

# A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

## Episode 14: THE JANE AUSTEN YEARS

*“And though Dr Grant is most kind and obliging to me, and though he is really a gentleman, and I dare say a good scholar and clever, and often preaches good sermons, and is very respectable, I see him to be an indolent selfish bon vivant, who must have his palate consulted in every thing, who will not stir a finger for the convenience of any one, and who, moreover, if the cook makes a blunder, is out of humour with his excellent wife.”*

Mansfield Park

At the end of the Eighteenth Century the population of Southchurch was small and scattered, the population returns for 1801 giving a total of 291. Chapman and Andre’s map of 1772-74 shows the church and rectory, with three buildings on the north side of the road opposite the church, and six or seven on the south side of the road west of the church; one of the latter is named as the Tile House. Southchurch Hall, Southchurch Wick and Thorp Hall are also shown. The first Ordnance Survey map (1805) shows the same three buildings opposite the church, and five others east of it.

Additional to the buildings shown on Chapman and Andre’s map, the Ordnance Map indicates the following: Butters (Buttery’s); a group of seven buildings south and west of Bournes Green corner; and Southchurch Lawn, with a row of buildings opposite on the west side of the road. Most of these named properties, together with the White Horse Inn, are mentioned in the earliest parish records as those on which rates were levied for relief of the poor.



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This is the rural idyll period, at least for the clerical rich, when Southchurch could have been the



setting for a Jane Austen novel. We had a wealthy but absentee rector, a highly colourful curate-in-charge and a generously proportioned rectory (then even more so than now, and I do mean the Old Rectory). As in Jane Austen’s novels, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars might have been on a different continent.

The absentee rector was Walter Wren Driffield, who was rector for fifty-four years between 1774 and 1828. He was undoubtedly an ecclesiastical gentleman of high standing, married to Elizabeth Townshend, the daughter of a Dean of Norwich, but he made only fleeting appearances in Southchurch. He is best known for his associations with John Constable, whom he is said to have christened at East Bergholt in the middle of the night when Constable had not been expected to live.

In 1814 Driffield even brought Constable to Southchurch. Writing to his future wife, Miss Bicknell, in July of that year, Constable said:

*“during my visit (to Feering near Kelvedon) he [Mr Driffield] had occasion to go to his living at Southchurch, and I was happy to embrace the opportunity to accompany him; by which I saw more of the county of Essex than I had ever before and the most beautiful part of it; as I was at Maldon, Rochford, South End, Hadleigh, ...etc”.*

The curate-in-charge, Rev. Thomas Archer, was our sporting parson who regularly rode to hounds. Archer was curate at Southchurch from 1783 to 1816, and also, at different times, held positions at Prittlewell and Foulness. His quaintness of dress and habit, and his life as parson, sportsman and poet have been the source of many stories, some of which were recorded by our local historian, Benton. On weekdays he often wore his surplice over his hunting attire, and on one occasion during a wedding ceremony startled the bride, bridegroom and congregation with a very non-liturgical cry of “Tally-ho!” when he heard the hunt near the church.

Not just a sportsman but also a poet. His “Poetical Description of South-end in the County of Essex and its vicinity” contains these words on Southchurch:

*“If bent for exercise you mount your horse  
the level beach presents a spacious course.  
Or should you wish for prospects of delight  
An handsome structure and romantic site  
To South-Church and The Lawn direct your reins  
The pleasing view shall well reward your pains.”*

Princess Charlotte visited Southend in 1801, for the benefit of her health and the sea-bathing. She was the only child of the Prince of Wales (later George IV) and was then five years old. During her visit she stayed at Southchurch Lawn and attended services at our church. It was her visit to Southend, followed by one made by her mother a few years later, which led to the place becoming a fashionable sea-bathing resort during the first twenty years of the Nineteenth Century.



**Come back in a couple of weeks' time for Episode 15:**

***“The Jane Austen Years – Life Beyond Southchurch”***

- Southend is established as a sea-bathing resort.
  - A secret visitor.
  - Bucolic peace and quiet.

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