

### AN ACCOUNT OF ALRESFORD

WRITTEN BY SIR GEORGE BRYDGES RODNEY,  
circa 1768-1782.

SUBSEQUENTLY MADE BARON RODNEY, OF RODNEY STOKE, IN  
THE COUNTY OF SOMERSET, IN RECOGNITION OF HIS NAVAL  
VICTORIES OVER THE FRENCH FLEET IN 1782.

[The following account was copied by my father, Bishop Sumner, when he was Rector of Old Alresford, from an MS. in the possession of the Dowager Charlotte Georgiana Lady Rodney, who died in 1878, widow of George, third Lord Rodney, who died in 1842. N.B.—Rectangular parenthesis marks indicate my explanatory notes.—HEYWOOD SUMNER.]

Alresford (*viz.*, the Ford of the Alre), so called from the river of that name, now generally known by the name of the River Itchen,<sup>1</sup> which rises not far from this place, and runs from thence through Winchester to Southampton, is situate about eighteen miles from Southampton and about seven from Winchester, and lies on the great road from those two places to London, from which it is distant 57 miles. It stands exactly in the centre between the several capital towns of four adjoining counties, *viz.*, Wilts, Berks, Surrey and Sussex; being just thirty miles distant from Salisbury, Reading, Guildford and Chichester. It is divided into two parishes, *i.e.*, Old Alresford and New Alresford: but these are united in one rectory, which also includes the parish of Medstead. The improved value of the living is about £500 a year.

The Church of Old Alresford is the Mother Church, those of New Alresford and Medstead being only chapelries annexed. This Church has within a few years past been wholly taken down and rebuilt<sup>2</sup> by the parishioners, assisted by large allowances

<sup>1</sup> The river Alre, or Itchen, unites four considerable streams within the Liberty of Alresford, one of which rises at Bishop's Sutton and another at Bighton, and these two meet together in the great pond, called Alresford Pond. Another rises at Braundean, and, taking with it the springs of Hinton Amner (Hampner), Kilmeston and Cheriton, and running through Tichborne, falls into the river at Alresford Marsh. The fourth rises at Candover (sometimes as far up as Preston Candover), and, running through Candover, Northington and Swarraton, it passes by the Grange and forms a beautiful piece of water in the Earl of Northington's Park, from whence it passes close by Abbotston (late the beautiful seat of the Duke of Bolton, now taken down) and falls into the river Itchen at the West end of Alresford Liberty, where it joins to the Liberties of Itchen Stoke and Avington.

<sup>2</sup> The body of the Church and chancel was taken down and rebuilt in 1753. The tower in 1769, and the bells cast and hung in 1770. The old Church had only four bells, on one of which was the following motto raised round in Saxon characters: "SUM ROSA PUL(SA)TA MUNDI MARIA VOCCATA," and on another of them was a date said to be some time in the ninth century, from which it has been concluded that the Church to which they belonged might probably be built in or about the reign of King Ethelwulf. The Church itself was dedicated to the Virgin Mary. [This motto may be translated, "I am the stricken Rose of the World called Mary." There is a similar motto, with PULSATA in full, on a bell at Sturminster Marshall. cf. Vol. xxv, Dorset Field Club Proceedings. "The Church Bells of Dorset," by Canon Raven.]

from the late and present Bishops of Winchester, and generous subscriptions from the proprietors of estates in the parish.

Dr. Hoadley, the present Rector, not only built the chancel at his own expense, but contributed very liberally towards completing the rest, and it is now a very neat structure with a beautiful tower and a fine peal of six bells.

The parsonage house, which has been greatly enlarged and almost wholly rebuilt by Dr. Hoadley, is now a handsome substantial building. The garden and outlet adjoining are also greatly improved, and rendered exceedingly pleasant, on the whole of which the Doctor must have expended a large sum. The house stands on the north part of the Church, about a hundred yards distant from it.

On the east side of the Churchyard is the site of the Manor of Old Alresford, whereon stands a mansion house, built by Sir George Brydges Rodney, Baronet, about the year 1752, on the same spot where the antient manor house stood, the site and desmesnes of the Manor<sup>1</sup> being held by him on a lease from the Bishop of Winchester, who is Lord of the Manor and Patron of the Rectory.

