



CHAPTER FIFTEEN - CHURCH

Right at the beginning of my story I told how the advent of Stage Coach was to a large extent responsible for the moving of the village from its ancient position quite a distance from the road itself.

The result of this is that we have a very old Parish Church, almost by itself surrounded by woods and fields, and a modern building in the main part of the village. Both of them are in regular use, served by one Vicar and Church Council and such circumstances for various reasons are not uncommon.

In my young days nearly all children went to Sunday School both in the morning and afternoon, some to Church and some to Chapel. The reasons of choice were many and varied, mostly perhaps to be at the same place as father's boss, and when the choice was free and easy, a close watch was kept on what sort of treats the different schools had. I had no say in the matter. I had to go to Church.

School was held in the Church Institute, about half a mile from the Church, the morning session beginning at ten o'clock, with four classes for boys and four for girls. There was no shortage of teachers, for in those days there were many young ladies of leisure who willingly gave their services for such jobs. The superintendent for the morning school was an elderly bachelor who, when we spoke to him we addressed as "Sir" but between ourselves Uncle Charlie, which on the quiet I am sure he knew and was really quite pleased about it.

At 10.40 we formed a double column to march to Church, where we stayed until the hymn before the sermon and what a noise when we were let out! One morning the curate was reading the first lesson and just finishing the verse which says "and the ass said unto Balaam:" when Patsy Brooks' donkey which was tethered on the green outside, let up a lovely "hee haw" Well, if you had been a child what would you have done?

In the afternoon Miss Fanny took charge and I think on the whole she was able to keep better control than Uncle Charlie, for the afternoon session was mostly far more orderly.

To-day the number of scholars is much smaller, and they only attend in the morning. I was present one morning as the school assembled, and I was thinking of the difference in numbers, when there were three fathers who had just brought their families along and I realize that here too was another difference. In the old days, many children were sent to get them out of father's way, but here were fathers interested enough to bring the children, which I am sure would have a far greater effect on the child, for it is a wonderful thing to go anywhere with Dad.

The scene on arriving at Church in the days of greater numbers is one worth looking back on. The small Churchyard is surrounded by a low stone wall, outside of which on three sides was open grazing land and it was quite common for the verger to have to drive the sheep or cattle farther away, a task with which he would get overdone help from the boys, who would if possible for a start, drive them in amongst the people, especially the girls, to see how many shrieks and screams they could raise.

We no longer see the animals around, for at the back of the building is a fairly new burial ground. On one side is a large block of one story flats for old people and the rest is a nice open space in such a position that it is not likely to be changed much.

It was quite a spectacle at times to see the horses and carriages whose passengers occupied the prominent seats inside and the traps and broughams with one or two early motor cars, nearly all attended by liveried servants, but on occasions the most outstanding contraption was the Vicar with his big heavy Lea Francis motor-bike and side car, with his good lady in the side car and sometimes one or two of his sons standing on the large luggage platform at the back. They were fairly safe, for the machine was no record breaker. It was an unusual bike at that time, for it was chain driven, which was enclosed in a gear case, whilst the majority were driven with a heavy rubber belt and it was started up with a handle.

Another conspicuous conveyance at times was used by the Christie brothers. They were farmers who lived some distance off the road

and in winter time everything was thick with mud. Their cob and cart had to do general service and came to Church in just the same state that it went to market or anywhere else, but when they got inside the Church and the service started, you knew they were there for they were both good basses in the choir.

As a child, living in a very quiet part of the village, this weekly scene for a few minutes was something for me to look forward to.

The boys and girls were parted, the girls sitting in the side aisle at the front end and the boys in a corner at the back, both being near a door which allowed an easy exit when the time came. What tales some of those seats could tell. Those used by the boys have countless initials carved on them and in the little framed spaces for name cards the three back rows have the marks for the separate gangs, the back one is "The Knuts", the one in front of it "Snobs", and the one in front of that "Tadpoles", probably all the work of one bright lad, while for many years on a seat end, now removed, was a delightful head and shoulder study of "Patsy" the verger, done in double lines with a broken pen-nib. However such a masterpiece was done without Uncle Charlie seeing the artist at work is beyond me, it must have taken quite a long time to execute.

At the evening service, two back seats were occupied by the lads of the village and two or three in the side aisle held the young ladies of the Girls Friendly Society. Needless to say to some extent these two blocks were an attraction one to the other and more than one lasting partnership was formed by their occupants.

At this time most of the pews were reserved, a card with the name and number of the people being placed in the end of the book-rest. The leading families of the place used the front centre block, with many of them having an extra seat on the side for their servants. This left just a small section free for visitors.

The pew carpets, kneelers and seat runners were found by the people using them, and so the colour scheme was wide and varied.

Some had well made boxes with locks, padded and covered with carpet in which they kept their books, when any of these fittings were renewed the best of the old was used in the visitors' seats and so you see how everybody had to fit into his own station even when going to Church.

