maintained that the land on which the house was built was his and he planted an avenue of beech trees between the two properties to act as a screen. These trees are still standing and the avenue is known as the beech walk.

When, shortly after our move into the village, in 1965, I saw Alresford House for the first time, I was most impressed by the tall wrought iron gates, surmounted by a Coat of Arms, which gave entrance into the forecourt. At first, I thought this Coat of Arms was Rodney's, but it belongs to the present owners, the Constable Maxwell family. Rodney's Crest bore the words "Eagles do not beget doves". Even now, by just standing in front of the house and looking at it, one can visualise the sea battles which took place and the history which was made.

The building rises to three storeys and is constructed of brick with stone facings, typical of the mid Georgian period, and with the exception of the porch, I would say that the exterior has remained unaltered structurally throughout the years. The massive front door is approached up a flight of stone steps flanked by a porch with pillars, which is considered to have been added later, and the drive is so constructed that it was possible for a carriage to pull up and allow the Ladies to

alight without stepping on the drive way. On the right hand side are steps leading down to basement rooms which housed the domestic staff, but are now used for storage, and on the left is a long single storey building, now the Chapel, entered from inside the house, which I will mention later.

On passing through the front door, one enters a spacious hall, hung with most attractive eighteenth century wall hangings which have recently been restored, and on the right is the morning room, approached through large double doors. This room is very beautiful and contains the best remaining features of Rodney's time in the form of a rococo ceiling with a central panel showing an eagle discharging thunderbolts, and corner medallions representing the four seasons. It is quite a remarkable piece of work, but the name of the artist is not known. Next to this room is the dining room, again through double doors. Apart from the very handsome fireplace, it is all the more striking because of the floor-to-ceiling panelling. This extremely decorative work, which is early eighteenth century, was brought over from France by the wife of a subsequent owner, Dr. Schwerdt. Doors at the far end lead to the domestic quarters.

On the other side of the hall is a large sitting room containing another marble fireplace, and this room gives entrance to a long single storey building running at right angles to the house, which is now the Chapel. Originally the Billiard room and Library, it was converted in the late 1950's by Wing Commander and Mrs. Constable Maxwell to a design by Pietro Annigoni, as a memorial to their eldest son, William, who lost his life in a flying accident whilst on active service with the Royal Air Force. The Chapel is dedicated to Our Lady of Alresford and is very beautiful inside. Although there is a Roman Catholic Church in the town, the Chapel is still used for public worship. Main and subsidiary staircases lead off the hall, and half way up the main one is a renaissance plaque in Italian marble by Rossellini, depicting the Virgin Mary and child, surrounded by Angels and Cherubs. Its fellow is in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. There are five bedrooms on the first floor, one of which was Rodney's own room, and seven on the second floor, which most probably were used for guests. The views across the Park from these rooms are quite picturesque and typical of the Hampshire countryside roundabout.

The south front is broken by projections and recesses, and about 1800, the surface was covered by yellow tiles, but these were removed in the 1960's revealing the mellow Georgian Brickwork. Further examination of this part of the building gives one the impression that when first constructed, the main entrance was on this side, and this impression is further strengthened by the fact that the basement entrance, which usually is at the rear, is now at the front. I have since ascertained that this indeed was the case, the approach being through an avenue of trees from the road leading to Bighton.

Interesting reminders of the Rodney period are the four small cannon, mounted on wooden gun carriages, which stand facing the Park. Tradition has it that they came off a French warship and this is borne out by the fact that each gun bears a French marking.

The landscaping of the Estate was undertaken by Richard Woods, a gardener of repute and a contemporary of Capability Brown. He was responsible for a number of Estate plantings about that time, and his original pen and ink design is preserved in the house to this day. The plan included the then popular Ha Ha and walks flanked by hedges of beech and yew, and on the east side is an old iron gate giving access to the churchyard, no doubt used by the Rodney family when attending Old Alresford Church. No estate was complete without its cottages to house the outside staff, and these are on the north side, still being used. Also on this side is a row of single storey buildings which originally were stables and coach houses, and which, during the Second World

War were occupied by American troops. There is a very attractive and well established rose garden, and next to it are extensive kitchen gardens. Further down are the watercress beds which were started up during the Second World War, and the water required for growing the cress is drawn from wells.