About a quarter-of-a-mile distant from this house, towards the north-east, stands another neat and substantial mansion house, built by James Rodney, Esq. (Sir George's brother), about the year 1768, to which great additions and improvements are now making by Samuel Rolleston, Esq., who lately purchased the same.

The Church and these three houses stand on an eminence facing south, having the great pond and the town of New Alresford in full view before them, and command a various and delightful prospect over villages and rivulets, fields and meadows, to the downs and woods on the distant hills.

The great pond lies within the Liberty of Old Alresford, although it adjoins to the streets of New Alresford on the south-west part. It is a fine piece of water, and having several boats usually kept on it, and being stocked with a great number of swans, has a very beautiful appearance. Large flights of wild fowl, chiefly ducks, widgeon and teal, and sometimes wild swans, geese, etc., resort hither in the winter, especially in the time of a frost, and some of them remain all the year and breed here, especially coots, of which there are always a great number, as also moorhens, water-rails and dabchicks. Divers other kinds of birds are frequently seen here, viz., bitterns, herons, cormorants,

<sup>1</sup> The Juries of Court Leet and Baron for the Manor are always impanelled on a certain spot in the garden belonging to the Manor House, after which they adjourn to New Alresford, where the rest of the business is transacted, and the parish of Medsted, being parcel of the Manor of Old Alresford, the tenants resident there are obliged to attend when warned on the jury, or when they have business to do respecting their copyhold estates; but they are not obliged to attend for making surrenders, there being several officers of the Bishopric before whom surrenders are taken out of Court at any time.

seagulls, curlews, sea swallows, oxeys birds,<sup>1</sup> and sometimes storks, and numbers of snipes, plovers, etc., feed in the bordering meadows and pastures.

In the autumn an incredible number of starlings visit this pond every evening, and depart again the next morning at day-break. Such immense flights of them are sometimes gathered together that they darken the spots over which they pass. They come in from all parts of the country for many miles round, and generally hover about in the air round the pond till the several flights are collected together in one great body;<sup>2</sup> when, at the close of the evening, they drop all together into the sedge growing by the side of the water, where they remain till the next morning. As soon as the day begins to dawn they rise all together, and instantly detach themselves into separate flights and go off into different parts of the country, to the downs, fields and commons, some of them at many miles distant, where they remain at feed in small companies, till towards the evening, and then they constantly return again in like manner, till towards Christmas, at which time they disappear, and are no more seen there till the autumn of the next year.

This pond is said to have extended from the Great Ware [Weir], on the West part, to a Palace of the Bishop of Winchester, which actually stood at Bishop's Sutton, and we are told that boats were wont to pass and repass from the Palace to Alresford town, at which time the pond is supposed to have covered above two hundred acres of land. But the sedge and rushes, through neglect and length of time, having gradually encroached on its borders, a great part of it is now converted into water meadows, so that the water, when it is highest, does not now extend to above one hundred acres. It is supplied by two rivers, one running from Sutton and the other from Bighton, and is stored with immense quantities of fish, viz., pike, trout, perch, tench, carp, roach and eels, which all grow to an uncommon size and are esteemed excellent in their several kinds. Of the last, there are sometimes above a ton weight taken in a night, especially about the months of September and October, on dark and rainy nights.

It is held by Sir George Brydges Rodney under a patent for two lives as pond keeper to the Bishop of Winchester, with the liberty of fishing therein.

At the west end of the pond is an enormous bank or causeway, called the Great Ware [Weir], which forms the head of the pond. It is about 20 yards wide at the bottom, and about

[<sup>1</sup> Oxbird or Dunlin, cf. "Birds of Hampshire," by J. E. Kelsall and P. W. Munn, 1905, p. 306. "Mr. Chalkley assures us that it visits Alresford Pond every August."]

<sup>2</sup> When the grand flight is hovering in the air, they are often pursued by buzzards and other birds of prey, and the various positions and evolutions they then form themselves into, in resisting or pursuing their enemy, are very curious and entertaining, and the whole quite astonishing to strangers to behold.

