

One Honorary Freeman Down

A long and full life

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On the 22nd October 2020 Dover lost one of its distinguished citizens when the Revd Michael George Hinton, Honorary Freeman of the town, died. He was in many ways a commanding as well as a much respected and admired local inhabitant and his life of some 93 years was hallmarked by the many and varied roles that he played in the community of Dover and elsewhere. He was, arguably, best known in Dover for his

Christian work as well as for being a former Head of the Dover Grammar School for Boys where he served for eight years. In recent years he moved from his flat in The Gateway to a clergy retirement and care home, St Barnabas, in Lingfield, Surrey, where he died peacefully after a brief spell in hospital. He had hoped he would return to Dover for his funeral service but because of the Coronavirus pandemic restrictions a service in thanksgiving for his life and ministry was held at the Kent and Sussex Crematorium Royal Tunbridge Wells on Thursday 29th October attended by four of his five children together with their family members.

Known to many people simply as Michael, he was born in Bristol on 25th May 1927, the elder of two brothers. His father, George, was a schoolmaster, his mother, Minnie, a nurse. Minnie died in 1940 when Michael was just aged 13, but he was fortunate in that his father was able to secure the services of a devoted housekeeper – Mrs Louisa Sutton – who cared for the family for many years. Michael attended Bristol Grammar School where he was so happy that the shape of his



Revd Michael Hinton (1927–2020)

future life as a teacher was decided. Due to his young age the disruptions of the Second World War affected him only marginally, and in 1945 he went up to Merton College Oxford with a postmastership (academic award) and a local authority scholarship. At Merton he read history and continued his involvement with the Scout Movement which had begun in 1935 and was one of the chief strands of his life

from then to his seventies. While at Merton he met and fell in love with Jean Lee who he married in 1950. It was a marriage that was to last for 59 years and they were devoted to each other throughout.

There followed, in Michael's own words, "four happy if poverty-stricken years" in Reading, during which time Michael and Jean's first child, Christopher, was born. Also during his period in Reading Michael wrote his first book *A History of the Town of Reading*. In 1953 he was appointed Head of History at Lancaster Royal Grammar School and during his time there his and Jean's second and third children, David and Mary, were born. Michael also completed a Ph.D. he had begun in Reading entitled *The General Elections of 1806-1807*. About this qualification Michael was to write, "There was a time, now past, when I knew more about the General Elections of 1806 and 1807 than anyone else in the world". To augment the family income he became an examiner, and later a chief examiner, in history. The amount of time his out-of-school activities took threw even greater

responsibilities upon Jean, who bore them heroically.

In 1960 Michael was appointed Head of Dover Grammar School for Boys. The eight years which followed were so happy for both Michael and Jean that it became a natural decision later in life to return to the area. A fourth child and second daughter, Sally, was born during this time. Michael combined his Headship with examining and with being a District Scout Commissioner. He also served as a Lay Reader at St Peter & St Paul Church, Minnis Lane, River, and began a long association with the Student Christian Movement in Schools, later to become the Christian Education Movement. He wrote a booklet titled *Ethics* and this was widely used in school sixth forms.

In 1968 it was suggested to Michael that he should apply for the Headship of Sevenoaks School. He did so and was duly appointed. Sadly, it quickly became apparent that the move had been an inappropriate one. For Michael and Jean the only bright spot of the family's two years at Sevenoaks was the birth of their fifth child, Geoffrey. It should be added at this point that Michael had by this time already been converted to the principle of comprehensive education, so he was glad to move to Weston-super-Mare in 1971 to take on the task of combining three schools to become a single comprehensive. Michael embarked on a rapid learning curve which transformed his views about education and life and which was to prove to be an excellent preparation for his subsequent church ministry. Life at Broadoak School was constantly challenging, but there were major compensations in a flourishing family life, happy years at St Paul's church, and ten years' experience of dinghy sailing. Michael wrote his second book, *Comprehensive Schools: a Christian's View* and was for some years Chairman of the Christian Education Movement.

From childhood Michael had been a Christian and had been a Lay Reader for the whole of his adult life to this point, but it was not until 1980 that Jean finally indulged his hankerings after ordination to the priesthood. From 1981 he trained for the priesthood in Salisbury and enjoyed it so much that he secured early retirement in 1984 in order to pursue a non-stipendiary, unpaid and self-supporting, ministry full-time. He was ordained in Wells Cathedral. The then Bishop of Dover enabled the family to return to Kent when he offered Michael the parishes of Shepherdswell and Coldred within a new benefice which also included Eythorne and Barfreston. The ten years at Shepherdswell, from 1985 to 1995, were incredibly happy and fulfilling both for Michael and for Jean and, in his view, were perhaps the best years of their lives. These years were also the time during which Michael and Jean welcomed the arrival of grandchildren and it was during this period Michael wrote his most substantial book, *The Anglican Parochial Clergy: a Celebration*, published in hard cover by SCM Press. A distinguished reviewer of the book, Dr Paul Avis, commented, "This book is a treasury of pastoral wisdom and experience. It enshrines the essence of historic Anglicanism".



