

THE WORK IN ALRESFORD OF NAPOLEONIC PRISONERS OF WAR

by

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The following extract from the 'Hampshire Chronicle' dated 17th February, 1960, describes a ceremony in New Alresford Churchyard bearing on a troubled of European history, when events penetrated into small towns and villages bringing, in this instance, perhaps, an understanding of people of other nationalities, character, language, crafts - perhaps changing in a small way the attitude of the small communities:-

'Homage to French Prisoners of War – Restored Tombstones at Alresford

The little ceremony, with the Tricolour flying, in Alresford Churchyard Wednesday afternoon, in which the French Vice-Consul at Southampton (Monsieur G. L. R. Fillias) figured, carried with it a flash-back to the Napoleonic Wars. During these wars 200 French prisoners of war were on parole in Alresford, some billeted in the cellars of large houses in the town. Some died, and the five gravestones erected by their relatives and friends are a reminder of those times. Actually, one of the stones was erected to the memory of a woman, Marie Louise Fournier, the wife of a Captain of Artillery, and this provides something of a mystery.

' These stones have recently been cleaned, re-lettered and weather-proofed, the cost (£23) being borne by the French Military War Graves Commission. This led to an invitation from the Rector (the Rev. A. J. Pearson, M. C.) to the Vice-Consul to visit Alresford, and this was cordially accepted.

' The ceremonial service around the graves in the churchyard was arranged by the Rector, and among the crowd which gathered to honour the memory of the captives, who have slept for 150 years in the quiet churchyard, were Sir Anthony Doughty Tichborne, Bart. , Comdr K. Hall (a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour), Lieut. -Col. Y. H. Palmer, M.B.E., M.C., Lieut. -Col. E. Hldson-Allen, Lieut. -Col. G. R. Chapman, Cmdr. C. R. Buck, C. L. Andrewes, and other representatives of the British Legion, the Parish Council and the Chamber of Trade. Also present were the Legion Standards, borne by Mr. R. Bentley and Mrs. N. Fidler.

In his address, the Rector said here were the graves of five people who had given all they had to the country they loved, and the ceremony was to honour their memory and loyalty. 'Their presence in our midst reminds us of that fair land across the Channel. Our ancestors came over to England with William of Normandy. Our churches and cathedrals reflect something of their great powers, and even in our Parish Church there remains something of their craftsmanship.

Before placing a floral wreath draped with the Tricolour on the graves, M. Fillias said he was glad that the Rector had invited him to render homage to his fellow country-men, who found their final resting in the little cemetery in Alresford. 'To honour the memory of our dead is a sacred duty', he said, 'and it is deeply moving to know that the graves of these Frenchmen so long forgotten, and that with the aid of the British and French authorities the gravestones have been restored and will be cared for in perpetuity.

'He spoke of the Rector's invitation in informing him of the stones and their condition and said that he was only too happy to obtain from his Government the necessary funds. 'The restoration of these ancient headstones, in their touching simplicity, is one more proof of the friendly spirit that exists between the two countries, and the flowers to be placed on the graves are a living expression of the ties that bind us together. I render homage to these dead countrymen on behalf of my Government and fellow Countrymen.

'Dr. M. T. Morgan, an Officer of the Legion of Honour, said that a prisoner of war's life in Napoleonic times was very different from that of today. There were no concentration camps surrounded by barbed wire, and in Alresford they were received in a friendly spirit by the inhabitants, who, in time, came to love them. They shared in the people's social and industrial life, and he had it on authority that the former Parish church clock was made by one of the prisoners.

'Wreaths were also laid by Mrs. N. C. Chivers (Chairman of the Women's British Legion) and Mr. P. E. Burchett (Chairman of the Parish Council) .

Prayers for the departed were said by the Roman Catholic Priest (Canon A. S. E. Burrett), with the Legion Exhortation and the final Blessing by the Rector. About 60 schoolchildren, many wearing their Cubs' and Brownies uniforms, watched the ceremony.

Headstones

One appears to have been incised by a Frenchman, and looks older than the others.

(1) *Ce git Jean L 'Huille, Ltd. d 'Artillere Francaise - decede le 6 aout 1812*

(2) *Ci git le corps de Mr. C. Lavau - Officier du Commerce - decede le 13 Dex' 1811 et le 29^{me} de son Age.*

(3) *Ci git le corps de Mr. Pre Garnier - Sous Lieutenant au 66me Regiment d' infanterie francaise - ne le 15 Avril 1775 - Mort le 31 Juillet 1811.*

(4) *Ici repose le Corps de Mr. Joseph Hypolite Riouffe - Enseigne de Vaisseau de la Marine Imperiale & Royale - Qui mourut Le 12 de Decembre 1810 Age de vingt huit Ans -11 emporta les Regrets de tous ses Camarades et des personnes qui le connurent.*

(5)* *Ici rest le Corps de Marie Louise Ve Fournier - Epouse de Fm Bertet - Capitaine au Corps Imperial de L' artillerie Francaise – decedee le 11 Avril 1812 agee de 44 ans.*

** There were a number of 'Camp followers – wives and fiancées- who apparently were taken prisoners if caught - this would explain the burial of this French lady here.*

Billeting

I have been told that prisoners were billeted in the Old Malthouse, in West Street. This is an interesting relic of a place at the back of what is now an Antique Shop - it has a fine weathervane (sketched by Mrs. U. Oxley and reproduced on the front page of the MSS Meeting Booklet No. 1). The old Armony in the Dean and the Volunteer Arms are also said to have housed prisoners, those who had committed misdemeanours being kept in the cellars the latter building.

Crafts

In order to earn a little money, and also to while away time, the 'Frenchies' as they were familiarly called, built models of sailing ships - which have become valuable but, no doubt, sold very cheaply at that time - Tobacco Boxes, sets of dominoes and many other things of use only, or attractive to the people of the town. Pillow-lace, having been, it is supposed, introduced to the English with Catherine of Aragon, first wife of Henry VI 11, who passed long hours of exile from the Court making this lace with her Ladies in Waiting in Buckinghamshire, must have been known to the inhabitants, as the Frenchies supplied them with the bobbins.

Most of the work was primitive in the making, decorating and material used, the latter usually consisting of bones bleached by long boiling, and carefully polished and shaped. The decoration seems mostly done with sharp needles and gouges, sometimes inlaid with 'tortoiseshell' of which there was probably plenty at that time. The bobbins were made on simple hand-lathes, and all sorts of ingenuity used in the decoration - beads, of course, and in some cases, names and these would be pricked out. Some had a man's name -coupled with a woman' s, given as a Love Token by the young man to his lady.

Mr. Wade, a resident of Alresford, has a Pin-Prick picture in his possession made by an Officer who was billeted in his Great-Grandfather's house in Broad Street, Alresford. It has the appearance of quilted work, and contains many thousands of tiny pricks, moulding and outlining intricate patterns of leaves and flowers entwined, the whole surrounded by a painted design of not too high standard artistically, but nice.

Where to see Bone Ships

Southampton Maritime Museum has some very good examples. Some private people have them, but the price for one sold in the London Auction Rooms recently fetched more than £1400 which means that many may be sold rather than staying unnoticed in attics, etc.

Flint Walls

It is possible that one of these fine flint walls may be in the garden of a small house called 'Olderne' in West Street - the late Mr. George Allen who lived there told my wife this, and a lane near there may have called 'The Way to the Frenchies' , so they may have been habitually working there.