

Alresford Historical & Literary Society November 17th 2021

## ‘Unremarked Ancient Curiosities in Alresford’

By

Peter Pooley



As your President, I add my own welcome back to the Hist and Lit in real life, after 18 months of electronic existence. Our Secretary has suggested that I might set the evening's entertainment going with an appropriate literary quotation. Another committee member has helped me with a short *well-known piece of verse which he attributes to Shelley, or perhaps Byron*.

*Here we are again, happy as can be*

*All good pals and jolly good company. Hi!*

Sounds more like Byron to me. What do you think?

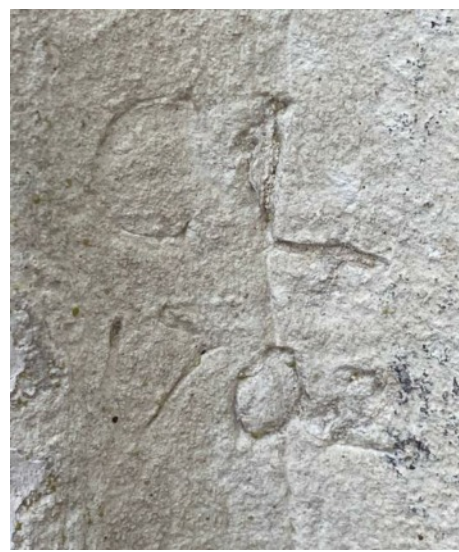
I must also welcome you to St John's Church. I can do so officially as I am actually a senior office-holder here — I have sole responsibility for emptying the litter bins, and other major jobs. I love this place, which for me is redolent of the life of Alresford over the many centuries that it has acted not just as a place of worship but as our main social and cultural hub. It is a major part of the inheritance of Alresford citizens and a precious asset. And yet there are little jewels in this place that are part of that heritage which many, including regular churchgoers, have never noticed.

This is the objective of my talk this evening, to call attention to some visible pieces of the history of this Town which many of you may have failed to notice, or if you did notice did not recognise their relevance to the life our predecessors lived, and which have with the passage of time become part of our lives; indeed, part of us. We are all familiar with the antiquarians' standard tour round the Town — the old bridge and the Great Weir, the French soldiers' graves, the fulling mill, the eel house, the Pond, and so on. Let me introduce you to some items that are not in the standard tour or guide, but which I think are worthy of remark.

I begin with one unremarked object right here, behind you. It is very visible, and some of you will know the reason for its existence. Yet I asked a number of regular church-goers to identify it from this picture. All had seen it, but most had never given it any attention and couldn't say what it is. Only three recognised it as the scar of the line of the roof of the old medieval building, left behind by the late Victorian re-builders of the church you now see around you. As true, proud, imperialistic late 19th century Brits, they left it visible to demonstrate how much bigger and (they would claim) how much better is their 'new' church.



From the big to the small. Look at this bit of graffiti:



All of you passed it on your left as you came in, and some will have passed it hundreds of times. There are a number of other graffiti on that column, carved long ago (I imagine) by lads loitering at the back during a particularly boring service. I have singled out this one from 1703 because the lad who carved it was also working in the main Alresford graffiti work centre, which is outside the North door, over there, as you see - in 1702. Same initials, same handwriting. That was just thirteen years after the Great Fire devastated Church and Town. This North door was then the main entrance, and shielded by a porch, which hid his criminal activity from sight. There are some lovely ones there, including (pointing) this classic of the church and steeple, with the people inside, beloved of children, and a couple of consecration crosses, marking the visit of a bishop. Someone has regarded them as unsightly, and tried to cover them with a cement render, but I think they should be preserved and indeed celebrated. Don't you? They are a part of our past, they are a part of us.



