





Alstonefield Memorial Hall and Community Centre

# Alstonefield

*A Village full of*  
vitality  
enterprise  
& creativity

Mike Smith is astounded by the vibrancy of this village of fewer than 300 residents

**I**t is hard to believe that Alstonefield is a small upland village of fewer than 300 inhabitants. Rather than huddling together for shelter at an altitude of over 700 feet above sea-level, the village's attractive stone cottages are scattered around a series of greens, as if masquerading as an assortment of quaint hamlets in lowland England. The church has the grand proportions and decorative details that would be expected in a place of worship in a far larger parish; and the

vitality, enterprise and creativity of Alstonefield is truly remarkable for a place with so few residents.

St Peter's Church contains many treasures from ages gone by. These include a Norman south door, beautifully carved 17th century box pews and a fabulous double-decker pulpit. But the building reveals a great deal about the love and care bestowed upon it by the present-day parishioners. Handmade tapestry kneeling cushions are arranged in colourful rows along the top of the pews; visitors are >



Katie Lane

invited to help themselves to biscuits and tea or coffee; the church clock is wound every seven days by a team of volunteers and the bell-ringers meet every Wednesday. Three years ago, the lead was stolen from the church roofs, prompting the villagers to raise £10,000 in six months to replace it.

Volunteers are never hard to find in Alstonefield. As a result, the village has a range of clubs and activities that must be the envy of places that can draw on a much bigger population. Many of these are hosted in the Memorial Hall and Community Centre, which is housed in the former village school, now much modified and extended.

The most recent improvements to the building are the result of a £100,000 project to convert the old school toilets and refurbish the former Headmaster's Room as a bookshop, meeting room and part-time



The Old Post Office



Village cricket. Photo: Brian Ross

post office. After showing me around the splendid new facilities, Jean Allen, the Chair of the Village Hall Committee, said: 'Thanks to local donations of £20,000 and a whole raft of money-raising efforts to match grants from the County Council and other organisations, we now have a first-class amenity that will serve villagers for years to come.'

Before her retirement, Jean ran Alstonefield's famous tea room, which attracted customers from far and wide. She now coordinates much of the catering for the many events at the village hall, which include parties, dances, talks, gardeners' question times, games evenings, concerts and even regular appearances by folk singers. The villagers also host regular car



Alstonefield Manor



Members of the Zumba class: Sue Lovatt and Cathy Reavy

boot sales and stage a Wakes Weekend at the end of June, with fun and games, together with fancy dress and cake-making competitions. Alstonefield's many clubs and groups include indoor bowls, a friendship group, a gardening club, a parent and toddler group, a craft group, a walking group, a cricket club, a pilates group and a Zumba group. Not bad for a village of fewer than 300 people!

Before meeting Jean, I had encountered Sue Lovatt and Cathy Reavy, who had just emerged from their zumba class and kindly agreed to give me a demonstration of the latest fitness craze. Cathy compiles the village website for the Parish Council, with contributions from Brian Ross. She also works in tandem with Jani Barnard to run a

“Brian Ross was the only British entrant to win first prize at a recent international photography competition in Budapest, with his amazing close-up view of a dolphin swimming in a shoal of tiny fish”

series of creative workshops called ‘Threads’. Cathy says: ‘The aim is to teach people, whatever their previous experience, to make Japanese temari balls, corsages, fabric boxes, practise embroidery stitches and work designs in silks and crewel wools.’

The village is home to lots of other creative people and artisans. Brian Ross was the only British entrant to win first prize at a recent international photography competition in Budapest, with his amazing close-up view of a dolphin swimming in a shoal of tiny fish. Katie Lane is another villager with creative flair. She has her own line in handmade fleece jackets, which she has christened ‘Huggets’. Katie previously worked as a designer for a Panama hat specialist, for whom she was required to go on a trip to a supplier in Ecuador. Wanting something that would be both warm and cosy for the long flight, she decided to design and make her first Hugget. Her range now includes ‘Double-Huggets’ designed for two people and even fleece jackets specially made for cats!

