



Prince Leopold's welcome, 1864 (Bishop's Waltham Museum)

## Bishops Waltham's debt to social entrepreneur

Barry Shurlock reports on a man who energised the sleepy Victorian market town of Bishop's Waltham

● MOST places have some obvious clues to their past. It just needs a bit of detective work to solve the puzzle. Bishop's Waltham is a good example. In the Newton area stands the Priory Inn. On the opposite side of the road are the Claylands Nature Reserve, Victoria Road and Albert Road. Then there is the Station Roundabout and a puzzling level-crossing gate. All these clues point to Arthur Helps (later knighted) who in the 1860s came to the town.

After a promising career in London went sour he bought the Vernon Hill Estate on the outskirts of Bishop's Waltham and settled down to be a writer. He wrote books on social reform and also biography, including the life of Thomas Brassey, who had built the London-Southampton railway.

But his interests soon took off in another direction. On his estate had been found deposits of a rare form of clay. In fact, experts have described them as "some of the finest clay beds in the UK". He took test borings and sent them off to Mark Blanchard, a London-based manufacturer of some of the best terra cotta products in the country. And the report was good.

Helps decided to found the Bishop's Waltham Clay Company and kick-start the town into an industrial revolution. It had long limped along with the ups and downs of agriculture. At great expense, he bought the necessary equipment, laid out a yard

and built houses for the workers. At first the company made bricks, many of which went into Blackfriars bridge across the Thames. In 1866 it turned to making fine pottery, using designs from the *Odyssey* and other classical tales, based on the drawings of the sculptor John Flaxman. They are now treasured by major museums in New York and London and are in the collections of the Hampshire Cultural Trust, Winchester. And locally, there is a fine display in Bishop's Waltham's superb museum.

Helps also set about improving the town's water supply and founding a gas and coke works. He and others built a railway between Bishop's Waltham and Botley (now a footpath) to reach markets in London and elsewhere. It had a halt at Durley and provided links to Gosport and Portsmouth and Eastleigh and Southampton.

Another project was the building of the Royal Albert Infirmary, so named with the queen's permission after the recently dead Prince Consort. The Foundation stone was laid with much ceremony in 1864 by the monarch's son, Prince Leopold.

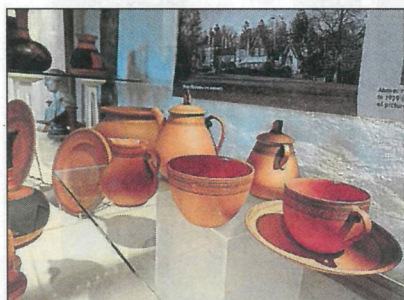
Unfortunately, like many visionaries, Helps became critically overstretched and only 18 months after the pottery had got underway he had to sell everything – even his Vernon Hill Estate. The infirmary was never used as a hospital. Eventually in 1911 it became home to French Catholic Missionaries, but, despite the name of the existing pub, and the Catholic church at Newtown, it never was a priory.

Helps' time at Bishop's Waltham must have been a great disappointment, but his legacy endured. The clayworks were bought by Mark Blanchard and continued to make bricks until 1956.

For more information, visit Bishop's Waltham Museum, and [hampshirearchivestrust.co.uk](http://hampshirearchivestrust.co.uk).

**Barry Shurlock**  
[barryshurlock@gmail.com](mailto:barryshurlock@gmail.com)

NOTE: George Moberly died in 1885, not 1895, as published last week (January 2).



Local pottery, Bishop's Waltham Museum