

## A virtuous woman

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*Father*

*We give you thanks and praise for your foundress, DAME ALICE OWEN, by whose bounty your School was established, and for the Master, Wardens and Assistants of the Worshipful Company of Brewers, and the Governors, whose wise guidance and generosity has enabled your School to flourish. We remember with gratitude the mercies vouchsafed during four centuries, with all the benefits therefrom. And we pray for the further well-being of the School, that both they who teach and they who learn may increase in wisdom and holiness, to the glory of God, the benefit of his holy Church, and the good of all mankind.*

*(Prayer from the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary service at St Paul's cathedral – adapted)*

Our text may be found in today's reading from the book of Proverbs, chapter 31 and verse 11 – I'm quoting the translation found in the King James Bible of 1611:

**'Who can find a virtuous woman for her price is far above rubies ?'**

In little over a week's time at Michaelmas, on 29<sup>th</sup> September, the School where I taught for 22 years before retiring from teaching to come here to Dinard to be your priest, Dame Alice Owen's School, will be celebrating its Founder's Day. Our reading from Proverbs is the traditional text which will be read at the Full School Assembly by the Head Girl. This year marks the 399<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that foundation and next year we will be marking its Quatercentenary, our four hundredth anniversary since the school opened in Islington in 1613, two years

after the publication of the translation of the Bible authorised by King James from which today's text comes:

**'Who can find a virtuous woman for her price is far above rubies ?'**

In my spare time during my first four years here, I researched and wrote an updated history of the school which has been edited and will be published in October in a limited edition to coincide with the four hundredth anniversary which will be celebrated throughout the coming academic year. I was sent an advanced copy of the book which arrived this week and it's good to hold the fruit of my work in my hand.

Our School was founded in 1613 but its origin is rooted some 50 years earlier with an incident with which all Owenians are familiar: the story of Alice, an arrow and a cow. It took place in 1558 when Mary Tudor was the Queen of England. Alice Owen, then Alice Wilkes, 11-years-old and the third daughter of Thomas Wilkes, landlord of an inn in the village of Islington on the edge of London had the urge to milk a cow. Alice had been wandering in the fields with a maidservant when she had the opportunity of trying her hand at milking. On standing up from the milking stool, Alice narrowly escaped death when an arrow from a nearby archery practice miscarried and pierced her stove-pipe hat. To her mind, her lucky escape was a sign of God's protection and providential care so in gratitude, she resolved to do something for the poor when in a position to do so.

She subsequently married three times, widowing each of her husbands. Her first, Henry Robinson, a brewer, may have died of the plague; her second William Elkin,

a draper, twenty years her senior, died of old age; her third Thomas Owen, a judge, did die of the plague. Alice had 11 children by her first marriage, only four surviving into adulthood, and one, Margaret, by her second husband. She was left a widow of considerable, independent means and though herself not a titled lady, she did have a coat of arms and enjoyed the courtesy title, Dame Alice Owen. Towards the end of her life, Dame Alice established almshouses for ten poor widows and a school for thirty poor scholars, both to be administered by her first husband's Livery Company, the Worshipful Company of Brewers.

And the rest is history. Until the nineteenth century the school offered free education to the son's of the deserving poor on the recommendation of the vicar and wardens of the parishes of Islington and Clerkenwell. With the education reforms of the time, the school became a grammar school for boys with a second grammar school established to educate girls. During the Second World War, the boys' school was evacuated to Bedford, the girls' to Kettering. After the war, the schools became Voluntary Aided Grammar Schools but with the comprehensive reorganisation in the mid sixties and the proposed redevelopment of the Angel Islington, the Schools moved out to Potters Bar in Hertfordshire as one mixed, all-ability school where, understandably, it still enjoys a reputation for excellence and is substantially oversubscribed.

But did Alice deserve the title of 'virtuous woman' and why did she found and fund a school and almshouses ?

Firstly, 'virtuous' which the NRSV translates as 'capable'. The word in Hebrew 'chayil' literally means 'force', 'strength of mind and body'. You can see that 'capable' neatly reduces the ideas to someone who is an expert at coping whereas 'virtuous' suggests she had all the right qualities a good wife should possess. A dozen pregnancies and successfully running a household with servants without any of the labour-saving devices we take for granted must mean she was by any understanding an excellent woman and wife both 'capable' and 'virtuous'.

But why her act of charity ? It's all down to the Reformation. Alice was born in the reign of Henry VIII and most of her married life was during the reign of Elizabeth I while her time as widow was under James I. For all three monarchs, a clear notion of civic responsibility was encouraged: that the rich should do something to aid the poor. Gone was the idea of founding a chantry chapel or paying priests to say masses for the repose of the soul – time off purgatory if you like. Instead, to finance the education of the deserving poor or to provide relief for sober, honest women was a duty that responsible Christians embraced. Alice Owen accepted that duty and as a result her name lives on today !

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist  
St Bartholomew's, Dinard  
23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2012*

H: Sermon 26 : Virtuous woman

