

ALCESTER & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

JUNE 2020

www.alcesterhistory.org.uk



St Leonard's
Church, Spernall
(c1910)
See the article
below for further
information.

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Even though the Government has announced *some* relaxation to the 'lockdown', it seems it will be some time before large meetings are allowed. We have already cancelled our meetings in April, May and June. Our first priority is always to ensure the safety of our members, speakers and school staff. So, we will continue to issue this extended monthly newsletter to keep members up to date with developments and, hopefully, entertain you with articles on local history. If you have any suggestions for subjects you would like me to include, please send me an email. I hope everyone takes care, keeps safe and I look forward to all meeting up again soon.

Alan Godfrey

ST LEONARD'S CHURCH, SPERNALL

The first documentary evidence of the church is in the 1190s, when the Canons of Studley Priory, who possessed Coughton Church, were given the right to bury all non-freemen in Spernall parish. Dugdale says that, shortly afterwards, most servile tenants died of pestilence and suggests that the lord of the manor disposed of their lands to freemen. This seems to have irked the Canons, for 150 years or so later they got permission to bury any who had lived on those lands; the nuns of Cookhill (who held the right of presentation to Spernall Church from 1228 to the time of Henry VIII) had the right to bury the rest. Some years after the Canons resumed their right, the Pope granted Spernall people the right to enclose a cemetery close to their church, burials previously having taken place at the Priory of St Giles (a community of nuns at Spernall who had originally lived here before moving to Cookhill Priory, probably before 1240).

St Leonards was never a large church, consisting only of nave and chancel. The chancel arch is probably 12th century, but the chancel itself dates from 1844, when the building was restored and altered. Fortunately, the first editor of Henry Teonge's diary in 1825 put an etching of Spernall church on the cover of the book – the original chancel can be seen and could well be Elizabethan; it has a timber gable over three lights, whereas the present chancel has a smallish wheel window. The 1825 picture

also reveals a small bell-tower at the west end (according to VCH: containing two bells), now replaced by a smaller bell-cote, containing a single bell (cast from the original two bells). The nuns of Cookhill held the right of presentation at the dissolution of the monasteries in the time of King Henry VIII, the Fortescues of Cookhill received the nuns' lands and advowson of Spernall church. Eventually the Allens, then the Chambers family of Gorcott Hall, received presentation rights until finally they rested with the Lord Chancellor. Since 1600 the clergy of Spernall have also associated with the neighbouring small parishes, including Morton Bagot and Oldberrow.

The communion rails date from the 18th century, while the font and other furnishings are later. The north door dates from 1535 and is described as "a work of national interest". The door was damaged in 1994 by vandals, but still retains its original uprights and wooden tracery, and a ring pull set in a lion's mouth. The church plate includes a cup hallmarked London 1655 and the parish registers date from 1562, but are incomplete before 1666. The church was closed and declared redundant in 1972. The Diocese of Coventry applied to convert it into house, which was declined, and in 1976 applied to demolish it, also declined. The Ancient Monuments Society acquired the building in 1980 and it is now under the care of the Friends of Friendless Churches. Since 1983 an artist has been using the church as a workshop. [Taken from the ADLHS publication 'Parish of Spernall – A History' by Richard A. Churchley & G. Edward Saville – 1984 and updated from Wikipedia "St Leonard's Church, Spernall"]

THE NEXT EDITION OF 'LOCAL PAST'

Most members buy their copies of Local Past at meetings, the Alcester Roman Heritage Centre, Venue Xpresso or PSW (Alcester & Studley). All these outlets have been closed as a result of the Government coronavirus 'lockdown'. However, it seems that bit by bit the 'lockdown' is being relaxed we hope that some, or all, of our regular outlets will be open very soon. The next edition will be released in **June** (rather than in May). Local Past will at least be available from Hills Retail (formerly Ross' Garage), and can be delivered locally in Alcester (subject to social distancing) or by post. Order your copy on our website: www.alcesterhistory.org.uk

**LAST MONTH'S: A SIMPLE CROSSWORD
THE ANSWERS**

[This first appeared in Local Past – Winter 1988]

Across

6 Lido 7 Census 8 Is 10 The Manor 11 Court 13 Isles
15 Bragging 17 No 18 Kneels 19 Mill

Down

1 Hi 2 Moat 3 Acres 4 In laws 5 European 9 Scouring
12 Ragley 14 Rinse 16 Game 20 Lo

THE ALCESTER FIRE BRIGADE



Alcester's two horse-drawn fire engines in a procession in 1911 (ADLHS Collection)

We do not know exactly when Alcester's fire brigade was formed, but the earliest reference to it was in an Alcester Chronicle (AC) article in 1895 which detailed the activities of the brigade from 1846, and in 1864 the AC reported the Alcester brigade turning out to a fire. The Stratford Herald of 17th October 1884 speaks of the 'newly-formed' fire brigade at Alcester, but this probably signalled the purchase of new engines.

