

Communion Plate

The communion plate consists of a cup dated 1577 and a paten dated 1638.

Redundancy

During the late 1960s the combined population of Alton Barnes and Alton Priors found the burden of upkeep of two churches beyond the means available. In the years leading to redundancy the church had been used for occasional worship during the summer months only. The difficult access, lack of electricity and the fact that the greater part of the community lives adjacent to St Mary's, Alton Barnes, were factors in the closing of All Saints' in 1972. It was vested in The Churches Conservation Trust in 1973. Essential repairs were carried out under the supervision of Kenneth Wiltshire of The Sarum Partnership, Salisbury.

Photograph by John Piper

THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the national charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource. In 2009 the Trust celebrates 40 years of saving historic churches at risk.

There are over 340 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from ancient, rustic buildings to others of great richness and splendour; each tells a unique story of people and place. All are worth visiting.

Many churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; entry is free to all. A notice explaining opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found at the church. Such information can also be obtained from the Trust during office hours.

We strongly recommend checking our website www.visitchurches.org.uk for the most up to date opening and access details and directions.

Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

Historic churches, due to their age and previous use, often have uneven and worn floors. Please take care, especially in wet weather when floors and steps can also be slippery.

Making a donation

Your donation, no matter how small, will enable The Churches Conservation Trust to save more historic churches across England. If you would like to make a contribution, please use a Gift Aid envelope located at the church you visit, see our website www.visitchurches.org.uk, or contact our fundraising team on 020 7213 0673.

Nearby are the Trust churches of
Berwick Bassett, St Nicholas
8 miles NW of Marlborough off A4361

Everleigh, St Peter
6 miles SE of Upavon on A342



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

1 West Smithfield London EC1A 9EE

Tel: 020 7213 0660 Fax: 020 7213 0678 Email: central@tcct.org.uk
www.visitchurches.org.uk Registered Charity No. 258612 Spring 2009

© The Churches Conservation Trust 2009

£1.00



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS

Alton Priors,
Wiltshire



Alton Priors, Wiltshire

CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS

by Neil Skelton (Development Manager with The Churches Conservation Trust 1980–2003)

Introduction

The name Alton is a derivation of the Old English *aewielle-tun*, ‘farmstead or enclosure by the stream or well’; a tributary of the Salisbury Avon rises in the meadow west of the church. The earliest mention of Alton Priors, as ‘Awltone’, is in AD825 after King Egbert defeated the Mercians at Wroughton in the county; he surrendered lands in the village to the cathedral church at Winchester. Later and during the reign of Alfred the Great, these lands came under the jurisdiction of St Swithun’s Priory, Winchester and with that came the suffix ‘Priors’.

Alton Priors is a field’s distance from Alton Barnes, now the larger of the two communities, which probably derives its suffix from the post-Conquest family of Berners, who received it and nearby Stanton St Bernard from William I. According to Domesday Book of 1086 Alton Barnes was valued at less than a quarter of Alton Priors. Doubtless this reflected the influence of the priory at Winchester; however it would appear that what was in Alton Priors was little more than a cell or dependent house of the Benedictine Order.

A short distance to the south-west of the church is a fragment of what was probably the manor house of c.1700, incorporating building material from an earlier house.

It was reduced in size in 1810, divided into two cottages and then restored as a single house in c.1970 when it became known as The Priory. Traditionally the present building occupies the site of the monastic buildings.

The Church

The church stands within a small churchyard, surrounded on all four sides by a field. A yew tree reputed to be 1,700 years old stands to the south of the church. Of the Norman church only the chancel arch remains.

The nave was rebuilt and widened towards the south during the 14th century. The stripping of 19th-century render from the south wall in the 1980s revealed much reused stone, some bearing traces of medieval painting. This suggests a further rebuilding, possibly during the 16th century. There are blocked doorways on the north and south sides of the nave. The keystone of the north doorway bears what is possibly a consecration cross. Either side of the south doorway are reused stone corbels now serving decorative, rather than practical, functions. In the north-east corner is the blocked opening to the rood stairs. Within the opening are two

Interior

fragments of a moulding, probably from the Norman church, each with a frieze of small saltire crosses.

The brick chancel is an early-19th-century rebuilding reusing the old Perpendicular window tracery. As can be seen from the outside of the nave east wall the former chancel was higher. In 1491 it is recorded that John Button bequeathed lead to roof a part of the church. Both nave and chancel roofs were renewed in the 18th century and repaired in the 19th century. The nave roof bears an inscription from an earlier lead covering: ‘William Hitchcock and James Young. Churchwardens. 1788’. The nave was restored during the late 19th century.

The late Perpendicular western tower is built of fine quality ashlar. It is of two stages with a stair turret at the north-east corner. The low pyramidal stone-tiled roof is surmounted by a modern weathercock. On the south elevation of the tower is a large sundial with Arabic rather than the usual Roman numerals denoting the time divisions.

The Norman chancel arch is completely unmoulded. The imposts have only a small pellet frieze. This arch leads into the low and narrow chancel with its Jacobean choir stall fronts and 18th-century panelling behind. The communion rails are 18th century. The 16th-century communion table has lost its original top and received a modern replacement. The ‘diminutive’ chair is Jacobean, much cut-down and later repaired using new timber.

In the north-east corner of the chancel is a large tomb chest with a brass plate above to William Button who died in 1590. The brass portrays the deceased rising from his tomb and approaching the gate of heaven where the angel appears, sounding the last trump. Below this and on either side others rise from their tombs. The brass was erected by his son, Sir William Button, who was created a Baronet in 1621; the title became extinct on the death of his youngest son, Sir John Button (4th Baronet) in 1712.

The piscina on the south side of the nave is probably coeval with the rebuilding of the nave south wall. Many of the early-19th-century box pews which filled the nave were cleared out during the early 1970s. Those remaining, with the addition of much new timber and forming two small groups, one either side, were removed in 2005. The 19th-century

pulpit and lectern suffered the same fate as the original box pews. The rush-seated chairs, formerly in Salisbury Cathedral, were given to the church in 2006.

The octagonal Perpendicular-style font and oak cover date from the 19th century.

Just inside the west end of the nave, on the north side, is a small figurine brass to Agnes Button who died in 1528. In the Heralds’ pedigree she is described as ‘Anne, daughter of John Cater of Letcombe Regis, Berkshire’. Her husband, William Button, was Member of Parliament for Chippenham and Marlborough and served Thomas Cromwell, Wolsey’s successor at the court of Henry VIII. He was the father of William Button commemorated in the chancel. The Buttons were lords of the manor from the 13th to the 17th centuries.

The tower arch leading into the nave is panelled with blind arcading – a not uncommon feature of churches in the Salisbury Plain area.

The display cabinet in the nave contains fragments of worked limestone, dating from the late 12th century, found in the south wall during repairs in 1977.

The Bells

In the tower are three bells hung for full-circle ringing; however, their present condition restricts them to chiming for occasional services. They are hung in a particularly good 17th-century bell-frame.

1. William and Robert Cor of Aldbourne. 1709.
2. No inscription or date but a vine-leaf pattern running round the inscription band. By the Cors of Aldbourne.
3. William Cockey of Frome. 1736.

The inventory rolls of 1553 record an absence of bells at Alton Priors. This may relate to the deprivation exercised under the Commissioners of Edward VI after the dissolution of the monastic house at Winchester. In a recent history of nearby Fyfield there is mention of the transfer of one of its three bells to the empty tower at Alton Priors but this cannot be substantiated; however, the 1553 inventory for Fyfield does record three bells whereas there are now only two!