

FREDERICK WILLIAM DAVIS (1888–1954)

It is great news for Deddington, Hempton and Clifton that their monthly *DN* is in the process of being bound into books, dating from 1976 to the present, which will be available to all in the local Library. Not forgetting that the same information is available on the web for those conversant with this innovation! Future researchers will have the goings on of village life handed to them on a plate and will only be defeated if they crave for politics or slanderous gossip. Not so easily accessible are 14 sturdily bound books of *Parish and Deanery Magazines* 1879–1930. Two incumbents of SS Peter & Paul took it upon themselves to bind and save them for posterity, but no one continued the job and we are now searching for village news of nearly 40 years from those who have lived here during that time. For such news I am indebted to Topper Davis who remembers his father Frederick William Davis (1888–1954).

Not that he is remembered under this name here in the village. As befits a quite extraordinarily outgoing person he was known affectionately, not just by one but by three different nicknames. In his day he was a village celebrity, jovial jester beloved by children, entertaining stalwart of his hostelry, but also a Jack of all trades whose knowledge and love of horses might have led him into the world of racing, but whose circumstances kept him more firmly on the ground.

Frederick William was born in Ditchley Park where his father was stud groom to Lord Dillon. When his father moved to Deddington and became landlord of the King's Arms pub, William's dreams of becoming a jockey were shattered. Quite undeterred he did the next best thing and worked with horses in various local stables, keeping equestrian tack in pristine condition, but also taking on heavy gardening jobs like felling trees. In 1931 Fred applied successfully for the job of verger and sexton at SS Peter & Paul Church in Deddington, a calling he fulfilled in his inimitable style between 1931 to 1951.

As Topper Davis reflects, the village community must have had an especially soft spot for his father because he loved to help out in any practical way he could and had the drive and often quite cheeky confidence to achieve successfully what he set out to do. Fred the worker and Fred the jester therefore qualified for the honour of village nicknames. It follows that when Fred ferried passengers to and from Deddington and Aynho Station in his father's trap he became known as 'Cabby'. (Return fare 1s.6d). To his merry mates in the pub however he was 'Donoghue' and was proud of this inferred likeness of him to the famous Irish jockey, Steve Donoghue, who rode 14 classic winners between 1915 and 1937. According to Topper his father was also well pleased when referred to as 'Colonel' which no doubt reflected on the smart and competent way he sat and exercised any horse in his care.

No one can remember now what attracted Fred, who served in the Yeomanry in World War I, and who enjoyed the kudos of free village spirit, to become fettered to the Church in the job of verger, sexton, gravedigger, cleaner, decorator, organ blower, sidesman, bellringer of curfew, Vicar's instrument to toll the bell to announce a death to the village, groundsman in the churchyard and keeper of the keys to God's house. I have my own thoughts on the subject. The Vicar, Dr Frost was, just like Fred, interested in the wellbeing of his parishioners. While he concentrated on their souls, Fred became the perfect counterpart to keep up their spirits. The formal proposal for his appointment as sexton and verger was seconded and carried by the PCC on 29 April 1931.

Naturally there had to be give and take in the relationship between vicar and sexton which is best explained by the following revelations. Vicar Frost was an avid bee- keeper but needed Fred to coax them back into the fold whenever one of his swarms escaped to a neighbour's tree. And Fred needed the Vicar to keep both his eyes shut when, at the end of a perfect day's work in and around the Church, he did a bit of moonlighting giving 'short back and sides' to his mates. The barber's chair was safely stored in the stoke hole and customers queued up quietly in the churchyard.

We can well understand why jolly Fred needed a few extra pence in his pocket. His weekly sexton's wage came to 27s.6d and for every grave he dug another 7s.6d was added. He was the sole supporter of a wife, three sons and two daughters and his dear wife made sure his wages got safely home, past the pub, by asking young Topper to collect them from the PCC Treasurer.

My brain reels just imagining how Fred coped with the various tasks set out by the PCC. How he managed we will hear in the next instalment in tribute to this Great Deddingtonian. Topper remembers well his father's nightly saying: 'The keys (Church) are in my pocket, the cat is at my feet. I do my duty. Good night!'

Topper's first and dearest memory is being carried safely, on his father's back, into the darkness of the scary winding stair well of the Church tower and up into the bell chamber. It was a verger's duty to ring the bell for services and curfew, which required Fred to mount these stone steps at least once a day and several times on Sundays. But it wasn't only bell-ringing duties that called for his attention in the tower. More frequent visitors than he were flocks of jackdaws leaving – in Topper's words – cartloads of twigs, sticks and dirt to be scraped up and swept out by the now much older Topper and his choirboy friends. Fred rewarded his young helpers with a couple of pennies, as he did when they assisted him with digging a grave or gave a hand with tidying the churchyard. Riches indeed in a boy's pocket in those far off days.

Inside the Church, Fred's daughters lent a hand with polishing the pews, black-leading the gratings, cleaning the brasses and, as befits the location, cleaning the floor on their knees. When it came to spring-cleaning (the memory still rankles!) a genteel lady on the PCC thought it quite outrageous that Fred should be paid an extra 3s.6d on top of his weekly wage for those chores!

Fred loved to decorate the Church for festivals, his showpiece being a Christmas tree mounted on top of the rood screen and decorated with fairy lights. Not so enjoyable was the task of keeping the furnace burning during the winter months. Sundays and weekdays he shovelled coke to keep the heating in the big building at an even temperature. It is of little wonder, that one small girl – now a grandmother – remembers being terrified by 'the man who jumped out of the stoke hole', when she was playing in the churchyard. One moment shovelling coke and the next standing smartly dressed at the Church door greeting congregations for weddings and funerals was all in a day's work. That Fred had to attend all services in his role as sidesman goes without saying, and woe betide if he forgot to warm the water for a baptism.

In 1935 the Church was wired for electricity, relieving Fred from organ pumping and cleaning gas lights. Just a bit of light relief!

In 2003 numerous unsung volunteers, steered by various committees, serve their Church. We admire Fred for what he achieved as a more or less one-man-band and thank him for his care.

Ruth Johnson, 2003