

NON-CONFORMITY IN ALRESFORD

by

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The Society of Friends appears to have been the earliest in the field to set up an order distinct from the established Church. At the headquarters of the Society in Euston Road, London there is a document which indicates that a lodge existed in Alresford in the seventeenth century. The late Mr, Geoffrey Craddock told me that Mr. Phair had remarked to him that a Quaker Meeting House once existed on the site of the house called St. Joan's (Ferndale) at the corner of Jacklyn's Lane and Pound Hill. Mr. Phair mentioned evidence in the cellars of this house of foundations of the Meeting House and the existence of a burial ground.

About 1850 the Mormons came to Wield in search of converts and were pelted with eggs by the children of the village. Apparently a number of people were baptised by total immersion in a pond in Wield Wood. Later some of these actually emigrated to Salt Lake City. At the end of the eighteenth and in the beginning of the nineteenth centuries really determined efforts were made to establish non-conformist communities, following the teachings of John Wesley, in Alresford. There were several aspects of Methodist opinion: the earliest successful attempt at putting down roots was made by the Independents or Congregationalists who established their chapel in Pound Hill, opening it in 1825. Much later the Wtsleyans built a corrugated iron structure on the site now in use in Jscklyns Lane. This cost £100 and was opened in November 1893, Then came The Primitives who collected £200 by February 1894 for their brick built, chapel near the top of The Dean. Foundation stones for the new building were laid by the Mayor of Winchester, A.R. Dyer, Esq., and nine others on 11th March 1896.

It is extraordinary to recollect how much opposition, taking the form of actual physical violence was offered to these pioneers apparently with the blessing and connivance of the Church of England incumbent. Generally speaking the usual plan of campaign of all the early reformers was to establish a base in a nearby village or town, infiltrate Alresford for a meeting and then beat a hasty retreat. The obituary notice of the Rev, Daniel Griffiths, born in 1779, tells of this gentleman's efforts, whilst resident in Alton, to "evangelise" Alresford. With two friends, Mr» Bennetfc and Mr. Jefferson he was booed and chased out of the town after his first attempt to address a group of citizens. In 1803 a certain Reverend Densham, designated "Honest" Densham by the people of Reading, a town which he had already infiltrated successfully, settled in Petersfield, He had written of his realisation of the "holy zeal for the welfare of others which impelled him to make excursions into surrounding villages and towns, there to proclaim the all important verities of the Bible, for the enlightenment and conversion of my fellow men". He decided to attempt an assault on Alresford, with the assistance of three of his brother ministers - it seems reasonable to assume that these were his close associates Griffiths, Bennett and Jefferson.

The three friends entered Alresford from the west, north and east respectively on Monday, 18th August 1803 where they met Densham who had slipped into the town unobtrusively. Like the apostles before them they preached from the window of the room they had hired.. They commenced their service at half past six: some of the audience seemed to be interested. The place from which they were speaking is in some doubt but there is evidence to suggest that it was in Pound Hill near the Running Horse (formerly the Dog and Star) where they had lodged during the day, They took it in turn to address the crowd in the street. They gave their motives for being there assuring them that they had no intention of opposing the Established Church but to recomend to the the very doctrines and truths the Church professed. To enable them to judge this they would be given some religious tracts. They were reminded of their religious liberties. After

Densham had read to them he dismissed them with a blessing and published the teaching for the following week.

When the preachers left the house and went into the street: the whole town appeared to be in an uproar. A fire engine had been placed to drench them with water as they passed. After Densham had mounted his horse he was insulted "in the most shameful manner" and townsfolk played the engine on him, hissing and hooting and throwing stones as he hastened out of town. His followers got out of Alresford as quickly as they could manage. Some escaped unhurt but others were in some danger of their lives. Mercifully no one was killed. One of them was removed from his horse, the bridle was cut into little pieces and the saddle was removed, whereupon the owner was obliged to ride out with a make-shift halter. Whilst this was going on the Innkeeper implored them to come no more to his inn; and the owner of the room from which they had spoken asked them to give it up as he intended to sell the premises. Densham, ever optimistic, said later that if he could procure a room for a longer time he could establish a permanent meeting place under the protection of the law. He claimed that several responsible people would attend his meetings. He also reported that he had found that the (established) minister of the parish had preached a sermon against them and called a general meeting of the inhabitants to prevent them returning. This minister would have been Francis North, Earl of Guildford, Prebendary of Winchester and Rector of Old Alresford and therefore responsible for New Alresford from 1797 to 1850 (this was of course before the parishes of the Liberty of Alresford were divided).

