

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

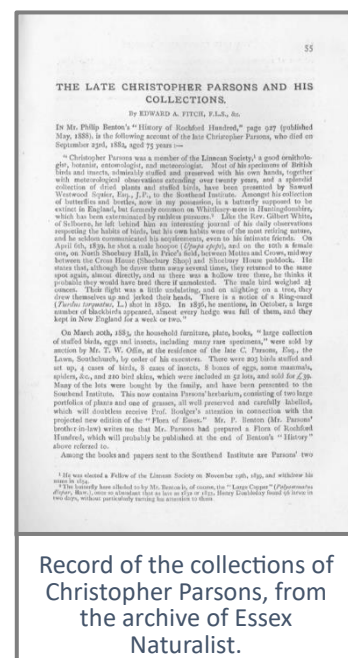
Episode 17: VICTORIAN SOUTHCHURCH – VILLAGE LIFE

The best-documented aspect of life in Victorian Southchurch was the education of the village children. Until the middle of the 19th century the only provision for this in the parish was a cottage school, connected with the church, for 25 children under a schoolmistress. In an 1840 directory there is no mention of any school at Southchurch, but we know that in 1848 Ann Arnold was both shopkeeper and schoolmistress. The school was held at the little building which subsequently became the Post Office (and was swept away when the Boulevard was constructed).

The cottage school was superseded by the National School, built in 1851 for boys and girls. It was established by a trust deed in 1857 as a school for "Church Day and Sunday School purposes in union with the National Society for Promoting Religious Education in accordance with the Principles of the Church of England". The School was erected on the Rectorial Glebe and was conveyed to the churchwardens and incumbents as trustees forever. The estimated cost of the building and Master's residence was £484. Towards this amount £200 had been subscribed locally, of which the Rector - our old friend and generous benefactor, the Rev William Vallance - had contributed £150, and he was prepared to make up any deficiency. The Diocesan Board was expected to contribute £20; a grant of £170 was made by the Government (the Committee of Council on Education); and the National Society gave £22. From other sources £15 had been contributed. In 1894 the School was enlarged by the addition of a classroom, at a cost of £444, the new room being provided for infants.

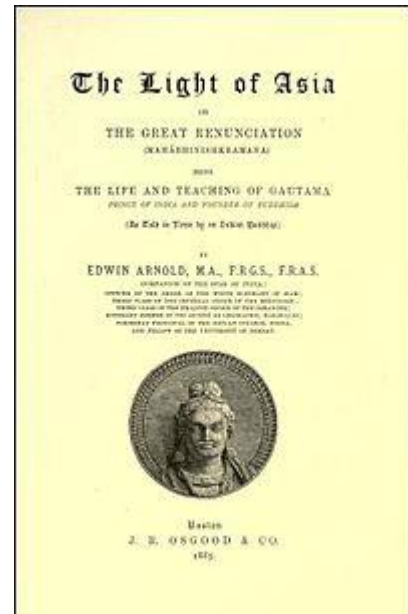
Alfred Goodale wrote with great affection about a school with which he had close familial ties, his aunt, Olive Gertrude Goodale, having been a teacher at the school for 45 years between 1903 and 1948 (when, Mr Goodale noted, "the school was ordered to close its doors"). He recounts how the school log-books (which sadly disappeared during the Second World War) were an interesting commentary not only on the vast strides made in education during the century but on the great changes in child life and occupation. There were constant references to the absence of children, in the early days, because of pea picking, harvesting and other agricultural pursuits. Mr F.S. Dunnett, who became a Town Councillor and Governor of his old school, was given time off to go rook scaring! In 1899 it is recorded that attendances were bad because of a fete in Marine Park, Prittlewell Park, and the Peculiar People's Sunday School Treat. The whole school was given a holiday the following year when Barnum and Bailey's show visited Southend.

The Parsons family of farmers was intimately associated with parish affairs over a long period, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. There was a succession of at least six bearing the Christian name of Christopher. Of these the most famous is the farmer naturalist Christopher Parsons, whose life covered the greater part of the 19th century (1807-1882). As a schoolboy he became a young naturalist, took lessons in bird stuffing and was elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society in 1839. Few of his writings appeared in print, but his manuscript collections are in the possession of the Borough Council. These include Shore-birds of South-East Essex; Birds of the Rochford Hundred; Notes on local plants; Meteorological records - a daily record from 1841 to 1869; and his Diaries in fifty-five volumes (1828-1882). He collected eggs, birds and grasses etc, and caught two specimens of the hoopoe, a rare migrant bird, at Southchurch. He kept his collection of birds at The Lawn, where he was born; members of his family also lived at Southchurch Hall and Thorpe Hall. He is buried in the Parsons family vault in our churchyard.



Another famous Southchurch resident, if only as a youth, was Sir Edwin Arnold, author of the epic poem, *The Light of Asia* (1879) that tells, in elaborate language, of the life and teachings of the Buddha. Arnold's family took up residence at Southchurch Wick when Edwin was about fifteen. He left England for service in India when about twenty-five, returning to Southend in later life to reside at Hamlet House. It is recorded that it was in the Southchurch district that he gained the love and knowledge of nature, which are shown in his writings.

(with considerable help from Alfred Goodale and others)



Title page of the 1885 edition of 'The Light of Asia'

Come back in a couple of weeks' time for Episode 18: "Those Happy, Golden Years".

- We take a look at the accounts of one of our Rectors.
- Discover how much the Rector paid his Curate.
- How much did the church make from tithes in 1887?

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