

# Secrets of St Leonard's

Well, well I didn't know that:

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 1852.

## LITTLE DOWNHAM.

MR. EDITOR.—In passing through Little Downham, I have been struck by noticing a well in the church-yard.

It surely cannot be wholesome to drink water from a well which drains its supply through and from the soil in which human remains are constantly putrifying.

I am not very fastidious: if the well were only twenty or thirty yards from the boundary fence of the grave-yard, I would be satisfied, relying upon the purifying properties of the intervening earth. But, certainly, a well, in the midst of putrefaction, without one foot of pure earth for the water to filter through previous to its being drank, requires to be looked to and remedied.—I am, Mr. Editor, yours,  
J. PRYWELL.

The well has now been covered over. Many houses along main street used to have wells, some in the front room. I am told that one former pub had a well in the front bar.

20th June 1974: After 100 hours of cleaning and restoration work by experts the royal coat of arms in St. Leonard's Church, Little Downham, has been brought back to its former glory. And it has been described by the experts who did the work as "one of the finest in the country."

All churches had to have coats of arms from the reign of Henry VIII. The present one at St. Leonard's was painted in 1763 on wooden panels high on the west wall of the church and measured about 12 feet by 14 feet. The work was probably done by people who painted the inn signs of the time. In 1868 the Victorians, with a typical philistine attitude towards 18th century art, decided to improve on the original. They added plaster panels on each side, bringing the width up to 20 feet, and repainted the arms using white paint over the gold and red over the green. They also tore out the old box pews in the church and the gallery where the band used to play.

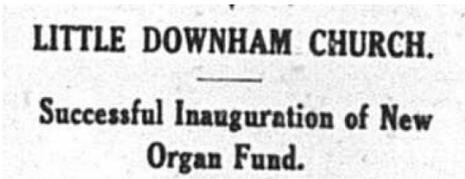
## Face-lift brings back former glory



Nothing was done for over a century until last year when the rector, the Rev Bill Patterson, thought that with the 700th anniversary of the founding of the parish coming up it would be a good idea to have the coat of arms cleaned. They got an estimate for £300 and started fund raising. The restorers from Colchester came at the end of May and spent ten days working on the arms, managing to clean off the white paint and expose the gold. The red paint had to be left as the Victorians put it. What you can see now, even if it isn't as the original artists intended, is very impressive and certainly well worth a visit.

April 1922: Underlying a scene of great activity in Little Downham Schoolroom on Wednesday afternoon was the bold determination of a large company to give the Church Organ Fund a

big send off. The present organ in the Parish Church is beyond repair, and an effort is being made to raise sufficient funds to secure a new one. It was initiated in the form of a sale of work, and with such a body of parishioners, ever ready to co-operate in support of the popular rector (the Rev H K Stallard), the new fund is bound to meet with ultimate success.



## **The bells of St. Leonard's have nothing to say**

6th March 1975: The bells of Leonard's are not saying anything these days apart from the odd chime on the hour, every hour, the lips of the four bells remain sealed. The problem lies not with the bells themselves but the medieval wooden frame which is holding them up in the belfry. The woodwork was treated about a year ago and although they are

perfectly safe at the moment the bells are only set for stationary chiming not ringing. A recent survey of the tower carried out by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry showed the only way the bells could ever be properly rung again would be to replace the entire frame.

Rector of Little Downham, the Rev Bill Patterson, presented the results of the survey to a meeting of the Parochial Church Council last Saturday. Rev Patterson told me: "The frame is certainly very unusual, possibly unique, and there is very little chance we would get permission to remove it. The tower is probably Norman, although it could even be Saxon since we know the village was founded in Saxon times. It is the oldest part of the church and the frame was put up in the 13th century. The frame is perfectly sound at the moment and provided it is treated every 25 years or so it is quite likely it could remain that way forever, since things were built to enormous tolerances in the Middle Ages. Even if the frame was replaced and the bells were re-hung for ringing we only have a peal of four bells which is not likely to attract ringers from all over the region. On the other hand although the frame is rare we shall not get coach loads of Japanese tourists up here to look at it," said Rev Patterson, indicating the very narrow confines of the belfry, which is reached by ascending an iron ladder.

The Whitechapel Bell foundry suggested the best thing would be to fit new clappers to the bells, the oldest of which was cast in 1659 by one Robert Gurney of Bury St Edmunds, and turn them when they were re-hung so a different part of the bell was chimed. This, said the experts, would give the bells a better tone.

September 1973: The children's corner at St. Leonard's Church, flower festival provided this delightful picture. Hundreds of visitors came to 32 floral arrangements, which filled the building with a blaze of colour. The festival was based on the theme "The seven ages of man," depicting milestones in the



life of the Christian. From "Birth" to "The call home." each was a reflection of much painstaking work by many friends of the church.

*New banner for St Leonard's*



November 1971: Little Downham Parish Church can now proudly boast a new banner depicting its patron saint St. Leonard.

The banner was presented to the church by the family of the late Arthur John Pearson of Soham. Mr Pearson was born in Little Downham and lived a part of his early life there. When he died last year his last wish was to be buried in the village.

At the funeral service the family requested that instead of flowers donations should be given for whatever need the church council felt was greatest. "After much thought the council came up with a new banner

because the old one rather tatty", said the rector the Rev Martin Suter. And in the Festival of St' Leonard the family of Mr Pearson watched as his eldest son carried the banner to the altar, where it was dedicated by Mr Suter.

The banner was designed by an ecclesiastical designer and made by two people in the village. Miss Audrey Smith executed the work on the material, while Mr Ken Jefferson was responsible for the pole. In the picture Miss Smith admires her handiwork.

July 1981: A survey of memorials in Little Downham churchyard is being carried out by members of the village society. There are about 100 memorials to be examined and listed and the society members will be looking out for a number of features. These include dimensions, geology, style, imagery, inscriptions, and the signatures of stonemasons.



The information gathered is entered on a special form supplied for the purpose, and copies of the completed survey will be circulated to various groups. The first visit to the churchyard was made on Wednesday evening, and after an informative talk by the rector, the Rev John

Hodder, about a dozen stones were inspected. Preliminary work was carried out by Mr Hodder, who is a member of Little Downham Society, and society chairman, Mr Richard Ambrose, used his skills as an architect to draw up a scale plan.

Members planned to return yesterday (Wednesday) to finish the survey, which will help preserve older memorials which are beginning to weather. The oldest memorial in the churchyard dates back to 1709, and the work of the society ensures information and sculpture on the monuments, which would otherwise be lost, is being recorded for posterity.



### **‘Splendid’ says rector on Downham’s historic day**

April 1977: Little Downham's two female Church Elders have been officially appointed by the Bishop of Ely, the Right Rev Edward Roberts.

Mrs Mab Ward, of The Bungalow, Cross Lane, and Mrs Kath Parr, of 2 Orchard Estate,

make history as the first women Church Elders in the rural area of Ely. The service at St Leonard's was "very similar" to a Matins according to Little Downham's Rector, the Rev William Patterson.

Commenting on this historic event he said; "These two were the most suitable people. We no longer think about Christians as being men or women, so much as looking for the most suitable. Although two women were chosen to become Church Elders there is no reason why it could not have been two men or a woman and a man. All in all it was a splendid occasion."

As Church Elders Mrs Parr and Mrs Ward will assist Mr Patterson by making visits to parishioners. And they will be authorised to conduct Evensong and Matins. The Bishop of Ely did not make special reference to them being the first lady Church Elders in the area. Rather he concentrated on telling them their duties and explaining that they are now representatives of their Church.

**Robin Pearl**