Later that year "Honest" Densham was to be killed when his carriage overturned on the descent of the hill into Haslemere (was he on another infiltration exercise?). Not long after his death his wish for a permanent meeting place was to be granted by the licensing of the Bell Inn in West Street as a place of public worship for Non-Conformists.

Other and less well documented attempts to "evangelise" Alresford were made during the next fifteen years. In 1820, according to the Rev. C. Howell, whose ministry was in Alton, a Miss Goodwin and her brother lived in Ovington with other branches of the family. During the summer of this year she collected together some of the children of the village of Ovington and its vicinity and instructed them in a room in their dwelling house. From then on the Reverend Howell together with members of his congregation made regular visits to Ovington to preach. From here Independent Methodism in Alresford was nursed until the building of the Pound Hill Chapel in 1825. Mr. Goodwin appears to have been the driving-force behind the scenes when the Independents moved into Alresford in force. He was helped by Mr. Elstone, a draper of Alton who opened a branch shop in Alresford in 1821, Together they obtained a licence for a room in Pound Hill in which children could be instructed and Mr. Howell could preach,

Some of the good folk of Alresford were attracted to the ideas of John Wesley but such was local distrust and prejudice, that it was difficult for Alresford children to attend the Sunday School which Mr and Miss Goodwin conducted. This after walking from Ovington into Alresford each week accompanied by the children from the former community. It was reported in 1822, for example, that the congregation in Alresford was largely made up of adults and children from Ovington, A great deal of financial support to this venture was given by interested parties in Gosport and Portsea.

Opposition still continued after the opening of the Independent Chapel. The Reverend Plessley, who was the first minister wrote that "an attempt was made to fix on the Chapel a charge for Church (of England) rates." When that charge, was not paid some of his personal possessions, including his bridle and saddle as well as the candlesticks from the pulpit were confiscated. Resistance to the charge led to a trial in Winchester where after a long struggle the demand for the charge was dropped and the items taken were restored.

Much information about his personal experiences of local agitation and bitterness is given in a manuscript written, in 1851 by the Reverend William Shepherd Ford, who also served, as a

minister.in the Chapel. Although the original violent persecution subsided into a kind of sullen quiet, it flared up again during the autumn of 1831 after dark on a Sunday evening. Whilst the congregation were engaged in prayer, he wrote, "handfuls of flints were thrown with great force from the adjoining premises on the right side of the pulpit to the upper window nearest to the north so that from the crash thus occasioned and the falling of glass and stones some of which reached to half and two thirds over the seats of the chapel a great, sensation was thus created, leading to signs of fainting among the females; but most. mercifully, the whole passed off without anyone being hit, much less hurt by the shower of scattered material which then descended". These, attacks continued so that it was necessary to lattice all the upper windows and brick up all the lower ones of the Chapel - just as they remain today.

