

REMEMBRANCE DAY 2016 Godfrey Hilliard

We have heard this morning the account of Lt. David Cowan, who was killed in Italy. I would like to tell you the story of his father, John James Cowan.

He had been born in New Zealand on 18th June 1886 to Scottish parents. As a young man he had suffered a spinal injury and been very ill as a boy. This experience seems to have given him special insight on illness and he was considered to be 'at his best with sick people'. His parents had returned to this country, as a young boy, for John to be educated.

John Cowan graduated from University College, Durham, in 1910 and proceeded to Wells Theological College in order to prepare for ordination. He was ordained deacon in 1910, priest in 1911 and served his title curacy at St Mary, Redcliffe, in Bristol. In 1912 he moved to be curate of St Michael's, Cathedral in Edinburgh, where he stayed until 1919. In 1919 he moved to be Priest-in-Charge of Langholm, in Dumfriesshire, staying until 1924 when he moved to be Priest-in-Charge of Gullane, near Muirfield Golf course and then to be Rector of Cumberworth, near Wakefield in Yorkshire. John Cowan was Rector there until he moved to Stoke D'Abernon in 1935, following the Reverend A.S.P. Blackburne, who had been Rector since 1898.

John Cowan wrote in November 1941, in the parish magazine, that he had accepted 'with the Bishop of Guildford's sanction, a Chaplaincy in the Royal Navy'.

He joined the Royal Navy on 25th October, 1941, as a Probationary Temporary chaplain and was appointed to HMS VICTORY, additional and for service in RN Barracks, Portsmouth. At this time the Dockyard and the RN Barracks was subject to heavy bombing by the Germans. His time in Portsmouth was very brief, probably for basic training and the issue of uniform and he moved in November, 1941, to HMS CONDOR, the RN Air Station at Arbroath, in Scotland, now the home of 45 Commando, Royal Marines.

His annual report tells us that;

“He has carried out the duties of Chaplain with tact and skill. He has the confidence of the officers and men and is always ready to help in any troubles. His relations with Chaplains of other denominations have been excellent and has done much to promote mutual goodwill. He would be suitable for duties in a training establishment and would like to serve abroad.”

It was during this time that his wife, Mary, moved out of the Rectory to live in Ayr, presumably to be closer to her family. It was there, towards the end of 1943, that news came through of the death of David, the only child of the John and Mary Cowan. Lieutenant John David Cowan, Welch Regt, was attached to the 9th Battalion of the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, part of the Eighth Army fighting in Italy. He was killed in September, 1943, aged twenty three. At that time the Rev’d Cowan was serving in HMS WOOLWICH, a Destroyer Depot ship based in Trincomalee in Ceylon, so his wish to serve abroad had been granted.

His Commanding Officer wrote that he found him to be;

“A straight forward man, with good and quiet manners. A good mixer and pleasant shipmate. Rather uninspiring in the pulpit but moves about much among the men, many of whom confide in him.” A report like this says as more about the person writing it as it does about the person being written about.

His report concluded that,

“He has had enough in a hot climate in view of his age.”

During this period he spent quite a lot of time in naval hospitals suffering from a heart condition. He was discharged from the Royal Navy in February 1945. The parish magazine carried an open letter from him, written while fighting continued in the Far East:

‘My dear People,

It is nice to be back home among familiar faces and familiar scenes, although I must confess that I enjoyed my Naval Service, until ill health in the trying conditions out East necessitated my return and subsequent discharge. And here may I say that although we have had our VE Day we must remember that many

thousands of our men and also women are still engaged in a bitter war under conditions which try the resolution and courage of man to the uttermost. Monotony at times, discomfort and heat and diseases make their task a grim one and we must not forget them in memory and prayer.

If you have relatives or friends out East don't forget to write and cheer and comfort them. Letters mean so much to them, and mail days transform the tone of a ship and other units, and happy faces reward your trouble. The appetite for home news is insatiable. And if less news comes from them remember it is less easy to write in great heat and humidity when the paper clings to your hand with sweat, and they generally write in a noisy crowd, and the days seem to pass with so little of fresh interest, and when things happen which you would like to write about the Censorship regulations [quite rightly] forbid. I should like to pay my little tribute to the good tempered endurance of the men with whom I served, and it will be a happy V Day when the great and difficult task out East is finished and we can contemplate the tide of returning men and women instead of the present outward flow.

..... Finally I would like to thank you on behalf of my wife and myself for the sympathy of the Parish when our son David lost his life in Italy.'

The Rev John James Cowan returned to his beloved parish and the people of Stoke D'Abernon and died in his sleep on 7th December, 1948, at the age of sixty two.

I am most grateful to Anne Stevens for the information about John James Cowan and for the information that I have been given from the archives of the Royal Navy Chaplaincy' Service archives.

I wrote in "The Story of Stoke D'Abernon and its people",

'From what I have read John Cowan was a very devout priest who served in the Royal Navy at the most difficult time in our nation's history. To serve in a wartime environment is draining for a fit person, let alone a man like John Cowan who was suffering from ill health prior to his joining the Royal Navy. It sounds to me that he was a true servant of Christ who really understood suffering, which would have deepened his ministry to his sailors when they needed it most.'

The accounts that we read every Remembrance Sunday from the record that Trevor Pidgeon has left for us is unique to Stoke D'Abernon. It seems to me that Remembrance is becoming more and more personal to people and areas as we remember conflicts past and, thankfully, not so present at the moment. Our troops are not so involved, as they have been, in recent years.

The names of John James Cowan and John David Cowan are recorded for posterity on the walls of our church and churchyard, a father and son who served their country and God in their own ways.

Very often we look at names on War Memorials and they are just names. I hope that next time we walk past our war memorial we will look and see the name John David Cowan. Next time we look at the names of our past Rectors, we will see the name John James Cowan and, now that we know something about them they will be more meaningful for us.

Perhaps today is summed up as follows;

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

“They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
we will remember them.”

“When you go home, tell them of us and say, for their tomorrow,
we gave our today”.

And finally;

“May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercies of God, rest in
peace and rise in Glory.”

Amen.