

Pear Tree Church: From the Bishop of Winchester to the Life of Pi

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Julian: Hello, I'm Julian Gerry, your podcast host for this episode of Hampshire HistBites, which is going to focus on Pear Tree Church in Southampton. Where is Pear Tree Church exactly? Well, it's on the east side of the River Itchen, across the river from the city centre, on Pear Tree Green. It's a building rich in history, having played a part in the city's developments over the last 400 years. Rather surprisingly, it even has a connection with cannibalism, but more of that story later. To help us explore the stories surrounding this church, I'm joined by Cheryl Butler, an historian who specializes in the history of Southampton. Cheryl has conducted research, presented on and written about topics as diverse as Tudor Southampton, the voyage of the Titanic and the city's literary connections, as well as the history of Pear Tree Church.

Cheryl, can I begin by asking you to take us back a little over 400 years, to the sort of early 17th century, and describe to us a bit of the historical and religious context around the time that the church was built at Pear Tree?

Cheryl: Well, this period draws from one generation down from the Reformation. And so the Anglican church is established in England, but there's still lots of concerns about Catholicism and also there's a growing sect around puritanism as well. So although things appear to be settled, there are still sort of issues bubbling under the surface, if you will. In this period, when the church was built in, in 1620, it was quite interesting because there hadn't been a church on the east side of the Itchen, although there had been lots of people living on that side of the river at, which came under the ownership of the Bishop of Winchester. But if they were having to go to church, which in that period was law, they had to cross the river to go to the mother church of St. Mary's in Southampton.

So they'd been doing this for sort of centuries, but in the beginning of the 17th century, a wealthy landowner, someone who had worked for the Bishop of Winchester, decided to build a house on the east side of the river Itchen, called Pear Tree House, and he gave it to his daughter and his son-in-law. And suddenly, it became more of an issue about people having to cross this dangerous river in the middle of winter, and it was sort of fraught with difficulties. And so the new owner of Pear Tree House, Captain Smith, decided that he wanted to build a chapel on the east side of the river. He had the money. And you'd think everything would be sort of smooth sailing, from that. But unfortunately, they actually started the building in 1618, it was finished then, but they then realized that they had to consecrate the chapel and, there was no sort of formal set consecration at this time, so you applied to the Bishop of Winchester. And this is what Captain Smith did. Unfortunately, there was a little bit of a hiatus. The previous Bishop of Winchester had died, and they hadn't appointed a new one, but in 1620, they appointed a man called Bishop Lancelot Andrewes. And so it was really quite significant in terms of the consecration of the church, that he was the Bishop at that time.

So if I can now sort of tell you a little bit about the religious context, if you'd like. Andrewes was, I suppose, you'd call it a more conservative Anglican. He's still had some, how should I phrase it? There are some parts of the Catholic forms of service that he quite liked. And when he came to look at how to sort of consecrate the church, he was looking at bit of what had happened to consecrations in the time when Catholicism was in England.

Whereas there was other schools of thought that about that there should be no grand service at all, it should be sort of quite, quite simple. But he wrote a special service for Pear Tree. He came down for a whole day to do this, and this is quite significant as well because the bishops of Winchester were political creatures as well and mainly, they stayed up in London, they didn't often actually come down and spend any time in their in their bishopric. But he made this journey, and he wrote this service and he consecrated the church and all the elements around the church and the churchyard. So it was a whole day event and it must have been quite, quite significant for the local people to see, cause they wouldn't normally see the Bishop. They wouldn't see him with all his pomp and with all his followers in this big service going on. And because he, I think perhaps, put such a lot of effort into it, the service was published and then people who are consecrating Anglican churches thereafter looked at this service as the way to do it.

So that's what makes the 400th anniversary of Pear Tree quite significant. The fact that it was done by Lancelot Andrewes, the way he constructed the service, the fact that he wrote it down and then there was an Anglican service for people to follow going forward.

Julian: I see. So am I correct in thinking then that this was the first church to have been consecrated with the service that's continued to the present day, but there were other Anglican churches in existence before 1620?

