

## JOHN ARLOTT, O.B.E., M.A.

by

John Adams.



John Arlott:

John Arlott died in December 1991, at the time when the current issue of *Alresford Displayed* (No. 17 - 1992) was in production and therefore no mention of his passing appeared in it. Not surprisingly, most national reports of his life deal with his professional career and little information has been printed of his twenty or so years residence in Alresford. The writer has been unable to find any reference to Alresford, not even the name, in anything Arlott wrote, including his autobiography, except for contributions he made regularly to the *Hampshire Magazine* and other publications. Even in the biography details of the tragic deaths of his son and wife Valerie appear to have been penned by someone else and Alresford and his residence are not mentioned, this may well have been to preserve his

privacy.

In the early years in Alresford, however, he was a cheerful sight around the place and could often be found taking coffee in the Hobby Horse Antiques or talking books in the Studio Bookshop and Gallery.

The Sun Inn at the junction of East Street and Sun Lane had been closed for business in 1958. The property was bought by an antiques dealer, Mr. Gardner Tait who sold it to John Arlott in 1961. John renamed it The Old Sun and without making any structural alterations to the outside renovated the inside completely. In particular he made use of the large cellar beneath the house to build up his famous collection of wines. This cellar itself had a long history, which John needed little encouragement to recount. It seems probable that drovers coming down Sun Lane, then Bramdean Way, bringing livestock to the Fair in the 18th century when smuggling was rife in Southern England, also brought other wares. Illicit brandy obtained at the coast would have been passed across to be stored in the cellar - the drovers would have been well paid by the landlord.

John Arlott also collected a comprehensive library of literary works of friends he had met through broadcasting. An auction by Christie's last month (September) of the non-cricketing section, of his library included signed first editions by E.M. Forster, William Golding, Kingsley Amis and Stevie Smith as well as a letter from Dylan Thomas to John. In this Dylan admitted making a wrong choice, of poems for a radio broadcast, when John was literary producer for the B.B.C's Easter Service. The auction brought in around £100,000 including £1,650, for Thomas' letter.

From July 1966 he was for fifteen years President of the newly founded Alresford Historical and Literary Society. On the occasion of the Society's dinner in the following December at the Bell Hotel he made a speech. In it he uttered his now famous description of Alresford:

".... a T shaped town, surrounded by watercress and riddled with woodworm : historically speaking, warm with wool, built around a pond and ravaged by fire... "



He took a great interest in the establishment of Alresford Displayed and wrote an early paper entitled 'Airesfords Famous Cricketers (A.D. No.. 3 1978 - Paper No. 9). Then the Society's annual dinners were temporarily suspended by accommodation problems in Alresford he presided at a number of replacement gatherings of members at which light refreshments were served, and eminent persons, including himself gave readings and opinions. He took an interest in some local activities such as the Art Group (as it was then). Once the writer having been coerced into the chair of the now defunct Alresford Family Car Club, lured him to a field at the top of Sun Lane on what is now known as the 'Lake District' of the town and introduced, him to gyrations involving reversing vehicles in and out of 'garages' and other madcap pursuits: he insisted on taking part with great glee.

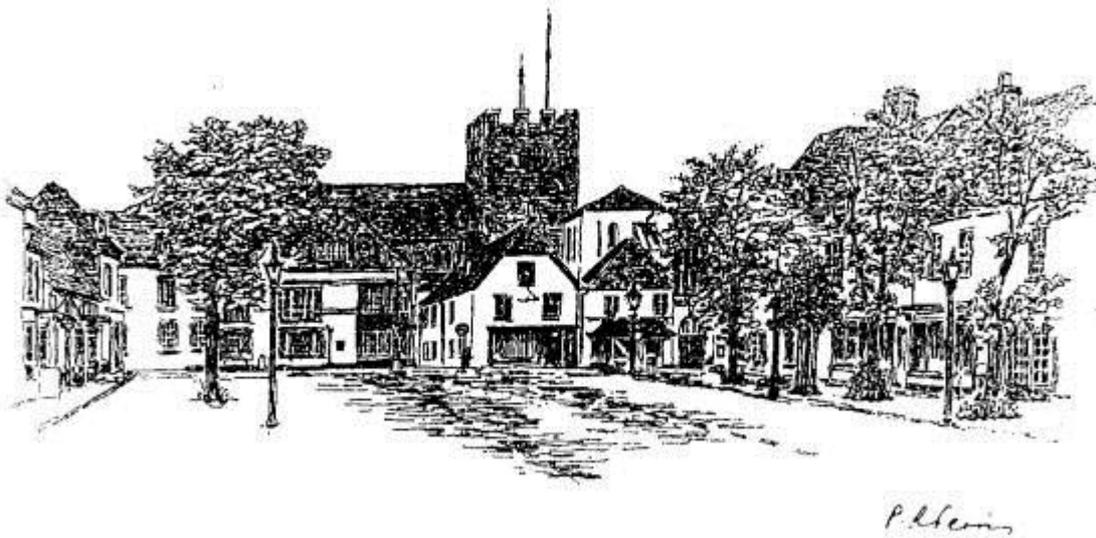
John was interested in Children's musical appreciation and would have written a good children's book if he had set his mind to it. Of the hymns he wrote one in particular (A&M 370) was a favourite with local children and at school harvest festivals was always their first choice:

God whose farm. is all creation  
Take the gratitude we give  
Take the finest of our harvest  
Crops we grow that all may live. . .

Then, under the Beeching Plan, the closure notice for the Alton, Alresford and Winchester Railway were published in 1967, John Arlott went into action. Mobilising a team led by himself and comprising the late (Sir) John Betjeman and this writer, and with the assistance of part timers, public meetings were held to shew that the railway was viable and necessary and should not be closed. This involved the assembly of a list of statistics and information covering passenger and freight loadings and so on. When all these efforts failed to prevent closure on the 6th February 1973; after six years of campaigning, nothing daunted, John joined the Board of Directors of those who were trying to purchase the railway in order to re-open it and run trains between Alton and Southampton or Winchester during peak hours and which would be paid for by volunteers running steam trains at weekends. Again John threw himself into the work whole heartedly and in the process introduced many of us to television filming (together with the required chalk marks on station booking office floor; so that one person at least, began to feel rather blase about it all When

the scheme, at least in, its entirety, did not materialise, John was very disappointed and eventually resigned from the Board.

John never got over the deaths of his son in a motor accident and the passing of Valerie in the very prime of her life. Gradually he withdrew from public activities and was seen less and less around the streets of the town. Finally he decided to leave Alresford for the comparative solitude of Alderney. One of his last acts before leaving was to seek out his old friends in the Historical and Literary Society resign his Presidency and say goodbye.



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Sources; personal reminiscences