

# Change and Continuity at St Mary in Castro

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On December 4th 2014 a ceremony at St Mary in Castro attended by many military, church, and civic dignitaries including the Minister of State for the Armed Forces Mark Francois, the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports Admiral of the Fleet Lord Boyce, senior commanding officers from the army and the Chaplain General Dr David Coulter, marked the end of an era. The church, which had been the garrison church for the army, based at Shorncliffe, was decommissioned as a church dedicated to the army and passed into the care of the Diocese of Canterbury, albeit owned and cared for by English Heritage. The event marked the closure of 2 (South East) Brigade which was being amalgamated into 11 Infantry Brigade based in Aldershot Hampshire, and the Bishop of Her Majesty's Forces, The Right Reverend Nigel Stock, blessed and dedicated a plaque to commemorate 2 (South East) Brigade and to celebrate over a century of military service by the Brigade. The Bishop of Dover, in welcoming the church more fully integrated into the Diocese, gave an assurance that St Mary in Castro would remain a place of community service and would continue to offer welcome and a message of hope and reconciliation. The service also marked the final appearance of the last army chaplain based at the castle church, the Revd Daniel Merceron, who just two days previously had been inducted as a parish priest in the Diocese of Chichester.

As one era closed to be replaced by a new era in the life of this majestic church within the grounds of Dover Castle and nestled beside the Roman Pharos one person absent from the ceremony was the Revd John Chittenden, an Officiating Chaplain to the Forces with a

commitment to the church lasting nearly a quarter of a century and, thereby, a regular weekly visitor to Dover and a minister to the worshipping community served by the church. For the nonagenarian the sadness of the occasion witnessing the withdrawal of the army connection was offset by the assurances given by the Bishop of Dover in respect of the future purpose and use of the church.

Born in Purley Surrey in 1924 as an only child of his parents he and his parents moved to Redhill, when he was four years old, where he attended school. During the last two weeks of his schooling he recalls many people rescued from Dunkirk passing by the school building. Following school he took a job in engineering at a Technical School before taking a post as an office junior in a branch office of a large electrical contractor ASEA, the Swedish General Electric, the main contractor for the Southern Railway electrification. He became a qualified incorporated company accountant. During the war years, post Dunkirk, he became a member of the 8th Battalion Queen's Royal Regiment Surrey as a Local Defence Volunteer before being fully taken into service in the army between 1943 and 1947 serving in the Royal Army Service Corps which covered a range of activities.

Following his military service in the 1950s he felt a call to the Ministry after spending some years as a Sunday school teacher and through his attendance at his local church. He attended the London College of Divinity at Ford Manor near Lingfield, known as St John's College, being ordained deacon in Southwark Cathedral in 1958 and priest in 1959. The single 35 year old priest served his

curacy in St Mary at Lambeth where he remained as curate for six years. He was appointed the priest of St Michael's, Hawkinge and St Martin, Acrise at the behest of Archbishop Michael Ramsey in the early 1960s where he was to remain for the next 26 years during which time he took in also Swingfield parish.

It was in the early years of his ministry at Hawkinge that he encountered a Swedish influence in his life for the second time in the shape of a young lady who was to become his wife, Kirsten. She had come to England to improve her English skills and was staying in Acrise and although she returned to Sweden to college at Karlstad near Lake Vänern, the largest lake in Sweden and one of the largest in Europe, over the two years from 1965 the relationship flourished and John and Kirsten were married in St Luke's Church, Hawkinge in 1967 by the Revd Harry Hedley. Married for some 47 years the two live in retirement in Folkestone while their two sons have settled in the United States and in New Zealand respectively. Nils, who was born in 1969, followed his father's course into the ordained ministry and has recently been appointed to a parish at Armonk New York, where he lives with his wife while George, who was born in 1983, is currently the organist and Musical Director in St Paul's Cathedral, Dunedin, New Zealand. While at Hawkinge John had to minister in two churches in the village – St Michael's being the original parish church outside the village on the Dover side and up a hill leading off the Alkham Valley Road and St Luke's which became established as the main church as the village expanded greatly and this church was located on the main road in the village. Each Sunday began with a 08.00 Communion Service at St Luke's followed by a Sunday school at 10.00 attended by 70 children and then an 11.00 Communion Service at St Michael's and in the afternoon a 15.00 service at St Martin's in Acrise. Kirsten took a very

active role in ministry with John in this benefice by being the Enrolling Member of the Mothers' Union as well as helping with the Sunday School and helping John in the many and varied ways that parish clergy wives do.

His military connection returned during his time at Hawkinge as he was chaplain to the ATC and through a verger at Shorncliffe, where the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were stationed, he was introduced to Shorncliffe camp where he ministered to the soldiers on the base. Having served the Argylls happily he was asked to become an Officiating Chaplain to the Forces based at the garrison church in Shorncliffe which dovetailed neatly into his retirement from parochial life in 1990. From there he began a long association with St Mary in Castro where he came over to minister from time to time before being based at the castle church where he has served for such a long period of time and under very many Chaplains who came and went over the years usually on a three year placement. Long-time Church Warden of St Mary in Castro Bob Joslin states "from his own military and clerical experience John was aware that the post of Senior Army Chaplain to 2 (South East) Brigade at Shorncliffe involved providing and supervising chaplaincy services to the Brigade of about 5,000 soldiers across Kent and Sussex - and sometimes very much further afield on active service - in addition to running the Dover and Shorncliffe Garrison Church in Dover Castle. He was aware that assistance was necessarily and regularly sought to cover the inevitable absences of the incumbent, not only to officiate at the Sunday services, but also to deal with any urgent welfare matters amongst the soldiers' families 'back at base'. John took to this challenge with alacrity and his usual good humour taking his part in services whenever he was required, quickly becoming the mainstay of the church, hardly missing a service for most of

the next twenty or so years". During his faithful and much appreciated ministry at St Mary in Castro, John has undertaken all manner of services his last one being a Battle of Britain Service but one of the most unusual being the leading of prayers for the Parachute Regiment of the French Foreign Legion who were on exercise with 1st Parachute Regiment. Asked whether he took the prayers in French John replies with a twinkle in his eye that was not necessary for the Legionnaires were an international body of soldiers and when he was talking with one "French" Officer and inquired where he came from he was told "Uxbridge"!

Despite being troubled with mobility problems, caused by difficulties he experiences with his legs, John still attends St Mary in Castro weekly with Kirsten and they both still actively play roles within the services from time to time, either leading prayers or reading the lessons. So, as the complexion of the church has changed, John and Kirsten provide an element of assurance of the continuation of the church's ministry

which is so valued by the dedicated members of the congregation and the many visitors who attend it. John's ministry has been appreciated by all who have met him and his infectious sense of humour and gentlemanly manner continue to inspire those who have had the privilege of knowing, or of having served with him. Bob Joslin states "he is loved by all his friends in the congregation who are most appreciative of his contribution to keeping the church on its feet, lively and welcoming, for many years. We all wish him well for many a long year yet". Tony Northey, a long term member of the congregation, adds "he is a good companion with an excellent sense of humour and a fund of light hearted good stories. His virtues as a priest are self-evident". Long may he and Kirsten continue with their tradition of service in this historic church which still retains its many links with the armed forces but which welcomes all comers to its services. The main Sunday service is at 10.00 and access is via the usual vehicular access to the castle for which there is no charge if attending the service.

## Zeebrugge Raid Commemoration 23rd April 2015



To commemorate VE Day  
at the WWII Memorial