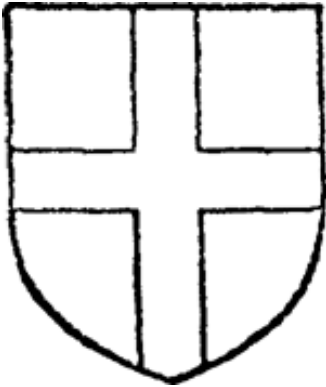


51 - GODSFIELD CHAPEL

By

Peter Hoggarth



Some people may not know that a few miles from Alresford, at Godsfild, there exists a fine example of a fourteenth century chapel. The Chapel, which is in private hands, lies quite close to the road running from Old Alresford to Wield. It belonged to the Order of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem, and although extremely old it was not built until two hundred years after the Order was granted lands at Godsfild. It replaced an earlier chapel.

The Hospitallers

Gules a cross argent

The Hospitallers originated in the Holy Land. From early times there appears to have been a house of shelter or hospital in Jerusalem for Christian pilgrims to the Holy Places. When Jerusalem was captured by the Crusaders in 1099, during the first crusade, wounded soldiers were cared for in the hospital. The Pope founded the Order of Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem in 1113, the name of St. John (the Baptist) coming from an ancient monastery they occupied in Jerusalem. The head of the Order at that time was a certain Gerard and he adopted for the Order the Augustinian Rule with its strict code of discipline. One rule of the Order was for the sick to give orders and for the brethren to obey. Within the Order were the three classes of Knights, Chaplains and serving brothers.

A class of military brothers was also founded which became the Order of the Knights Templars because they occupied a palace near the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. The Hospitallers were, however, never exclusively a caring order: they had a proud fighting record in the crusades and later in wars with the Turks in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Jerusalem was lost to the Saracens in 1187 and although it was held again briefly by the Crusades, Christian power ebbed in the Holy Land until finally extinguished by the loss of Acre in 1291. In that year the Hospitallers moved to Cyprus, thence to Rhodes in 1308 and finally to Malta in 1530. Their emblem became the eight pointed or Maltese Cross.

Hospitals of the Order were founded in many European seaports to help pilgrims journeying to the Holy Land. Many inland hospitals were founded in France, Italy, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire and England. The Order was funded by generous grants of land and money made by wealthy landowners. The unit of administration was the priory (England constituted one priory whilst in Italy there were seven) and within each priory were a number of commanderies of administrative units (thirty six in England). Commanderies usually had daughter chapels or preceptories.

In England the priory of Clerkenwell was built in the twelfth century and became the headquarters of the Order with estates amounting to thousands of acres spread over many counties. The head was the Lord Prior who had precedence over all the lay barons in the English Parliament.

The commanderies in their religious aspect were organised like monasteries, but economically and socially they were administered as manors. Hospitality was supplied to travellers

and pilgrims. Each commandery had a chapel, a commander's residence, a dormitory, a refectory, kitchen, bakehouse, brewhouse, stables, farm buildings and farmland. Sometimes there was a small hospital. There were also manor courts to dispense justice.

The Hospitallers' manor of Godsfield was created from grants of land. The first grant was made not later than 1171 by the Daundelays, Lords of Chiltern Candover and the conveyance was effected in the presence of the Bishop of Winchester, Henry de Blois, a brother of King Stephen. King John ratified and confirmed the title. Other grants included one by Adam de Port, the Lord of Abbotstone.

Godsfield was a commandery and head of the Hampshire preceptories of Baddesley and Rownhams near Southampton. For a brief period, up to 1187, it even took the Hospital of St. Cross at Winchester under its wing. The first known preceptor was Thomas le Archer 1304-1306.

The knights were essentially guardians of pilgrims and although Godsfield chapel appears to us to be off the beaten track it is probable that in those days a road ran from Southampton through Twyford and Old Alresford to Alton and perhaps linked up with the pilgrims way and so to Canterbury. It is true that Thomas a Becket was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 and canonised in 1173, whilst the first grant of land at Godsfield was made not later than 1171, i.e. before the canonisation. However, since 971 pilgrims visited the shrine of St. Swithun at Winchester. Pilgrims also travelled to Southampton to embark to Spain to visit the shrine of St. James of Compostella.

The date of the existing chapel has not been accurately determined. It is thought to have been built between 1350 and 1400 but as the knights moved to Baddesley in 1365 leaving only a much reduced staff at Godsfield it seems probable that the date of construction was between 1350 and 1365.

Whenever it was built Godsfield chapel is a singularly perfect example of a commandery.

Built of limestone and flint under a tiled roof it measures forty eight by eighteen feet. It is marked by three lancet windows on the south side, but the large east window is blocked. In the north wall at the east end is a blocked opening which may have given a view of the altar from some building adjoining all traces of which have disappeared. At the west end are incorporated living quarters on two floors. These have windows and a fireplace a stone staircase and a larder or storeroom. The upper room has a small opening giving a view of the altar. If the chamber had also been used as an infirmary the sick would, by means of the opening, have been able to hear Mass.

