

Local History: Alton's Churches

ST LAWRENCE'S CHURCH, CHURCH STREET

Like many parish churches, St Lawrence's has been much altered with time. There was probably a Saxon church in Alton but nothing appears to survive of this except, possibly, the old font. The original Norman church would have been much smaller than the present one and some remains of it can still be seen at the bottom of the tower. The carvings at the top of the pillars depict a wolf, a cock and a pelican amongst other things.

The church was enlarged in the 12th century and again in the 15th century. A chantry chapel, founded by John Champflour, was also added, although the priest there had to stop his teaching of grammar to local children and his helping in the church when such establishments were abolished by Edward VI.



During the Civil War, two skirmishes took place in Alton. In the second one, in December 1643, there was fighting around the area of the church and the Cavaliers, under Col. John Boles, took refuge in the building. Some musket balls can be seen in a case in the church.

Over the years, the interior of the church was filled with galleries to give more seating, but in the 1860s plans were drawn up for many changes, with locals donating items such as a new lectern, font and windows. The re-opening took place in April 1868. Further alterations and additions were made on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

The parish registers begin in 1615, but there are many gaps in them until the late 1700s.

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ALL SAINTS' CHURCH, BUTTS ROAD

All Saint's was built in 1873-74 to serve the newly developing west end of the town, having been designed by Frederick Charles Dyer. A vestry was added in 1878 and the tower and spire in 1881. The font (carved by J Boggust junior and William Pickett) was given in 1874, the clock (in memory of Dr Louis Leslie) in 1883, the oak reredos and pulpit (in memory of William Dyer) in 1892 and the wrought iron chancel screen by Mr and Mrs George Frost (in memory of their daughter) in 1894. Other items were given by other local people.



The baptism registers began in March 1875, the marriage registers in October 1875 and the burial registers in December 1882.

THE FRIENDS/QUAKERS

In the *History and Description of the Town of Alton*, William Curtis says that *'there is no evidence as to the exact date when the Society at Alton was first formed, but this was certainly during the lifetime of the founder of the sect (George Fox). The archives of the Society here extend, we believe, from about 1664.*

'The present meeting house seems to have been used from 1672... The old building house wall, next the road, has the date 1672 built in it. During the early part of their history the Quakers here shared in the general persecution of their sect.



'The penalties inflicted on the Quakers at Alton tended in no degree to diminish their numbers, for we find that after the Meeting House had been built a few years, it was too small to accommodate the congregation, and a subscription was raised in order to add two galleries.' Although numbers fell until the meeting house closed about 100 years ago, it reopened in the 1930s and is still in use today.

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INDEPENDENT/CONGREGATIONAL UNITER REFORM CHAPEL

Curtis, in his *History and Description of the Town of Alton* of 1896, says that the 'first meeting house of the Congregationalists at Alton appears to have been built somewhere during the 17th century by a person from Selborne, from which place Mr Ferrol was ejected.' No evidence has been found for this so far.



The first known group was 'a conventicle in Lawrence Geale's house of the Presbyterian type, frequented by about 200 persons' in 1669. Over the following years, the meeting place moved from a 'barn or outhouse, Normandy Street' and 'the back building of John Fielder in Alton Est brook' at the back of the site of the Victorian Chapel.

By 1760, members were known as Independents although the numbers were falling and in about 1780 there were only eight in the congregation. The Chapel was saved by the arrival of Rev. David Griffiths in 1799 and it was soon necessary to build a gallery to house everyone.

The surviving registers begin in 1788, with the baptism of Richard Benjamin Palmer, son of Richard, jun. and his wife, Charity. In 1837, it was said that there had been a Church or Register Book prior to 1788 but it could not be found, nor had the minister ever seen it.

1834 saw the start of the building of a new chapel on the site of the old one which was opened in 1835. The two cottages that lay alongside the street were demolished ten years later and, in 1868, the building was extended towards Normandy Street. In the 1870s, a Gospel Hall was opened in Tower Street. By this time, the members were known as Congregationalists.