Here's another big sight, West Street, North side, looking West .You all know this extraordinary dip down from the crown of the road to the level of the houses. It is popularly assumed that this is the natural slope of the land, but the slope just here is East/West, not North/South. No, this I am sure is the result of depredations by the great grey dray horse over the centuries. I'll tell you about him in a moment. I am old enough to remember seeing dray horses in London in the sixties, hauling Mr Whitbread's barrels of beer round their pubs. When they thumped their front feet down on flint cobbles the sparks flew, literally. More recently, you young people may have seen heavy horses at the Alresford Show and noticed their enormous hooves. Now, imagine the effect on a poor road surface, just packed stones on chalk, of cart horses making a special effort going up the hill, keeping as ever to the left, getting towards the top here, pulling a heavy load. They dig their hooves into the ground, and over a period produce a sunken lane. Jacklyn's Lane, South of the railway bridge is a classic example. You can see how much higher the lie of the land is on the left, the uphill side, compared with the right.



A hundred and fifty years ago the traffic in West Street had dug a virtual trench, and people had to place planks between the road and their doorsteps to bridge the gap. I cannot see this feature without thinking of another literary quote, a real one this time, from Gerard Manley Hopkins' lament on the death of the farrier, Felix Randall:-

*Who, at his random grim forge, powerful amidst peers*

*Didst fettle for the great grey dray horse*

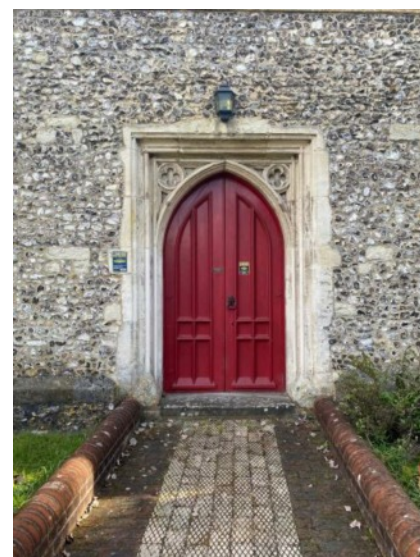
*His bright and battering sandal.*

OK, that's enough literature for one evening. Come back now into the Church, to see a small curiosity, just over there to the right of the war memorial, the photo and commemorative shield presented in 1941 by the crew of HMS Alresford, a minesweeper which saw distinguished service at Dunkirk and Dieppe. She was built just at the end of the First World War, too late to see action in that conflict. It was a 'Hunt' class vessel, and all that class were named after Hunts— but not this one. How did it come to be named after us? Not many people know this, but our Chairman and I can tell you. The naming of ships is the prerogative of the Royal Navy Commander in Chief. In 1919 this was Lord Jellicoe.



Now, if we look at the list of Rectors on the wall behind you, the name of the incumbent in 1919 was — Jellicoe! He was the Admiral's brother. Nepotism! The eighth listed Deadly Sin, and in a Church! Blimey!

Let us step outside again, and look back at the North door. This is disregarded now, having lost its pre-eminence when the West door took over as the main entrance in 1899, but it merits your attention, not just for the graffiti. It is in itself a lovely fourteenth century door, much praised by the supreme architectural critic Pevsner. What fascinates me (pointing) are these four bits of stone which surround it, looking like window lintels. These mark the places where medieval masons made niches to hold the effigies of saints, as was standard at the main door of churches in the 13th/14th centuries. Some still exist, notably in Cathedrals. Typically these niches would have housed figures of the Virgin, Saint John the Baptist (to whom we are dedicated), St Peter (the Pope's man) and the local boy, St Swithun. On the North side of the tower there are similar remains of niches, and a surviving central figure of Christ crucified, much weathered. All such effigies, except crucifixes, were classified as idolatrous and swept away in the 1530s, and the niches filled in with flint rubble, to make sure nobody would try to put them back. If I win the Euro Lottery on Friday night perhaps I will pay for them to be re-created and restored. It would be my way of saying 'sucks to you, Thomas Cromwell'.





