

## John Denton (1830-1903)

### Vicar 1875-1903

*Last Friday evening witnessed one of the most sorrowful events that have ever been experienced in Ashby – the death of the Rev Canon Denton, MA, Vicar of Ashby and Rural Dean. For some weeks the inhabitants of the town have watched by his bedside, hoping and trusting that he would be restored to good health, but providence willed otherwise, and now he has passed away to his well-earned rest. Although the deceased gentleman lingered for a considerable time, his end was sudden and one could hardly believe the sad news when it was first circulated. But, alas, their doubts were soon driven away by the sound of the muffled bell from the old church tower, and each mournful boom went home to their hearts as a dagger thrust. Gradually the sad news spread and on every hand was received with expressions of sorrow and sympathy for the bereaved ones, for he was respected by all men and beloved by many. All political and sectarian differences were forgotten in this hour of sadness, and all hearts joined in lamentation. Those who knew him well found in him a true type of an English gentleman, and recognised that his virtues far outweighed any shortcomings that he may have possessed.<sup>1</sup>*



John Denton as an older man  
(photo courtesy of Ashby  
Museum)

John Denton had an enormous influence on life in Ashby in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was a well-known face around the town. He was on the boards of several Ashby schools, an active Mason and chaplain to the Leicestershire Volunteer Regiment. He was closely associated with both of Ashby's parish churches for almost half a century and was instrumental in several ambitious building projects, the largest of which was the extension and restoration of St Helen's between 1878-1880.

John Denton was born at Lawn House in Hotham, a village just west of Hull in East Yorkshire, the only child of William and Elizabeth Denton (née Wright). His father is described on consecutive census returns as a bricklayer, a builder and an architect. William Denton also owned significant numbers of properties in and around Hull, which his son later inherited.

John Denton was educated at St Peter's School in York<sup>2</sup>, before being admitted to St John's College, Cambridge in 1848. Some of his diaries from his teenage years survive, giving a glimpse into the life of a young man in the 1840s and '50s.<sup>3</sup> His diary for 1848 describes his New Year break from Cambridge, at home in Hotham, where he spent a lot of time out shooting and went to church twice on Sundays. Back in Cambridge, he spent some of his free time out walking with a friend and mourned his lack of Valentines' cards on 14<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Burton Chronicle. 18<sup>th</sup> June 1903 (FindMyPast). Reporting on the death of Canon John Denton.

<sup>2</sup> One of the oldest schools in the world. Guy Fawkes was once a pupil.

<sup>3</sup> John Denton's early diaries are in the care of Leicestershire Records Office

February. In June 1851 he visited the Great Exhibition in London, enjoyed the musical entertainment at 'Evans' in Covent Garden and attended the Italian Opera.<sup>4</sup>

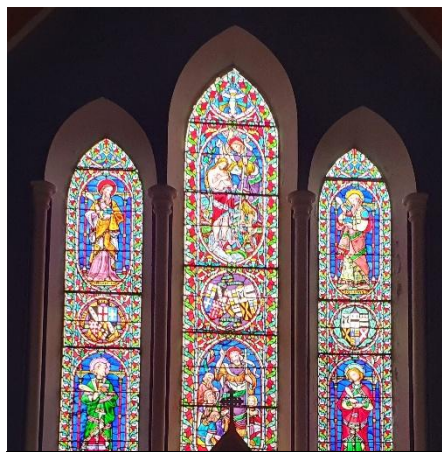
Whilst at St John's, he was a member of the Cambridge Architectural Society and of the Lady Margaret Boat Club, a rowing club for members of St John's College. He graduated with a first class BA in 1852, was ordained deacon by the Bishop of Peterborough in 1853 and priest in 1854. He spent a year as curate at All Saints Church in Northampton before arriving in Ashby as curate and lecturer in 1854. Thus started an almost 50 year association with the town.

John Denton's first post in Ashby was as curate to Marmaduke Vavasour who, in November 1856, despatched him to minister as 'perpetual curate' at Holy Trinity Church, which had been built in 1837 to help guide the spiritual life of a growing town. Denton laid the groundwork for his future work in Ashby here. In 1857 he married Vavasour's third daughter, Mary Ann Elizabeth, and the 1861 census records the couple with three children, aged 3, 2 and 3 months plus a cook, a housemaid and a nurse living in the brand new Holy Trinity vicarage on Wilfred Place.<sup>5</sup> John Denton had managed to raise the funds<sup>6</sup> to build this new residence a year earlier. Trinity's previous curate, Thomas Fell, had lived in one of the Regency terraces on Bath Street.