What of the people who did the work at this time? It is true that there are many more who were willing to do things than there are to-day and somehow there seemed more time to do them in. Take the Vicar first. He had a half mile to walk to whichever Church he went, for he did not always use his motor-bike. He had three services every Sunday and sometimes four, morning and evening at

the New Church and afternoon at the old Parish Church and yet he nearly always walked and seemed to have plenty of time and also his wife had time to go with him. Our Vicar now always uses a car, and always in a hurry, but let us be fair. In the case of the former he had a staff of four indoor servants and two outdoor, whereas the latter has no resident staff at all and so, especially at week-ends he and his wife have to do all their own chores, another change in everyday affairs.

For centuries the ruling powers in the Church had been the Vicar and Church Wardens, a very important trio. Often apart from the work of the Church itself, they were trustees for charities and schools etc: being that there were only three of them and all men who were looked up to, decisions were much more readily arrived at than they are to-day when there are many more in the form of the Parochial Church Council, who have got to agree.

When this body were first set up, just after the first war, all the members were people of leisure and the meetings were held, like other Council meetings at eleven o'clock in the morning and most definitely had to finish so that no one was late for one o'clock lunch, for to most, this was far more important than matters discussed in Council.

As time has passed, so to a great extent has this class of person and it is interesting to note on looking through the minute book how the times for holding meetings have had to change to suit the conditions of those serving. For a while they were Wednesday afternoons, to suit housewives and shopkeepers, the shops being closed on this half-day. You see the next change as these people were able to buy cars and motor cycles and wanted their half-day to enjoy them, so six o'clock was then tried, this gave some school-teachers a chance to do something, but for many years now it has had to be eight o'clock because as we have seen in other chapters almost everybody now has a job of some kind which occupies much of his day. The sad thing about this is that generally speaking there are fewer willing to give their time and the sense of privilege to do so, seems to be very much on the decline.

While at school I became friendly with a boy in the choir. I spent every evening with him except Friday, when he went to choir practice, leaving me on my own and it was quite a long time before it occurred to either of us that I could go too. At that time there were more boys than there were seats for them to sit in, but that was a long time ago. I served some time as a probationer and if one of the regulars was away I sometimes had a chance to go in the choir. I had no idea then how this was going to influence the rest of my life, for no doubt from what you have already read you have seen that I have taken quite an active part in village life. Well, this is where it really started, but it might not have

been so, had it not been for my grandparents with whom I was living at that time, for they insisted that if you joined a thing, or body, you should keep it up, with no fooling about and going when you felt like it. After a year or two the number of boys got very low and no doubt if left to please myself I should have followed the crowd when my voice broke, but how glad I am that the old people kept me at it over that period, for I am still a member.

We at all times are apt to think that we were a lot better boys and girls than the young people of to-day, but on looking back I am sure that older folks have always thought the same, for when I was the new boy of course I came in for all the well-tried tricks by the old hands. There was a row of boys on each side of the Chancel, in full view of the whole congregation. The kneelers were long wooden ones reaching the length of the seat and when we knelt down the end boys pulled them in and usually they were quite safe, but if there was a greenhorn like I was, two of the chaps with longer legs would keep pushing the form away to see how much you would wobble in trying to keep your place. In the end I could not manage any longer and fell smack in the middle of the chancel.

When I got outside after the service two old ladies were waiting to tell me what a naughty boy I was and when I arrived home a dear old gentleman had called already and told my grandparents. I wonder if they had ever been caught when they were young.

At Christmas the boys went carol singing, led by the senior boy, who had charge of the box and copies of music. Year after year the rounds for each evening were repeated, we almost knew how much we would get at each call and also whether there would be anything to eat or drink.

One year our leader would start at every house with a carol that the rest of us did not like, although I think it was a favourite with the older people. The climax came with our visit to the doctor and on our way up the long drive we told him that if he started off with that particular carol again, we would burn it, but sure enough he did and when we got outside someone opened a lantern and the copies were burnt one by one, all except his. At the end of the carolling, when the music was handed back to the choir-master, who also opened the box and shared out the money, after a good telling off, we all, except George, had to pay for a new copy and put a shilling in the Vestry missionary box.

At Christmas now, we still use those copies bought so long ago, and it is one of my favourites.

As boys we were paid a penny a service. There were three services each Sunday and if we failed to attend choir practice on Friday evening, a fine of one penny was imposed. To-day the small payment

made is no incentive to the boys, for they all seem to have pocket money without worrying about such jobs and as for practice, well, that doesn't matter. They sure all got that wonderful excuse - homework, which I expect, does get a bit regular.

It is remarkable in any society of this kind, how over the years they move in cycles, sometimes up, and sometimes down, with one or two who stick through thick and thin.