Cheryl: Yes. So what had happened, of course, was after the Reformation, all the Catholic churches were just changed to Anglican churches, but there were a few that were built but there was no fixed service. But what makes Pear Tree different and what makes it important is this service that was written down by someone who was considered a great scholar, a great theologian, people used to travel from all over Europe to meet him. He's one of the people who's writing the King James' Bible - the Authorised Version of the Bible. So he's an outstanding figure in sort of religious circles and in general scholarship. And so the fact that it's his service and he's so highly thought of, and it's then - the service is followed. That's what makes it significant.

Julian: I see. And when it was first built, the church in that form was known as Jesus Chapel. So I presume it was quite small compared to the church which sits on the site currently.

Cheryl: Yes because it was a chapel associated with the mother church of St. Mary's. So if it had been built on the St Mary's site, it would have been like a little side chapel off the main church. But of course, because it was on the other side of the river, it looks like they'd take this little chapel, and put it on the east side of the River Itchen, St. Mary's being on the other side in the town of Southampton. So it's quite small. It's quite plain, because again, we are in this period when people are, still sort of becoming more Puritan in their leanings. So, you don't get any fancy decoration. There's just a simple table which forms the altar. There weren't fixed pews or box pews and things in there. It was quite small, quite plain, but it had quite a nice little character. It sits on the green, around the little village of Bitterne Ferry, which most of the people who are living there are fisherman, they're also the people who are responsible for taking people across the river, so they're ferryman. And so it was, it was both a rural and a little maritime hamlet, but the church, yes, the chapel, which is called the Jesus Chapel St Mary Extra was quite small.

Julian: Right. So that the chapel was used successfully for 200 or more years then before any real changes came to either the chapel or that particular area. But in the 19th century, I think quite a lot changed in that part of Southampton, is that right?

Cheryl: Yes because in the mid-18th century Southampton had been a really important port in the medieval and early modern period, but by the 18th century, it was suffering from an economic decline and it had to reinvent itself, find something else to drive its economy. And because at this time it was

surrounded on three sides by water and we have the fad for sea bathing, they decide to promote themselves as a bathing resort. So, this they do from the mid-18th century, they then discover a health giving spring in the town, so they can now be a spa as well as a bathing resort. And so, you suddenly get lots of people coming there for their holidays and they're not coming for sort of couple of weeks, or a weekend break, they're coming for several months. And you then get people building estates around the outskirts of Southampton. And these are people who are usually the merchants who've made their wealth and are now wanting to become landed gentry. And they like the area around Southampton because it's still very rural and particularly on the east side of the River Itchen, you're higher up and you've got this wonderful view across the river, back to the town. So suddenly the area around the Jesus Chapel and Pear Tree Green becomes incredibly popular with some new incomers to the town. And where are they, these people who are making their money is that they're East India Company merchants. So they are super rich and they've made their money in India and in China. And Southampton appeals to them for a couple of reasons. One is that when they're back in England, they can get very easily to East India Company headquarters in London, but if they've got to go sort of back out to India or China, they can do that very easily.

Most of them have returned to England because they are suffering with their health, through living in climates that don't suit them. So being the spa resort also has its advantages as well. And so once you have one or two people doing it, suddenly they tell their friends and you end up with the whole town being encircled by these villas, built by East India Company merchants.

Julian: So with this great deal of change that was taking place in the population of that part of Southampton, Cheryl, what did this mean for the church? How did the church building itself have to change to cater for them?

Cheryl: Well, the issue really was a lot of these villas and the people who lived in them, their natural church to go to would have been St Mary's the mother church of Southampton. Unfortunately, this had got into a very poor state of repair and the area that it was in was not quite as salubrious as they perhaps might want. And so they looked for an alternative. And of course, having the chapel on the eastern side, which was a lovely setting with wonderful views. It was the perfect alternative place for them to go. And once these rich people started to go there, it became more fashionable. But again, the effect of that was that they wanted changes in the church because it had been very plain, grey walls and sort of benches to sit on.

So you have the next great change in the building where they're having to extend it to put in box pews for these private families to have their own special pew. All the poor people are sort of sent upstairs, sitting on benches and they're allowed 18 inches for the width of their backside. And they also then start to look at other improvements in the church. And this is where you then get lots of new memorials being added around the interior of the building.