*John Denton as a young man. (Photo courtesy of Ashby Museum)*

John Denton became the first vicar of Holy Trinity Parish when Ashby was divided to give Holy Trinity its own parish and he also became vicar of Willesley in 1866. Holy Trinity soon proved to be too small for its growing congregation and Denton set



*Chancel window in Holy Trinity Church (JS)*

about raising funds for its expansion, partial rebuilding and 'beautification.'<sup>7</sup> The work was carried out in 1866, the church re-opening that September. The Chancel, originally a 'mere recess,'<sup>8</sup> was demolished and rebuilt on a much larger scale on land donated by neighbour John Davys, who lived at Hill House. The vestry was doubled in size and a stained glass window was donated for the Chancel by Lady Edith and Mr Abney Hastings. The nave was partially re-modelled and the whole building was thoroughly cleaned and decorated. The churchyard was also remodelled and its walls rebuilt. The work was carried out by Lilleys of Ashby, the architect being James

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evans\\_Music-and-Supper\\_Rooms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evans_Music-and-Supper_Rooms)

<sup>5</sup> It is now a private house.

<sup>6</sup> Leicester Journal. 16<sup>th</sup> August 1861. The building cost £1400. The land was given by the Marquis of Hastings and valued at £280. £780 was granted by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and £400 raised by voluntary subscriptions, leaving a deficiency of £260 which was raised by a bazaar held on 6-7 August 1861.

<sup>7</sup> The Derby Mercury. September 1866.

<sup>8</sup> The Derby Mercury. September 1866.

Piers St Aubyn; the same team who had built Denton's new vicarage five years earlier.

The Denton family grew rapidly. By 1871 there were five children in the vicarage, aged between 7 and 13 years. The family employed a cook, a housemaid and a nurse.

In May 1875, Marmaduke Vavasour, by now elderly and ailing, retired as Vicar of St Helen's after 42 years' service and moved to Bristol. The way was now clear for John Denton to apply for Vavasour's post. This was not a straightforward process. Despite his 21 years in the town, Denton could not have been appreciated by everyone because *'he was at first denied'*<sup>9</sup> the post of Vicar at St Helen's before being granted it in August, three months after Vavasour's departure. Perhaps this was due to his style, which is alluded to in one of the lengthy obituaries which appeared after his death. *'For several years he worked with great energy and determination and, despite a good deal of opposition by those who were partial to high church practices, he won his way into the hearts of the people and made his church a complete success.'*<sup>10</sup> Could it have been that St Helen's at the time was partial to *'high church practices'* and not keen to change? Certainly, Denton had support among people in the town, as reported in the Leicester Journal in May 1875: *'A correspondent, who does not sign his name, writes to us:- "The venerable vicar of Ashby, the Rev Marmaduke Vavasour, has, we hear, resigned the living of St Helen's Church, which he has held for nearly fifty years. Nothing is yet known as to who his successor will be, but a universal wish is expressed that the Rev John Denton, who is so deservedly esteemed in Ashby, may succeed him – indeed, if the town were polled there is no doubt that Mr Denton would be its almost unanimous choice.'*<sup>11</sup>

By August, the arguments had evidently been settled and Denton was presented to the vicarage of St Helen's. He was inducted on Monday 13<sup>th</sup> September 1875 by the Archdeacon of Leicester, Henry Fearon.

The new vicar set to work immediately. By all accounts, the mainly 15<sup>th</sup> Century church dedicated to St Helen was in a very poor state of repair. Galleries on three sides of the building made it dark and gloomy inside and its ancient monuments were in need of attention. Little had been done since the building was re-pewed in 1829, four years before Vavasour's arrival. On 14<sup>th</sup> May 1877, a public meeting was held in the Town Hall, presided over by the Earl of Loudoun. Such was the enthusiasm in the room for a restoration of St Helen's that £2678 was collected there and then. A building committee had already been formed and architect James Piers St Aubyn, who had previously worked twice with Denton at Holy Trinity, was appointed to oversee the works. St Aubyn was known for his work on churches in the Gothic Revival style and had worked on the restoration of St Michael's Mount. He narrowly missed out to John Loughborough Pearson on becoming the architect of the new Truro Cathedral, which began construction in 1880.

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<sup>9</sup> Burton Chronicle. 18 June 1903. John Denton's obituary.

<sup>10</sup> Burton Chronicle. 18 June 1903. John Denton's obituary.

<sup>11</sup> Leicester Journal. 14 May 1875.