The drill books of the fire brigade start in 1887 and according to these, two manual engines were in use. By 1900 the brigade made public the inadequacy of its equipment and, following Stratford's lead, on 10th July 1902 bought a steam powered pump or engine.

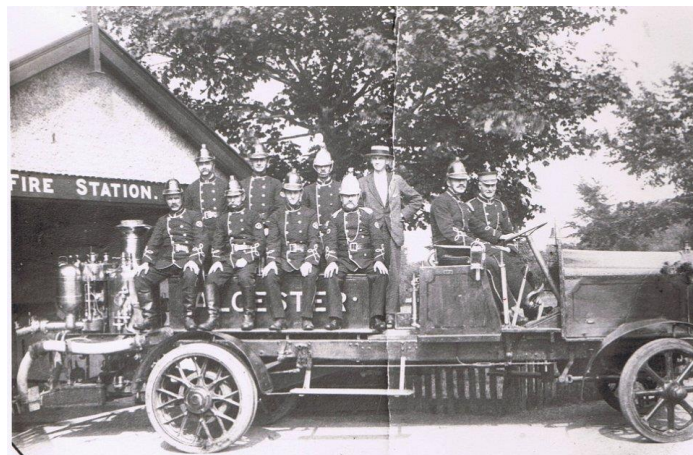
The brigade was made up entirely of volunteers and reports show it often took a long time to assemble both men and horses. Fires outside Alcester usually got a good hold before the brigade arrived. In 1890 the AC reported that there was a fire in Alcester High Street at Joseph Buggins' house (behind the empty shop today which was Girl Friday), but there was no water in the mains, which was often the case at night. Sometimes the hoses were too short, especially at places like the Workhouse, where the distance from the river was 100 feet greater than the hose lengths. Sometimes, too, the horses went lame.

The fire in 1897 which destroyed three cottages in Birmingham Road brought to a head, what must have been the growing criticisms of the running of the brigade. The AC spoke of the tardiness of the brigade: it was not the fault of the individual firemen but the entire system, "if any system there be at all. There should be a centre for alarm, a bell or other signal and a more reliable water supply." "This deplorable condition of affairs has been tolerated in Alcester long enough."

The Drill Books suggests a monthly meeting was held where individual speed competitions were held and the hoses, pumps and hydrants were tested. Occasionally visits were made to large buildings in the area (including Ragley Hall and Aston Cantlow Church to test the viability of the water supplies. In

1900 AC reported a fire at the Alcester Co-op: "never before in its history has Alcester had such a fire". The ringing of the newly acquired bell brought the men of the brigade together in Gas House Lane where the Fire Station was, and their endeavours apparently saved "the whole of Evesham Street" from being consumed by fire. However, the Co-op building in Evesham Street was destroyed and replaced by the building that stands today (now an antique shop and solicitors' office). By the time the Studley and Stratford brigades arrived, the Alcester firemen already had the blaze contained. The Book also mentions that the No.2 pump was placed at Spittle Brook. To buy the new engine, the parish council borrowed £250 and a further £100 came from voluntary donations. The fire brigade also published its list of charges: use of the engine for six hours was 5 guineas, with extra charged for hoses, horses and firemen.

The two sections (one for each pump) included a number of well-known Alcester names: Gothard, Haines, Buggins, Adcock, Elsley and Bomford.



Alcester's motor fire engine from 1920s. (ADLHS Collection) [Based on articles in Local Past: Winter 1984 & Autumn 1994 by G. Edward Saville]

WORD SEARCH

Can you find these 18 words hidden in the grid. Words can run horizontally, vertically or diagonally.

Alauna, Alcester, Alne, Altar, Antedate, Arbor, Arch, Arrow, Battle, Book, Carl, Celt, Coast, Coughton, Haselor, Hilt, Oversley, Stone

A	R	B	O	R	X	S	Q	A
Z	C	O	U	G	H	T	O	N
A	A	O	B	H	I	O	V	T
L	R	L	A	A	L	N	E	E
A	L	C	E	S	T	E	R	D
U	L	Y	H	E	T	T	S	A
N	U	T	P	L	C	E	L	T
A	W	K	A	O	B	I	E	E
O	N	A	R	R	O	W	Y	Z

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