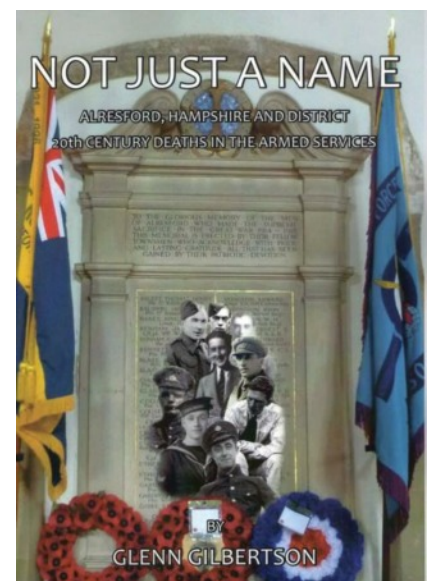
We walk away from the Church now and turn right into East Street, where on the right is one of our great houses, The Lindens. This was occupied during the first decades of the last century by our leading medic, Dr Hodgson, a very eminent citizen and a JP (as is proudly noted on his gravestone, with his many medical degrees). On the right of the front door, you will see a bell-pull marked 'surgery'. His living quarters are on the left, and out of hours you could call him in an emergency

by pulling the bell marked 'night'. And if you did not want to disturb the great man himself you could use the bell marked 'servants'. These are at least a hundred and twenty years old, and should be retained.



Hodgson's grave is up against his garden wall, opposite the door of the John Pearson Hall.

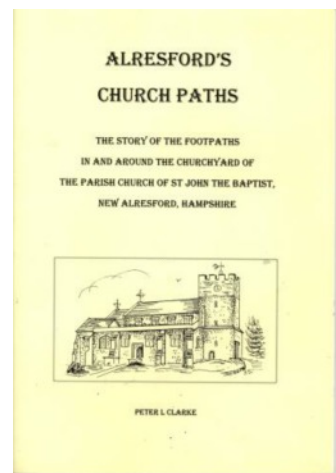
In the Church, just by the War Memorial, are two brasses celebrating the sacrifice of his two sons, one a midshipman killed at Jutland and the other an infantry subaltern killed in modern-day Iraq. You can read their full histories in our Chairman's wonderful book, 'Not Just a Name'. I can't help thinking that one of these Alresford boys died at the age at which we were studying for our A Levels and the other could have been in his second University year.







Almost alongside Dr Hodgson's grave lie the ashes of our greatly lamented friend Peter Clarke, who died so suddenly and so young, having published his last great study which is of the Churchyard pathways.



To him I owe my understanding of the three blocked gateways in the wall that bounds the very long garden of The Lindens, leading from Peter's memorial stone in the direction of his house at the far end of Churchyard Cottages. These were entries to allotments, small areas 'allotted' or allocated to people in 1805 as compensation for their loss of commoners' rights on land enclosed by Act of Parliament. You will recognise this one at the end of the transverse path. Peter tells us this was the entry to Shitten Dell, through which — in the days before 'artificial' fertilisers — dung from the streets was shovelled for the use of the allotment holders. There was plenty of it, from the periodic sheep fairs but also regularly from the great grey dray horses and other four-legged locomotives of the haulage and transport sectors. At some time the owner of the house bought out the allotment holders to extend the garden, making the gates redundant. Perhaps it was Dr Hodgson.

Moving back towards the Church, I take credit for drawing Peter's attention to this headstone which records the death of Frances Fitt in 1900 at the age of 101 — three centuries in one lifetime. Not many people achieved that distinction.



Peter in turn pointed out to me, just behind Miss Fitt the gravestone of Billy Sensier, a celebrated National Hunt jockey who won a couple of Grand National steeplechases but died after falling at Plumpton Races in 1894. The broken column signifies a life ended prematurely; he was only 38.



These graves are over the border from the original churchyard. Until an extension in 1858 everyone had to be buried in a very limited space. Everyone also wanted to be laid to rest on the South side, where the sun warmed the graves, not on the cold North where the paupers were laid. The result was that the ground level rose as burials were placed on top of previous burials, over and over again. That is why we have an extraordinary number of table-top tombs. In the late 18th and early 19th century, when the area had got really crammed, the wealthy could afford to pay for them and thereby avoid their family being 'buried over.'