*St Helen's Church looking East prior to its extension.*

The building works were put out to tender and won by local builder George Lilley, who had also worked twice with Denton at Holy Trinity. The works at St Helen's would far exceed the scope of work carried out at Holy Trinity; enlarging the church by fifteen feet (almost 5 metres) on its north and south sides, removing the galleries, repairing the roof, walls, windows and doors, restoring the tower and the vestry, levelling headstones in the churchyard and creating new footpaths. It was initially estimated that the work would cost around £8,000. Almost immediately, however, it became clear that not everything could be

accomplished for the price and plans for restoration of the vestry and upper part of the tower were shelved.

The church was closed in May 1878 and worship moved to the Town Hall. At a crowded farewell service, Denton proclaimed:

*"...as we take a look round the old walls, so soon to be dismantled, we find that they are all full of treasured associations. And while we bid these, I may venture to call them the household portions of our church, a temporary farewell, we may be assured they will all re-appear in our restored church: - each monument will still be there:- the Pilgrim of the 15<sup>th</sup> century will have opposite the memorial raised to the memory of the distinguished townsman of the 19<sup>th</sup>. And speaking generally I may very confidently say that we who have*

*been proud of the old Parish Church of Ashby, as we have known it, will be a hundredfold more proud of it when it is restored. These cumbrous galleries removed, two new aisles (while giving additional room) giving additional dignity to the whole edifice, these beautiful windows renewed and standing out to view, the high pews cleared away and fitting seats substituted, special gifts adorning this house of God in various parts, all these and many other things cause us indeed to look forward to what we spoke of this afternoon, even to*



*St Helen's Church looking West prior to its extension.*

*realising that promise made to the re-builders of the second Temple – “The glory of the latter house shall be greater than that of the former.”<sup>12</sup>*

The building committee was mindful of costs. A large quantity of timber, presumably from the dismantled galleries, was sold to raise funds for the building works and accurate accounts were kept. Old iron was also sold and the sale of the old Hornbuckle organ raised over £100. There were setbacks. Bad weather in the winter of 1878-9 meant that some newly built stonework had to be dismantled and rebuilt due to frost damage but progress on the building was generally steady. The Chancel window was raised in height by two courses of stone and the roofs of the old aisles, the Chancel and the Hastings Chapel were entirely replaced, with repairs carried out to the nave roof. The Hastings Tomb was moved from its position by the east wall of the Hastings Chapel to its centre, a concrete floor was laid in the nave and a new heating system was installed. Blue brick paving was laid around the building and new drain pipes were put in place. The monuments, which had been carefully wrapped and stored, were replaced in the church. Unfortunately, records have not yet come to light as to the position of the monuments prior to the church extension.

New gas lighting was put in, red and black Minton tiles were laid around the altar and in the aisles, a new alabaster pulpit and font were installed and varnished pitch pine pews arrived for both congregation and choir in February 1880. One by one, in honour of prominent local citizens and at the expense of their families and friends, eleven of the church's plain glass windows were replaced with new painted glass windows to a design scheme set out by Denton, illustrating events in the life of Jesus from the Annunciation of his birth to bearing his cross to Calvary. St Helen's has no depiction of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, but perhaps this was intended for the West window in the Tower, which has plain glass to this day. The windows were made by Messrs Lavers, Barraud and Westlake. Medieval roundels of stained glass were given to the church by Lord and Lady Donington for the windows in the Chancel and Hastings Chapel. A brand new Kirkland organ was installed at the head of the north aisle.

The church re-opened at Easter 1880, not quite two years after its closure. However, works were sufficiently advanced for one important service to be held there on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1879: the funeral of Rev Marmaduke Vavasour, who was then laid to rest in Ashby Cemetery.

Re-opening of the church was an exciting time, but all was not financially well. Outlay on the project had been more than £11,000 but there was still a deficiency in funds of just over £2,000. This caused much anxiety to John Denton and his building committee. Funding fatigue had set in and new donations merely trickled in, not meeting the shortfall. Damage to the Church Tower by a storm in October 1881 caused further woe.<sup>13</sup> A huge Medieval themed bazaar came to the rescue in August 1882, raising more than £1,600 over three

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<sup>12</sup> St Helen's Parish Magazine. June 1878. Courtesy of Ashby de la Zouch Museum.

