

Dick Watson 1922 - 2008

Dick was a regular worshipper at St Nicholas. Accompanied by Jane he attended Sunday morning Mass and as he became less mobile, sat in his wheel chair at the back of church – an ideal spot where he could talk to members of the congregation as they arrived or left. Dick always seemed to be ‘on the ball’ and could be relied on for a cheery exchange of views.

At school he epitomised the all-round sportsman. Cricket, rugby, hockey, tennis, athletics and real tennis were all sports that he excelled in at Canford. Unfortunately his benefactor died suddenly when Dick was 16 and there were no funds to continue his schooling. So he joined the RAF. Only when he qualified as a pilot and was commissioned in Rhodesia was it discovered that he was under age and he had to stay on in Africa training other pilots until he was old enough to qualify for active service. He then flew Wellington bombers and piloted a crew of five men, completing raids on industrial sites in the Ruhr. In 1942 he and his crew flew to India to help in the war in the Far East.

In February 1942 (on his 21st birthday) his plane developed engine failure flying back from a bombing trip over Burma, but he managed to land safely in a dry river bed near Chittagong, not far from British lines. The crew made radio contact with the Squadron but bad weather prevented a rescue attempt. Walking towards the border the crew was betrayed by the local people and captured by a Japanese patrol. They were taken to Rangoon Jail where Dick spent three months being interrogated in solitary confinement. Then followed nearly three years working as coolies in Rangoon and in the docks unloading ships.

Surviving on a meagre rice diet, Dick was fed ants to ‘cure’ nutritional blindness. Later he talked of the humour and courage of British Tommies, of the brave Ghurkas and the stoical Chinese – all fighting to stay alive. Finally, in 1945, when the Japanese fled, leaving behind those too sick to march, the jail was bombed by British aircraft and one member of Dick’s crew was killed. Dick climbed on to the roof of the jail with a Chinese fellow inmate and they wrote messages on the roof – JAPS GONE and EXTRACT DIGIT – after which food was dropped instead of bombs !

Back in England he married Jane that same year and they had two daughters. Dick was granted a permanent commission and stationed at Transport Command working for Lord Tedder. For a short while he played hockey for the RAF. In 1946 he resigned his commission and joined the Standart Motor Company in Coventry where he became a Marketing Director. He set up his own company in 1972 and he and Jane settled down in Chiswick.

Dick was always the life and soul of any party. He once went to the Motor Show with a string of *seven* women on his arm. When he entered the Carlton Towers Hotel, an American woman turned to him in astonishment and said, 'Now THAT is organisation !'

Members of our congregation may recall Jane and Dick's Diamond Wedding when they received a letter of congratulation from the Queen and celebrated with members of our congregation after Mass one Sunday.

Despite his fast failing health Dick remained in touch with the world around him, especially with the fortunes of the English cricket team. His cheery presence at St Nicholas will be missed. Our condolences go to Jane who continues to play an active part in the life of our church.

With thanks to Dick's grandson, Ben Hardy.