A walk through the grounds, over the little bridge and across the Bighton Road brings one to the Water Gardens and a Cottage. In their heyday these gardens must have been quite a picture, but over the years there has been encroachment of vegetation and the ground is marshy in parts. Even today, the outline can be seen and the fact that in recent times some landscaping has been undertaken, has improved the view. The cottage, originally the home of the Pond keeper, is extremely old, and quite possibly early seventeenth century. Built of flint with a very low roof, at one time thatched, and with a single chimney stack, it stands well back from the pond, although in earlier years, it must have been nearer to the edge. Now it is surrounded by trees and shrubs, but there has been some clearance, and with the trout stream running through the grounds, the overall effect is quite charming.

Further south lies Alresford Pond, originally covering a large area stretching towards Bishops Sutton, but now only about 26 acres in extent. I could well imagine that in Rodney's day, the view from his grounds towards Alresford would have been quite impressive. Today the trees have all reached maturity, but from the house glimpses of the pond can still be obtained, and it is a favourite place for bird watchers and a few fishermen.

I have endeavoured to give you an outline of this old mansion and its surroundings, but my article would not be complete without a brief word picture of Rodney himself. He was born in 1718 into a family of ancient lineage, his father being Captain Harry Rodney whose ancestral home was at Rodney Stoke, Somerset. His cousin was George Bridges of Avington Park, Hampshire, a very wealthy landowner, who represented Winchester in Parliament and as previously stated was related to the Duke of Chandos. At the time of Rodney's birth, Rodney senior was living very simply at Walton-on-Thames with his wife and family, his lack of capital being mainly due to unsuccessful financial dealings. The christening was at St. Giles-in-the-Fields in the county of Middlesex, George Bridges being his Godfather, hence the two christian names, George Bridges. At a very early age, it was decided that his Godfather, later to become his Guardian, should make himself responsible for the young boy's education, and he went to live at Avington Park. From that time on his whole life style was changed from that of the son of a retired Captain of Marines, to one of wealth and gracious living befitting the ward of a man of considerable means and very influential connections.

When old enough to go to school he was sent to Harrow. Life at a Public school in those days could not be looked upon as a bed of roses. Treatment of the scholars was harsh and floggings were not uncommon. However, he seems to have come through this early experience without harm, and it might even have stood him in good stead in later years. At the age of thirteen the Navy was chosen as his career and he departed from Harrow. To join the Navy in those days as an Officer, the most sought after method was to obtain a letter under the signature of the King which was known as a "Letter of Service". This enabled the recipient, who was called a "Kings Letter Boy" to present himself on board a ship chosen by Their Lords of the Admiralty, and it is recorded that young Rodney was the last one to receive this document.

He commenced his naval career on H.M.S. Dreadnaught, one of the guard ships at Portsmouth. In those early days of sail, life at sea was not easy. Conditions on board were somewhat hard and in many cases the officers fared little better than the men. They ate much the

same food, which was not always in the best of condition, and drank to excess, often resulting in gout at an early age. Rodney himself suffered from this crippling complaint. Many tales are told of the hardships which were endured, but Midshipman Rodney seems to have taken everything in his stride, and after ten years at sea and only two as a Lieutenant, during which time he served in several ships, he was promoted to the rank of Captain.

He was a man of culture and considerable charm, and as said by one of his contemporaries, an aristocrat to his fingertips, but like many of his fellows, given to bouts of wild extravagance, and when on shore frequented the Gaming houses, not always to his advantage. Nevertheless, he was, first and foremost a fighting sailor and a brilliant tactician, destined to reach the top of his profession in later years. His successes against the French and Spanish fleets during the years following his promotion to Captain, and his decision to set up house at Old Alresford, have been well documented by the Public Records Office and Naval Historians, and I will not go into any detail on these, but a personal event of this period was his marriage. He had taken his seat in Parliament, the house and some of the grounds at Old Alresford had been completed, and in January 1753 he married Jane Compton, daughter of Charles Compton, and sister of Spencer, Earl of Northampton. On Christmas Day of the same year, she gave birth to a son, christened George, who in later years became the second Lord Rodney, and another son, James, was born the following year.

At that time life for the Rodney's was a period of marital bliss, and letters which still exist indicate that his love and affection for his wife and the two boys was paramount. He took a great interest in the gardens and grounds, also the wildlife, and I quote some of his comments:

"In the autumn an incredible number of starlings visit the pond, and at times the flights are so immense that they blot out the spots over which they pass."