<sup>13</sup> Storm of October 14<sup>th</sup> 1881 which caused damage throughout Europe, most tragically at Eyemouth in south east Scotland, where 189 local fishermen died.



days. It wasn't until John Denton's New Year Address for 1885, however, that he could finally report that the loan was '*wholly paid and the church is now free from debt.*'<sup>14</sup>



*Stalls set out for the Bazaar of 1882. Photo courtesy of Ashby Museum.*

An important part of Denton's vision for his restored church was that it should have '*free and open*' seating. Pew rents had raised significant sums for parish churches over the years, but they came at a cost. Those who could afford to pay got the best seats and those who couldn't were pushed to the back. Denton was part of a growing movement who wished to abolish pew rents in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and when St Helen's re-opened in 1880, every member of the congregation was free to choose their seat.

Denton also had definite ideas on musical provision for services. Prior to 1878, St Helen's had an ad hoc choir who sang from the old West Gallery, but in 1880 a surpliced choir was formed and provided with dedicated choir stalls on either side of the nave, just below the Chancel steps. The fact that 40 choir surplices were purchased indicates that this was a substantial choir indeed.

John Denton did not rest once the great work of restoring and enlarging his church was completed. In 1885, virtually as soon as the rebuilding and restoration project was paid off, another bazaar was announced, this time to raise money '*to meet our present pressing*

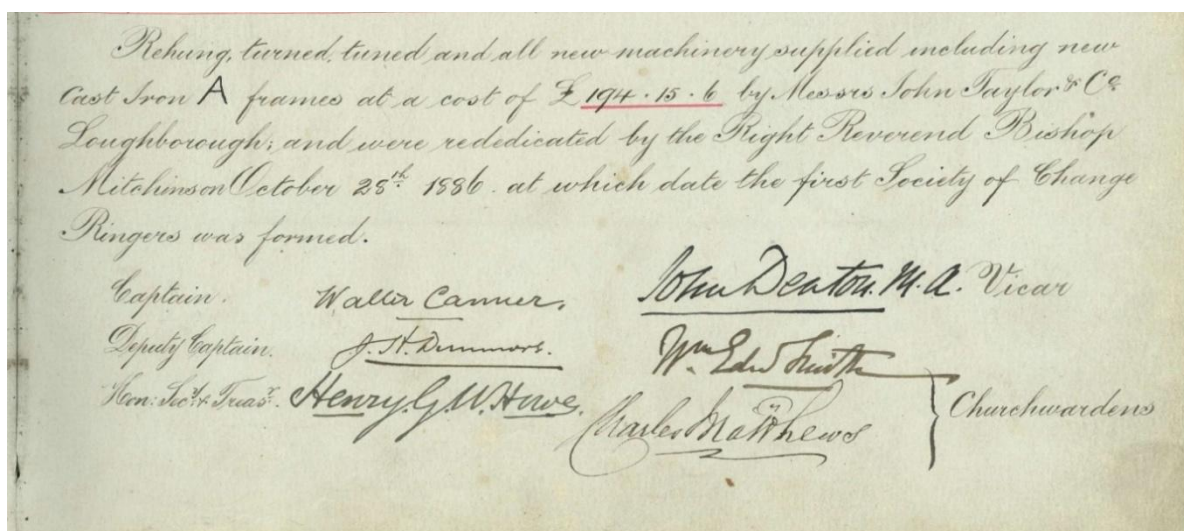
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<sup>14</sup> New Year Address by the Vicar, John Denton, reported in the Parish Magazine, January 1885. Courtesy of Ashby de la Zouch Museum.

*needs and restore the upper portion of the Tower, and rehang, turn and renew the machinery of the eight famous bells of our Parish Church.*<sup>15</sup> Lord Donington gave the church free use of the Bath Rooms<sup>16</sup> to hold the bazaar and, after costs, it raised around £450 to fund works on the tower and the bells.

Work on the church tower, reluctantly postponed in 1878 due to a lack of funds, took place during 1886. A service, led by Bishop Mitchinson of Peterborough, was held in St Helen's on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> October 1886 to celebrate the opening and re-dedication of the church's eight bells. The upper part of the Tower had been renewed, four '*exceedingly large handsome pinnacles*' were erected on it and the bells had been despatched to Taylor and Sons of Loughborough, who turned and tuned them, then refixed them on new machinery, including new cast iron A frames, at a cost of £194 15s 6d.

Denton was also instrumental in the formation of a Change Ringing Society, founded in 1886. The Ashby ringers, all men in those days, were inexperienced and were trained by men from St Paul's Church in Burton on Trent, who travelled over by train. Bell ringing at the service to re-dedicate the bells was largely carried out by the Burton men, but the Ashby ringers were making good progress and were to go from strength to strength in the following decades. The church's magnificent leather bound 'Peal Book' is testimony to the work carried out by both Burton and Ashby ringers in the years up to the First World War.



