

Sutton's famous organist.

By Norman Granville Evans

In 1975, the late Norman Evans was asked for some information on Dr. John Alcock, and he responded as follows:

Dear Mr. Marr,

Your letter to Mr. Gray concerning Dr. John Alcock, the eighteenth century organist, was passed by him to the Rector of Sutton Coldfield, Canon Rose, who has given it to me to answer as he knows that I am interested in Sutton local history as a hobby.

The Rev. W.K.Riland Bedford was Rector of Sutton Coldfield in the last century and researched the history of this town and church very thoroughly. He wrote a History of Sutton (in 1891), many articles, and gave lectures on this subject, but I went first to a book he wrote in 1889 titled *The Rilands of Sutton Coldfield – 300 years of a family living*. In the writing of this, he was in the privileged position of being able to search through the preserved letters of those who had corresponded with the occupiers of the Rectory over the centuries, and copied these into his book of the history of the Riland family living; so I have no doubt that, as he handled the originals, the information is quite authentic and reliable.

A copy of this book can be seen in the new Sutton Coldfield Public Library in the centre of the town where, in the Local History Reference Department, there are other works by Riland Bedford and copies of his *History of Sutton Coldfield*. Should you visit Sutton Central Library ask for Mrs. Susan Griffiths who is in charge of the local history section and tell her that I have been in communication with you about John Alcock. I am sure you will find her most helpful.

On page 39 of his *History of Sutton Coldfield*, Riland Bedford refers to the repairing of Sutton Parish Church, Holy Trinity in the 1760's, and the construction of the galleries "where room was found in the West Gallery for an organ". In his book *300 years of a family living* he goes into greater detail, and tells us that from 1758 to 1760, Sutton Parish Church was extensively restored, extended and altered as parts had been found to be unsafe, and that when this rebuilding was completed (1760), the Rector's brother, who was the Curate, "gave the organ, to which the eminent musician Dr. Alcock was appointed..."(see page 48).

It would seem from this that Dr. Alcock would have been consulted about the organ and its position, and would presumably be the first one to use it – as the completion of the organ and Dr. Alcock are mentioned in the same sentence. The fact that "room was found for the organ" as the galleries were completed (1760) and not that the galleries were built round the organ would seem to make the date 1761 correct for both the opening recital and the date of Dr. Alcock's appointment. Incidentally, this part of the west gallery was removed in 1879 and the organ rebuilt in the south-east part of the church.

Continuing on page 48 of *a family living*:- “Dr. Alcock was appointed, a post he held until 1786, when Clark is stated to be the organist, at a salary of £20.” “Dr. Alcock does not appear to have been so well paid as Mr. Clark”, writes Riland Bedford, “to judge by a letter addressed to the Rector in 1784”.

This letter, which is dated 11th October 1784 from John Alcock in Lichfield, is some 800 words long and is printed in full by Riland Bedford, but for your information I have summarised it for you as follows:- Addressing the “Reverend Sir”, John Alcock wrote that he was scarcely receiving enough money to sustain himself and his family, as there were deficiencies in his salary at Sutton Coldfield, namely of £2-6-0 in 1775, £1-9-0 in 1776, £1-18-0 in 1777, 6/- in 1778, £4-5-0 in 1779, £5-19-6 in 1780, and from Christmas, 1780, to the end of May 1781, £9-0-0, a total of £25-3-6.

He wrote that the Sutton organ was played by his eldest son and himself from 25th March (“when his youngest son went to Newcastle”) till the last Sunday in May inclusive, but whether this is the end of May 1781 mentioned above, or May 1784 when the letter was written is not clear – perhaps you know the year his youngest son went to Newcastle.

He continued that the mare which he rode from Lichfield to attend Sutton Church had been taken and galloped by a youth for one hour during a Sunday service and then watered whilst hot, with the result that she had died. That was a total financial loss, and as the cost of hiring a horse for the journey from Lichfield to Sutton and back (18 miles) was 2/- plus 2/- expenses, he said that he received not above 1/6d for his labours. (From this, it would appear that he was paid at the rate of 5/6d for each Sunday, i.e. a salary of £14-6-0 per year.)

His letter continued that some parishioners seeing him coming from church had said “Why, Doctor, your horse looks very thin,” “Ah, so she does”, he replied, “And I should look as thin too, if I got no more money than I have for playing your organ”. He compared his lot to others, and wrote that as Mr. Brown, organist at Lichfield Cathedral, had £60 per year plus £12 per annum as Master of the Boys, together with £5 annually for tuning the organ and only had a very short journey to work, he, the writer, felt that for playing at Sutton he deserved £20 per annum.

He had lived in this country nearly 35 years and other Masters had always been paid two or three times as much as he. He had had three places (besides Sutton) where the salary was by subscription, viz: Plymouth, Reading and Tamworth. The first two places were £30 per year and the last only £20, but always in full without deductions. At Plymouth and Reading he was paid by the churchwardens either quarterly or half-yearly, and at Tamworth by a Commissioner for the Organ.

He gave further details of the cost of hiring a horse for the Sutton journey, plus “Ostler; Sunday dinner and ale; Wear and Tare; and missing the Cathedral – a total of 4/-. (Leaving the aforementioned 1/6 profit).

He closed his letter by stating that his eldest son who was organist at Walsall had officiated for him at Sutton for part of the last two months, thereby displeasing the Walsall congregation and risking losing that place.

I have asked Canon Rose if this letter is still in existence, but he thinks not, as it is not in the church or rectory archives, and I am afraid there seem to be no other documents which might help you in Sutton.

We are not told why Dr. Alcock left Sutton in 1786, the fact revealed in the letter that his son was deputising for him from Walsall in 1784 may indicate the state of his father's ill health two years before the actual time he relinquished his Sutton post; or did he resign because he thought he was poorly paid? One would hardly think he would be dismissed for continual grumbling about his pay when his employers were willing to appoint his successor, Mr. Clark, at a better salary, for surely Dr. Alcock's could likewise have been brought up to £20 per annum, had he wished to remain.

It is interesting to note (on page 47 of the *family living*) that the Sutton Town Corporation actually "voted sums towards the organist's salary in 1774, 1775, 1781 and 1786" but we are not told what the amounts were, though the last one must have been to make up the total to £20.

Note – Norman Evans concluded by asking for a copy of the completed research, but this does not appear to have been received. There is, however, an article on Alcock in Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* by "Watkins Shaw (with Peter Marr), which refers to Peter Marr's Reading University dissertation of 1978.