



## A Golden Jubilee

... from the Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News archive

Having served for 50 years as verger in a village church must be an almost unique experience these days, a record any man could be justly proud of. But Michael Bowler will have none of that. If he had his way this jubilee would be quietly forgotten and it was only with some reluctance that he agreed to tell us something about his life and his experiences. According to him it was almost by chance that his lifelong service began. "When I was a boy", he remembers, "our verger was Mr Tickner who used to come up from Friday Street with his brother who pumped the bellows for the organ. Well, early in 1941 he was called up for military service and as I was then the oldest choir boy - nearly 15 - I took over some of his duties. Originally this was only meant as a stop gap until somebody older and more experienced could be found, but no one came forward and so I was officially confirmed in the job by the PCC.

I was still at school in what was then the Dorking Grammar School and before that I had attended the village school here as I was born in Abinger. My father worked for the owner of Mark Ash and we lived at the cottage. Gradually, I grew into my job as verger and this did not change when I left school and began to work for the railway. Luckily this did not mean moving elsewhere, as "for the duration" the offices had been evacuated to Dorking and I worked there where the Kuoni building is now. For the next two or three years things went on peacefully until the church was badly damaged by the flying bomb just before 8 am on a Thursday in August 1944. A communion service was due to be held, but luckily neither the Rector nor any member of the congregation had arrived yet.

A good many houses were damaged and as a member of the fire service I had to keep watch at night in the Manor. All the windows had been blown out and it was necessary to guard the house as it was full of valuable items, including paintings, etc. The church could not be used at all to start with and services were held in various places: in the Evelyn Hall, at the School, at Goddards or the Army Camp. The congregation was quite large in those days, and

because of the soldiers attending we had regular church parades. Later we could use the North Chapel for services, but it was not until 1951 that the church was rebuilt and fully opened. That, of course, was a very great day for the whole village. But we still had no bells - they were not recast until Mr Cardale's time. During the war there was no bell ringing and after that we had to make do with a gramophone record.

I am sometimes asked what exactly are the duties of a verger? The traditional answer is: 'everything that the parson doesn't do!' It means in general being responsible for the security of the church, locking and unlocking it, cleaning the silver and brass, laying out vestments and preparing everything for the services. It depends very much on the individual verger how he regards his job and I have been able to do more since I retired a few years ago from the railway. A great deal depends also on the person how much use he makes of his verger. During my time there have been five rectors in Abinger: Mr Meade, Dr Chapman, Mr Kelly, Mr Cardale and now Mr Venus. They were very different personalities, each had his own ways and it is difficult to compare them with each other, but I am glad to say that personally I got on with each of them very well.

There is no general rule as to how a verger is to be dressed, Originally I had a cassock, but now have a gown, more like an academic's dress. For many years I carried a cross during church processions and was very pleased when last year I was given a proper verge, which had been bought with money given by an American in memory of Mr Bob Clarke at the Manor. The verge is a staff of office so that the verger can assert his authority if "unruly elements" should create a disturbance in the church. Fortunately I have never needed to act like that even if sometimes the midnight mass at Christmas some people tend to be a bit noisy! The temptation is perhaps too strong with the Hatch being just opposite St James'.

What other great events can I remember? Well, there was of course the lightning in 1964 which again partly destroyed our rebuilt church. It was just before the Annual Mediaeval Fair which had been revived some years previously. All those attending the Fair gave most generously towards the

restoration of the church and this time we did not have to wait so long before it could be fully reopened. That again was a great day.

Most recently, of course, we have had the dedication of our fine new organ and it seems fitting that my 50 years' service which has given me so much pleasure should culminate with such a happy event."

From the Abinger and Coldharbour Parish News, April 1991 - Gert Furstenheim, editor

See Michael Bowler's obituary from Dorking Advertiser December 1999.