*Detail from the Ringers' Peal Book. Signatures include those of the vicar, John Denton, and his churchwardens, E W Smith and Charles Matthews. Also, Tower Captain Walter Canner. (JS)*

In 1890, John Denton was made an Honorary Canon of Peterborough Cathedral. He was Rural Dean of Akeley West from July 1896 until his death. His appointment as Canon was reported in the Leicester Journal: '*Canon Denton has been long connected with the diocese and with public matters in Ashby de la Zouch and its neighbourhood and this recognition of his services by the Bishop has given general satisfaction. Canon Denton ... was a scholar of St John's College, Cambridge, and took his BA degree in mathematical honours in 1852 ... At his*

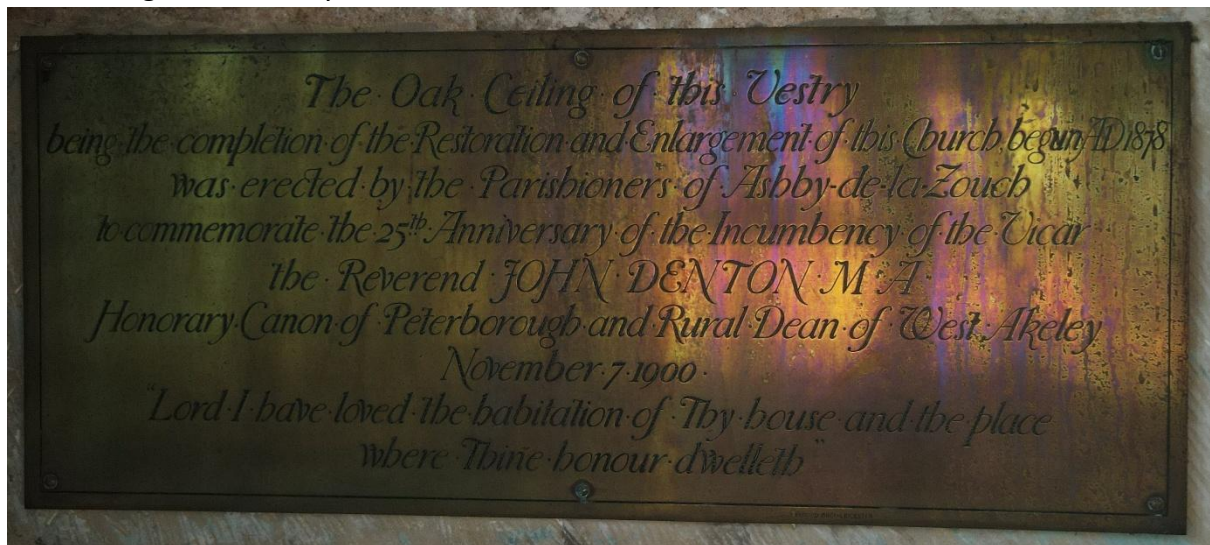
<sup>15</sup> Parish Magazine. April 1885. Courtesy of Ashby de la Zouch Museum.

<sup>16</sup> Bath Rooms. Ivanhoe Spa Baths behind the Royal Hotel, which were in decline after about 1870 and demolished in 1962



*ordination in Peterborough Cathedral in 1853 he had the distinction of reading the gospel ... in 1875 he was presented by Lord Donington to the Vicarage of Ashby de la Zouch. He is chairman of the Ashby de la Zouch Board of Guardians and of the Governors of Ashby Grammar School, as well as holding other important offices. He has been a member of the Diocesan Conference since its foundation, and for some time he acted as Diocesan Inspector of Schools.'*<sup>17</sup>

In 1900, to celebrate Canon Denton's twenty five years at St Helen's, the parish gifted him an oak ceiling to the vestry, in completion of his work to restore and enlarge the church, which was left incomplete in 1880 due to lack of funds. This is commemorated on a brass plaque which hangs in the vestry.



It reads, 'The Oak ceiling of this Vestry being the completion of the Restoration and Enlargement of this Church begun 1878 was erected by the Parishioners of Ashby de la Zouch to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Incumbency of the Vicar, the Reverend John Denton MA. Honorary Canon of Peterborough and Rural Dean of West Akeley. November 7 1900. Lord I have loved the habitation of Thy house and the place where Thine honour dwelleth.'

Denton was enthusiastic and active in planning Ashby's celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations in 1897 and moved the resolution to celebrate the King's coronation in 1902, but in the final two years of his life, his health was failing. He had been using a bath chair to get about for a while and his health declined more rapidly after a collision with a horse and cart some 18 months before his death. He died on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1903 at the age of 73 years.