After the parson with the motor-bike left, his successor was a man of rather quieter disposition and in consequence in many cases parents were not so persistent about their boys being in the choir and so the membership fell among the boys to three. The number of men if anything increased, but there were only three trebles. The parson then had an unheard of idea. He asked half a dozen teenage girls if they would help with the singing. The outcome was just wonderful, for they were keen and soon several young fellows came along to take the under parts and for many years we attended Choir Festivals, had grand parties, took part in plays and concerts and enjoyed the many pleasures which music can give. I expect that you have guessed that one of these young ladies was the girl with the curly hair. She and I have been together at it ever since.

In the years covered by these thoughts we have had four vicars, each one introducing something fresh and cutting out little things we had known for years. Of course this happens in all walks of life and if we stop and give them full consideration, for the greater part we are bound to agree that they are improvements, brought about by good common sense, alas, none of them made without upsetting someone's way of thinking.

Through these many gradual changes our services are very different from those of long ago and so also is the attitude of the various denominations towards one another. Going back to the early part of the twentieth century we have still evidence of the bitter feeling which existed between any branch of Church and any branch of Non-conformity. At that time two or three small sects which included Baptists and Congregationalists got together and built a Free Church, which is still flourishing. Some two or three hundred yards away is a big house in which at that time a zealous Churchwarden lived and it is said that he planted a two of chestnut trees - "to hide that nonconformity from his windows", the lovely trees are still there, but there was no thought of beauty whatever when they were planted.

To-day the atmosphere is much better, and the co-operation between the two bodies is most certainly growing.

In two other fields this tendency is to be seen. Adjoining the old Parish Church is a large Methodist College, whose personnel

make quite a lot of use of the Church and at times their Ministers have preached at the Church services.

The other move towards unity is that as there is no Roman Catholic Church in the village for some time its followers have used a room in the Church Institute for weekly Mass.

Many of the good works started by religious bodies and carried on for hundreds of years have gradually been taken over by the state, such things as school hospitals, benefits for the unemployed and help for the aged, with numbers of other services which are now taken for granted and regarded by many as their right because they pay for them. As this as it may, they are still worth saying "Thank you" for.

At one time the offerings on the first Sunday of the month were for the Aims Fund, which was to help the old and poor and often in winter special appeals were made for this fund. Can you wonder that more poor people went to Church in those days with not always the right idea or attitude?

Such things as soup kitchens, boot and shoe clubs, coal clubs and Miss Fanny's clothes for new babies were an accepted thing and although the State has taken care of these needs now, let us never forget the source from which they started, nor think that we can sit back in the matter of helping other people. Indeed there is now a far wider field opened to us all, with many of the backward countries. Here again is a thing being tackled in a very different way from those in practice a few years ago, when for the greater part the help given mostly covered immediate needs and as far as I can see putting preaching very much to the fore. Good work no doubt, but it did little in the way of filling empty stomachs. Of recent times appeals have been made to help the starving millions and much of the money has been spent on tractors and teachers with the idea of showing these people how to help themselves and in doing so, opening up wonderful opportunities for the missionary.

As generations pass, so has much of the old style of teaching and theology practised by the Clergy. The men of the present day, for the greater part acknowledge many of the mistakes of the past and they have to be right on top of their job, to meet the layman who generally is much better educated than the masses of fifty years ago. This brings about rather a peculiar situation. The better education was brought about by the Church, thus making it possible for people to read and think for themselves, whereas in days gone by, thousands did things which they wouldn't think of doing now, because "Parson said so." I wonder how often this power that the man of the cloth had was wrongfully used.

I have sat in Church sometimes looking at the empty seats, thinking how nice it would be if they were all full, as they were when I was a boy, but if I go far enough with my thoughts I can see many reasons why they were full then and now, no longer exist.

There were those who had to go to Church to keep their jobs. Not much Christianity in that! Many went for the music, because that was the only music they ever heard. Certainly this was something to be grateful for, but wireless and television now supply a much wider variety. For others, church going was the only chance they had to meet other people, to hear news, gossip and see changes of fashion.

I knew one old fellow and his wife, who only went in the evening through the winter months and then on ~~to~~ the Black Horse for an hour or so, their chief reason being "to save a bit of coal."

I have no doubt whatever that the number of worshippers everywhere, who attend Church and Chapel with a genuine sense of duty to God is greater than ever before in history.

All the time that age-old mystery and wonder called love, sends young couples up the Vicarage drive to put up the banns, life with its hopes and fears will go on. The Psalms show that these filled everybody's mind all those years ago, just as much as they do to-day. The causes indeed have changed, but the great things are much the same, except that if we are Christians, the hopes will outweigh the fears.

To close I cannot do better than use a quotation from a speech made by the Duke of Edinburgh, in New York and later used by the Bishop of Rochester, "If you suspect that we are living in the past, forget it!"

We simply like to carry our history with us as we face the uncertain future.