



## All Saints, Alton Priors and St. Mary's, Alton Barnes

### A SHORT HISTORY

The derivation of the word Alton is Saxon and although 'ald or 'eld' prefixes 'tun' to mean old enclosure or village, the presence of numerous water sources in the area, which ultimately give rise to the Avon, lead authorities to point to 'awel-tun', -village by the streams – as being the most probable origin.

Earliest mention of Alton Priors as 'Aweltone' is made in 825 when after King Egbert's defeat of the Mercians at Wroughton, near Swindon, he ceded land in the village to the Cathedral Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Winchester. Later this bequest came under the authority of Alfred the Great's Benedictine priory of Hyde Abbey and with it the addition of 'Priors' to the original 'Aweltone', it is quite probable that St. Swithin himself was concerned with Alton's affairs during Egbert's reign since he was both advisor to the King and tutor to his son prior to his enthronement as Bishop in 852. The Chapelry of Priors is again mentioned during the time of Alfred for, in his presence, further lands were sold by one 'Ceolwin, widow of Osmund' to 'the refectory at Winchester's church' with the attendant wishes that the community were to keep in memory both her and her husband's anniversaries.

In the Domesday Book of 1086 Alton Barnes is first recorded as 'Aulton', a village valued at less than a quarter of neighbouring Priors, which no doubt benefited from the capable stewardship of Hyde Abbey's administrators though no records exist as to the actual establishment of a Benedictine community in the village. At the later date of 1316 Alton Barnes appeared as 'Aultone Berner' and it is probable that William I had given the village to John Bouchier, Lord Berner, a fellow Norman who accompanied him at the time of the invasion. Bouchier also received the neighbouring hamlet of Stanton, whose present name, Stanton St. Bernard, inaccurately reflects the Berner claim. Another of the Conqueror's bequests was to his cook, William Scudet, who received under the Bishopric of Winchester nearly 300 acres of land at Priors for tenure during his lifetime.

Between the years 1370 and 1375 William of Wykham, Bishop of Winchester and sometime Lord Chancellor of England acquired land in the Altons, by means which were later to come under heavy parliamentary censure. On receiving Royal Licence for the alienation of the manor in 1385, he endowed the living of Barnes to his new-founded Oxford College of St. Mary's of Winchester, later to be called New College.

#### All Saints

The Lords of the Manor from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century at Alton priors were the Buttons and though little trace exists of the great house today, a contemporary sketch suggests that The Priory south of All Saints could be the sole fragment of an establishment whose gardens and orchards once extended to the present Pewsey Road.

Agnes Button lies buried at the west end of the nave in Priors and the small figurine brass is dated 1528. Her husband William was Member of Parliament for Chippenham and Marlborough and served Thomas Cromwell, Wolsley's successor at the court of Henry VIII. William's son is also commemorated by an engraved brass which was erected by *his* son, sometime before the latter received a baronetcy from James I. Dr. Pevsner\* comments on Sir William's offering as 'conceitism at its best' since the brass in the chancel portrays the resurrected boy approaching heaven's gate to the accompaniment of an angel's trumpet with an appropriate laudatory verse to the memory of the deceased. The blanked arch stall fronts in the chancel are attributed to this period and it would be nice to suppose they represented a more practical gift of filial commemoration. The Button family's Royalist allegiance led to the plunder and sequestration of their property at Tockenham during the Civil War, and the imposition on Sir William in 1650 of a considerable fine. Such disturbances were coupled with the self-imposed exile of their son-in-law Richard Steward, Dean-elect of St. Paul's and companion

of Charles II, and with the termination of their lease in Alton in 1652 the Buttons moved to Shaw-in-Alton, a now vanished village which was situated just below the Wansdyke on the hills to the north of Priors.

In 1541, after the dissolution of the monastic house of St. Swithin, the chapelry of All Saints was Included in the neighbouring parish of Overton with Fyfield, an association which continued until just Before the Great War, when it was included in the Parish of Alton Barnes. On inventory rolls of 1553 the absence of bells is recorded at Priors, a likely indication of the deprivation exacted on the chantries, colleges, and guilds by the Commissioners of Edward VI but in a recent history at Fyfield's chapel mention is made of the transference at some time of one of their three bells to the empty tower of All Saints. This bell, probably the undated one, now hangs with those of 1709 and 1736, whilst ironically Fyfield still lacks a replacement!

The present fine chalice dates from 1577, like a number of others in Wiltshire and it is perhaps relevant to refer to the late Canon Goddard's comment\*\* that 'so thorough were the Activities of the Crown's officers during the mid-sixteenth century that little more than forty pre-Reformation chalices exist in the country today'. The sealing up of the doorway in the North wall to a now dismantled rood loft and of a piscine on the south side may well be other reminders of the protestant church's firm authority.

Other points of interest at All Saints are the two walled-up doors on the north and south side, the former with a surmounting consecration cross, the scratch sundial on the tower, and the eccentric position of the chancel with respect to the main body of the church. Such a position indicates that the sides of the chancel must be on the original foundation. The nave's widening and building of the tower occurred at a later date, the external position of the earlier roofing being visible above that of the present chancel.

Despite the acquisition of a paten of 1638, the past importance of the chapel, -exemplified by the perpendicular tower, the twelfth-century chancel arch with pelleted frieze impost and wide nave (an earlier arcade has been removed) – declined, and its former role in the rural community fell to the tiny sister church of St. Mary, Alton Barnes.