What of the man? He was clearly driven and hardworking, with boundless energy and a clear vision of what he wanted to do and the determination to carry out that vision. His obituaries go into great detail about his achievements and, to a degree, attempt to describe his character. Obituaries are often generous in the way they describe the recently deceased, but it may be possible to read between the lines.

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<sup>17</sup> Leicester Journal. 31 October 1890.



He must have inspired loyalty in those around him, because his churchwardens served him and the Parish Church for many years. Charles Matthews and William Edward Smith, who were churchwardens at the time of the church extension, served for seventy years between them.

John Denton fulfilled many public roles in the town, as well as being vicar of St Helen's. He was Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Workhouse for many years, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Grammar Schools, Chaplain of the Leicestershire Volunteers and, at the time of his death, *'the oldest Mason in the province as far as years of membership are concerned.'*<sup>18</sup> Denton joined the Ashby Lodge in 1859 and held all major offices. It was due to his long and close association with the Masons that the alabaster pulpit and font were given by them in 1880 as part of the church restoration. He was associated with the Church of England Friendly Society for almost 50 years, was chairman of the Ashby Burial Board and president of the Ashby auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society.

*'Few are there who can boast such an honoured and energetic career as his. For nearly fifty years he was connected with Ashby, and during the whole of that time lent a willing hand to the furtherance of any and every good cause. In public life he held a prominent part: in fact, there was hardly any body of importance that lacked his co-operation.'*<sup>19</sup>

Copious achievements are recorded and great praise offered, but also a measure of criticism. The man became softer hearted as he grew older.

*'His long and honoured connection with the Poor Law is perhaps one of the chief features of that portion of his life. During the long period that he held the chairmanship of that Board he served the Union honestly and well, and though towards the end his leniency was too marked for such a position, none would have sanctioned his displacement.'*<sup>20</sup>

*'It may truly be said of the deceased that he was a gentleman in the true sense of the word, and one whose life has been one long spell of perseverance, energy and goodwill to all men. Could he not say a good word for his fellow men he refrained from saying an unkind one.'*<sup>21</sup>

He is described as a tactful, courteous and sympathetic man:

*'In the numerous offices he filled, those qualities of tact, courtesy and sympathy which were natural to him in his daily intercourse found useful manifestation and it is not too much to say that no other gentleman could have filled so many and varied appointments with more success and credit to himself than did Canon Denton, whose popularity was as widespread as it was well earned. He was identified with every project which has marked the progress of Ashby during the half century he has been a resident of it, and his life's work may be said to have been the restoration of his dearly loved parish church.'*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Burton Chronicle. 18 June 1903.

<sup>19</sup> Burton Chronicle. 18 June 1903.

<sup>20</sup> Burton Chronicle. 18 June 1903.

<sup>21</sup> Burton Chronicle. 18 June 1903.

<sup>22</sup> Melton Mowbray Mercury. 18 June 1903.

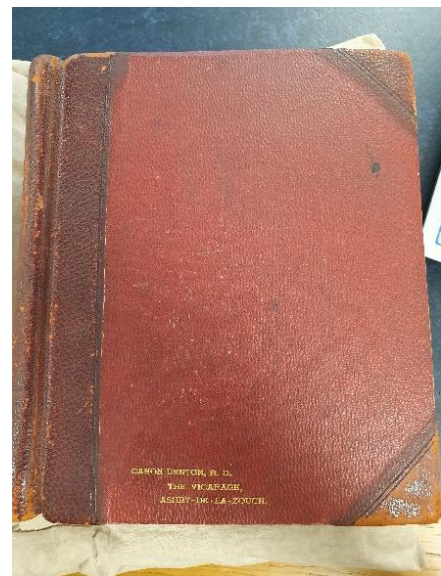
He was kind to the Gentlemen of the Press, a characteristic much appreciated by this journalist:

*'The late Canon Denton ... was one of the kindest disposed towards the representatives of the Press, and was ever ready to grant an interview on any matter.' 'In the matter of relief (to the poor) he was never known to be harsh, although he might occasionally pounce upon imposition. He lectured applicants occasionally, and cross examined with the skill of a lawyer, but was always large hearted and erred on the side of charity if at all.'*<sup>23</sup>

Denton was a writer himself, keeping journals throughout his life, writing at length for the Parish Magazine and seeing some of his historical writings published. In 1892, articles written by him about the French prisoners of war and about Ashby Castle appeared in 'Bygone Leicestershire,' a collection of historical essays by different contributors.<sup>24</sup>