Mr. W.J. Batchelor was living in Alresford in 1836. Later, members of his family were to move from Ovington to 49 Broad Street where Fred Batchelor achieved fame as the producer of the famous Batchelor's Mineral Waters and Ginger Beer with its distinctive flavour, the recipe for which was never disclosed in spite of substantial offers. In his letters he, Mr. W.J. Batchelor, recalled attending religious services in the house of Mr. Baker, a draper (probably of 25 Broad Street) being taken there as a child from Ovington by his grandmother. He remembered live sparrows being tossed into the room in Mr. Baker's house during the services and was present in the Chapel during the incidents recorded by the Reverend Ford. On a Sunday morning in the mid 1830's he was leaving his lodgings, which faced the churchyard, for worship, A riotous, noisy mob was chasing a respectable looking man up Broad Street and knocked him down in front of the door. Mr. Batchelor opened the door and gave him sanctuary. The man, whose name is not reported, had attempted apparently to preach in the street. A large stone was thrown through the bedroom window from the churchyard. Much damage was done to the windows of his lodgings, owned by Mrs. Gregory at No. 1 West Street, who had continued in the clothing trade after the death of her tailor husband. (These premises are now occupied by an estate agent). Mr. Batchelor recalled that the rioters were not all o'f the "baser sort" as he put it, but included an auctioneer who seemed to be the ringleader. One of the rioters was the landlord of "The Running Horse" who approached him, clenching his fist and threatened "If it twasn't for the law I'd smash you.....head". Because he had given sanctuary to the would be 'evangelist' Mr. Batchelor was considered by Mr, J. Dunn, the magistrates' clerk to be in some danger and was escorted to and from his lodgings for a period by the parish constable, Harry Cole. A rotten egg thrown, at him missed and went through the doorway of Samuel West, ironmongers then occupying what is now the Studio Bookshop and Gallery in Broad Street.

Another ringleader of the mob which assaulted the preacher was an assistant to Francis Hoad, the blacksmith of 44 Broad Street. He was summoned before the Bench sitting in the Swan. Mr. Cole, the constable escorted Mr. Batchelor to witness the case; when they entered The Swan Yard the auctioneer and others were seated at an upper window with a pail of slush which they had intended to pour over him, but they desisted after sighting the constable. Meanwhile the blacksmith's assistant dressed himself as a sailor so that the complainant failed to recognise him and he was set free. The magistrates. Sir Henry Tichborne and Mr. Walter Taylor - one a Catholic and the other a Protestant - seeing the danger the preacher was in, themselves escorted him down Broad Street and out of the Town.

Mr. Batchelor laid a great deal of blame for these happenings on the Rector, Francis North the Earl of Guildford, He also censured him doing nothing about the horrific practices of bull baiting on Pound Hill and in The Swan Yard, pugilism in the Fair Field and after cock-fighting was suppressed in the Old Cricketers Arms, to prevent its resumption in The Bell (Market) Inn. During this first half of the nineteenth century it seemed Alresford was indeed "totally without the Gospel", as "Honest" Densham had proclaimed years before.

By the end of the century opposition to the Non-conformist movement had largely disappeared in this district. People were worshipping according to their own inclinations and desires. The Salvation Army was permitted to hold open air meetings - 'provided they did not obstruct the

highway. The history of Non-conformist belief has followed a tranquil and uneventful course. After the Methodist Union in 1932, worship was concentrated in the former Primitive Methodist building in The Dean as well as the Pound Hill chapel. The former Wesleyan. Methodist church was used as a Church, Hall.

In 1963 services ceased in The Dean Chapel (which in its time has also accommodated the Sperry's Kindergarten and Pre-Preparatory School as well as a pin factory) and were transferred to Pound Hill. "This in turn was closed as a place of worship in 1979 and services were held in the Church Hall in Jacklyns Lane whilst a new church was being built at the rear. Now (1988) with further additions and improvements and a completely modern Church Hall all activities are centred at this site where the inscription near the entrance records the legends "Stone laid by John Sanderson, Sen: On behalf of the Congregation and Sunday School of Alresford Methodist Church 9th October 1971", The buildings are most attractive and very conveniently laid out and fulfil their designed purpose admirably. Indeed, at the Annual General Meeting of The Alresford Society in 1988, the Society's prestigious Rose Bowl was awarded to the Methodist Church for what in the Committee's opinion constituted the most outstanding improvement to the visual aspects of New Alresford during that year,

The Pound Hill Chapel served as a costume museum for a while. When it was put up for sale the most strenuous efforts to purchase it for use as a museum for Alresford and the district failed and it has now been bought for use as a private residence.

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Sources:

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