

THE LOST VILLAGES OF SURREY

A Village Transplant

Albury is unique among Surrey villages — it is the only case of a "village transplant". Because the village, and its ancient church, were inconveniently close to his mansion, the owner decided to move it lock, stock and barrel to another site. But of course he could not bodily move the church, which was built of stone, so he had to build another one, and also new cottages for the villagers. And all this happened in our own County only 138 years ago!

Old Albury

Old Albury Village was one of the oldest in Surrey. It dates back to A.D. 675. The name means the old "bury" or fortification, a reference presumably to the old Roman settlement at Farley a short distance to the south. The old church contains some Saxon stonework and the herringbone pattern can be clearly seen at the base of the tower, and part of the structure almost certainly dates back to Saxon times.

For hundreds of years the village by the Tillingbourne River complete with its pub, mill and cottages clustered around the Village Green, enjoyed the normal life of any Surrey village.

The only "abnormal" thing about the village was its remarkably close proximity to the mansion of Albury, a circumstance that was due to the constraints of the site. The valley is steep sided and village and mansion had to compete for the limited amount of flat land. Yet this geographical chance was to spell the ruin of the village.

Albury House began as a half-timbered mansion rather like Great Tangley Manor today, but it underwent many changes over the years. During the time of the Howards, in the Seventeenth Century, the gardens had been laid out to the design of John Evelyn, complete with an 80 feet wide "canal" fed by the Tillingbourne, terraces, fine trees, vineyards and a long tunnel. The village survived all these changes although a high wall was built to separate the gardens from the villagers. The church remained a stone's throw away from the mansion.

Eventually the inevitable happened. The mansion came into the hands of an owner who was not prepared to put up with the commoners living and worshipping so cheek by jowl with himself. This was Captain William Finch, a naval Captain who had come into a fortune as a result of his capture of a Spanish ship. According to the various booklets by Mr. R.C. Walmsley (see bibliography at end) who kindly conducted me over the church and mansion, Captain Finch obtained magistrates orders in 1784/5 to close or re-route a number of roads through the Park, particularly the road between Shere and Albury which had previously run very close to the mansion, enclosed the village green, incorporated part of the churchyard into his grounds, and generally so harassed the villagers that some of them moved away to the nearby hamlet of Weston Street (the present day Albury). However he died in 1794 and for a while the village was reprieved, although the harassment continued with some of the succeeding owners. Somewhere about this time the spire of the old church was removed and the very unusual cupola installed which makes

it, in Pevsner's words, "one of the few really attractive churches in Surrey". So the village had somehow survived, but the writing was on the wall . . . or on those walls that were still standing!

The Transplant

In 1819 Mr. Henry Drummond, the wealthy banker bought Albury Park and the doom of the village was sealed. For Mr. Drummond was a most extraordinary man, with the wealth and influence to implement his ideas. He was a very religious and devout man, and he soon became intimately friendly with Irving, the founder of the Catholic Apostolic faith, that "weird blend of ritual and Presbyterianism". It was at Albury Park (they will show you the room) that the "little prophetic parliament" of Irving, Wolfe, Drummond and others met at Advent 1826 for 6 days of discussion on the scriptures which led eventually to the founding of the new church.

Henry Drummond was a curious character. Carlyle spoke of his "enormous conceit of himself", and, in 1831, having just had dinner with him, he wrote: "He is a singular mixture of odd things, of the saint, the wit, the philosopher — swimming, if I mistake not, in an element of dandyism". The dandy and man of conceit seems to have triumphed over his other characteristics — at least so far as the future of Old Albury Village was concerned. For he now determined to complete the process that his forerunners had started and to get rid of the village and its church. For a man of his conceit of himself it was insufferable to have the villagers coming within shouting distance of his house, and drinking their ale only a song's distance away. In 1836 he had written to the Archbishop of York warning him of the impending end of the world and the Second Coming. For Albury he was about to ensure that his own prophecy would come true.