### **St. Mary's**

The 'long and short' stone corner quoins, the impost moulding of the present Victorian chancel arch And the tall narrow nave (25ft by 15ft) point to the Saxon foundation of St. Mary's but the church has Been subject to successive works of restoration. The tie-beamed and wind braced rood if sixteenth Century, while the three decked pulpit, balustered font, and panelled gallery are all Georgian. The Complete chancel was rebuilt by Nicholas Preston in 1748 as is recorded by an external tablet but the Three windows have an earlier history, very likely coming from the fourteenth-century chapel of Shaw-in-Alton since excavations at that site in 1929 revealed a fourth window of similar identity. Evidence also points to the filling in of a Saxon north doorway at the present window site and its replacement by the present entrance. The only piece of notable stained glass in either church dates From 1737, a heraldic panel commemorating the Reverend Lamplugh, builder of the nearby handsome Rectory. Such mid-eighteenth-century activity coupled with the purchase of the present chalice and Paten in 1757 reflects the increasing prosperity of the small farming community at the time of the 'Agricultural Revolution'.

During the Regency period two Public Orators at Oxford, William Crowe and Augustus Hare, were incumbents at Alton and their respective country writings 'Lewesdon Hill' and 'The Alton Sermons' received considerable contemporary acclaim. It is in a published collection of the Hare family's correspondence entitled 'Memorials of a Quiet Life' that a vivid picture is drawn of the day-to-day activity in an early nineteenth century Wiltshire village and the assiduous devotion of the rector and his wife Maria is readily observed. In this isolated community educational and medical, as well as spiritual services emanated from the rectory and the setting up there of a weekly 'cut-price' shop in the shopless village reflects the extent of the Hares' practical concern.

November 1830 saw the arrival before the parsonage and the old manor farm adjacent to St. Mary's of an itinerant mob who, incensed with the introduction of agricultural machinery and the effects of the dispatch of militia from Marlborough and Devizes to quell the rioters. Disturbances of this kind, though fortunately rare, gave occasion to further reveal the character of the rector, who stalwartly stood his ground in the face of the rioters.

By 1832 services from the parish of Overton to Alton Priors had fallen to the extent that Hare had unofficially taken over the welfare of 'Great Alton' and in July of that year his wife records that alterations were made in St. Mary's to enable the visitors from over the streams to be accommodated more satisfactorily. These 'improvements' included the dismantling of the original Saxon chancel arch and Mrs. Hare goes on to quote a text from the Book of Kings – 'And the house of Baal was full from one end to another' – as the one which her husband intended to use at the reopening service in order to remind his flock of the importance of their active

involvement in the regular meetings at their little church. Such was the nature of the short incumbency of the man who was probably the most distinguished and beloved of Alton's clerics.

A bust of Hare is still retained in his rectory study, whilst a print of Dr. Crowe hangs in the vestry. Memorials in the church to the Crowes recall their strong connection with overseas service, a tradition recently upheld by Sir Colin Crowe, at one time Britain's permanent representative at the United Nations. On a tablet in the nave's wall to the Pile family of Manor Farm the name of the once-wounded Robert is included who, in 1812, authorised the cutting of Wiltshire's largest 'White Horse' which overlooks the Altons from Milk Hill (964ft).

In 1904 St. Mary's underwent extensive restoration and the two bells of 1626 and 1788, the latter from the famous Aldbourne foundry of Robert Wells, were removed from the eastern gable to their present position. During the operation five wooden panels were found to surround the bells and on examination these revealed a series of Jacobean inscriptions overpainted on an earlier religious scene. The panels originally hung over the chancel arch since their dimensions were shaped to the recess above the crossbeam and comprised of two passages from the Gospels, the Ten Commandments, and a Royal Coat of Arms. Unfortunately the present whereabouts of these tablets is unknown and the existing modern inscriptions above the gallery are of little interest. The erection of the original writings probably resulted from a Royal Decree of 1608 when 'most choice sentences of Holy Scriptures' were authorised to be displayed in all places of worship and the tablets follow the text of the 'Bishop's Bible' which was mainly current until the publication of the 'Authorised Version' in 1611. An illegible painted fragment in the nave at Priors may also have stemmed from this period and have a similar history.

In the Churchyard William Crowe's tomb can be found beside the chancel wall but Hare's body rests alongside the poet Keats in Rome where he died aged 41 after a lifetime of indifferent health. The record, however, of another untimely death, that of Rector William's infant son, is simply recalled on a worn tablet on the external west wall:

'Blessed little lamb, before that thou couldst roam  
The Shepherd's bosom claimed thee, caught and carried home.'

And in the quietness of the burial ground to the north of the church lie the remains of Sir Eric Phipps, British Ambassador in Paris at the time of the stormy Munich Crisis.

In the relative calm of more recent years the two churches have joined up with others in the locality to form first, the Swanborough Team, and in the mid 1990s the Pewsey and Swanborough Team of 13 churches, sharing the duties of fewer clergy. All Saints has been made a redundant church, but still enjoys three different services each summer, and also has become a wonderful setting for a series of "Music for a While" secular concerts, with all seats booked up in advance. Recently the Georgian box pews have been removed resulting in a remarkable unification of space and vision.

St Mary's has been enhanced by the addition of a War Memorial wall tablet recording the names of four villagers who did not return from the Great War, with an additional plaque for two more who were killed in World War II, one of whom is buried under a Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone in the churchyard. On a shelf beneath it, the Millennium Memorial book, the pages turned weekly, displays the names of villagers who have died within living memory and is frequently updated. Small but truly beautiful memorial panes of glass, etched by both Laurence Whistler and his son Simon, the renowned glass artists, who each lived in the village for some years, have been installed in the south window of the chancel. During the renewal of wooden flooring in the vestry a previously unknown vaulted tomb was discovered below, the occupant possibly of mediaeval time. Outside, the cobbled path from the churchyard gate to the church door has been re-laid in mortar using the same cobblestones, making a safer and more level path.

During excavations in the fields adjacent to both churches to lay mains drainage for the villages much archaeological evidence of roman occupation was found.