

Dover's Motorbike Priest

by Fr Peter Sherred

It is not often (fortunately perhaps) that a former Dover priest is the subject of a full page obituary in *The Times* but this occurred on Saturday 23rd May 2009. Archbishops perhaps could expect to be accorded a page or two in the obituary stakes while bishops, suffragan or diocesan, would be fortunate to qualify for a half page but this was no ordinary priest as the honour was to reveal. The Reverend William Frank Shergold had made an impact of national and international significance as well as having made a significant impact locally on Dover where he was a priest from 1969 to 1974.

Bill Shergold, Father Bill or 'Farv' as he was variously known, was born in 1919 and his early years were spent in Enfield. He was ordained deacon in 1942 after studying at St Chad's College, Durham and the theological College of the Resurrection, Mirfield in Yorkshire. He was ordained priest in 1943 and served a curacy in the East End of London at All Saints with St Frideswide Poplar, before moving to West London and All Saints Hanworth. It was in 1959 when he moved to St Mary of Eton with St Augustine Hackney Wick that he was to become a 'sensation' or, in modern parlance, a

'celebrity'. Prior to his arriving there the Reverend John Oates had founded the 1959 club as a youth club to attract young people to church.

Bill Shergold's vision for the club was to expand its horizons beyond the traditional youth club to attract alienated young people associated with the leather clad motorcyclists known as 'The Rockers'. He was a motorcyclist himself and utilised his machine for visiting parishioners because of its cost effectiveness. Ironically, for someone to become so famous for his biker involvement, he would reminisce on the fact that he failed his first test, "I was unlucky to have to face a woman examiner who had a great dislike of parsons and an even greater dislike of motorcyclists! As if to turn the knife in the wound she told me I was a menace to the public!"



In 1962 he decided to hold a church service for motorcyclists and visited The Ace Café on the North Circular Road, where many bikers congregated to listen to the juke box and drink coffee, to invite people to join him in a service. The 59 club became such a success it claimed to be the largest motorcycle club in the world and the media went sensationalist as



some of the motorbikes were brought into church to be blessed. Even the famous cartoonist Giles immortalised the club in one of his cartoons. When 'Farv' moved parishes the club moved with him. As The Times recorded in his obituary, (The 59 club had turned round the aimless life of many a young man. Dance halls and bowling alleys refused them entry. Youth clubs were terrified of them. Shergold welcomed them, married them, buried them and saw them through many a court case).

In 1969 Father Bill moved to Dover to be Vicar of St Bartholomew's church (at the junction of Templar Street and London Road) and St Peter and St Paul Charlton in Dover. St Bartholomew's was a lovely church of the Anglo Catholic tradition and the first midnight mass Fr. Bill celebrated was an event that lives long in the memory. As the service began there was a tremendous cacophony of noise outside, the doors of the church burst open and an army of leather clad youngsters burst in, to the apprehension of the congregation. They filled all the side aisles of the church

and their contribution to the singing of that mass was amazing. It was the 59 club members who had decided to come down to 'Farv' for his first midnight mass in Dover. They stayed overnight in his vicarage bedding down wherever there was a space. It was an amazing experience for all of us privileged to be in attendance on the night.

His impact on Dover was at the least two fold. Firstly, he established the 69 club of motorcyclists and 2009 saw the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the club with a commemorative service planned at the Church of St Peter and St Paul on Saturday June 20th. Sadly, 'Farv' was not destined to be there, due to frailty initially and then his subsequent death, but he had managed to send a card before he died with his good wishes. The service proceeded as a celebration of his life and a commemoration of the club. It was attended by the Mayor of Dover Councillor Mrs Sue Jones and her Mayoress, Councillor Ronnie Philpott, as well as members of his beloved 59 club, the 69 club and even the 79 club which he

established when he move on from Dover to Tunstall. The service was lead by Fr Colin Johnson, Rector of Charlton in Dover, who himself, a biker started the service by riding his own machine into church and straight up the main aisle! At least eight machines were in the church and outside a parade of impressive machines was testament to the pulling power of this celebrated priest even in death. He would have been quietly pleased. Fr Bill's second significant impact on Dover was his challenge of overseeing the closure of the beautiful church in Templar Street and the amalgamation of its congregation with the Church of St Peter and St Paul Charlton in Dover in St Alphege Road where he moved to The Rectory in 1972. He followed Fr James Snell as the Rector of Charlton when he was appointed in 1969 to St Bartholomew's.

