

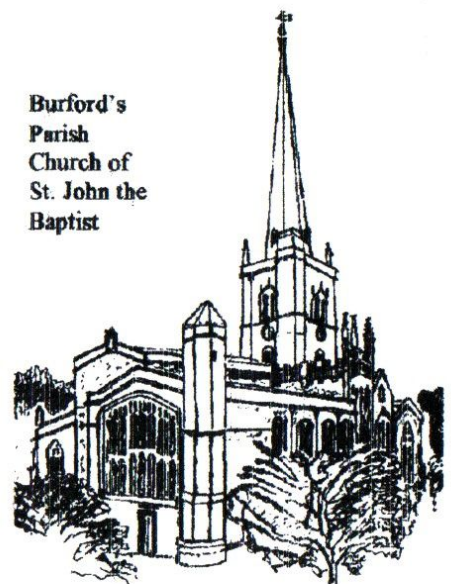
## Then and Now: Falkner's Burford

Raymond Moody

Mrs. Gretton in her 1944 revision of her 1920 *Burford Past and Present* draws a word picture of her recollection of two figures in the Burford Vicarage hallway - "*the six foot just arrived tendering his bulky passage, and the shorter figure receiving it*". The taller figure was J.Meade Falkner bringing one or other of those ecclesiastical treasures that he presented to Burford Church, the shorter figure Canon W.C. Emeris, Vicar of the place, receiving the gift. By 1944 both were gone, Falkner in 1932 and Emeris in 1937; and though much of the past had been frozen by the years of the war, Burford itself was shortly to become part of a new age.

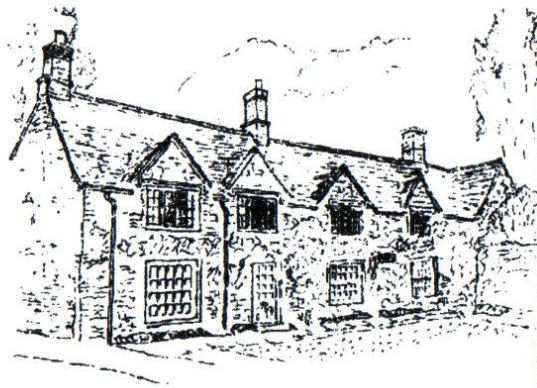
Falkner first saw Burford in his undergraduate years, between 1878 and 1882. For the rest of his life he continued to return to it, though never to reside. "*To me*", he wrote, "*Burford is, I suppose, a sort of fetish. Certainly the church is more to me than a survival of youthful enthusiasm. It is a vigent pleasure.*" (*Vigent*, no doubt, from *vigere*, to thrive. It is only in the Supplement to the OED, interestingly with a Durham reference.) Besides the many treasures he presented, with John Noble he provided a window, and later in 1910/11 restored the old guild chapel, the Lady Chapel, and gave it its superb modern reredos.

If Falkner were to rise from the bale tomb where his ashes rest with his brother below Burford spire, and walk through Burford by night, or on a dull November evening, he would find little change. New stone houses of traditional style inserted here and there in the side streets, new signs and lights for the road, but little else. The preserved appearance hides the radical transformation of the town. As the nineteenth century dawned, Burford was a bustling place: a centre for racing, second only to Newmarket, a great route town with at least forty scheduled coaches every twenty four hours and a host of stage wagons and private conveyances, a busy market and flourishing trades in leather, masonry and malting, and of course inn keeping. In the wake of the enclosure movement, farming was riding high. Only the cloth trade had moved away. But in the 1830s the first trains ran from London, and in 1850 the last scheduled coach ran through Burford. Despite all plans, the 1870 the nearest the railways ever came to Burford was six miles away in another valley. Then in great agricultural depression that was to last until 1940 deprived Burford of its last claim to prosperity.



Burford's  
Parish  
Church of  
St. John the  
Baptist

As the century drew to a close, the Arts and Crafts movement, the search for the rural picturesque and the romantic obsession with the Middle Ages were in full cry. The latter two at least were shared by Falkner. Burford was everything that Victorian industrialism was not. In Murray's *Handbook for Travellers to Oxfordshire* he wrote of Burford that "besides its objects of antiquarian interest, (it) possesses a High Street scarcely inferior in picturesqueness to any in the country". In the twentieth century the effect on the town of this perceived antique quality has been extraordinary. Since the Second World War, Oxfordshire has been subject to the most immense pressure for development. The County plan has attempted, with slight success, to contain this in four towns. Witney, which is one of these, is seven miles from Burford, and has grown from four to thirty thousand and will grow further, but villages have also expanded beyond measure. Though Burford is a Conservation Area within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, it seemed to the planners that the only way to preserve the historic quality of the place was to put a tourniquet around it and limit its development to infilling and some conversion of non-residential buildings. Perhaps they were right, but the result has been predictable: local families have been priced out of the town, while London money has arrived and many houses are now held as much for investment as habitation.



