

ON FINDING THE LIBERTY OF ALRESFORD

By
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"You're going to live where?"

"Alresford. In Hampshire".

"Never heard of it".

"Just this side of Winchester". They had heard of Winchester. "Wait a minute . . . Alresford? I think we've been through it".

I explain about the early settlement by a ford across a tributary of the Itchen, which may or may not have been the Alre or the Arle, and mutter something about alder trees which may or may not be relevant, and give the address. If I dictate it, the result is 'Awlesford' and if I write it down, they persist in calling it 'Ahlsford', and if any letters succeed in reaching me, the juggling of 'Ls' and 'Rs' leaves all the options open.

The unseen guardians of the Liberty of Alresford down the ages give an ancient chuckle. 'Come here', they say, 'and be bamboozled'. When first I visited the town, a grocery shop with Victorian fittings occupied the premises now known as 'The Georgian Tearooms', which only goes to show how changes here can defy chronology. New Alresford on first acquaintance looked uniformly older than Old Alresford, and I had yet to discover 'Newest Alresford', areas of modern development curving discreetly behind and between the main thoroughfares. A large proportion of Britain's motoring public might say "Alresford? I think we've been through it". If traffic going west on the A31 is sluggish, a glance right from a moving vehicle may on occasion glimpse the ribbons of Morris Dancers outside the Horse and Groom, against a backdrop of summer foliage and elegant architecture, but it isn't easy to stop, not in the twentieth century. The experience of Alresford for many amounts to no more than a couple of gear changes.

It is a place to be experienced, not driven through. It has much to teach about changing gear between forward and reverse according to circumstances, harmonising progress with conservation. I came to live here six years ago, but only for weekends at first, travelling from Waterloo on Friday evenings. As the diesel train from Alton drew into Alresford station, bell-ringing practice began in Old Alresford, and there is something uniquely indicative of a place in the sound of its churchbells. Since the bells were first rung in 1770, the town has had its railway communication constructed and abandoned, and the bells still ring on Friday evening, and railway enthusiasts say "Let us preserve at least some part of the experience".

The town can claim, if nothing else, an early mastery of the art of establishing and preserving an identity. Before the Domesday Survey, dwellers in these forty or fifty hides had seen the land granted by Saxon kings to the clergy, leased out, redeemed, the grant annulled, confirmed, and restored again to the bishopric. It probably made little difference to the seasonal round, to the grazing and harvesting, to be the coin of kings. The boundaries of the Liberty seem impossible to determine. But, give or take a few hides, the area could claim 'I am valued, therefore I exist'.

"Alresford? I think we've been through it". No illustrious visitors to either Royal Saxons, or the Norman Courts and Parliaments still held sometimes in the old capital, would have been so vague. At dinner with Godfrey de Lucy, Bishop of Winchester (1189 —1204), the conversation would turn on his plans for the new Great Weir, the newly-navigable river, the new broad street, the new market.

("I'm going to call it Novium Mercatim", the Bishop would enthuse, "It will be a thriving centre for transport and trade — all kinds of merchandise — corn — wool — fuel! Oh, you'll hear great things of Novium Mercatim!")

"With respect, sir", a brave dinner-guest may have replied, "A name ought to be comprehensible, even if it is unpronounceable. New Market? Rather commonplace, don't you think? New Alresford would serve the purpose, surely?"

De Lucy may have looked crestfallen, but would soon brighten up and say, "The name is a mere detail — did I tell you about my two-hundred acre pond?") To any traveller who has been through Alresford without noticing, I'd like to point out that in 1294 it became a borough and could return *two* members of Parliament. *Two!* In the fourteenth century, its wool market was in the national top ten, and it was the third richest town in Hampshire. Perhaps if this boom town had gone on booming consistently for another six centuries, the reverberations would have destroyed its present-day appeal. The unseen guardians of the Liberty may have breathed a sigh of relief when Winchester's importance went into eclipse. Suppose London as a centre of power had never caught on? Suppose progress over the centuries had been concentrated here? Alresford could have been the Hackney, the Bethnal Green, the Liverpool Street Station of the metropolis. Having established and preserved its identity, the Liberty of Alresford would lose nothing by retiring gracefully from the competition.

What with fire and pestilence, and the market trade having passed its peak, the town which had achieved greatness now had modesty thrust upon it. I wish some precursor of Pepys had been resident in 1440 to record the whole town burning, and if it couldn't be managed on that occasion, he should have been around for the repeat performances in 1610 or 1620. That the Royalists set the town ablaze as part of their retreat in 1644 gives those of us who would have fought alongside them a nasty crisis of allegiance. But Warty Cromwell's soldiers had to stop to put it out. At least *they* couldn't pause on the outskirts of Winchester to say "Alresford? I think we've been through it".

So there is no account of a "Great Fire of Alresford" in the literature of the English-speaking world, which is surprising, as there were more fires to come, in 1678, 1689, 1710 and 1736. Perhaps a diarist was waiting for a really good human-interest story. He could have found it when some of Napoleon's officers were on parole in the town between 1808 and 1814. The Liberty of Alresford was extended to Frenchmen with the utmost reluctance at the time; being at war with France had dire effects on the wool trade. But they were made more welcome and treated more kindly after proving themselves heroes in the face of . . . (you must have guessed) . . . yet another fire. No graphic eye-witness account appeared from our elusive man of letters, so, if people say they've never heard of Alresford, you know who is to blame.

By this time, the town could with justice have been re-named "Phoenix" which is easier to say than Alresford and just as difficult to spell. But the guardians of the Liberty knew what they were doing. The urban identity, unmistakably Alresfordian, was developing. There was enough agriculture, craftsmanship and service to support it. While it was in retreat deciding on slate and tile rather than thatch, while the communications network included it more as a convenient coach stop than as a destination in its own

right, and while the river became a playground for eels and waterfowl, drastic changes were taking place to the north. In other regions, rural peace was being shattered, and the Industrial Revolution was sullyng and over-populating other towns. Industrialists ignored the south and the guardians of the Liberty of Alresford can't have resented being left out. There were the days of De Lucy to look back on, and no businessman would have risked building a manufactory in a town with such a combustible reputation, anyway.

Of course there have been changes. One of the most impressive sights of Alresford is to watch the rate at which volunteers emerge from their daily lives to answer a summons to a fire, pounding into Pound Hill's fire station. It wasn't always there, next to the Secondary school, and the Secondary school wasn't always there, either. You can eat a roast dinner where Henry Perin endowed his Grammar School, or attend Parish Council meetings where firemen used to foregather. It is planned that the Dean Junior school, long-deserted by the children, shall be used to make soft toys for them and children like them in other countries. The Liberty will accept useful changes within its boundaries.

"Alresford? Isn't that where your toy guinea-pig came from?" they may say in New York.

"Alresford? Oh, yes, we've heard of Alresford. We saw your Antiquarian Bookseller's stand in the Tokyo exhibition".

"Alresford? We've been to a restaurant there. It's in the Good Food Guide. I bet you all live on rainbow trout and watercress, lucky creatures".

There is much, much more to Alresford. It is not a suburb of Winchester, it has its own identity. In the few years since I came to live here, local government has been re-organised, and we must listen to the unseen guardians of the Liberty who have established and preserved this identity through the ages, contriving within the framework of circumstance to let this town survive and prosper with a certain style. A Parish Council Sub-committee surprises Winchester Planning Officials with the notion of a Town Plan Review, a reminder that we are not merely a minor, acquiescent part of the Winchester Area. "In our experience a unique undertaking", the Officials say, "We shall be interested to see how it progresses". A former Bishop of Winchester may well be taking a benevolent interest in the current desire to convert watercress beds into trout lakes. "Novium Mercatim isn't quite what I envisaged", he muses, "But it seems to have found an identity. Good luck to them — but they should have seen my two-hundred-acre pond!"

With local government re-organisation, the plan for an Alresford by-pass slipped to thirteenth in the order of high-expenditure projects. This means that many thousands of travellers for many years will be saying "Alresford? I think we've been through it", when we would prefer them to come here for a specific reason, or by-pass us altogether. We can provide a multitude of specific reasons for coming here. We cannot provide a by-pass.