St Bartholomew's Church was a prominent building in the London Road Charlton area of Dover but its history, in church existence terms, was relatively short. In 1877 the ecclesiastical district of St Bartholomew, to serve the Tower

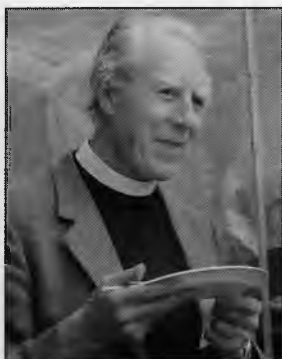
Hamlets district, was formed and the foundation stone of the church laid. The building was consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury on 22nd January 1879 and vested in Keble College Oxford. Constructed by W. J. Adcock of Dover, the building was 111 feet long and 55 feet wide. It comprised a clerestoried nave with five bay side aisles, apse-shaped chancel, organ chamber and a northeast chapel with later a vestry added. The church was never unfortunately destined to reach its centenary. Second World War damage was repaired but following boiler problems and, after the merger of the two parishes, the church and vicarage demolished to make way for flats.

Father Bill retired in 1984 moving to Chichester Diocese and then Bath and Wells where he was given authority to officiate. The figure 9 was prominent in his life - being born in 1919, establishing or being associated with the 59, 69, 79 clubs, then dying aged 89 in 2009!

What made this person so special? To those of us privileged to know him he came across as a rather modest, almost diffident individual who carried his shyness well. It seemed incongruous that such a man would appear posing on a motorbike under Southend Pier in an advertisement for Wrangler jeans as he did in 1991. Those jeans would no doubt be a collector's item today but Father Bill donated them to the homeless on the basis that they had more need of them than he did. What was so remarkable was that he took his ministry as a priest earnestly and did not subscribe to the view that he expected people automatically to come to church. Instead he went out to the people, especially the young, and identified with them in dress, interests and machines in the case of bikers. He was often to be seen in his



parishes walking about meeting people and knocking on doors. One such occasion gave him quite a surprise when he called at a house where the door was opened by a customs officer who announced he too was DD - "not Doctor of Divinity but on Detached Duty from Liverpool to Dover" as happened in the summer months. Father Bill was quite taken by the humour of the situation. He was courteous, kind, compassionate and driven by a desire to reach out to the marginalised and isolated from the institutionalised church. He caused a sensation in the 1950s and 1960s by taking his mission to the motorbike gangs. In so doing he recaptured a spirit of ministry the modern church, so inward looking and focussed on the management of terminal



decline, should well try to recapture for in that lies growth rather than the perpetual decline of self preservation. Bill never married and, despite his celebrity status, never forgot that first and foremost he was a priest of the church of God which was his strength and his joy. It was in that role that he made a lasting impression on the people to whom he ministered and in the communities in which he served. Despite his renown he remained a humble parish priest rather than having climbed the hierarchy of clerical careerism and in that he would have been well satisfied, knowing that the most valued recognition was to be aware he was faithful to the calling to which he came in the war years - the service of Almighty God. May he rest in peace.

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MEMBERSHIP NEWS

Autumn 2009

Many members have let me have their email addresses. This has allowed the Society to provide them with updates and information in between issues of our newsletter. I have sent them notification of and an invitation to attend our meeting with Sea Change Dover representatives and of the River Dour Steering Group. I have sent minutes of the Sea Change meeting and will send out minutes of the Dour Group.

We took a straw poll of members' preferences for the Christmas Feast via our members on the email register. The poll was very helpful and resulted in a change to a hot first course followed by cold puddings.

Anyone who would like to be sent Society news via email please contact me on jeremycoppe@willersley.plus.com . You will receive only Society news and nothing else.

Sheila R. Cope