

OLD ALRESFORD PLACE , OLD ALRESFORD

By

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On the corner of the lane leading up to the village of Bighton and opposite the parish church of Old Alresford, is a large country house, standing in its own grounds and surrounded by well-established beech trees, lawns and flower beds. Whilst it gives the impression of being a private residence, it is in fact the Winchester Diocesan Retreat and Conference house, and was for over three centuries, the Rectory. When first built it was much smaller, but in the early part of the seventeenth century was enlarged.

Its history up to the present day, is very interesting, in fact, I would venture the opinion that the village of Old Alresford is much the richer by having this old house in its midst. Further additions were made in later years and. I will comment on these in due course, but meantime would like to give you some information regarding the Rectors who were resident during the period covering the seventeenth to the early part of the twentieth centuries. No details seem to be available as to when the Rectory was built or even whether it was reconstructed from an older building, but we do know that it was in situ in the year 1620 when Dr. Hamlet Marshall was Rector.

Dr. Marshall left the parish in 1633 when he exchanged Livings with Dr. Peter Heylyn, a man of letters, and Chaplain to King Charles the first. This exchange was by command of the King who required the presence of his Chaplain when the Court came to Winchester. I have already commented on Dr. Heylyn in a previous article on Old Alresford Church, but there are certain matters concerning the Rectory recorded by his Biographer, which should be mentioned. When he

moved into the Rectory he decided on a programme of rebuilding which included a small chapel, a hall in the middle of the house, and a wide staircase with a glass cupola at the top, built into the roof, which is there to this day. He also planned gardens with pleasant walks, cyprus trees and arbours, and caused a high wooden bridge to be built across the road to the churchyard to avoid the common way which at times was almost impassable. No details are available as to when the bridge was pulled down. There is little doubt that in Dr. Heylyn's time and for many years after, the grounds were quite extensive, but today are much more contained. They are however, in immaculate condition due to the skill and dedication of Mr. K. Benham, who has been gardener there for many years. Dr. Heylyn died in 1662 and was succeeded by Mr. George Beaumont, a Prebendary of Winchester. He was presented by Bishop Morley and held the Living until 1692 when the Rev. William Needham was inducted. He was a Prebendary of St. David's, and according to Duthy, was in receipt of a private income which enabled him to devote the whole of his stipend to charity. He was much loved in the parish and there is a memorial to him in the church, and also one to his housekeeper, Mistress Davenport, on which is a small sculpture of the household dog holding crossed keys.

He was followed in 1727 by the Rev. Joseph Foley M.A. also a Prebendary of Winchester, and Duthy records that he was presented by Bishop Willis. In 1736 Dr. John Hoadley, son of Bishop Hoadley, moved into the parish. He was Chancellor of Winchester, and it was during his Incumbency that Old Alresford parish church was rebuilt, the Churchwardens at that time being James Rodney, brother of the famous Admiral Lord George Bridges Rodney and William Bulpitt, a well-known resident and landowner. Hoadley died in 1776 and in that year Dr. William Buller, D.D. later to become Bishop of Exeter, was appointed. He remained in office until 1795 when he was succeeded by Francis North, in later years to become Earl of Guildford. He was a son of Bishop Brownlow North and lived in considerable style, spending a large sum of money on major work which considerably increased the size of the Rectory, and many would have expressed the view that it was quite out of keeping for such a small parish. According to Duthy it became in style and dimensions much superior to what would be found in a building of this description, so that the value of the Living caused it, on occasions, to be the option of the Metropolitan.

