

CHAPTER 13

THE 1940'S - THE WAR YEARS

(Mrs. Irene Millman here recalls those uncertain years)

The 1940's were traumatic times for everyone, not least for the church and indeed during these years many used the church to pray and to seek for hope and strength to face each day. Their faith in victory over the oppressor was always strong.

I was elected to the Parochial Church Council in 1941 and during this and succeeding years the wardens were Mr Tudor, Mr Brayne, Mr Richards, and Mr Beer. Indeed the partnership of Charles Tudor and Fred Beer lasted for eleven years.

During the war our evening services were held at 3.30pm in the afternoon as it would have been very difficult and costly to black out the church. The vicar (Rev. J.H. Spencer) and his wife had two young girls and after afternoon Sunday School (which we then had) I would take them for walks or to my home while their parents were at the service.



Rev. J.H. and Mrs. Spencer

As Don Pitchford, our organist, was in the army, Mrs. Spencer officiated as organist and Choirmaster. She asked that fees she should have received be paid to the church day school. She was the Enrolling Member for the Mother's Union as well as Sunday School Superintendent and we [the Sunday School teachers] attended one evening a week at the vicarage to receive a good grounding on what we should teach next Sunday.

Mrs. Spencer ruled us all quite firmly. She was a great influence in my life, and through her I became interested in ballet, plays and music. She was a wonderful exponent of the Brontes and gave talks about them to organisations outside the Parish.

Mr Ward played the organ for a short time in 1941 while he was in the district and Arthur Onions was encouraged to play by Mrs. Spencer.

Rev. Spencer was liked by everyone and was a familiar figure in the village wearing his trilby hat and puffing away at his pipe. He had nicknames for most of the boys - Ron Edge, for example, he called 'Hunter' because he once went to Church in a red coat!

During this time there appeared to be more reverence in Church than there is today. Any talking before a service was done in subdued tones at the back of the Church and never during a service once you were in the pew! We were also taught to kneel properly when praying and not just to lean forward in the pew.

In those days there were just two candles on the altar and no vestments were worn.

During the war some of the female singers were drafted into the choir. I was one of them and so were Kathleen Mason (now Pitchford), Margaret Mason, Dorothy Maiden (now Simmons), Doris Pee, Joyce Asbury (now Jones) to mention but a few. I sat between Kathleen and Dennis Maiden and his voice (tenor) thrilled us as much then as his sister's has since. We wore our ordinary clothes and hats always.

Holy Communion services at Christmas and Easter were at 7am, 8am, 9am and 11am. The 9am was usually held at St. Aidan's, Newtown but during the blackout the early celebrations had to be curtailed.

Church bells were silenced during hostilities but permission was given to ring them in November 1942 (to celebrate victory in the desert) and when the danger of invasion had passed and the ban lifted our one bell was rung with great gusto! During the war, soldiers worked in the brickyard and lived under canvas in a field in Hobnock Road. Many church families were hospitable to them.

Dates which stand out are the dedication of the Banner of the Women's section of the British Legion (December 1944) and the dedication of the War Memorial in September 1948. During the war years, National Days of Prayer were regular but the most outstanding were the Thanksgiving Days on 10th May 1945 (end of the European war) and 19th August 1945 (end of the Japanese war).

The arctic spell starting in January 1947 disrupted everyone's life, including church life and congregations were low in number. This lasted for more than three months and all roads into the village were blocked. Italian prisoners of war were brought in to dig a road through the snow in Bognop Road. Buses taking and fetching

the miners from Hilton Main had to be abandoned in what was then called New Invention Lane, now Essington Road.

St. John's Hall (the old Iron Church) was much in use during the 1940's. One of the highlights was the New Year's Eve Dance (with 'live' music) which finished at 11.30pm after which we all trooped up to Church behind the Vicar for the Watch Night Service at 11.45pm. After the Service we made our separate ways home without any fear of being "mugged" or accosted, even though there were few houses and not many lights either. It was a happy and joyous occasion - the beginning of another year.

The Hall was also used for film shows and an outside group of players presented several plays including Emlyn Williams', 'The Corn is Green'.

The Hall was heated by two cast iron stoves and the vicar was the chief stoker! I can see him now poking away, with the smoke rising to high heaven and with the dust descending onto the wooden benches where we sat. The 'mod. cons.' were those used by the children in the school playground and you risked life and limb falling over brambles and branches as you ran through the long grass to answer nature's call!

An 'all denominations' Youth Club was held in the Hall and the equipment acquired over a period rivalled that found in any Youth Club today. It was well attended. Mr. Fred Beer (the Churchwarden) would teach us old time dancing - he was a lovely dancer - and Mrs. Beer would play the piano.

Mrs. Spencer produced plays both religious and secular, the latter being performed in the Hall and the former in Church. I remember 'Cox and Box' (Messrs. Pitchford, Beer and Irene Millman) and was delighted when I heard it on the radio. In any Passion Play, Kathleen Mason (now Pitchford) was always the Virgin Mary and I was Mary Magdalene. However, on one occasion I was Pilate's wife and Tony Ridgway (recently murdered in Uganda) was Pilate. While I was reclining on my couch having the dream which told me to ask my husband to have nothing to do with the crucifixion of Jesus, George Ponder was in the organ loft switching lights on and off to represent lightning and banging on sheets of tin to represent thunder! We took it all very seriously!

On another occasion Mr. Carter (one-time head of Cheslyn Hay School), Stan Simmons and Percy Griffiths were characters in a Christmas play - never were there three wiser men than these!

Certainly during the 1940's our social life was centred round the Church - we had a new Church and were full of enthusiasm. But this was just a start. Read on for future developments!