

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH AT NEW ALRESFORD

By

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The year was 1897, The Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, when the reconstruction of the Parish Church of St. John the Baptist in New Alresford commenced. It was a quiet yet busy year in the long history of the market town of New Alresford, the sheep fairs still prospered, also the Broad Street markets, and Charles Eddoll had opened his drapers shop next to the George Inn. The New Alresford Parish Council and the Town Trustees had both just been born, and gas was piped throughout the town but water, and sewerage was yet to come. A short walk along Station Road led to a goodly service of trains throughout the country, and on hot summer days the water cart would trudge up Broad Street into West Street and down The Dean to refill in the waters of the river while the horse enjoyed a cool well-earned rest. The parish church of St. John had served the townfolk of New Alresford for many many years. Referred to in the Domesday Book it had suffered both neglect and fires, but in periods of prosperity it had always been well cared for and maintained in good order for worship.

There are photographs of the church, at that time, displayed in the nave of the church today, the church that had risen from the ashes of the Great Fire of 1689 that had devastated the town so tragically. Over the intervening two hundred years the galleries had been added also the dormer windows to light them, the Lady Chapel and a vestry had been built, together with further embellishments of the clock and the organ.

In notes at the beginning of his history of events during the rebuilding the Rector, Arthur Headley, wrote "The Church is plain and neat, built with brick and flint and covered with tiles. It is formed with three aisles and the roof supported with two rows of lofty pillars, and is kept in very decent repair by the inhabitants".

Separated from the Old Alresford Mother Church, the parish became a distinct ecclesiastical benefice in 1851 when William Brodie was inducted as the first Rector of New Alresford. Within the following years many improvements were implemented and performed by local craftsmen, but in 1895 it was clear that major repair work was necessary. A Vestry meeting was called and a Committee, under the chairmanship of the Rector, was appointed 'to take the matter in hand'.

The Committee engaged Sir Arthur Blomfield, the eminent Victorian church architect and diocesan architect to Winchester cathedral to 'examine the structure and proceed with proposals outlining the necessary work to be done'.

Early the next year, 1896, a vestry meeting called to receive the architect's report and Committee recommendations attracted tremendous interest among the parishioners. The number being far too great to be accommodated in the small vestry, it was necessary to adjourn and reassemble immediately in the Town Hall. Here, a ground plan of the new proposals was circulated around the meeting and the Chairman read the report. Briefly, plans had been evolved to remove the galleries, replace the old roof tiling, reduce the ground level around the building to form a drainage channel, insert new windows and external buttresses to the north and south walls; also to remove completely the existing chancel and vestry building and replace them with 'something worthier and better'. All this work amounting to some £5,500.

Col. Stratton Bates replied that he thought the present building was well suited to the Town and no serious alterations were required, so with a small amount spent on the present structure it would last for years. But Mr. J. Shepherd raised a question concerning a previous structural report that

had been obtained from a local builder. In reply the Chairman acknowledged the point and read the report which confirmed that 'the roof might be renewed to serve say for twenty years but recommended that the whole church should be rebuilt'. And Mr. Chapman pointed out that the new plan shewed a considerable reduction in seating and deplored such loss, especially the difficulty in 'securing a like number of free seats in the restored church'.

At the end of the discussion it was proposed and seconded that 'the Committee should proceed to raise funds for the work in accordance with Sir Arthur's proposals and report again in due course'. The report of the meeting then continues ' Mr. H.H. Walford of Arle Bury has offered to contribute one half of the total cost if the other half be obtained within six months'. This magnificent offer was gratefully accepted and Mr. Walford duly invited to join the Committee.



Work proceeded throughout the year when the final plans and proposals produced by Sir Arthur Blomfield were agreed and approved at the Vestry meeting on the 16th December 1896. Some changes had developed during this interim period. These chiefly consisted of repairs to the nave roof structure, retention of the west gallery and the seating in the nave; also rebuilding the Chancel, a new Priests vestry, a new organ vestry on the south having a heating chamber below, all 'Designed so as to improve the elevation and general appearance of the church'. There is an added note that in the architect's opinion 'we can do the work now proposed to be done for something under £4,000'.

The Churchwardens were instructed to submit a petition for a Faculty for Rebuilding the Church, to the Bishop of Winchester; and this was granted on the 25th March 1897.

A note dated the 10th April stated that 'as soon as preliminaries relating to the contract are completed there should be nothing to prevent the work being commenced at once'. Messrs. Goddard and Son, of Farnham, were subsequently appointed as the building contractors and work commenced by the 16th June 1897.

During the period of the contract which was scheduled to take about ten months all services for worship were to be held in the Town Hall at the usual times and all marriages would be performed at St. Mary's Church, Old Alresford.

After the first couple of months a major problem arose, which, when resolved was to have a tremendous effect on the final form and finish of the Church building.

The first phase of demolishing and removing all unwanted elements was followed by the next operation of opening up, in places, for additional new works. When on removal of the decorative casings to the six lofty columns or piers supporting the nave roof, the timber posts exposed were found to be in a defective, even dangerous condition. News of this dangerous state of affairs spread throughout the town, appeared in the local press and even made the national technical journals. Sir Arthur examined and reported that 'unseasoned 'tree trunks', some of which had split asunder had been used' and others talked about the 'shoddy workmanship' performed by the builders in 1694.