He held the Living until 1851 and was succeeded by the Rev. George Henry Sumner, D.D. son of Bishop Sumner. He was appointed a Canon of Winchester, then Archdeacon, and finally, Suffragan Bishop of Guildford, which at that time came under Winchester. Much has been written about him and his wife Mary, who founded the Mothers Union in 1876 and I will not go into further detail. He was followed in 1886 by the Rev. Sir Frederick Currie, and in 1895 by the Rev. Frederick Matthew Middleton M.A. who died in 1904. There is a memorial to him in the church with the words "Blessed are the Peacemakers". The appointment of the Rev. George Pardoe M.A. in 1904 marked the end of an era, as he was the last Rector to live in the old Rectory. Before proceeding further, one interesting feature is worth mentioning. The church registers record quite a number of entries made by Curates, but nowhere in the Parish books is there any reference to a place of residence. I gather however, from people in the village that the house known as Brook Lodge was originally the Curate's House. This attractive red brick building, now considerably enlarged, which stands facing the village green, was at one time well within the Rectory boundary, and this alone gives sane credence to what I have been told.

In 1908 it was decided that the Rectory was too much of a burden for the Rector and arrangements were made to acquire a smaller property further up the lane, now known as Hill House. So, the old Rectory passed into private hands and was renamed Old Alresford Place, the new owner being a Mr. Laming, a London stockbroker who remained in residence until the middle

thirties. Mrs. Laming was a very active member of the British Red Cross Society, and during the First World War the house was used as a convalescent home for wounded soldiers. Then came the Second World War, and in common with many other concerns who moved out of large cities and towns, the Provident Mutual Assurance Co. bought Old Alresford Place as a war-time headquarters. No alterations were made to the building, but air raid shelters were constructed for the use of the staff, one being behind the old coach house and stable block. This one is still functional and is used as an apple store. A little further down the grounds a strong roc was built to house the firm's records. In 1945 the house was sold to an Organisation for the care of maladjusted children, and from what I have heard in the past from parishioners, the boys were unruly and very destructive, and when the place closed in 1961 it was in a very sorry state.

In that year it was bought by the Diocese for use as a Retreat and Conference House and the facts leading up to this change in ownership are worth mentioning. In the north east corner of Hampshire in the village of Sherbourne St. John is a large mansion of Tudor origin called the Vyne, which belonged to Sir Charles Chute, a Barrister of the Inner Temple and one time chairman of the Hampshire County Council. At his death, in 1956 the property was bequeathed to the Church of England in the hope that it could be used as a lime for retired Clergy, but although very careful consideration was given to the bequest the cost of maintenance and the fact that it was too isolated, precluded acceptance. The Winchester Diocese was then approached with the view to ascertaining whether the House could be used as a Diocesan Retreat and Conference House, but here again, after much thought and many meetings, the cost of adaptation and day to day running was considered to be far too heavy, and eventually the property passed into the hands of the National Trust.

In 1960 Canon Julian Rudd came to Old Alresford as Rector and Rural Dean and quite by chance on the day before he was due to attend a meeting of Bishops and Rural Deans at Wolvesley, he was informed by the local policeman that Old Alresford Place was to be sold, and the date was March 13th 1961. This was exciting news, particularly as he had in mind the previous discussions concerning the Vyne, which emphasised the great need for a Retreat House, and having obtained the plans of the old Rectory he brought them up at the meeting. After some discussion it was agreed to refer the whole question to the Diocesan Board of Finance, and finally from there, to the Diocesan Conference. There was a substantial body of opinion that considered it a waste of money, but with the enthusiastic support of Sir William Makins, Chairman of the Board of Finance, Lt.Col. Hubert Madge, Secretary, and Canon Julian Rudd, agreement was reached to purchase the property. The Bishop of Winchester also gave his full support. The price, which reflected the bad state in which the house was in, was £12,300, and this included nine acres of land some of which was later sold. In the words of Sir James King, later to become Chairman of the Planning Committee, "They took the chance when it came, and with courage and a sense of purpose, carried it through to a successful and triumphant conclusion". The overall cost was estimated at £57,000, but generous financial help was available from legacies left by the Chute family and there is a plaque in the entrance hall paying tribute to their beneficence. Many other gifts from donors who wished to remain anonymous, plus an appeal and a large sale of work, enabled the target to be reached.

