

A SHORT HISTORY
of
ST MARY'S Alton Barnes, and ALL SAINTS Alton Priors

The area around these two villages has a notable history. On the Downs above are the Neolithic Knap Hill Causewayed Camp and the long barrow Adam's Grave; known as Wodnesbeorg by the Anglo Saxons, and the scene of a Battle in 593. The ancient Ridgeway descends to Alton Priors having first crossed another colossal earthwork, the Wansdyke (Woden's Dyke.) The Romans occupied the area, and in 2005 a 3rd century hoard of some 3,000 coins was discovered in Alton Barnes. It was donated by the Tenant Farmer and New College, Oxford, to the Wiltshire Museum in Devizes.

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 in 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 Osmond' 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 recorded as 'Aultone', with Edward of Salisbury as the main landholder and possessor of a mill. (*The Domesday Book: England's Heritage Then and Now. Ed Thomas Hinde. Hutchison 1985 p.291.*) The village was valued at less

than neighbouring Priors, which possessed two mills, and 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 Wykeham, 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 College of St Mary's of Winchester, later to be called New College, at Oxford University.

St Mary's Alton Barnes

"The appeal of Alton Barnes and its neighbour Alton Priors lies partly in their juxtaposition. They lie in muddy fields on either side of a small stream.....So small is the space that preaching in Alton Barnes must be more like a private conversation with the congregation.....This is an enchanting place." (*England's Thousand Best Churches. Sir Simon Jenkins. Allen Lane, the Penguin Press 1999.*)

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 roof is 15th century, while the three decked pulpit, balustered font, and panelled gallery are all Georgian. The complete chancel was rebuilt in brick by Nicholas Preston in 1748 as is recorded by an external tablet, but the three windows have an earlier history. These, very likely, came from the 14th century chapel of Shaw-in-Alton as 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 dates from 1737 and is a heraldic panel commemorating the Reverend W. Lamplugh, builder of the nearby handsome rectory. Such mid-18th 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 University, William Crowe and Augustus Hare, were incumbents at Alton Barnes, and their respective writings *Lewesdon Hill* and *The Alton Sermons* received considerable 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, education and medical, as well as spiritual services emanated from the rectory, and the setting up there of a weekly cut-price shop in a village without one, 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 effect of the common land enclosures, shot and wounded Hare's neighbour and friend Mr Pile, entailing 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. (The outline of the Saxon east end of St. Mary's was identified during the 2016-2018 renovations under the Georgian chancel.)

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.

A print of Dr Crowe hangs in the vestry of St Mary's, as does a panel listing incumbents from 1299. 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 (964 ft.) During the 2016-2018 renovation to the church the Pile tomb was discovered with the family remains.

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 1904 St Mary's underwent restoration by the Wiltshire born architect CE Ponting; and the two bells of 1626 and 1788, the latter from the famous Aldbourne foundry of Robert Wells, were moved from the eastern gable to their present position on the west end of the church. During this operation five wooden panels were found to surround the bells, and on examination these revealed a series of Jacobean inscriptions over-painted 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 whereabouts of these panels are currently unknown, and the modern inscriptions on the Ten Commandments above the

gallery was found to be beyond repair during the renovations to the church of 2016-18. 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. 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 Alton Priors may also have stemmed from this period and have a similar history.

In the twentieth century, St Mary's was enhanced by the addition of a War Memorial wall tablet recording the names of four villagers who did not survive World War I, 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. A booklet kept beneath the tablets records the lives of those whose names are given. Also on the shelf beneath is the Millennium Memorial book, the pages turned weekly, that displays the names of villagers who have died within living memory. It is updated frequently.

Small but truly beautiful memorial panes of glass, engraved by both Sir Laurence Whistler and his son Simon, the renowned glass engravers, who both lived in the village for some years, have been installed in the south window of the chancel. At the back of the church there is a photograph of *The Music of Chalk*, a bowl engraved by Sir Laurence, showing St Mary's Church under the White Horse on the Downs.

During the renewal of wooden flooring in the vestry, a previously unknown vaulted tomb was discovered, the occupant possibly being of medieval time. Outside, the cobbled path from the churchyard gate to the church door has been re-laid in mortar using the same cobblestones and making a safer and more level path.

During the renovations of 2016-2018, dendrochronology tests showed timbers in the tie-beamed and wind-braced roof came from trees planted in 1203 and felled between 1380 and 1403.

In 1974 the parish of Alton Barnes joined up with others in the locality to form the Swanborough Team of six parishes. Subsequently, in the mid-1990s the Pewsey and Swanborough Team of thirteen parishes was formed by amalgamation, sharing the duties of fewer clergy. This was expanded in 2010

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**Foreword in the Appeal leaflet by the Chairman
of the Restoration Appeal Committee**

The village of Alton Barnes is an ancient Wiltshire Settlement lying under the Marlborough Downs where the prehistoric Ridgeway meets one of the sources of the Avon. It is wonderfully atmospheric, steeped in history, circled by Neolithic sites. Close to the Spring is the Saxon Church, itself almost certainly picking up the vibe of a more ancient Holy Place. For generations the tiny church has tended to the spiritual needs of our community and after some 1000 years of service, maybe more, it requires quite a bit of care and attention to keep it weathertight.

