

THE TEN YEARS BEFORE THE RAILWAY CAME TO ALRESFORD

By
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For a hundred years Alresford was 'on the railway'. On May 6th, 1865, the first passenger train from Alton pulled into Alresford station. It was decorated with flags and coloured bunting and carried, amongst other important passengers, two Alresford men — James Calvert, a director of the railway company who ran a high class drapery business in Broad Street, and William Bulpitt, the banker.

It was probably the most important single thing which had happened in the town since the fire of 1736. What was Alresford like during the ten years before the railway came?

The census of 1861 tells us that 1618 people lived in 282 houses. White's directory of 1859 describes the town:- 'New Alresford has a market every Thursday for corn, etc. and four annual fairs for sheep and cattle. The town has a bank, a brewery, a small iron foundry, a few good inns and well stocked shops. The erection of a police station is in contemplation'.

As far as schooling was concerned; there was Elizabeth Cole's nursery school, a British School, a National School and Perin's Grammar School in West Street. There was a Literary and Scientific Institution, two Friendly Societies, a Savings Bank and an Orphan's Home.

Letters were posted at Miss Anne Keene's for despatch by mail cart to Winchester or Alton (for London) twice daily. Parcel carrier services were operated by private enterprise to Winchester and Alton daily and to Basingstoke on alternate days.

Public transport was adequate. John Freeman's omnibus left the Swan daily for Winchester at 9.30. Collyer's London coach arrived from Southampton in time for the passengers to breakfast at the Swan. The coach from London arrived at 2 in the afternoon on its way to Southampton. Alternatively you could use Besant's eight-wheeler or be really swagger and book on the Self Defence.

What about local travel? Suppose you were a hairdresser (there were two in the town — Privett and Spary) and needed to go out to Armsworth Park to do the ladies hair for a ball. How did you get there? Charlie Butler from the Horse and Groom would drive you out in his fly and maybe give a lift at the same time to Frances Fowler who specialized in stays.

If you wanted to eat out, Bob Glaysher had a 'farmer's ordinary' in the Market Room at the Bell. The Swan had to keep up a high standard because of the coach traffic. Probably the best place to choose was the Sun, where Lizzie Daniels, if given notice, could set up a bumper supper.

If you felt queasy after over-indulging you had the choice of Doctors Covey or Hayles or Lipscomb or you could just take a draught at one of the rival chemists — Huggins and Loe. If, on the other hand, your party at the Swan had made you light headed and rowdy, Sergeant John Bray would arrest you and let you cool your heels

in the cell under the stairs of his house in West Street. You will remember that a proper police station was still 'in contemplation'!

The picture which is building up is one of satisfactory self-sufficiency.

Amongst

trades and services — from fishmonger to chimney sweep — there was not one missing.

We had no real need of Winchester; it was only after the railway came that the idea of

shopping there caught on. And when it did arrive, the complaints flooded the correspondence columns of the Hampshire Chronicle. The hunting people loathed it; Station Approach was a bumpy muddy track (isn't it still!); because Station road didn't exist you had to hump your baggage through the churchyard to get to the centre of the town. And — worst of all — the railway brought the administrators of Winchester onto our doorsteps.

Before they came we managed our own affairs. Magistrates held court at the Swan on

alternate Thursdays. There was a choice of solicitors. There was no parish council but the fairs and markets of the town were run by a Corporation of Bailiff and eight Burgesses, who were men of substance doing a voluntary job. In the years immediately before the railway came they comprised two solicitors, two doctors, the Master of the Grammar School, an architect, an insurance agent and a retired gentleman living at Langtons. They organized the planting of trees on Broad Street and the Avenue; they paid for the singing boys and for a chap to pump the organ in church; they made annual grants from their income from the markets and fairs to widows and widowers, to the hospital and to the overseers for the poor. They helped Mr. Privett to go to America with a £10 grant and advanced the same sum for the people of Alresford to celebrate the marriage of the Prince of Wales in 1863. Their income was derived from 'farming out' the right to run the fairs and markets to a local man who paid an annual rent for the privilege. How lucrative this was can be gauged from the size of the sheep fair alone (32,000 sheep in 1857 was the lowest for twenty years!)

The only noticeable outside influence was that of the Bishop of Winchester and his control seems to have been both sensible and benign. His representative collected the quit rents and his presentment court settled complaints and differences. the Presentments of 1857 were held at the Globe on the 2nd September before the Deputy Steward — James Lampard — and before a jury of Alresford men who in that year were:

Edward Moreton — cabinet maker

William Hall — blacksmith

Adam Spary — gas fitter (a very up-to-date trade)

Henry Spiers — tanner

Stephen Penton — landlord of the Running Horse

Young Fry (memorable name!) — watch maker

Robert Mitchell — tailor

William Holt — landlord of the Globe, who was responsible for the jury having a good dinner at the end of the session.

Alresford men deciding Alresford things which were whether the new owner of St. Joans had taken more land for his garden than his contract entitled him; whether Lancelot Lipscomb had really blocked the footpath at the top of Jacklyn's Hill; what was to be done about the dirty heaps in Broad Street and the nuisance running from George Bulpitt's cottage; who should repair the bridge and footpath by the Fulling Mill.

In 1976 — this year — our parish council faces almost identical problems — building complaints at St. Joans, rubbish in Broad Street, footpaths obstructed, the conduct of Thursday markets and even the water conduit at the Fulling Mill getting blocked. Do we handle them any better now that we have to refer our problems to Winchester? The worthy jurors of 1857 had complete confidence in their own judgement. Take the Fulling Mill problem; their verdict was that 'a pain of 5 pounds each should be levied on the five members of the Hall family who lived at the Mill if they didn't repair the said bridge within one month'. Rough justice but at least you knew where you were!

In 1864, Alresford had no Assembly Room and knew it would be needed once the railway had put the town on other people's maps. In August of that year, a public meeting was called to decide on a site for the Market Hall and Assembly Room. By April 22nd, 1865, they had built it on the site of the Rose and Crown Inn and it was ready for opening 12 days before the first train arrived. It had taken them 8 months to decide and build. We now call that building the Community Centre which, in 1968 we thought needed re-building or replacing. Today after 8 years, we have neither decided nor built anything. No wonder we're no longer 'on the railway'!