

## Remembering Betty Gearing and Peggy Tope

Back in the '60s and early '70s, when Fr Lewis Lloyd was vicar, St Nics was run very differently from today: the lessons were read by men only; the choir, which included a good many children, sang regularly for weddings on Saturdays; pastoral work was carried out by the sisters of St Denys, who lived frugally in the Church Street cottage and also ran Sunday School for the neighbourhood at St Nicholas Hall, on the Devonshire Road estate; there was a Men's Society, a Women's Fellowship and there was a flourishing branch of the Mothers' Union.

Earlier in 2014 we said goodbye to one of the Mothers' Union stalwarts, Rhoda Collingwood, and now we remember two other members, who made a great contribution to the life of our parish in the '50s, '60s and '70s: Betty Gearing and Peggy Tope.

I asked Joy Barrett for memories of Betty and this is what she told me: 'Betty had lived in Chiswick all her life until she and husband John retired to Goring-on-Sea. She was a regular communicant at St Nic's and continued to be so at her new church in Goring. I first met her when we came to St Nic's in 1958 and both had children of a similar age. We both joined the Mothers' Union in 1961 and Betty went on to become Deanery President for a number of years. She also administered the Chalice at St Nic's and took Communion to the sick. When it was suggested we have coffee after the main Sunday service, Betty and I set it up and served coffee every Sunday morning for a couple of months until we got a rota going. Betty and I also hosted Lent Lunches, followed by a discussion group, for many years. (Betty did three and I did three - Heather Hay took over from Betty when she left). She was also one of the regular band of Thursday morning Church Cleaners after Joyce Mercer moved away.'

In the '60s John Newton at St Nics put forward the idea of setting up an Abbeyfield Society in Chiswick, to provide sheltered but independent living for elderly people who wanted to live in a small community setting. With his wife, Pamela, John Barrett, George Nissen, Frank Field (then a local councillor), Frank's mother, and the help of an architect, solicitor and doctor, the idea came to fruition when first one, and, over time, five houses opened locally. Joy Barrett got involved quite soon, and some years later, Joy writes, 'Betty took over as Treasurer for the Duke's Avenue House' and was a valued member of the Chiswick Abbeyfield Society'.

In later years Betty was brought home to Chiswick by her son and lived at St Mary's Convent, where she died.

Another pillar of the Mothers' Union was Peggy Tope, who was the enrolling member from the early '70s, and who also died in 2014. Born in 1916, she grew up in Ealing, and, refusing to go to university, she preferred to excel in shorthand and typing with which she obtained a job in the Civil Service. However, marriage to Bill Tope in 1941 put paid to her job - no married women allowed in the Civil Service then - but very soon Peggy had her hands full with three children, nappies to wash by hand and war-time rations to eke out in an area near Biggin Hill known as 'Bomb Alley'. Undaunted she grew vegetables in the back garden, and thus began her lifelong interest in gardening.

At her funeral her daughter, Celia, spoke of Peggy's long association with St Nics, begun when the

family moved to Chiswick in the mid '50s: 'My mother became adept at flower arranging, was a member of the Mothers' Union, and when a needlepoint group was started, she designed and made several kneelers for the church, which are still there today. (*Indeed they are, and were beautifully restored by Heather Hay.*) She ran a very successful stall at the Christmas Bazaar with dried flowers and flower arrangements, and she was a volunteer helper with the Boys' Brigade for many years.' Joy Barrett also remembers the beauty of Peggy's flowers arrangements for the Altar of Repose at the Easter Vigil, and Peggy's gardens both here in Park Road, and later in Taunton, where Peggy settled when her husband died.

Peggy suffered from increasing deafness for many years but never appeared to be depressed by it, rather, her daughter Celia said at her funeral, to have 'the happy knack of knowing how to be content with any situation', having 'an abiding intellectual curiosity, equally fascinated, by 'Horizon' programmes and science fiction films' and managing, at 95, 'a trip around the Albert Dock in Liverpool'. Peggy maintained her interest in St Nics and never failed to send in her subscription for the parish mag.

It is this gutsy, forthright person, as I told her daughter Jennifer (with whom I spoke after her mother's death), whom I remember and think of every time I work in the church garden in Church Street, for it was Peggy who planted the roses there on behalf of the Mothers' Union. I love it that the choice of roses is very '60s: they include Chicago Peace, a pink version of the original Peace rose, and a gaudy one, Jacob's Coat. Jennifer told me Peggy once said 'I'm fed up with good taste'. So I smile at each Jacob's Coat flower !

My best recollection of Peggy is from the days (literally) of preparation for the Christmas Bazaar at St Nics Hall. It was one of the years when I was organising it and Peggy will have been getting her dried flower stall or the stand for the MU cakes ready. Margaret Thatcher had just been driven out of Downing Street and the contest was on for who should succeed her. Peggy and I were agog - she being a fervent Socialist, I a mere echo by comparison, and we always talked politics. On a hunch, with no political basis at all, I bet her that John Major would win because he had the fullest lips of the candidates and it was my belief that thin-lipped politicians don't rise to the top. The others were Heseltine (very thin lips) and Douglas Hurd (rather small mouth and thin lips). Well, whatever the real reason for Major becoming PM, my diagnosis was right. I won my bet ! And Peggy and I had a good laugh.

Christabel Ames-Lewis