*'He possessed probably the best historical knowledge of Ashby de la Zouch, collecting cuttings from every newspaper which referred to his parish, piles of newspaper cutting books, carefully arranged in his library making it possible for him to 'turn up' any notable event or fact on which enlightenment was required.'*<sup>25</sup>

Throughout his adult life, John Denton also kept 'Common Place Books' or 'Literary Diaries.'<sup>26</sup> These were books in which he recorded ideas and quotations which he found interesting or useful. He started the first of these as a student of St John's College, Cambridge, in 1849 and kept them until his death. In 1897, he had one of them re-bound. There is little in them that is obviously personal except that the topics he chooses to note indicate interests that are personal to him at different stages of his life. He quotes from the classics, on Richard III, on church buildings, on Napoleon, on the life of Cranmer. He enters passages from contemporary novels he has enjoyed reading, such as Jane Eyre, Martin Chuzzlewit and Villette. In 1857, the year in which he married, he copies in several passages on 'married life.' Only occasionally does he enter personal notes, such as a poem he wrote, grieving the death of his cousin Edith in Ireland in 1852 at the age of just 18.



*One of John Denton's Anecdote Books (JS)*

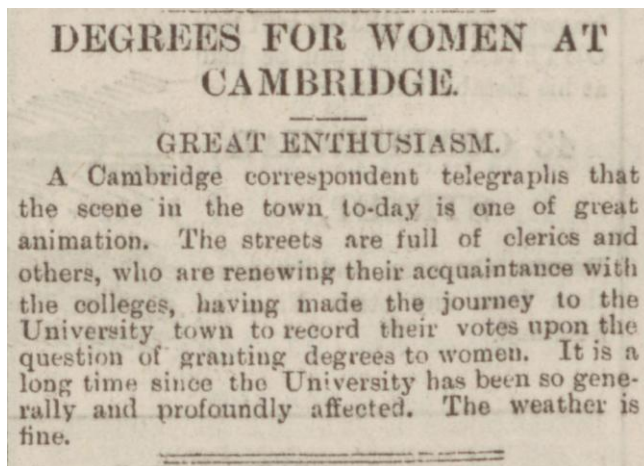
One interesting personal entry comes very late in his life, in May 1897, when Cambridge University invited all members (graduates) to return to their colleges to vote on the question of granting degrees to women. He wrote, 'John Denton RD late scholar of St John's College,

<sup>23</sup> Melton Mowbray Mercury. 18 June 1903.

<sup>24</sup> Bygone Leicestershire. Edited by William Andrews, FRHS. Published in Leicester by Frank Murray. 1892. Available online as a free download.

<sup>25</sup> Melton Mowbray Mercury. 18 June 1903.

<sup>26</sup> John Denton's Anecdote Books are held in Cambridge University Library.



Cambridge, who intends on May 21 to vote at Cambridge for women having degrees – he did and was in a big minority.’<sup>27</sup>

Voting took place on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1897, with graduates travelling to Cambridge by train from all over the country. 1713 voted against women being granted degrees, 662 voted in favour. John Denton was one of the 662. In fact, Cambridge was to be the last university

in England to award degrees to women, finally admitting them to full membership on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1948. This shows John Denton’s open mindedness and his willingness to embrace progress. Articles about the vote appeared in the national press.<sup>28</sup>

The Vicar of Holy Trinity, in his sermon on the Sunday after Denton’s death, said Denton *‘looked upon himself almost as a father of the community. Many faults had been laid at his door, but ... they should now forget and believe that whatever Canon Denton did he did it believing that he was right. He worked for the good of society, for the good of education, for the good of the Church and for good in all ways. He was most kindly disposed towards everyone and always acted in a spirit of friendliness and goodwill.’*<sup>29</sup>

Almost all Ashby businesses were closed and houses shuttered on the day of his funeral. Although the service wasn’t until 4 pm, people started to gather in the churchyard at 11 am. The Leicestershire Volunteer Regiment lined the route from the entrance to the Vicarage in Upper Church Street to the West Door of the church and Bishop Mitchinson presided over the service. Both church and churchyard were packed with people. There were representatives of all the Boards Denton had sat on and the united choirs of St Helen’s and Holy Trinity sang.