10 yards wide on the top, and about 20 feet perpendicular. It begins at the stone bridge at the north end of the Broad Street of New Alresford, on each side of the south end of it which forms a street of the town, called the Soke, where it is much wider than in other parts of it.<sup>1</sup>

The great road leading from Southampton and Winchester to London went along the top of this ware or causeway, till the turnpike road through Bishop's Sutton took place, about the year 1753, since which, that road being kept in excellent repair, the other has been disused as the London road, although it is said to be above a mile nearer than the other, and much pleasanter from Alresford to Alton. The Bishop's copyhold tenants of Old Alresford and Medstead are obliged, by their tenures, to keep it in repair in district lots, and the several allotments are so particularly described in the Court Rolls of the Manor as to ascertain and distinguish the identical spot (and the exact measure thereof) which every particular estate is to maintain. But since the obtaining of an Act of Parliament for a turnpike road from Gosport through Waltham, Alresford and Odiham to London, which was to be carried along the ware, the tenants neglected their antient services thereon, and the intended turnpike road being never completed, it is now repaired by the parishioners of Old Alresford in the same manner as their other public roads are repaired.

The town of New Alresford stands on a rising ground, in a fertile, open part of the country. The situation, therefore, is exceedingly pleasant, the soil dry and healthy, the water excellent and the air remarkably pure. The streets are broad and open and generally clean, except on the thawing of a frost. They slope gradually from the Market House, which stands nearly on the highest ground in the centre of the town.

The three principal streets and the Church form a cross. The Market Place is a spacious square; few in any of the country towns in England are equal to it [copy torn here].

The seats of many of the nobility and gentry are situate within a few miles of Alresford, among which are those of the Duke of Chandos, at Avington; the Earl of Northington, at The Grange; Hinton Park, belonging to the Countess of Hillborough, heretofore the residence of the late Lord Stawell; Woodcote Park, belonging to the family of the Venables, each of which is about three miles distant; Stratton Park belonging to the Duke of Bedford; and Worseley [?] Hall to the Earl of Granville, each distant about five miles; and Tichborne House, the mansion of the antient and respectable family of that name, now of Sir Henry Tichborne, Baronet, is situate little more than a mile from the town.

<sup>1</sup> Although the houses on the Soke are deemed to be in New Alresford, yet in their perambulations the inhabitants always leave out the road as a part of Old Alresford parish, though they take in the houses.

A great extent of land adjoining Alresford has belonged to the Bishops of Winchester for upwards of 1,100 years, being devoted to the Church by Kingill [Kynegils, Cynegils], king of the West Saxons.

Concerning the rise of New Alresford, there is a tradition amongst the antient inhabitants that the Saxons (at what time they do not say), having engaged and defeated a body of Danes in or near a village called Testwood or Tisted and gained a complete victory, granted them quarter on condition of their embracing Christianity and going all to the ford of the Arle to be baptized, with which the Danes complied, and that, in commemoration of this victory, a sumptuous statue of the Virgin Mary was erected near the spot where the Church of Old Alresford stands,<sup>1</sup> and that great numbers of persons afterwards resorted from all parts to pay their devotions at this shrine, and that these devotees at length became so numerous that the few houses then standing within any convenient distance from it were not capable of affording them proper accommodation, whereupon houses began to be erected on some part of the spot where New Alresford now stands, which by degrees increased till, in process of time, it became a place of very considerable trade. Indeed, while the kings made Winchester their residence, Alresford must, no doubt, have been a place of great resort and thoroughfare on account of its lying so near and in the antient road from thence to London. Winchester was then a very great and prosperous city (at one time the Metropolis of the Kingdom), and there was not so much as a single village in the road betwixt that and Alresford. Besides, the many exclusive privileges in trade and charters of exemption, which the merchants and citizens from time to time obtained