In the late 1830's Drummond made an offer to build the people of Albury a new church at Weston Street, a hamlet about half a mile away towards Guildford. The old church would then be turned into a family mortuary chapel. Whilst on his travels in Normandy he had been much taken with a church he had seen at Thaon so he wrote back and instructed his architect, McIntosh Brooks, to design the new church as a match. Building took place during the early 1840's and the last service was held in the old church in December 1841, the new church being opened in 1842. It is said that when Mr. Drummond returned and saw the new church he was disappointed because he had visualised it being constructed of stone whereas in fact it was built of brick. It gives the church a very Italianate appearance.

A few years later he built houses in Albury for the displaced villagers and estate workers and he employed the young architect Pugin for this purpose. Pugin had already been at work designing the mortuary chapel in the old church, and he was now redesigning Albury Park mansion. Pevsner calls his front elevation of Albury "some of the worst things Pugin ever did" but I cannot agree. Certainly the fantastic

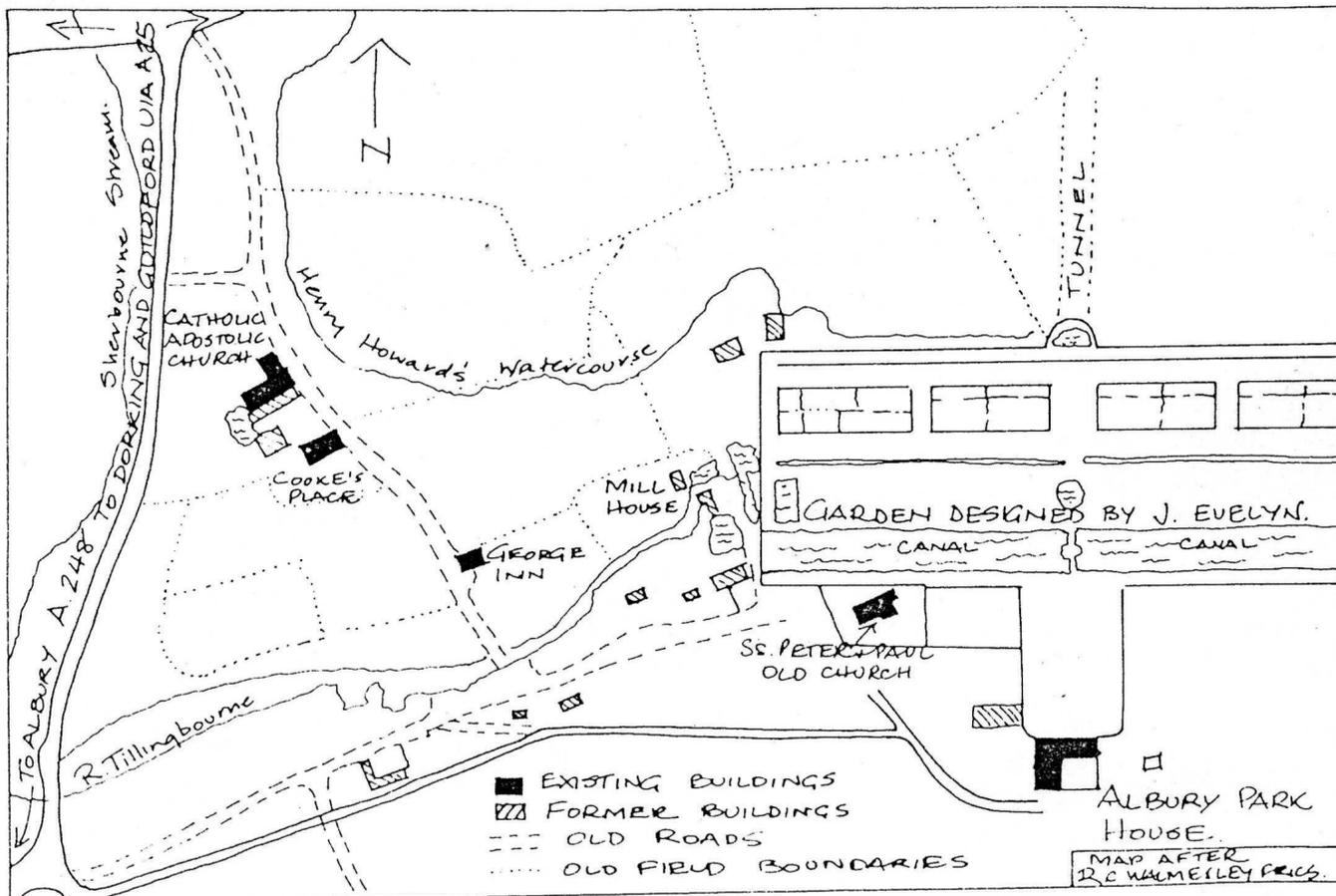
Tudor style chimneys (there are said to be 63 of them – all different) give the building a very romantic appearance. Pugin gave similar chimneys to the houses at new Albury Village.