Another interesting point to note and another indicator of John Denton’s character and determination is in his choice of burial place. St Helen’s Churchyard had been closed from 1855, apart from burials in existing family graves. Marmaduke Vavasour, Denton’s father in law and his predecessor at St Helen’s, was buried in Ashby cemetery, but John Denton managed to secure a burial place for himself and his wife in the churchyard, by dispensation from the Privy Council Office. Permission was granted in writing on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1903 for Canon Denton and his wife, *‘to bury their bodies in the Churchyard of the Parish Church of St Helen Ashby de la Zouch, in a walled grave to be constructed in a grave space in which no interment has taken place within the period of fourteen years prior to the first day of June 1903; provided that the burials hereby authorised shall be subject to compliance with the*

<sup>27</sup> John Denton: Commonplace Books', identifier GBR/0012/MS Add.9205-9206. Access courtesy of Cambridge University Library.

<sup>28</sup> This article is taken from the Dundee Evening Telegraph. 21 May 1897.

<sup>29</sup> Melton Mowbray Mercury. 18 June 1903.

requirement that each of the coffins buried in such walled grave be separately enclosed by stonework or brickwork properly cemented.<sup>30</sup>

His burial actually took place before this date, on 16<sup>th</sup> June. Mrs Denton had sent a telegram to the Privy Council and a letter from them dated 13<sup>th</sup> June, the day after his death, informed her that a variation of the Order in Council (for the cessation of burials at St Helen's) was likely to be granted.<sup>31</sup>

The monuments to John and Mary Anne Elizabeth Denton are on the north side of the church, immediately opposite the gate into the Community Heritage Centre. There have been very few exceptions to the churchyard's closure but in 1918 permission was also granted for the burial of Florence Edith, Denton's youngest daughter, and in 1933 for the burial of her brother, Charles St John. Crosses to the memory of Charles St John Denton, and Florence Edith Shaw stand alongside the monument to their parents. Tribute is also paid to Henry (Harry) St Aubyn Denton, who died in India in 1898.

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BURIALS in the Parish of <i>Ashby de la Zouch</i> in the County of <i>Leicester</i> in the year One thousand <i>Nine</i> hundred and <i>Three</i>				
Name.	Abode.	When buried.	Age.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
<i>1903.</i> <i>John Denton</i> <i>retired</i>	<i>Ashby de la Zouch</i> <i>(Vicar of Ashby since 1875)</i>	<i>June 16</i>	<i>73</i> <i>years</i>	<i>Bishop Mitchinson</i> <i>Master of Pinchoke</i> <i>College, Oxford.</i>

No. 825

*Excerpt from the burial register of St Helen's, Ashby de la Zouch. (Find My Past)*

Mary Anne Elizabeth survived her husband by less than two years. She remained in Ashby, living in a house near the church gates, and died on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1905.

John and Mary Anne Elizabeth Denton had six children, three sons and three daughters. Apart from their second son, Henry, Headmaster of the Junior Department of Aligarh College in the North West Provinces of India, who died of enteric fever in 1898, all survived their parents.

Charles St John Denton was the eldest child, born in 1858. He married Rose Swonnell, an actress and they had two daughters. He became a theatrical agent and died in London in 1933, though he was buried at St Helen's. The eldest Denton daughter, Mary Cecil Penelope, was born in 1859. She married Samuel Joseph Viccars of Wigston Magna in 1893. Mary died in London in 1927.

<sup>30</sup> Leicestershire County Records Office. Documents from Crane & Walton. G36. Ref: DE1347. Box 47.

<sup>31</sup> Leicestershire County Records Office. Documents from Crane & Walton. G36. Ref: DE1347. Box 47.



Alice Louisa Denton was born in 1861. In 1887, she married Norton Joseph Hughes-Hallett, a solicitor. They lived in Derby and had at least five children. Alice also died in 1927. Henry St Aubyn was born in 1862, became a schoolmaster and went to teach in India, where he died aged 35 in 1898. Florence Edith, Denton's youngest daughter, was born in 1864 and married Frederick Charles Shaw, a Captain in the Sherwood Foresters, in 1891. They had a daughter, Phyllis. Florence died in Dublin in 1918, where her husband was Commander in Chief of the British Forces in Ireland. She was buried at St Helen's, under Coroner's Order, beside her parents.

The youngest Denton child was John Fleming St Andrew, who was born in 1872. He became an actor. There were two children, a son and a daughter, from his second marriage and he appears not to have married again after the death of his second wife, Hettie, in 1926. He died in Surrey in 1949.

*Julie Starkey*

*November 2025*

Thanks are due to Ashby Museum for access to St Helen's Parish Magazines 1877-1885, photographs of John Denton and of the Medieval Fair held at St Helen's in 1882. The photographs of the church interior prior to 1878 are by an unknown photographer and are on display in St Helen's Church. Other photographs are my own.