However, analysis of the surviving documents and evidence, together with the remarks suggests that the 'dangerous condition' arose inherently from the form of structural design of the three gabled roof structure. Such a design required two long, mostly concealed, internal valley gutters for the collection of rainwater from the roof slopes. Without adequate maintenance these gutters had seeped rainwater penetration, from time to time, over a period of two hundred years and thus the heads of the encased timber posts were continually saturated, leading eventually to a state of near collapse.

The report then recommended a change of design, and continued 'We estimate the cost of an entirely new roof to the nave in oak with nave arcade and columns and clerestory windows in stone approximately at £1,000 beyond the present contract'. In other words, in considering the difficult point of such considerable additional cost and contract time involved. Sir Arthur offered the Committee the most attractive alternative of a dramatic change in the design and concept of the project.

But research shews that this proposal for 'a new roof with nave arcade and columns and clerestory windows in stone' had previously been submitted to the Committee, the drawings are dated January 1897, but were no doubt declined due to the additional cost. However, the contract was now in progress, and delays mean extra costs, so a quick decision had to be made. In their dilemma the Committee quickly accepted the situation, approved the architect's recommendations including the extra expense, and work on site was able to continue with little delay.

And so in August 1897 a wide appeal was launched for the extra money - 'Every effort is being made locally to raise the funds, and we make this appeal in the hope that you will help with any sum, however small, to assist in meeting the amount the parishioners are unexpectedly called upon to raise. Even a few stamps will be a help, and can be sent to any member of the Committee'.

Sir Arthur's firm grasp of the changed situation that had developed enabled him to substitute his splendid proposals, which had been first turned down by the Committee, and today we are able to enjoy to the full the benefits of his skills and expertise. In lieu of a revamped continuation of the 'plain and neat church built with brick and flint and covered with tiles' so aptly recorded by Arthur Headley, the church was beautifully transformed. And today the first impression when entering the church fully confirms that the splendid Victorian Gothic style has been carefully designed and detailed. The well-proportioned nave, separated from the north and south aisles with handsome stone piers and arcading supporting the lofty clerestory from which the windows give generous light and a sense of spaciousness to the whole interior. Above this the roofs of the nave and adjacent aisles are well framed in solid English oak. The impact on the parishioners when they returned to their renewed church must have been quite considerable.

The upper parts of the perimeter walls were rebuilt including the insertion of new windows. When removing the old plaster from both sides of these walls several pieces of ancient carved and moulded stone, being buried in the walling, were exposed and collected. Some of these stones have been cleaned, examined and identified and are now carefully preserved in the display cabinet in the church.

The new Chancel was built higher and longer to give adequate space and setting for the choir and the Sanctuary, being supported by the refurbished Lady Chapel of the north aisle and balanced with the new organ vestry and Priests vestry of the south aisle. The architect designed a fine perpendicular east window above the altar, which was filled with plain glass. However in 1902, due to the further generosity of Mr. H.H. Walford, the window was reglazed with beautiful stained glass depicting the 'Glorified Christ' together with the reredos in opus sectile work representing 'The Last Supper'.

In the newly furnished Lady Chapel, the three light window in the east wall with its stained glass panels, erected to the memory of Francis and Selina Marx of Arle Bury in 1879, was removed from the demolished chancel and replaced a previous single light window.

The floor paving in the organ vestry contains the original inscribed grave cover stones removed from the burials in the body of the church, also there is the front panel removed from the west gallery which records some of the charities administered by the church dating back to the seventeenth century.

The fine west tower was not disturbed except for repair works to the archway to the nave, and the provision of the new west door. The clock, installed in 1811, was repaired, and the bells rehung and quarter turned. A service of rededication of the bells was held on the 22nd of December 1897 followed by a Peal of Kent Treble Bob Majors rung in 3 hours and 3 minutes in celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

A separate appeal for funds to cover the cost of removing and completely rebuilding the organ into its new position was made by the organist. At the same time it was modernised in every way.

The favourable weather conditions throughout the winter months enabled good progress to be maintained to the work on the site. The completion was forecast to be early in July, but subsequently it was put back to mid- August, a total delay of some four months on the contract.

There is a note by an unknown person who visited the church immediately after the re-opening, 'It has been handled with much taste and success and is converted into a handsome structure of Perpendicular style, though it will be more pleasing when it gets some good stained glass into the fine east window. At present it is all somewhat cold and bare, obviously the structure was the first thing to be considered, but the whole building offers scope for beautiful decoration'. A remarkable perceptive comment.

At 11 o'clock on Wednesday the 17th of August 1898 the service celebrating the reconstruction of the Parish church commenced, led by the Bishop of Winchester. The authorised form of consecration was conducted and then the Bishop, having said the opening prayers, proceeded first to the font, then the chancel steps, the pulpit and the holy table saying at each the appointed prayer. Having then seated himself, the sentence of consecration was read by the Deputy Chancellor. The Bishop signed the sentence and directed that it should be forthwith preserved amongst the muniments of the diocese at Winchester.

The restored church, as can be seen today, fully justified the great efforts made by the people of Alresford. It is a tribute to the zeal of the individuals concerned and illustrates to the full the creative judgment so admirably expressed by the architect. Sir Arthur Blomfield.

The total cost of the church reconstruction amounted to some £6,000. In acknowledging the work performed by the Committee it must be remembered that finally it required the many monetary gifts continually made so generously by Mr. H.H. Walford in order to happily complete the fine church we all enjoy so much today.

He died, at Arle Bury, on Christmas Day 1928 and his memorial on the south wall of the Sanctuary simply states 'In memory of Herbert Henry Walford to whom the restoration and rebuilding of this Church in 1898 was principally due'.

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