It must not be assumed that the village-transplant took place altogether without opposition, although to be sure the period of harassment had been spread over so many years that by 1840 many of the villagers had already taken the hint and moved to Weston Street. The principal opposition came from the formidable Martin Tupper, the philosopher and author who lived at Albury House, but in spite of his petitions and pleas to the Bishop it was too late and Old Albury was doomed. Such was the conceit of Henry Drummond that he tried to prevent all access to the old church – as if a Saxon church could be treated like a stable block! In this at least Martin Tupper was successful and future access was assured.

Whilst all this was going on the Catholic Apostolic Church was in difficulties. Its leader Irving was accused of heresy, and he lost a lot of his earlier support as his claims to have received "manifestations" and other evidences of the Holy Spirit were rejected by those who had earlier supported him. At this stage Mr. Drummond stepped in to provide a church. Again he

been removed to the new church, together with the altar and plate. As for the Drummond Chapel it is splendid in a way, but being Victorian it is totally out of place in the old Saxon church. It is amazing that Pugin was interested in designing such a delicate mortuary chapel in such a crude and empty building. Of more interest for me are the ancient wall painting of St. Christopher carrying a child, and the splendid barge board over the entrance porch. A major restoration was carried out in the 1930's by Mr. P.M. Johnson, and in 1963 the cupola was repaired. But an empty church like this was very difficult to maintain properly and there were many doubts as to its long term future. Then in 1974 it was taken over by the Redundant Churches Fund (Albury was one of the first churches to be taken over by them) and was put into safe structural condition. Local oversight of the building is in the hands of the Albury Old Parish Church Fund, whose Hon. Treasurer is Mr. R.C. Walmsley. He has written several pamphlets about the history of the church and I gratefully acknowledge his help in the writing of this article. He told me that in 1978 there were about 2000 visitors to the church, and that it is probably busier now than ever it was when it was the village church!

As to the Catholic Apostolic Church it is no longer used for



commissioned McIntosh Brooke, assisted by Pugin, and the new church was built in 1840 on a little knoll of Albury Park – seemingly placed there by the Creator for just that purpose. So Henry Drummond built two new churches within a mile of his home within two years.

By 1847 Henry Drummond seems to have decided that the end of the world was not so imminent after all, for he became M.P. for West Surrey and retained his seat until his death in 1860. Despite his conceit and great wealth he was by no means a bad landlord and he looked after his workers very well. He probably thought he was being very generous to build the villagers a brand new church – even though his main purpose was to enhance his own privacy.

Old Albury Today

Once the new church was opened the old one ceased to be used for services. The mortuary chapel was of course well maintained, but not the rest of the building and towards the latter part of the 19th Century the roof of the chancel fell in. The pews had all

services. There are adequate funds to maintain the structure intact, and there is a caretaker who looks after it although the building is not open to the public. Since the last of the "Apostles" of the church died in 1901 the church has been in the hands of lay people and the Albury building is no longer needed for services. In any case the number of members is now very small.

Finally what happened to Albury Park? It passed from the Drummonds into the hands of the Dukes of Northumberland (who used to come down "en famille" from Alnwick in a special train every Summer) and in 1969 the house and the immediate gardens were taken over by Mutual Households Association Ltd. as flatlets for the elderly. It is opened to the public every Wednesday and Thursday from 2 to 4 during the period May 1st to October 1st and is certainly well worth a visit. What would Henry Drummond think if he could come and see his house today? Perhaps he would think that at last the end of the world had come . . . his world at any rate!