Michael and Jean Hinton

In 1995 Michael fulfilled an ambition he had held since 1960; he and Jean retired to The Gateway flats in Dover. Flat number 212 was on the very top floor of the block of flats and offered a commanding view along the seafront towards the Clocktower. Michael was hospitalised at the William Harvey Hospital in Ashford and underwent major surgery, making a wonderful recovery and earning himself the name of Lazarus within the family! Once the major surgery was out of the way, the first years of retirement were very happy ones for both Michael and Jean, with more time to spend together than ever before and with the continued opportunity for Michael to serve the Church in a variety of ways. Michael played a part in the life of St Mary's Church, Cannon Street, which formed his home parish and he was much respected by all who knew him there. He chaired the Ecumenical Group which ensured that the spiritual dimension to Dover's celebration of the Millennium was not lacking. He edited the *Dover Christian Chronicle* and began to write a weekly column in the *Dover Express*, which he continued even after his move to St Barnabas in Lingfield. He was Secretary of Dover Christian Aid Committee and taught English to immigrants. He joined the Labour party and played a small part in its local activities.

Priests never fully retire and so Michael led worship in most of the local churches from time to time and continued his service to the Cursillo Movement, which had enormously enriched his own spiritual life. This movement of the Church provides a method by which Christians are empowered to grow through prayer, study and action and so enabled to share God's love with everyone.

Michael's last major literary effort was a considerable achievement, being an abridgement of the Bible. *The 100-Minute Bible* was published in 2005 and became an

astonishing and unexpected success, both in this country and abroad. This publication was designed to bridge the gap that existed, as many owned a Bible but few had read it from beginning to end. Its abridgement meant that Michael's publication was pocket sized and easily portable. It was thought that most people would be able to read it in 100 minutes, making it a very accessible publication and one that could be read during rail or airplane journeys, let alone in the comfort of peoples' homes. Its real value, however, lay in Michael's amazing ability to reduce the essential elements of the Bible itself to universal language, a skill given to few people.

Jean's health became uncertain and from early 2004 was poor. Looking after her became a priority for Michael, who felt privileged to be able to repay in a small way the debt he owed Jean for more than fifty years of looking after him. Jean died in 2009. Michael's own health gradually declined and he had to limit his activities accordingly but, because of wonderful support from his family and his Christian friends, he was still able to lead a full and happy life.

The loss of an eye in a childhood accident meant that Michael was exempt from military service. Michael attributed to this and, in his own words, his "gangling physique" the fact that he was hopeless at ball games. Yet this fact did not prevent him from adoring rugby football, which he played, then refereed, and finally watched, avidly. He rowed at Oxford, and thereafter trained schoolboy oarsmen. He enjoyed the theatre and the cinema and was an enthusiastic, if uninstructed, listener to classical music. However, his chief leisure interest was, always reading, both serious and frivolous. He loved history, theology, Bible study and philosophy. In a different vein he also loved thrillers, which he read in vast and, in his view, excessive numbers.

Michael, despite his busyness, always seemed to have time for other people. He was a leading light in the movement to enable Dover to become a Fair Trade Town and was the oldest volunteer associated with Dover Food Bank. On a personal level, he proved to be an excellent mentor and guide to me personally as I trained for ordination and he attended the ordination service in Canterbury Cathedral in 2000. His support and advice was invaluable. I was delighted when, without his knowledge, my recommendation that his name be considered to be added to the roll of Honorary Freemen was accepted by Dover Town Councillors and I was equally delighted to be invited by him to be his guest at the Mayor Making at which he was accorded the honour of Honorary Freeman in Dover Town Hall on 28th May 2018.

Looking back in later years, Michael felt that he had had an exceptionally happy and fulfilling life. He had found teaching to be rewarding and ministry even more so. He was proud of all members of his family, his children and grandchildren, but undeniably he was especially proud of Jean and understood he had been incredibly fortunate in his choice of wife. In memory of Jean, Michael commissioned a uniquely beautiful carved wooden statue of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child which he presented to St Mary's Church and which occupies a place in its Lady Chapel. Above all it was Michael's faith that had stood him in good stead and he remained deeply grateful to the countless souls who had assisted him on his spiritual journey. Michael said that his life had taught him the elementary but profound lesson that what really matters is love; "when other things have been taken away, nothing is really lost so long as love remains".

Michael and I shared similar journeys in life – we were both members of professions, he

in teaching, I in the law. We both exercised ministries as Lay Readers in the church and we both were ordained as self-supporting Anglican priests. As he became enfeebled, it was my privilege to act as his personal taxi service to ecumenical gatherings of local clergy. He was faithful in his attendance at such gatherings and his views and opinions were much appreciated across denominational barriers. Having been present at his 90th birthday celebrations, it was an honour and privilege to be asked by his family to officiate at his funeral service in Royal Tunbridge Wells where, although no singing was permitted, we were able to listen to three hymns Michael had chosen for his funeral service:- "And can it be" as we entered the chapel, "Lord of the Dance" during the service and "Thine be the glory" to end the service. His daughter Sally Simmonds read a Scripture extract from 1 John 4:7-12, chosen by Michael, and which contained the words "My dear people, let us love one another for love comes from God", while grandson Thomas Hinton read from *The 100 Minute Bible* the event of the raising of Lazarus. Sadly, his daughter Mary was unable to be present as she was herself coming to the end of her life, having terminal cancer and, in fact, she died a week or so after Michael's funeral. It is hoped that at some stage in the future, circumstances permitting, a service of interment of ashes and/or a memorial service will be held in Dover or Shepherdswell.

Headteacher, Author, Lay Reader, Priest, District Scout Commissioner, Christian Aid promoter, pioneer of Fair Trade for Dover Town, Food Bank volunteer, Editor of *Dover Christian Chronicle*, weekly Christian commentator in the *Dover Express*, husband, father, grandfather - just some of the roles carried by our departed Honorary Freeman. It was a long and full life and a pleasure and a privilege for those of us who knew him as a dear friend.