Now here is a picture of me, standing with my metre rule in the trench which marks the level of the Church floor. On my left is the floor level of the John Pearson Hall, internally six steps up and externally 90 centimetres higher. To my right is the old South door, blocked up in the 1850s because by then it opened on to a waist-high mound of burials. Now here I am again outside the JPH in a second trench; this one is 85 centimetres deep. The ground rises further from there, another 75 centimetres, very steeply to the 1858 churchyard boundary, where I showed you the last of the table-tops. So, altogether the continuous re-use of the land had caused it to rise by two and a half metres. You can see the old boundary still, where the ground falls away sharply and levels off. (For those who insist that my measurements are translated into 'old money', my pocket calculator tells me 2.5 metres equates to fifteen shillings and tenpence ha'penny).



I will move you now to the bottom of Broad Street to look at *Old Timbers* at the top of Mill Hill:



This is an authentic medieval long house built probably before 1350, that is to say before the Black Death brought house-building to a halt. Wings have been added, but the central part is original. John Leask once showed me the original base- cruck timbers of the steeply -pitched roof. It escaped the 1689 fire. It was a farm house — there was good unenclosed land behind it, above the slope down to the river. This placing on the slope was traditional and also important, because the family occupied the uphill part, while the lower part housed the farm livestock, whose slurry (excuse the euphemism) could be pushed away down the hill to the river. The wing you can see was added in the 16th century, when the owners stopped living with their animals and perhaps needed a spare bedroom. Popular guides do not notice it, but it is historically the most important, and by far the oldest domestic building we have. To the side there is a lovely old sundial which even I never noticed until recently. I can't read a date, but one wonders why anyone needed a sundial in sight of the town clock, which is dated 1811?





There is, or was, another sundial right by the Church West door, very close to the clock. No, this is not a birdbath. Don't be ridiculous, who would put an architect-designed stone birdbath outside the Church? It was a sundial but someone stole the works, presumably for the valuable brass. These sundials were not there to tell the time. The church one, certainly, was a *momento mori*, a reminder of our impending death. It might have had the popular Latin inscription 'ut hora sic fugit vita' — as time flies, so does life. So, goes the implication, behave yourself; you will be called to account, perhaps quite soon.



Close by is the Town war memorial. This recalls an intriguing tale of the realities of the balance of power in Alresford a hundred years ago. The Parish Council, reflecting the popular view of their voters, proposed placing the memorial in the centre of the town, as was obvious and usual, that is at the top of Broad Street; but H H Walford said no, it will be by the Church door. Who he? Not only the richest man in Alresford by far, and the owner of Arlebury Park, but also the principal financier of the rebuilding of this Church twenty years earlier. He was paying most of the cost of the memorial. Say no more. HH got his way. Read all about him in Jan Field's magisterial study '*The Big House*'.

*An illustrated history of  
'THE BIG HOUSE'*

*Arlebury Park House & Estate since the 1770s  
New Alresford, Hampshire, England*



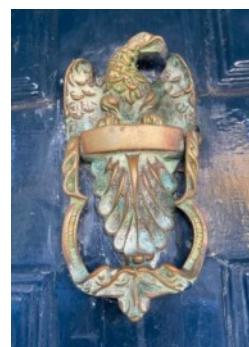
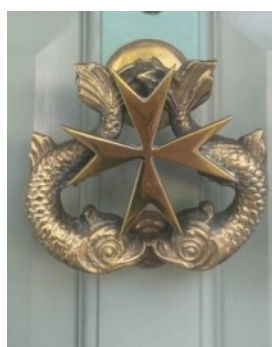
*JAN FIELD: THE ALRESFORD SOCIETY*



The guides do notice the great houses in Broad Street, but ignore the glorious street furniture. Here is a collection of boot scrapers (there are some also in West Street):



These were essential in so shitty a town (excuse the lack of euphemism). The best belongs to the Cowlings at number 43, and the most interesting is this 'his and hers' model with a smaller scraper for the more delicate boots of the ladies. This one in West Street is Graham Trasler's favourite, because it is the most elegant. You know what he and Liz are like. And coming up now is a collection of beautiful and individual bits of door furniture. This one of a maltese cross is my favourite, because one of my favourite working history scholars lives behind it. We pass these delights daily, but do not notice them.





Up the street there is an old butcher's veranda, where, in the days before refrigeration, joints of meat and poultry carcasses could be hung up to catch the cool breeze, in the shade all the day long. Some of the rings for the hooks are still there.