To a much smaller extent this goes on today, and one has only to go down to the pond in the late afternoon and look across the far side to see them settling in the sedge. Of the wildfowl he said:

"The pond is a fine piece of water being stocked with swans and wildfowl, mainly geese, ducks, widgeon, and teal, which resort hither in the winter, also coots, moorhens, water rails and dabchicks. Divers other kinds are frequently seen, such as bitterns, herons, storks, cormorants, gulls, curlew, dunlins and snipe."

In 1755 Rodney extended his Estate by acquiring farms at Pinglestone and the Lanhams, and in 1756, having set his heart on purchasing Alresford Pond, he wrote to his wife from Portsmouth and said:

"As tis so much interest to have the pond, I cannot answer for myself or the children not to purchase it, especially as the reeds alone will pay the interest on the money, and I may never again have the opportunity of shewing our mercy in not having the poor birds shot."

He knew that Sir Harry Tichborne was interested and urged Jane not to lose the sale for the sake of a few pounds, and was much relieved when she wrote and told him that her offer had been accepted.

Sadly, this period of domestic happiness came to a tragic end. In 1756 Jane was expecting her third child, which Rodney hoped would be a girl, and in January 1757 she gave birth to a baby girl but died shortly after, followed by the death of the child. On the north wall of Old Alresford

church is a magnificent memorial in Italian marble to her memory. It does not bear the name of the sculptor, but having regard to Rodney's association with Sir Henry Cheere it is quite possible the work was his.

During the early years of Rodney's marriage he talked of leaving the navy, but after the death of his wife there was no question of this taking place. The outbreak of the Seven Years war recalled him to sea and his successes in this campaign brought him further fame. A Baronetcy was bestowed on him and he was promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral. Unfortunately this did not bring any improvement in his financial position, but despite this, he decided to carry out further work at Alresford House which entailed the complete redecoration of the interior and the installation of new furniture supplied by Webb, a well-known manufacturer. This step coincided with his decision to marry again and his bride was Henrietta Clies, daughter of John Clies, a Merchant of Lisbon, but who had Cornish connections. The wedding took place in 1764 and in the same year he was appointed Governor of Greenwich Hospital, which included an official residence. This appointment however, brought him further financial worries, and the strain of keeping up the two properties was so heavy that he let Alresford House. Even this step did not help and he was forced to go to moneylenders, at the same time making over his property to his son, George. The early 1770's were traumatic years for Sir George. The money he owed continued to mount up to such an extent and the pressure from the moneylenders became so great that in 1775 he fled to France, and did not return until 1778, All his debts were paid by his son, but it was due to the kindness of a friend in Paris, who loaned him money, that he was able to return to England.

Immediately, he was re-employed by the Admiralty, promoted to full Admiral and appointed to the West Indies Station. His exploits in this part of the world when he soundly defeated the French, notably the battle of The Saints in 1782, were looked upon as some of the most famous of his career. He returned home in 1782, hauled down his flag for the last time, and was awarded a Barony and a pension of £2,000 a year. This enabled him to live quietly with his family until his death in 1792. He was buried in Old Alresford Church, next to his first wife Jane, and his name was added to the Memorial. There is also a monument to his memory in St. Pauls Cathedral.

The Rodney family continued to live at Old Alresford for a further three generations, and in 1870 the mansion was sold to William Whitear Bulpitt, a wealthy landowner and Banker, whose family remained in possession until 1926 when the property passed into the hands of C.F.G.R. Schwerdt, an art collector, who carried out the alterations in the house which I mentioned earlier.

He died in 1939 and is buried in the Mausoleum at the south end of the Churchyard. The next owners were Wing Commander Gerald and Mrs. Constable Maxwell. He was a member of a very ancient Scottish family and served with great distinction as a fighter pilot in the First World War, having thirty enemy planes to his credit. He was awarded the M.C. D.F.C. and A.F.C. and in the Second World War commanded the night fighter base at Ford. He was a member of the Royal Company of Archers, a Knight of Malta, Papal Chamberlain, and as Gold Staff Officer, was in attendance on the Queen at her Coronation. He was also Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Hampshire under the Duke of Wellington. His eldest daughter, Anne, is now Duchess of Norfolk. He died on the 17th December 1959, at Old Alresford and is buried in the churchyard next to his son, William.

Mrs. Constable Maxwell, her son Peter and his family, still live at Alresford House, and plans have been made to open the gardens to the public this year, and the house, in 1984, when it is hoped that visitors will not only see an attractive old Georgian residence, but in some small way absorb the atmosphere of, those far off days when our naval power and the deeds of men like Rodney stirred the world.