Julian: Did these affluent incomers contribute to the extension of the church building?

Cheryl: They did. The architect who actually designed it, did it for free, he was a wealthy person living on that side of the water. They were also contributing to the general area. So they acted as churchwardens in the church, they were giving them money to support the poorer members of the community. They also invested in things like bridges so that it was easier for people to travel, you know, from Southampton over to the east side edge of the ferryside and vice versa. So they did invest in sort of that infrastructure and, into the, you know, the buildings of the church. I think most of the money they invested in the physicality of the building was actually in the internal monuments.

Julian: Just out of interest, do we know why that part of Southampton is, or was known as Pear Tree? Was there literally a pear tree or orchard on the site?

Cheryl: There is actually a pear tree and it's right in the middle of the green. And it's said to have been planted by Elizabeth I. And so, yeah. The original pear tree eventually sort of died off as trees do, but sort of, bits were taken off it and a new pear tree, was sort of, grown on the site and it's sort of protected, it's in a sort of a little enclave. But yeah, so, the church sort of is still properly known as the Jesus Chapel, but it's just locally, everyone calls it sort of Pear Tree Church because it's on Pear Tree Green. But yes, you can see the actual pear tree.

Julian: I understand that the rebuilding and extension of the church in the 19th century wasn't all done at one specific time and that it happened a number of times over quite a long period. Could you tell us a little bit more about how the church extended?

Cheryl: Yes, absolutely. So, you have this first development, which is, as I say, off the back of all these new East India Company families moving in. So, in 1822, they add the west porch and the south transept. Then the population sort of grown again, by the mid-19th century. So, in 1846, north aisle is added. And then 20 years later an east aisle. And the last main thing that was altered in the church was in 1883, when the Chancel and south chapel were built. And I think that was more to make it more grander and to Victorian tastes rather than it being sort of absolutely necessary sort of piece of work to account for the growing sort of population. So you do have quite a bit of Victorian inputs into the fabric of the building towards the end of the 19th century.

Julian: And during those developments, I think that there were a number of memorials and monuments installed in the church. Are there any of those that are still there and had particular or particularly notable stories behind them.

Cheryl: Yes. I mean, all the memorials are still there. I mean, during the second World War, the church windows, most of those were damaged. So, we lost a lot of the beautiful, decorated windows. But the memorials are still there and they're very grand. There's one to the Chamberlain family, who were big landowners on that side of the River Itchen, but also owned property elsewhere. So you'll see their name associated with lots of things in and around sort of the Southampton, Eastleigh area.

Julian: So, Cheryl, I think one of the more interesting memorials in the churchyard or in the church was to someone called Richard Parker. Could you perhaps tell us the fascinating tale behind that one?

Cheryl: Yes. So, I've been talking about how fashionable the church was in the 18th and early 19th century, but by the mid-19th century it changed again, all these wealthy people sort of started to move away, go up to London. So, the church returned to what it had been previously, somewhere that served the local families. And there are one or two local families in the area that have been there really since then, almost the time of the Conquest. And one of these is the Parker family. And they spend, you know, they're living, they are, they are sailors and are for generations. And one of them is a young lad called Richard Parker and he goes to sea for the first time, age 17, he signs on as a cabin boy, on a yacht called the Mignonette. And the Mignonette has been bought by a wealthy Australian and he wants it sailed down to Australia.

And so a man called Captain Dudley is given the task of transporting the yacht. He needs a crew of three, which he signs up in Southampton. And one of these is Richard Parker. Now there's lots of concerns from people who know about these things that the yacht isn't perhaps seaworthy enough to make that, that long voyage, but nevertheless it sets off and unfortunately it gets caught in a really bad storm. And the yacht is going down, and the crew have to abandon it. They do have a small boat that they get into and get off of the yacht, so all of them survived the sinking, but unfortunately in all the stormy weather and trying to get stuff off of the yacht, they don't have any water. They only have a tin of turnips to sustain themselves. And, in those days you don't have radios that you can sort of send messages out to people, you just have to hope that, you know, a ship will pass and will pick you up.