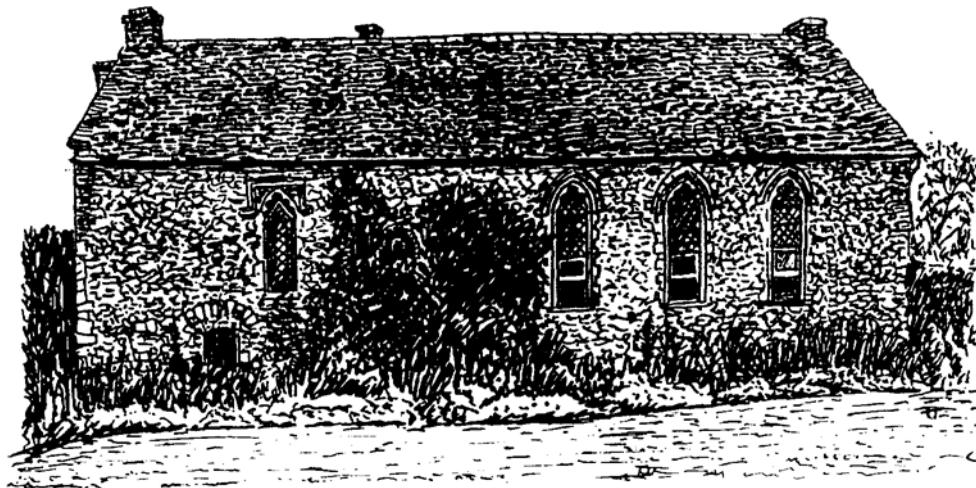
The chapel probably formed part of a complex of buildings, including a dwelling house and farm buildings. Nearby, foundations of other ancient buildings have been found. An earlier chapel once existed but nothing is known of it. In 1921 workmen carrying out drainage works in connection with the repair and renovation of Godsfield farmhouse came across several graves containing human remains.

In 1338 the Grand Master of the Order at Rhodes called for a return of all the property of the Order, worldwide. Prior de Thame, head of the order in England made a return of all the property here. It has been likened to an ecclesiastical Domesday.

The Report for Hampshire covers Godsfield, Baddesley and Rownhams. From the report we see that the Hospitallers at Godsfield had a house and a garden, three hundred acres of arable land and a meadow at Swarraton. Of livestock there were nine oxen, six animals for plough and

nine hundred sheep. The harvest was gathered in by the neighbouring farm workers. Although prices were much lower then and comparisons with today are difficult it is of interest to see that of the three hundred acres of arable, one hundred were worth 4d. per annum per acre; one hundred were worth 2d per acre and one hundred uncultivated were worth 1d. per acre. Total value was 58s.4d. The household consisted of the Commander or Preceptor, Prior William de Multon; his assistant; a steward; four servants; a chaplain and a woodman.

The report revealed that the manor of Godsfield was in a depressed condition. In his defence De Multon claimed that the land was poor; taxation high; the price of wool was low and the voluntary contributions from the neighbourhood were down! Finally he blamed the burning of Southampton and Portsmouth by foreigners (possibly Genoese pirates), we can only speculate on the connection between these ports and Godsfield.



Godsfield Chapel

Tom Trussler

In 1365 The Knights moved from Godsfield to Baddesley, perhaps because the outbreak of the Black Death in 1349 and 1361 had depleted their numbers. A reduced staff was left behind.

Sadly in 1540 the Order suffered the same fate as the monasteries, being suppressed by Henry VIII. The grounds given for suppression were that the Knights sent money out of the Kingdom; abetted the usurpation of the Pope and defamed the King and his subjects. It was claimed that their revenue would be better spent in the defence of the Kingdom. The last Lord Prior was hanged on Tower Hill by Henry. Following the savage and tragic end of the Knights Hospitallers Godsfield was granted to Sir James Seymour, later executed for treason. The manor reverted to the Crown and was then given to Sir William Paulet, Earl of Wiltshire. Later owners included the Rodney family. In more recent times the chapel has been used as an agriculture store and a youth hostel.

In 1924 the then owner wanted to pull down the chapel partly on the grounds that it was haunted. However, the Office of Works intervened and "scheduled" it as an ancient monument. Few treasures have been found apart from a bronze pyx (a small receptacle in which the Eucharistic Host is kept), which is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The later history of the Order may be of interest. In the early nineteenth century attempts were made to revive the Order in England as a Protestant branch of the main Catholic Order but the Pope ruled against this and in 1858 the Order was re-established as an independent Protestant Order. In 1874 the Order acquired the gate and the remains of the Priory at

Clerkenwell, the original headquarters in the twelfth century. The Order was incorporated by royal charter and in 1888 the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) became its Grand Prior. The old Knight Hospitallers now live on in the shape of the St. John's Ambulance Brigade, which did outstanding work in the medical field in both world wars and now carries on the caring work of its illustrious forebears.

SOURCES: Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Victoria County History - Hampshire.

Country Life - Dec 24th 1981.

Hampshire Magazine - July 1966.

(Hampshire Field Club.

(Paper read by Rev. W.L.W. Eyre on 27th May 1887.

Copyright Peter Hoggarth November 1987.