<sup>1</sup> The truth of this story is much to be questioned, although some circumstances are strongly in favour of it. The Barrows in Tisted are a proof that a great battle was fought there, and there is at this time a Mound or Hillock in the south-east of Old Alresford Church which has been generally said to contain the ruins of some antient place of Devotion. Moreover, in a survey of the Manor of Old Alresford taken in the reign of Edward VI, in describing the buildings then on the site of the Manor, mention is made of an antient chapel, which had stood on or near this very spot, and in 1769, whilst the tower of the Church was new building, a farmer of the village had the curiosity to take one of the workmen with him, who, with a pick-axe, made a small opening into the mound, where, he says, he discovered the foundations of a very strong wall, and a kind of pavement within it, but did not proceed to make any further discovery. [I remember this mound on the south side of Old Alresford Church. Scientific excavation would probably reveal its period and purpose, as the diggings mentioned do not appear to have done much damage.] In the first year of Ethelwulf a body of Danes landed at Southampton, and soon after at Portland, but we do not find in the genealogy of the history of these times that they had yet advanced so far into the country as Tisted, or even to Alresford. Besides, by the date on the bell before mentioned, if there really was such a date, it is reasonable to suppose that the Church itself must have been founded and dedicated to the Virgin Mary before the Danes penetrated so far into the country; and, if so, what reason could there be for erecting another place of worship so near it? Our histories inform us that an action happened at Yattendon [in Berkshire] in the reign of Alfred, anno 878 A.D., when he obliged the Danes to embrace Christianity, and caused numbers of them to be baptised at Aller, in Somersetshire, and it is to be questioned whether the near resemblance of the two names—Aller and Alre—may not have occasioned a misrepresentation of this matter. [cf. "Early Wars of Wessex," by Albany F. Major.]

by the favour of divers princes, rendered their trade and commerce very great and extensive in many branches, besides those of wool and leather, for which it became the grand staple of the kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

The effect of all this could not but be felt by the inhabitants of Alresford from their situation and vicinity to Winchester. About the end of the twelfth century Godfrey Lucy, Bishop of Winchester, formed a noble and magnificent plan for improving the trade and commerce of this great city, in which that of Alresford was necessarily included by the establishment of navigation on the river Alre or Itchen, which the Bishop undertook and completed. In order to accomplish this great design, he caused the great ware to be thrown up at the head of the great pond between Old and New Alresford, and drained the several springs and rivulets between Alresford, Sutton and Bighton, and brought them to meet in this pond, by which means there has ever since remained a sufficient head of water to keep the river continually well supplied without the least danger of overflowing, and, having brought the river below into a regular channel, he furnished it with convenient locks and aqueducts laid with stone at an enormous expense. He, by this means, made it navigable for barges, lighters and other small vessels to trade from Alresford to Winchester and Southampton, and from, thence to all parts of the world. In consideration of this noble undertaking, King John granted to the Bishop and his successors the following charter:—

‘ John by the Grace of God King of England, Duke of Normandy, etc., to all Bishops, Archbishops, etc., and others our loving subjects greeting. Know ye that by these presents we have granted unto our venerable Father Godfrey Bishop of Winchester and to every of his successors for ever free license and authority to take receive and apply to his own proper use and advantage by himself or bailiff all fines tolls taxes and customs arising from the goods wares and merchandises that shall or may hereafter be conveyed up or down the river Itchin which the said Bishop hath now caused to be first trenched and made navigable at his own expense. Wherefore we shall receive on

<sup>1</sup> In 1187 Henry II granted a charter of Privileges to the citizens of Winchester. In 1207 John granted them a new and more exclusive charter, wherein amongst other privileges, he vested them with the coinage and exchange of money for the whole kingdom, to be held and executed within the city of Winchester, and also ordained that the citizens should have the liberty to buy and sell in all fairs and markets toll free; and that all their goods and chattels should be freed and discharged from all manner of tolls, bridge-money, customs and duties throughout England by all the seaports, etc. In 1242 their charters were still further enlarged by Henry III. In the reign of Edward I, 1302, a composition was made between the Corporation of London and the citizens and merchants of Winchester, whereby the former confirmed the exemption of the latter from bridge fare and all duties for the sale and show of cloths in London, and all other customs usually levied for the sale of goods, wines and merchandise, except certain particulars specified in the sd. compositi. In 1352 Edward III appointed Winchester the grand staple for wool, wool-falls and leather.

all goods wares and merchandizes the customs and tolls herein-after specified. . . [These customs and tolls are omitted in the copy as 'needless to enter.' There is nothing to show if they were entered in the original MS.]