Simon Wisdom built this row by the Bridge in 1576

Although the number of dwellings inside the town has almost doubled in the past century the population has fallen from around 2000 in 1800, to 1200 in 1900, and is now about to pass down through 1000 as household size falls and age rises. Carterton, four miles away, a bungalow development of a few market gardeners before the war, is now Burford's *alter ego*, and a town of 13,000. The small size of Burford's population is hardly noticeable on the street,

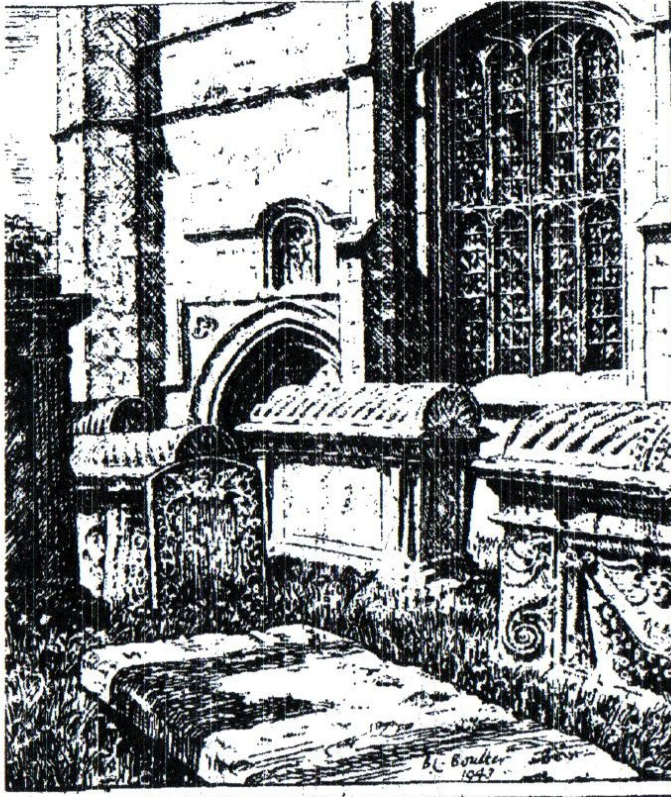
for while the vast heritage industry has preserved the appearance of the town, the even vaster leisure industry has transformed its nature. The photographs of a hundred years ago show the emptiness, a horse and cart, a child or two or an old man sitting on a bench. Now throughout the day, the world with time to spare comes to Burford and cars queue to pass over the bridge, or congest the street seeking for parking. Where six centuries ago, Italian merchants came to buy wool, now the Japanese come in coaches to



photograph. Only at night is Burford silent. Almost all the money that is spent here these days has been earned elsewhere, by way of pension, investment, executive work in other places, or is simply leisure spending. The downside of this is that Burford, which could at one time have supplied almost all human needs, has lost most of its ordinary shops, its police station, magistrates court, hospital and may yet lose more amenities. Conservation is a piecemeal activity. It is still however a centre

for quality marketing and, perhaps because of its perceived historic character, has not entirely sold out to the tourist trade. The church of course stays, but what has happened there is the subject for another article.

One big question remains. There are other lovely Cotswold towns, and other great mediaeval churches. What was the magic of this place that for fifty years constantly drew Falkner here, and made him such a benefactor of the church? I am not the person to answer that. I came here forty years ago and purchased as a shell part of the vast vicarage that he knew. I have never seen a sufficient reason to move, and the history of the town would provide me with occupation for another millennium.



Wool-bale tombs in Burford churchyard.

Suffice it to say that he has not been alone in his obsession, and I have known others for whom the spell has become a compulsion.

[Raymond Moody has kindly allowed illustrations from his booklet *BURFORD: An Introduction and Guide* (Hindsight of Burford 1999) to be used for this article.]