

THE CHURCH ROOMS



The Victorian Church Rooms

John Allitt was responsible for building the Church Rooms in 1887. He was a butcher, baker, and well known church supporter and benefactor.

But to understand why he decided to build the Church Rooms we should perhaps look at his life and circumstances at this time.

Three stained glass windows in Cropredy church tell us a little of his family.

John and his wife Ann had just one child, a daughter named Emily Ann.

In 1880 Emily died suddenly in London at the age of 26. She was buried in Cropredy and her grieving parents sealed up her bedroom at the Bakehouse. They had a stained glass window erected at the east end of St Fremund's Chapel in her memory. Interestingly an image of Cropredy church tower was included in a resurrection scene in this window - this was introduced because Emily was buried near the tower and her father, John Allitt, was for many years the ringer of the great tenor bell which hangs there.

Three years later, in 1883, John Allitt's wife, Ann, died aged 61 and John was soon installing another window in St Fremund's Chapel, this time in memory of his wife.* John was now a widower, aged 62, with no direct heirs to inherit his estate.

*Note: A third window was later installed in St Fremund's Chapel in memory of John Allitt, after his death in 1909. This window was procured and funded by his brother and sister and their families.

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Left to right: 'Stone Cottage', Church Rooms and The Bakehouse

Following his marriage in 1854, John Allitt lived at The Bakehouse on the South side of Church Lane from where he worked as a baker and butcher.

Between 'Stone Cottage' and the Bakehouse at that time was a small brick and slate cottage which John Allitt rented for use as his butcher's shop. By 1871 the Vicar was renting this former butcher's shop which he had now converted for use as a Sunday School.

Later, in 1887, John Allitt acquired the freehold of this property and had the Sunday School pulled down. With the help of other parishioners he raised enough money to commission W.E. Mills, a Banbury architect, to design and build the new Church Rooms on this site. The new building provided space for a Sunday School and also a Reading Room where people could read the daily newspapers. The Birmingham Post would arrive each day by train and someone would be despatched to collect it from Cropredy station. It was then placed in the Church Rooms for evening reading by the men of the village. Teenage boys were also allowed to play cards, dominoes etc. in this building – as long as they were quiet!

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Cropredy Church tower hiding in the window dedicated to Emily Allitt

Pictured above is the east window in St Fremund's Chapel, which is dedicated to Emily Ann Allitt, who died aged 26 years.

The photo below shows John Allitt and the Revd. W. Wood D.D. behind the newly built Church Rooms. It also shows the architect's attention to detail when designing the building.



The Church Rooms at Cropredy

DID THE CHAPEL INFLUENCE THE CHURCH AND JOHN ALLITT ?

In 1881, six years before the Church Rooms were built, John Allitt would have watched the new Methodist Chapel being built in Cropredy. This new Chapel provided both space for services and also additional rooms which could be used for Sunday School and other functions. Could John Allitt have felt a need to provide similar facilities for the church?

Before the new Reading Room was built many Cropredy men would have visited the Brasenose Inn or The Red Lion to read the newspaper, taking the opportunity to have a drink while reading the paper. But with the rise of Methodism in the village came strong views and organised opposition against alcohol, strengthened by temperance movements such as the Band of Hope. Would John Allitt have wanted to protect the integrity of the Church of England by providing an alternative venue for people to meet where alcohol was not available?

Certainly he was a committed church supporter and a generous benefactor, sparing no expense with the design of the new Church Rooms. He was also careful to suggest that a relative must always be one of the trustees of the Church Rooms to ensure their proper use.

John Allitt was not able to leave direct descendants to follow in his Cropredy footsteps. But he did leave lasting memorials in the church windows and he left the village with a building which provided both additional facilities for the church and an excellent example of Victorian architecture.