Fashions from years gone by are on display at Notty Hornblower’s Hope House Costume Museum, which has a huge collection of period costumes. Notty has made a number of television appearances and puts on displays at various venues. Working with Ann Colclough, she organised last year’s ‘Dig for Victory’ flower and costume festival at the parish church, >



‘Dolphin Magic’ - Brian Ross’ prize-winning photograph Unfortunately since this article was written Brian has sadly passed away. We publish this in tribute to a great photographer



Tug of war at the Wakes Weekend

which illustrated village life during the war years. Delighted with the event, which raised over £4,000, shared equally between St Peter's Church and the Village Hall, Notty said, 'It was a great effort by a very productive village.'

A villager who makes a living from crafting his own products is Michael Griffin, a self-taught cabin-maker, who specialises in furniture made from English oak, Douglas fir and other good-quality hardwoods. Michael is helped by his wife Dot, who also manages to find time to chair the parish council. The couple live and work in the former Methodist chapel, where their living quarters are beautifully furnished with products from their own workshop. Michael has also increased his workspace by building an extension to the



Michael and Dot Griffin, cabinet makers



Competitors in the Leadenboots Challenge Photo: Jo Wood

chapel, carefully constructed in reclaimed stone to match the old building.

Stone is the building material that has been used over the ages to create the substantial cottages that give Alstonefield its distinctive character. Most houses are constructed from the local limestone, but gritstone is used for detailing around doors and windows. One of the finest houses in the village is Alstonefield Manor, a grand Georgian mansion set in an acre of beautiful grounds. Rob and Jo Wood run the 18th century house as a B & B and the old Estate Rooms as a private suite. Given the fine period features of the accommodation, they have no difficulty in attracting guests.

When I called at the Manor, Rob was working with his neighbour Nicholas

Pitts-Tucker to design promotional material for a touring exhibition of wood engravings illustrating places in both the Dark Peak and the White Peak. The show is being mounted at 14 venues across the Peak District from April to October. Nicholas first came with up the idea for the exhibition when he and his wife Ruth came across some engravings when they were visiting the town of Winchcombe in the Cotswolds.

Explaining his motives, Nicholas said: 'Although I was bowled over by the wood engravers' art, I realised that the leading engravers have neglected the Peak District as a subject, even though its gorges, crags, rocks and stone buildings would make it a perfect subject. I decided to invite 12 of the country's leading wood-engravers to stay at my house for a series of long weekends.'



**Above:** Jean Allen, Chair of the Village Hall Committee  
**Right:** The Village Pump  
**Below:** Rob Wood (left) and Nicholas Pitt-Tucker with prints for the Peak Prints Exhibition



The result is a unique collection of 40 wood engravings that capture landscape and life in the Peak District?

Another Alstonefield man who organises an ambitious event is Noel Peat, who is the coordinator of the annual Leadenboots Challenge, a marathon for both runners and walkers. Noel says, 'The participants cover 26.2 miles of Peak District terrain, involving 5,800ft of ascent in all - plus the equivalent descent, of course! We limit entries to a maximum of 300, but we attract participants from all over the UK and we even have one from America this year. To date, Damien Thacker holds the record for the best time of 5 hours, 22 minutes. He is entering again this year.'

A sporting activity of a slightly less strenuous nature is that pursued by

members of Alstonefield's cricket club, known as 'The Gargoyles'. According to the club's website, 'The name is designed to reflect the rather careworn faces of the majority of members and takes its inspiration from the more playful examples of the church's gargoyles. An important feature of our games is the post-match analysis, which always takes place in *The George!*'

This well-known pub, characterised by its fine food, roaring fires, lime-washed walls and farmhouse furniture, has been described by the *Sunday Times* as 'the perfect Peakland pub'. It stands picturesquely alongside the largest of Alstonefield's greens, making it the centrepiece in one of the many perfect set-piece views to be found in this

delightful Peak District village, which has won Staffordshire's 'Best Kept Village' award on numerous occasions. ■



Children's Fancy Dress at the Wakes Weekend