Moving on towards my house, I had the curiosity the other day to measure the width of Station Road at the West Street end. As I expected — 11 yards (in old money). This is the standard plot frontage in the part of the town which was developed in 1200, and shows that the railway company had to buy a whole burghage plot -eleven by 110 yards - and knock down the buildings to get direct access to and from the station. Before then access was via the churchyard pathways, which cannot have been very convenient, especially if you had a cartload of watercress to put on the train.



This thought prompts me to pause our history for a moment to check if you all know that eleven yards, in very old money, is two rods (or poles, or perches, if you prefer). Yes/ No? Clearly not all. Listen in.



When New Alresford was New, this was the handiest measure, as every farmer or farmworker had to have a long rod or pole to steer his draught oxen by tapping them on the nose — the mouths of oxen are inconveniently shaped to take a bit. For practical purposes the length required for the ploughman to reach the nose of his ox was about five and a half yards. Well, that was a long time ago and nobody uses the rod any more — but it lives on in the old streets of our town.

In another sense, it lives on through the continuing use of the acre, twenty rods square, and the chain, four rods or 22 yards. Farmers wanting to measure a cricket pitch used their chain, which in the 18<sup>th</sup> century they kept to measure 'stints' of work. The guy who did Janet's father's hedging and ditching work, I remember, still charged by the chain just fifty years ago. More interesting, if you have seen small boys in India preparing a cricket pitch, as they do on every scrap of bare land, their measurement of 22 yards, or four rods, goes back to the medieval English peasant ploughing his strip of land. On our tour of India Janet had to restrain me from jumping out of the bus to give the boys this fascinating piece of information. She said they might not be all that interested, and anyway I did not know the Urdu word or even the Hindi for a rod, pole or perch.



Onwards and upwards to roofs. We have some marvellous roofscapes, another delight that gets too little attention. See how very steeply some of these roofs slope:



Two great fires tore through Alresford in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Blown by the wind the flames raked the thatch off the roof and moved on — leaving behind the timbers that had supported the thatch. Thatched roofs have to have a steep pitch to move the rain off quickly. Tiled roofs can have a lower pitch, which clears the rain fast and is moreover more convenient for upper-storey accommodation. Sensibly, those affected by the fire used the original timbers to support their new fireproof tiled roofs. So it is that we have this great collection of high- pitched roofs, making Alresford different and special.



Fifteen years ago the Alresford Society (Jan Field and Peter Pooley) made the case to the Winchester planners that this characteristic 'Alresford pitch' should be extended to new-builds in the town centre. The planners claimed that they were already encouraging developers to keep the 'Alresford pitch' going in the case of larger houses, and promised to redouble their efforts. Et voila! Here are houses in Style's Yard, and here is the view from my front windows in The Mulberries. John Lang's house is opposite ours.



If you take to walking around with your head in the air, viewing roofscapes, you can tell which roofs were built or rebuilt after 1860. Look back at these houses in Broad Street, in which one on the right, a Victorian build, has a lower pitch and is in slate. It was in the 1860s that slate became cheap and popular, because we then had a railway that could move slate to us cheaply from Cornwall or Wales. Alresford builders were from that time onwards no longer reliant on materials that could be produced locally.



That is my little addendum to works published by more distinguished members of this Honourable Society on the sights and history of Alresford. It is no more than an appeal to stop and think about how countless of our predecessors contributed in small ways to the Town we now have, for the most part without thinking about it and largely un-noticed. I hope it helps you to know better where we came from, who we are. Now we ourselves are contributing to the future Alresford, perhaps also unthinkingly, but I hope with a forward vision inspired by the heritage left us by previous generations.

Standing here, Chairman, I have the strange feeling that I have come to the end of a sermon, and I should declare my faith — which is in part that one day we shall have the joy of meeting with those predecessors, and with those who are now and those who will later be taking our Alresford vision forward. We shall gather with all these generations in a sort of heavenly All Centuries General Meeting of the Alresford Society together with the Hist and Lit; but on another shore, and in a greater light.

See you there.

