

Canon Reginald Campbell Tait

Rector of Grasmere 1945-1973



It is now 40 years since my uncle died at his home Highways in Ingleton, where he had retired with his cousin my aunt Miss Cynthia Bell, after serving 28 years as The Rector of Grasmere.

He was brought up in Great Corby in Cumberland and attended Carlisle Grammar School. He went on to win an Exhibition to Keble College Oxford where he read History and English. He was awarded a BA Honours Degree and later he gained his Masters.

The Church of England was deeply rooted in his family on his father's side, and Archibald Campbell Tait, The Archbishop of Canterbury from 1868 until 1882, was his great-uncle.

My uncle had a vocational calling too, and went on to study theology in Oxford at Rippon Hall and in 1928 was ordained by the Bishop of Carlisle and made curate of Crosthwaite, near Keswick. He then went on to a further curacy at St. Martins in The Bull Ring,

Birmingham before being made Vicar of St. Cyprian's Parish Hay Mill in the city suburbs.

Before the outbreak of War World II, and throughout that turbulent period, he managed to build and have consecrated St. Chad's, a rural district church, as well as a new vicarage. My aunt had joined him there with his parents where she studied domestic science and during the war served as a member of the St. John's Ambulance Brigade.

When his father died in 1945 he was offered the living in Grasmere and he moved to the Lake District taking up residency in The Rectory with his mother and cousin. His mother died six years later. My Aunt Cynthia then took on her role in running The Rectory household as well as taking on many responsibilities in the parish.

She worked tirelessly running The Sunday School, was on the flower arranging rota, a stalwart committee member of the Women's Institute, washed starched and ironed the communion linen each week and was one of the many who distributed the parish magazines around the village. An outstanding cook she provided wonderful meals for Rectory guests and visitors. A keen gardener she tended the Rectory lawns, flowerbeds and kitchen garden with some enthusiastic help from the verger Mr. Jack Wilson.

In 1961 Uncle Reg was made a Canon of Carlisle Cathedral and little later Rural Dean of Ambleside. In 1963 he was appointed as Chaplain to the Sheriff of Westmorland which he enjoyed undertaking for the yearly period. A committed member of The Modern Churchman's Union he contributed countless theological articles and book reviews to the issues of their monthly magazine.

From the late 1950s he accepted invitations from the BBC Radio in Manchester to broadcast services from Grasmere Parish Church. In 1964 The Morning Service was televised from there and a week later, Songs of Praise.

As an academic and historian his sermons were always extremely well researched, thoroughly prepared and delivered with impeccable communication skills appealing to all those who attended his services. He preached on many occasions in Carlisle Cathedral, Sheffield Cathedral and in Westminster Abbey at the invitation of the Dean.

An avid reader his library was vast and he cherished his fine collection of books. His love of literature also included poetry and he deeply appreciated the works of William Wordsworth. He was instrumental in the commemoration ceremonies in 1950 and 1970 to mark the centuries since the poet's birth and death. Poetry recitals were regularly given in the church with such eloquent speakers as Robert Speaight and Richard Wordsworth.

An unashamed music devotee he arranged concerts and recitals throughout the summer months, welcoming renowned international players. A passionate lover of organ music he introduced the highly acclaimed organist Philip Tordoff who gave regular recitals. Church music in general was something to which my uncle paid a great deal of attention. He was served extremely well by a succession of fine choir leaders and organists and under them, and encouraged by him, the church choir thrived.

As the Chairman of the Governor's of Grasmere Village School he oversaw the appointment of one of its most successful and popular Headmasters; Mr. James Hildrew. He worked endlessly to raise funds for the additional buildings and equipment needed to keep the school functioning as a first class educational establishment.

In other areas of the parish my uncle supported Miss Taylor who helped to raise funds for the Ockenden Venture. He also gave his total commitment to overseas causes and in particular to the hospital work in which Dr. Alexander had been involved in Peshawar in India.

My sister and I were both christened by him in St.Oswald's and we spent most of our childhood summer holidays at The Rectory. After I left home I would also spend many Easters with them both too. I would sing in the church choir when in Grasmere and was the crucifer for The Rushbering Parade on two occasions.

Our stays at The Rectory were idyllic. Having the freedom of that lovely large house with The Rectory Room (Tith Barn) as an added bonus, as well the extensive gardens, made this place a child's paradise. My aunt and uncle were incredibly hospitable and generous. In fact when my family returned from Hong Kong after a three year residence we lived in The Rectory for three months whilst my parents found somewhere for us to live in North Dorset where my father was to work.

I have of course so many very happy memories of my uncle. He had the most wonderful sense of humour and much laughter was always heard each day. He loved the radio and never missed such comedies such as 'Men From The Ministry' and 'Beyond Our Ken/Round The Horne'. He had an extensive collection of LPs two of which were of the revues of Flanders & Swann and he would enthusiastically sing along with them.

In retirement he often took services in Ingleton Church. His retirement present from the parishioners of Grasmere was a colour television set. Having never owned one before, he soon became a fan especially of some of the children's programmes; 'Bagpuss' being such a favourite. This was inevitable as both he and my aunt were passionate cat lovers. They loved and cared for a succession of long haired Persians throughout their life.

Auntie Cynthia moved to Wiltshire two years after his death. She continued to be a committed churchgoer and was involved in parish duties too. She took advantage of my living in London and came up to stay often and always enjoyed trips to the theatre. She died in 1998 after a long battle with Parkinson's and slight dementia but spent her final years being wonderfully cared for in a nursing home near Hungerford. Another of her godsons, The Rev. Paul Kettle conducted her funeral service in Reading.

They were both very influential in our spiritual lives. I still have, and use, The Book of Common Prayer that my uncle gave me for my confirmation in 1963. My aunt was also a godmother to me and her love and attention for my work and career was always evident, her advice inspirational.

The forty years since his death, twenty-one since hers, seems to have flown past. My memories of them and Grasmere remain vivid but my association with that lovely part of the country only fleeting.

I have to confess that I was somewhat saddened to see the poor state of The Rectory Garden when I last visited in 2015, as well to learn of the sale of the house. It is a great shame that it will no longer serve subsequent Rectors as it has done over so many centuries.

My hopes though are that whoever buys it will restore the grounds to the visionary example set by my aunt, and that those dwelling in those walls will feel the warmth and pride of the many clergy who have been honoured to reside there, not least Canon Reginald Campbell Tait.

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Sudbury, Suffolk.

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Editor's note. From the Ockenden Venture website: The Ockenden Venture was founded in 1951 to help refugee children of any nationality. Its work began when children from Nazi slave labour camps were provided with a refuge at 'Ockenden', the home of Joyce Pearce, who was to become the Honorary Organiser of the charity's Executive Committee.

The charity's work attracted great support, with people giving time, money, and even whole houses to further its work. By the early 1960s, the organisation had 16 reception centres looking after people from many different countries.

childrenshomes.org.uk/Ockenden