

Tragedy averted at church

DIVINE intervention may well have prevented the loss at the weekend of one of Alton's most historic and much loved landmarks.

A fire at St. Lawrence Church would almost certainly have gone unnoticed but for a Sunday night concert which proved the building's salvation.

"But for the concert, the Church might have burnt down," said the vicar, the Revd. Robert Gussman.

The incident happened during a well-attended performance by the Waverley Singers, of which the vicar is fortunately a member.

The sanctuary light in front of the altar burst into flames, spitting candle wax and molten plastic over the 80-strong choir.

"We were singing in the chancel when the lamp decided to set itself on fire," the vicar told The Herald.

The lamp has been part of the fabric of the church for as long as can be remembered. It is traditionally lit on a Sunday morning and contains a 24-hour candle set within a red plastic casing.

Normally the church would have been locked up after the evening service and the candle allowed to burn itself out during the night.

As it happened nobody was hurt in the incident. The singers rapidly dispersed while someone found a pitchfork and lowered the flaming lamp into a bucket of water.

It caused a slight hiatus in the first part of the programme until the thing was extinguished and then we carried on. There was a nasty smell of burning plastic but that cleared when we opened the windows," said the vicar.

He has not heard of a similar incident happening within a church and has said that if St. Lawrence was to replace the lamp, it would not have a plastic casing.

"But the replacement is a matter for review," said Revd. Gussman who pointed out that, although it had been there for a considerable time, the sanctuary lamp was "not an absolute essential requirement".

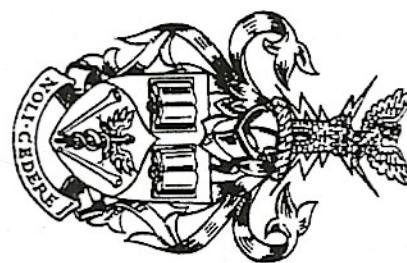
Dating to as far back in parts as 1070 - the tower being of Norman origin, St. Lawrence Church is one of the oldest buildings in the town. It was rebuilt in the 13th and again in the 15th century, when it doubled in size, and is heralded as one of the major examples of Perpendicular style in Hampshire.

In 1643 St. Lawrence provided the final scene for a battle in the Civil War between the Roundheads and Cavaliers. Musket shot and other relics are preserved in the church, and the main door and walls still bear the marks.

At the moment the building is undergoing major refurbishment work. The rendering is being removed from the outer walls on the east side, patching up and weathering undertaken, and the buttresses repaired.

It is being carried out under the auspices of a £300,000 appeal, launched in 1993.

But it could have been for nothing if Sunday's fire had taken hold. The fact that the vicar was singing as part of the choir meant that he was on hand to deal with the fire straight away. "I knew where everything was and we were able to deal with it before the flames got out of hand. We didn't even need to use the fire extinguishers," said a relieved Revd. Gussman who believes that the church has had a lucky escape.



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Saved from the flames - St Lawrence Church (Picture No. 25/198/30)