Numbers remained fairly constant until after the Second World War. Then, with the congregation dwindling, the building was closed in the mid-1990s and sold for development. In 1996, a notice was issued saying that all the burials and memorials in the adjoining grounds were to be moved to Alton Cemetery. Later the remains of Charlotte Louisa Goble Spicer and her son, James Freeman Spicer, who had been buried in the chapel, were also reinterred in the cemetery.

The memorials which were inside the chapel are now with the Hampshire Cultural Trust. These were to the memory of Charlotte Louisa Goble Spicer, James Freeman Spicer, Martha Gage Spicer, James Terrell, Elizabeth Terrell, Catherine Hellis (daughter of Joseph and Mary), Rev. Frederick Morell Holmes and his wife, Jane Eliza. The Spicer one can be seen in the Curtis Museum.

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THE BAPTISTS

William Curtis, in his book on the *History of Alton*, gave a summary of the Baptists in Alton:-*'The Baptists started as a small body in Alton about the year 1840, under a Mr John Forman, and in all probability held their meetings in an outbuilding, or a kind of loft, at the back of a house in Normandy Street, occupied by Mr Bartholomew, a Baker (6/6a Normandy Street?). After this, being very few in numbers, they met in a private house. Some years later they appealed for help to the late Mr C H Spurgeon, and by his aid they rented the large room of Mr Cox (which was in Cross and Pillory Lane) ... and remained there for about five years. After this they met with many ups and downs, meeting in a private cottage for a time, then occupying Mr Cox's room again, and eventually, in 1891, they succeeded in building a Chapel in Mount Pleasant Road.'*

THE METHODIST CHURCH

The first meetings of a Primitive Methodist Mission in Alton seem to have been held in 1841, but it was not until the next year that the Wesleyans had any success in the town. Rooms were lent for the first meetings and then a chapel was planned, the corner stone being laid in October 1845. The new chapel stood at the western end of the High Street, near to the site of the present one. The congregation quickly grew and so the chapel was enlarged in 1886 and a manse was opened in 1893.



In the 1970s, it was decided that a new chapel was required. Money was raised and the foundation stone for the new building was laid in September 1979. Less than a year later it was ready for use.

THE SALVATION ARMY

The first meetings of the Salvation Army in Alton took place about 1883 in a building at the bottom of Amery Street. New Barracks were built on the corner of Lenten Street and Amery Street eight years later. General William Booth, the founder of the Army, visited Alton in 1908. The present, larger building was opened in January 1958 on the site of the former one.



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THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

The first known Catholic chapel in Alton since the 1500s seems to have been in Normandy Street. On 8 June 1901, the *Hampshire Chronicle* reported that Normandy House had changed hands several times since the death of Mrs Crowley in 1892. *'In October 1899, the present owners, a body of Roman Catholic nursing sisters, came into possession of the property, subsequently opening the Chapel known as St Saviour's to the Roman Catholics of the district, the Rev Father Henry B Bulbeck, OSB, being the priest in charge. The Diocese of Portsmouth, however, being unfavourable to their purposes, they are disposing of the property, and will shortly proceed to a western diocese. The Bishop of Portsmouth, we understand, will open a chapel in Alton upon their departure.'*



The replacement chapel or church was not, in fact, opened for another 10 years. On 21 January 1911, the *Alton Gazette* noted that *'work will shortly begin'* on the Catholic Church. This new building was in Albert Road and a confirmation service was held there by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Portsmouth on Sunday 19 May 1912.

Alton Lodge (59 Normandy Street), which had been the home of the Spicer family, was later purchased and, in 1938, a small building erected in the grounds for use as a church. This served the local congregation until the 1960s. The *Alton Gazette* of September 1964 included a picture of a model of the proposed new Roman Catholic Church and the present St Mary's was first used on Christmas Eve 1966.

THE CEMETERY

The Cemetery was opened in 1856 with the first burial there being that of Kate Godwin, aged 10 weeks, the daughter of William (a grocer) and Anne of the Market Place. The area contains both consecrated and unconsecrated parts and has had to be extended.

The register of burials in the Cemetery has been put onto microfiche and copies can be found at the Curtis Museum in Alton and the Hampshire Archives and Local Studies in Winchester.