The Bishop, no doubt foreseeing this, and considering how necessary Alresford would be to the advantageous carrying on of the then vast trade and commerce of Winchester, and for the better supply of its numerous inhabitants, seems to have intended the former as a wharf or magazine, as well for the goods, wares and merchandises which were to be sent off from Winchester towards London and other eastern parts of the kingdom, as for the goods, corn and other provisions and necessaries of life which must necessarily be brought from the towns and villages adjacent to Alresford for the supply of that great and populous city. He, being lord of Alresford, and the inhabitants his tenants and vassals, had the town new modelled and laid out in the form it now stands—the streets broad, spacious and regular, and a noble square in the centre for a market place; and probably at the same time not only enfranchised their tenures, but procured them a royal charter for a free borough and incorporation.

There is great reason to suppose that this was the case, because the tenants and proprietors of estates in New Alresford antiently held them by the same tenures as the tenants of Old Alresford, and the other manors within the bailiwick of Sutton, which still continue for the most part copyholders,<sup>1</sup> but those of New Alresford are and have been for several hundred years (in all likelihood from Bishop Lucy's time) [1189-1204] free tenures, the town either then was, or very soon after became, a borough incorporate; for it appears by the records of the Tower of London that it sent two burgesses to Parliament in the reign of Edward I.

Alresford is said to have been at that time a large and populous town and its trade very great, which, no doubt, must have been still further augmented by the removal of the staple for woolfalls and leather from Brabant to Winchester in the year 1353. About this time, Alresford, as well as Winchester, must have been in a very flourishing way. . . But upon transferring the

<sup>1</sup> The copyhold estates, held of the Bishop of Winchester within the bailiwick of Sutton, have for many ages been granted as estates of inheritance to the several copyholders, and as such descended according to the custom of the manor to their respective heirs, yet they were originally precarious and bare tenures, at the will of the Lord, the tenants being his vassals, and on many occasions liable to forfeit their estates. . . But since the Reformation, either through the moderation of the Bishops—the remissness of their officers—or the spirit of the times, the nature of these copyholds is greatly in favour of the tenants, the servile conditions are in general dispensed with, the personal services and rents in kind being for the most part either extinguished or commuted for very moderate pecuniary payments, and nothing now remains of the antient base nature of the tenure, except that they are held by Copy of Court Roll, and pass through the hands of the Lord from one tenant to another by surrender and admittance, etc. In other respects the tenants have almost all the advantages of freeholders (except that of voting in the County Elections), for they cut and dispose of the timber as their own, remove or pull down their buildings at their pleasure, and make what alterations they think fit on their estate, which antiently they could not do without license from the Lord.

staple to Calais [1363] and Melcombe Regis, Winchester grew presently into decay, the manufactories soon declined, and all those streets and buildings where they had been carried on were deserted by the artificers, the buildings tumbled down for want of tenants, the Churches mouldered away for want of use and care, the navigation became neglected, the river was suffered to choke up, and the appearance of trade and commerce, before so famous in this city, wholly vanished.

But, notwithstanding this, the inhabitants of Alresford seem still to have carried on a considerable manufactory in the clothing way for some ages, for even in Henry VIII's reign there were four fulling mills within a mile of the town.

The design of the Bishop in new modelling the town is apparent from his giving it the name of New Market. But it still retained the name of Alresford, but was called New Alresford to distinguish it from its sister village, which for the same reason was called Old Alresford.

The Corporation of Alresford consisted of a Bailiff or Port Reeve, and eight burgesses, which are still kept up, though they have not for many ages sent any representatives to Parliament. The account the inhabitants give of the discontinuance of their representation is that at the time when the members were paid by their constituents for their attendance in Parliament, they were unable to support the expense, and therefore declined the privilege.

During the Civil Wars in Charles I reign, the principal inhabitants were strongly attached to the Parliamentary party; and about the time the battle was fought on Cheriton Downs between the King's forces, commanded by Lord Hopton, and those of the Parliament, under Sir William Waller, Oliver Cromwell was frequently at Alresford.