With a rapidly evolving profile, local society no longer has the religious commitment, nor physical means, to safeguard such a building. Yet it has always been at the centre of our community both spiritually and physically. We have a duty to safeguard it for future generations in whatever way we can. In practical terms that means we must find the money for conservation experts and contractors to repair the building for us. And quality construction is today a very expensive process.

But given the antiquity of St Mary's, the years of service and inspiration it has given, and the potential role it will play in the future, the repair and conservation costs are small relative to its intrinsic value to the Community. Deterioration can happen quickly, and we have an overwhelming duty to ensure that its integrity is maintained for future generations, and that it becomes more fully used by parishioners and visitors alike.

We need to find £200,000 for the restoration of the roof and the fabric, and to start a maintenance fund for the future. Please help us.

This amount was raised, and the vast majority of it was spent on the works done to St Mary's during the 2016-2018 renovations. Fundraising to maintain the church in its present condition continues.

All Saints, Alton Priors

The past importance of the chapel is exemplified by the perpendicular west tower with a panelled arch towards the nave, the Norman chancel arch (the oldest part of the church which was built nearly 1000 years ago) and the imposts with pellet frieze. The nave was originally narrower, an earlier arcade having been removed. There is a prominent stone font near the entrance, and the small remains of medieval painting on the south wall.

Either side of the south doorway are reused stone corbels that are now purely decorative. An interesting drawing in New College Oxford has recently been discovered showing that this north door was in use about 400 years ago.

The Lords of the Manor from the 13th to the 17th century at Alton Priors were the Buttons, and though little trace exists of their 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. Rumour has it that there was a passage underground joining the previous monastic buildings there with the church.

Agnes Button lies buried at the west end of the nave in Priors, the small figurine brass is dated 1528. Her husband William was Member of Parliament for Chippenham and Marlborough and served Thomas Cromwell, Wolsey'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. Pevsner (*The Buildings of England: Wiltshire*. Nicholas Pevsner, revised by Bridget Cherry, Penguin Books 1982) comments on Sir William's offering as 'conceitism at its best' since the brass in the chancel portrays the resurrected body 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 stalls are attributed to this period, and it would be nice to suppose that 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. With the termination of their lease in Alton Priors in 1652, the Buttons moved to Shaw-in-Alton, a now vanished village which was situated just below the Wansdyke on the Downs to the north of Priors.

On Inventory Rolls of 1553, the absence of bells is recorded at Priors. This is a likely indication of the deprivation exacted on the chantries, colleges, and guilds by the Commissioners of Edward VI, but in a recent history of Fyfield's chapel, mention is made of the transference at some time of one of 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 sealing up of the doorway in the north wall to a now dismantled rood loft, and of a piscina on the south side, may well be other reminders of the new Protestant church's firm authority.

In 1491 it was recorded that John Button bequeathed lead to roof part of the church, and the nave roof bears an inscription from an earlier lead covering: 'William Hitchcock and James Young, Churchwardens. 1788.' Sadly, the lead on the whole north side of All Saints was stolen in 2015; fundraising to replace this has been taking place since.

The fine chalice dates from 1577, like a number of others in Wiltshire, and the paten is dated 1638. Of the chalice, 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-16th century that little more than forty pre-Reformation chalices exist in the country.'

Other points of interest at All Saints are the two walled-up doors on the north and south side, the former with a surrounding consecration cross, the scratch sundial on the tower with Arabic rather than the usual Roman numerals denoting the time divisions (around this is thought to be evidence of Civil War gunshot damage) 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, which was rebuilt in the early 19th century, must be on the original foundation. The chancel includes reused 15th century window tracery and has Jacobean choir stalls fronts and 18th century panelling behind. 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. The stripping of the 19th century render from the

south wall in the 1980's revealed much reused stone, some bearing traces of the medieval painting.

There are two hinged floorboards in the floor of the nave underneath which are sarsen stones, one a 'fertility stone', thought possibly to be of spiritual significance in the days before Christianity came to Britain, and even maybe the site of a Henge.

Memorials to the Stratton family, who have farmed in the Altons for many generations are placed at the west end of the church. There is also a display cabinet containing fragments of worked limestone dating from the 12th century, found in the south wall during repairs in 1977.

Outside in the churchyard is an ancient yew tree whose age, according to a certificate in the church, exceeds seventeen centuries, though it has been more recently dated as over 1,400 years old. The weather vane on the tower was replaced in the 1970's with a cockerel; it was restored in 2005 when the S and W were gilded in memory of the artist Simon Whistler who lived in the village and loved the church.

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 for centuries. However, as its former role in the rural community declined, just before World War I it was formally included in the parish of Alton Barnes.

All Saints is no longer used for regular services and is now under the care of the Churches Conservation Trust rather than the Church of England. It holds a limited number of services in the summer, but an annual summer festival 'Music for Awhile' brings hundreds of visitors to the church, and community events also take place, including candle-lit Carols before Christmas. The Georgian box pews have been removed resulting in a remarkable unification of space and vision and making a wonderful setting for events.