The architect was Mr. Alfred Howard A.R.I.B.A. and immediate steps were taken to carry out the necessary alterations and repairs, the drawing room and dining room being the first to be restored to their former elegance, including the re-positioning of two carved pillars which were found in the basement. The large room on the first floor, reputed to be Mary Sumner's bedroom was converted into a chapel in the modern idiom to the design of Mr. Colin Shewring A.R.I.B.A. It

has a central altar with seating on three sides, and is dedicated to the Holy Spirit. A very arresting circular wrought iron treadle representing the tongues of fire, hangs over the altar, and this is repeated on the altar frontal. The altar and frontal were the gifts of the Winchester Mothers' Union, and a donation of £500 was made by the Central Council of that Organisation towards the cost of furnishing, which was carried out by the Warham Guild.

Leading off the chapel is a small room which was converted into a Conductor's room, and across the passage another room was made available to house the Christopher Library which originally served the Bournemouth Deanery. An anonymous donor provided a small endowment to keep it up to date. The old coach houses and stables were demolished to make more room for the parking of coaches, and the war-time strong room was altered to make room for two cars and a workshop. In the late seventies it was decided that additional space was required in which groups could hold meetings, and this was accomplished by increasing the height of the garage block to encompass a good sized room, a small kitchen and toilets. Space was also provided at the rear for camping together with the necessary equipment, and this complex is known as the annexe. In the main building accommodation consisting of a small flat was provided for a caretaker, and this is now occupied by the warden.

The task of carrying out the repairs, adaptation and furnishing was completed at the end of 1963 and the scars which had been left by the previous occupants disappeared for ever. On January 11th 1964 the Bishop of Winchester blessed and dedicated the chapel and on April 25th he performed the opening ceremony of the House. Canon Julian Rudd, now Rector of Warwick, was appointed Warden, and a management committee under the chairmanship of Sir James King, and in later years Admiral Sir Desmond Dryer, was formed. The staffing was undertaken by four Sisters from the House of Bethany, Bournemouth, the first Sister-in-charge being Sister Felicity, followed over the years by Sister Elisabeth Julian, Sister Christina Mary and Sister Angela Beryl. They were much loved and it would be true to say that the atmosphere of peace and tranquility which one felt on entering the House was, in no small way, due to their presence. Their living accommodation, including an Oratory, was on the first floor at the north end of the building, and a small refectory, adjacent to the main dining room was converted for their use. Voluntary help was afforded by ladies from the village and outside, particularly when large parties were expected, and quite apart from this, help was also available for such things as sewing and clerical work.

Sadly the time came when the Sisters had to be withdrawn, and in May 1981 they returned to the Mother House. They have been greatly missed. Their departure necessitated a complete change in management and a full time Warden, Mr. David Rogers, is in charge, with a paid domestic staff, and the Chaplain is the Rev. Michael Campling, Rector of Old Alresford and Bighton. The Sisters' accommodation has been converted into additional bedrooms, bringing the total of beds available to thirty eight. The Oratory is now a small conference room and the Refectory is the Warden's office.

The house continues to attract a wide variety of people and undoubtedly fulfils a very important need in the Diocese. It has a full programme which includes Retreats, Clergy conferences as well as Clergy retreats, Youth groups, Parish week-ends, pre-confirmation groups, Sunday school teachers and Probation Officers meetings, also a few business house conferences to fill any gaps which remain. A regular retreat Leader wrote "The staff go out of their way to promote the atmosphere of prayer, friendliness and calm which makes a good Retreat House We can say that it is as good as ever it was". Support is given by the "Friends of Old Alresford Place" who not only pray for its welfare but also provide many items for the House by means of subscriptions and donations, and this support is greatly valued. One big advantage of Old

Alresford Place is its situation, and for those who love the countryside, and wish to enjoy the walks along the river, the footpaths, droves and country lanes, also the abundant wild life, a better area than this part of Hampshire would be hard to find.

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