They were at sea for days and days. It was very hot. They managed it to catch a bit of rainwater, but it wasn't enough. They caught a turtle and like drank it sort of blood, but things were getting sort of very desperate. So they decide to do what was called the custom of the sea whereby you draw lots and whoever gets the short straw is sacrificed to keep alive the rest of the crew. Believe it or not, this form of cannibalism during shipwrecks is not unknown, which is why, you know, it was what was called an established custom.

The member of the crew that is sacrificed is young Richard Parker. So, he is killed, and he is eaten by his three shipmates and two days later they're picked up. So, they've done this terrible act, but it has kept them going, but they are picked up and there are rescued. And they'd been sort of in the elements for about 20 days at this point, so I don't think that they were completely sort of *compos mentis* themselves with the effects of, you know, being dehydrated. But they, they were alive, and they made no - they didn't hide what they'd done. They, they had recorded, you know, the actions that they had taken, they freely shared this with the crew of the ship that picked them up and they were brought back to England and then were quite surprised to have been arrested. And they were put on trial. Now the significance of the trial was not that they had drawn lots and eaten one of their crew, but that Richard Parker was under-age. He was 17 and he was under this guardianship and the protection of the captain of the ship. And it was deemed that he should not have been included in the drawing of lots.

So, it was a huge core celebrity trial, made headlines in all the press and the outcome of the trial was that the ends do not justify the means, that you cannot kill somebody in this manner, but just sort of justifying, you know, sort of saving the lives of the rest of the crew. They were found guilty and could have been executed, but their sentence was commuted to transportation to Australia. But there was a big campaign against them, look for, for them to put, to have clemency, which was actually led by members of the Parker family, because they really understood what it was like to be at sea in this, this time and you know, what could happen. And they bore no ill will towards Dudley and the other, the other crew. So, they were given a reprieve but their lives were blighted. Dudley mentions a move to Australia himself and, unfortunately, he died in the bubonic plague outbreak in Sydney in 1901. You have the crewman, Stevens, you know, he took to alcohol. He couldn't get another job; his wife lost her job. The other crewman ended up, working in a, a Carney, a carnival as a sort of Cannibal of the Seas. So, really it had, you know, a terrible effect on, on all of them.

There wasn't anything of Richard Parker to bury, but a memorial was put on the grave of his parents, which records the incident and, really such show of, people are so intrigued by it that it's still studied by lawyers today when they're learning their profession and there's sort of lots of myths and legends sort of associated with it as well. And you might remember in the film *Life of Pi* that the tiger is called Richard Parker, and that's the reason, it's to do with this story.

Julian: Indeed. It it's an amazing, although tragic story. Thanks for retelling that to us. And just to round off, Cheryl, what sort of things have been going on at Pear Tree Church to celebrate the fact that they're now into their fifth century at the church?

Cheryl: We have done a new book about the church. So some of the things that I've told you and indeed a lot more are in that book. We put together a literary trail around the churchyard because there's lots of interesting literary connections with the chapel, not least of all Jane Austen. We also have an ecology trail and we, we produce a pop-up exhibition, which you can see in the church as well.

And we updated our website. So if people are interested you can go onto the Pear Tree website and see films that we made about history of the church and some of the recordings of some of our study days and things are up there as well. And what we want is to have more people come and visit the

church. So we're planning to take some of the things that worked really well in our anniversary year and develop them in future years to hopefully bring more people to see this really interesting chapel.

Julian: What an amazing site with so many fascinating connections and it is the church and the churchyard generally open to people to wander in and take a look?

Cheryl: The church yard is open all the time. Generally, the church is open on a Wednesday, that's normally the day that it's open to visitors. But again, you know, if people are interested in visiting the church, they, if they look at the website, it would say when, when its open, when events are on there and yeah, and if there's a group that wants to come along, you know, the churchwardens are very keen for people to come so they will make efforts to open the church up.

Julian: That's really good to know. Cheryl, thank you so much for taking the time today to tell us about a place that I, until recently, wasn't even really aware of despite living in Hampshire for years, so it's been a real insight. Thank you.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.
Thank you.