

St Mary in Castro

- plays host to special visitors

by Fr Peter Sherred

NOTWITHSTANDING the vacation of Connaught Barracks, by the army, the ancient church of St Mary in Castro remains a continuing Christian witness as the garrison church for the military and for others who attend services held there. Its Christian history has been punctuated by a long spell of secular use ending as a coal store before being reconstructed and restored in the 19th Century under the influence of Gilbert Scott and Butterfield since when worshippers and tourists alike, from far and wide, have visited the church to take in its unique atmosphere. On May 21st it played host to a meeting of the members of The St Michael the Archangel Chapter of the Guild of Servants of the Sanctuary who, for the third year in succession, were able to come together to sing their Guild Office in the beautiful setting of the chancel and sanctuary of this place of worship. The evening was overseen by the verger of St Mary in Castro, Chris Harpham, who had prepared the church for the event and the service, attended by five clergy, was presided over by the chaplain to the Guild Chapter, Fr Paul Christian of Temple Ewell. Chris Harpham had just received news of his appointment as verger to Romsey Abbey in Hampshire and the Senior Chaplain of the St Mary in Castro clergy team, Padre Paul Wright, was present for the last time for a Guild Office before his posting away from the castle church. Also among those attending was a person special to the Guild Chapter and a long time visitor to



the town over 70 years, Fred Palmer.

The Guild has its origins in the 19th century - in 1897. It comprises an association of altar servers in the Church of England representative of lay people. Its objectives are to help raise standards of altar service and make those who are members to be conscious of their duties and obligations in the expectation that their attendance and service will add to the spirituality of a service in the Catholic Tradition of the Church of England. Area groups cover the country and East Kent falls into Provincial Group 2 covering Canterbury, Ashford and Margate, Dover coming under the umbrella of the Ashford Chapter of the Area Group. This Chapter includes some 17 parishes from Charing to Dover with churches in Ashford and Dover providing a very good representation. Servers from St Peter and St Paul Charlton, Temple Ewell, Lydden, St Andrew's Buckland, among others, are members. Chapter members meet a minimum of four times a year to sing their office, share in the Mass (Eucharist), admit members and retain fellowship. In fact Chapters probably meet monthly with the exception of key holiday periods and approximately 50 members comprise the Ashford Chapter with both male and female servers. Sadly, in 2007 the weather precluded an outdoor procession as in other years, but members and visitors alike enjoyed the plainsong chant of the Guild Office.

Much of the continuing success of the local Chapter is the work of one man - Fred Palmer from St Mary's Ashford - who has been a frequent visitor to Dover over the years. His connection with Dover stretches back to 1937/38 as a member of the summer staff at the Western Docks where he would receive messages from London of the train loadings to be communicated to the connecting ferries and vice versa, so he could advise Victoria Station of the train loadings bound for the capital as notified from the ferries. Fred travelled by train in those days and has done so all his life although he drives himself to Guild meetings. He started as a junior clerk with the railways in 1936 and by the time he retired he was the senior stores inspector for British Railways, Southern Region, based at Croydon, responsible for an area from Thanet to Weymouth including Dover. Born in Ashford and living in Kennington he has been a visitor to churches in Dover for very many years. Serving in the RAF during the war he became involved with The Guild in 1948, after demobilisation, at the encouragement of his parish priest. He immediately became Secretary, a post he still holds nearly sixty years later! He is also Councillor for the Provincial Group. Belying his 87 years he acts as Cantor for the Guild Office as well as making it his business to telephone each Guild member with a reminder of a meeting and its venue - no doubt the reason for good turnouts of members. After 50 years of service as



Fred Palmer

Secretary, at a special service at Temple Ewell Church, he was presented with an embroidered cotter (small surplice) and a crucifix. Fred first became a server at the altar of the Lord in 1937, so this year he celebrates 70 years service in that role. This faithful servant and frequent visitor to Dover is a role model for

service and commitment in an age when, perhaps, commitment is deemed too much of a challenge for many. Married to Kathleen for 48 years he has two sons, living in Aberdeen and Fleet in Hampshire respectively. In 2008 Fred will celebrate 60 years as Secretary of The Guild Chapter, which has, through its members, enriched worship in the town's churches as well as in neighbouring villages and towns. Dover would do well to remember that anniversary as he comes back to it from time to time in the next twelve months. Well done you good and faithful servant and well done St Mary in Castro for inviting the Guild to share its special place in the wider worshipping community, not isolated on the hill behind the castle walls!



St Mary In Castro