

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 11th July 2021

“Let’s all go down the Strand!” was a popular music hall song, and I found myself strolling along it last week when my duties took me off to London for a couple of days.

It is a fascinating street which has been around since Roman times, and all through mediaeval years it was associated with the British Upper Classes, whose important palaces, townhouses and mansions were built adjacent to the River Thames. Amongst those who once lived on the Strand are Anne Boleyn, Lord Burghley, the Bishop of Durham, the Bishop of Norwich, and the Bishop of Carlisle! It was in a tavern on the Strand that Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot met - and today it is replete with some very well-known properties, including the world renowned Savoy Hotel; Coutts, Bankers to Her Majesty The Queen; Somerset House; Stanley Gibbons, the Philatelist; the Adelphi and the Savoy Theatres; the Royal Courts of Justice; and Twinings, the world famous supplier of teas, which has had a shop there since 1706, and claims to be the oldest ratepayer in Westminster.

At the west end of the Strand, you are in Trafalgar Square, and walk the full length of three quarters of a mile, and you will end up at Fleet Street, at the east end, and the Anglican Church of St Clement Danes, well worth a visit if you are in the capital.

Although the first church on the site was reputedly founded in the 9th century by the Danes, and consecrated to St Clement, the patron saint of mariners, the current building was completed in 1682 by Sir Christopher Wren.

During the Blitz of 1941, the Church was almost destroyed by German bombs, the interior being gutted by fire, only the outer walls, the tower and the steeple surviving the Blitz. As a result of the conflagration, the church’s ten bells fell to the ground and were recast when the war was over. The church was rebuilt in 1958 and since then has served as the central church of the Royal Air Force.

On the completion of the reconstruction, underneath the Royal Coat of Arms an inscription was added in Latin and is translated, “Christopher Wren built it in 1672. The thunderbolts of aerial warfare destroyed it in 1941. The Royal Air Force restored it in 1958”.

If you look around, you will notice both inside and outside the building many features commemorating people and units of the RAF. Outside the church stand the statues of two of the RAF’s wartime leaders, Arthur “Bomber” Harris and Hugh, Lord Dowding.

The erection of statue of Harris was very controversial indeed due to his responsibility for the bombing of Dresden, and other bombing campaigns against German cities. When the statue

was unveiled by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother, in 1993, she looked very surprised when she heard the jeering of several protestors and the statue had to be guarded by police day and night for some considerable time as it was frequently sprayed with graffiti.

As you walk around the interior, the floor of the Church, of Welsh slate, is inscribed with the badges of over 800 RAF commands, groups, stations, squadrons and other formations, and Books of Remembrance list the names of all the RAF personnel who have died in service as well as the American airmen, based in the UK, who died during the Second World War.

It is a very moving experience indeed.

But it is one of its former rectors, whose story is little known, that I wish to highlight.

The Revd William Pennington-Bickford was instituted as Rector in 1910, and within a very short time, he gained a fine reputation for his pastoral work amongst the members of the congregation and parish.

In 1919, he started the Service of St Clement's to celebrate the bells and carillon which had been recently restored. It was his idea to make them chime to the nursery rhyme which we all know, "Oranges and lemons say the bells of St Clement's", and this special service for children ends with the distribution of oranges and lemons to the boys and girls who are present.

The first published record of that rhyme dates back to 1744, and scholars are all agreed (for once!) that the meaning behind the words is quite unclear and there have been lots of suggestions down through the years!

The words were written when London was a very different place to what it is today. It was a time when the churches of the city were utterly dominant, not only in terms of their impact on the skyline, but in terms of their influence on social life as well.

The theory that appeals to me is that the rhyme was a way of remembering the topography of London by a widely illiterate population. People would have associated the bells and the churches with what happened in that part of town.

"Oranges and lemons" probably recalls an area of the city where fruits from abroad were unloaded at the wharves on the Thames. The rest of the rhyme references churches and bells where other kinds of activity in the city would have taken place.

"Halfpence and farthings," say the bells of St Martin", for example, is a nod to the money lenders who operated in that area;

"Two sticks and an apple" say the bells of Whitechapel" – could that be to do with the shape of the handbells which were cast at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry and resembled toffee apples? ;

"Pokers and tongs" say the bells of St John's", the oldest church featured in the rhyme and located within the walls of the famous Tower of London. It is believed that the pokers and tongs might have something to do with the methods of the torture of prisoners held captive with the Tower.

The church bells of all the churches mentioned in the rhyme ring out and tell a story.

As I sit in the Vestry before worship on Sunday mornings, I love to listen to Isobel's beautiful organ voluntaries as our church bell is rung out over the rooftops of our town, as it has been for over a hundred years, calling folk to leave behind the daily round and common task and take "time out" to think of eternal things.

I love to think of all the people who have responded to that call through good days and bad and have made their way from their homes to join others in the worship of the sanctuary, seeking God's blessing upon their lives.

I love to think that the bell of St Nicholas tells a story of faith and devotion, of self-sacrifice and love, of perseverance when the going is tough and a vision for a better tomorrow.

Jeremy Pratt, the head bell ringer at Westminster Abbey, has said, "When people hear a church bell being rung, they know that something important is happening."

There is nothing more important in our week.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister