

## The Rev. David Bertram Harley

5<sup>th</sup> October 1922 – 13<sup>th</sup> March 2017



David was born on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1922 to a military family, the second son of Lt. Colonel Arthur Bertram & Mrs. Joyce Harley, though his father was always known to the family as Punch, the nickname that his sisters had given him in childhood. David's mother Joyce was a Christian Scientist and being a woman of very strong determination, the children were brought up as Christian Scientists. Upon the death of Joyce in 1951, David's father Punch reverted to Anglicanism. David's very lively mind and intellectualism was such that he read widely and it seems likely that he departed Christian Science some time in his adolescence, passing probably through phases of doubt and agnosticism and turning to Anglicanism as a young adult.

Educated at Bedford School between 1931 and 1940, David was in the Officer Training Corps. He described with great pleasure how in the Lower Sixth his form master encouraged the boys in very wide reading and study without the prescriptions of any set syllabus, and this allowed David to explore areas of interest and develop further his already enquiring mind. On the day of the declaration of war, Sunday 3 September 1939, David reported to his school and spent many hours filling sandbags to protect the ground floor windows in case of bombing. It was also whilst in the Sixth Form as a member of the Officer Training Corps that he saw his first active service in 1940, patrolling the school playing fields of Bedford School on many a night with a rifle and 10 rounds of live ammunition to defend against the much anticipated landing of German paratroopers.

On leaving school in July 1940, David volunteered for the Indian Army, and whilst awaiting passage to India he served in the Royal Observer Corps, stationed in the local R.O.C. headquarters above the General Post Office, plotting enemy aircraft during the Battle of Britain and thereafter, until in June 1941 he was able to report to Aldershot as an Indian Army cadet.

A few weeks later he was on board a convoy sailing from the Clyde, via Greenland, down the coast of the USA, across to Freetown in Sierra Leone, West Africa, and then calling at Cape Town for a week, then around the Cape of Good Hope with its high seas and on to Bombay, India. They slept on hammocks, crowded like sardines, but fortunately their circuitous route had spared them the attentions of the German U-boats.

Once in India he trained at the Officers' Training School at Mhow in Madhya Pradesh, & was commissioned into the 2<sup>nd</sup> King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1942, aged 19 years, serving at the Regimental Centre at Dehra Dun in the beautiful Doon Valley with the Siwalik Hills to the south and the Himalayas to the north. He passed through Signals School at Poona and joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> K.E.O Gurkha Rifles as part of the Eighth Army at El Alamein.

One thing that stands out is David's ability to be both respected but also liked by his Indian and Gurkha colleagues. On his way to Egypt he was sent to the hill station of Lansdowne to pick up a draft of 18<sup>th</sup> Royal Garhwal Rifles to join their 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, which was serving in Palestine (Syria today). He got on so well with the men that their senior N.C.O. asked that he apply to join them permanently. David was very touched by this request, however remained in the Gurkhas.

Once in the North African theatre of war, David narrowly missed being killed in a strike by a Stuka dive bomber but was not so fortunate on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1943 when he was wounded by Italian mortar

bombs at the Battle of Akarit twice in one day, the first wound injuring his right arm and paralysing his thumb and first two fingers for months to come, the second wound peppering him with shrapnel. His wounds and resultant shock caused his evacuation to hospital in Tripoli.

Subsequently David took part in the Italian campaign and fought up through the mountains of mainland Italy. Eventually arriving before the German fortifications of Monte Cassino he recalled in a letter to his grandchildren: "I had an enormous premonition of a terrible disaster awaiting us, and went into the local Roman Catholic church to pray." He also wrote: "I remember well standing at Cassino before the battle, surrounded by corpses and thinking: 'Oh God, if I were you I would obliterate the whole human race, so wicked and stupid are they.'"

David had long and powerful legs, and his family well remember how in later years on country walks he would stride ahead of them. On the night of 17/18<sup>th</sup> February 1944 during the Battle of Monte Cassino, whilst attacking the German-held monastery, this long-legged distinction of David's nearly proved to be the cause of his extinction. Making swift progress and not realising that he had already reached the frequently shelled Snake Pass, he paused to allow the shorter-legged Gurkhas to catch up with him. As he wrote: "The next thing I knew was that day was breaking, I was in great pain and unable to move below the neck. I thought I was dead, when our new M.O. came to me, injected me with morphia and organised 4 of my Gurkhas to carry me on a stretcher down the mountain to a jeep which flew a red cross... We passed below the German lines, but they respected the red cross and did not fire."

David had received a severe wound to the upper spine. Indeed, the duration of the battle and the high number of casualties were such that Cassino became the worst battle in the history of his regiment. David was sent to the hospital at Caserta where he was expected to die of his injuries. As David wrote: "There were so many wounded in beds that we were left much to our own devices... having now been wounded 3 times, I could see no point in getting well again, if it merely meant being put back in the front line next time to be blinded or seriously crippled for life." However, his comrade and friend Subedar Lalbahadur Thapa, V.C. brought him a bottle of whisky, and "with my unparalysed left hand I managed to drink a lot of whisky straight from the bottle and decided to fight to live after all."

(His sons have continued to honour the tradition of whisky in times of trouble, and other times too, it has to be said!) He received a medical evacuation via Algiers back to England, to Derby Hospital as being the closest hospital to his parents with an available bed. His mother Joyce and father Punch devotedly alternated daily visits by train. After many months of intensive treatment at Derby and then at the annexe to Addenbrooke's Hospital at the Leys School, Cambridge, David recovered sufficiently to stagger a little. It was many more months before his right hand functioned again and he was able to straighten his head. But it was many years before his spinal wound ceased to scab, and in his last years he again suffered considerable pain from this wound once more.

One of the abiding tenets of David's life was the need to be of use and not to be a burden, something he disliked about old age and life in the care home and nursing home that he experienced in his final two years. He began to regain his health and was deployed to work at an Indian Army Resettlement Camp outside Thetford in Norfolk, but there was little for him to do so characteristically he felt he was wasting his time and volunteered to go as a platoon commander to 13 Infantry Training Centre in Maidstone to train Indian Army Cadets. This was in the area called 'Bomb Alley', but despite the frequent danger from V1s and V2s, David described this period of his war as "a happy time". He was effectively embarking on a teaching career of sorts, and it was also

“happy not least because (Jean) used to visit me there each evening... whilst serving in the W.R.N.S. awaiting a ship to take her to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). It was an important phase in our relationship which convinced us that we would like to share our future lives together. We had been friends since 1938, but separated all too often by the war.”

It was a great honour that David was selected to represent the Indian Army on the London VE (Victory in Europe) Parade on 8<sup>th</sup> June 1946 with his beloved Gurkhas, and afterwards he took them on leave to Scotland. It was wonderful weather and, coming from Nepal, they remarked that Scotland was just like India!

Despite his experiences of war where he said, “you experience mainly two emotions: terror or boredom”, David decided to remain in the army with the end of hostilities and in 1946 he obtained a regular army commission in The Buffs (the Kent regiment). It was also the year that he married Jean Craigie Halkett (28 November). The funeral march chosen by David at his funeral was ‘Lili Marlene’, the theme tune that the Eighth Army adopted (or captured) from Rommel’s Afrika Corps in the North African campaign. Jean had it played as a most unorthodox wedding march at their wedding – much to David’s surprise and delight. He always said that Jean’s sense of humour was part of her attraction.

After some time with The Buffs, David felt himself drawn back to India and he reverted to the Indian Army and returned to the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun with Jean, this time as an instructor. It was a place which they both loved and at which they had intended to remain after Indian independence. However, with the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, British Officers were withdrawn as there was a fear that they would find themselves on opposite sides of another war! The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 2<sup>nd</sup> Gurkha Rifles were to be drafted to Malaya, but rather than be separated from Jean again, David re-joined The Buffs, but in 1948 he found himself drafted to Berlin at the time of the Soviet blockade which began to look like the advent of World War 3.

Having held in all the trauma from years of front-line service and having been wounded 3 times, he suffered delayed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (then called shell shock) and was flown back to England, and was invalided out of the Army. The advice given to Jean by the military psychiatrist was to administer whisky and to get David to talk, and he never ceased to be grateful to Jean for her support in helping him thus. As he said so often, thanks to her care, he was able to go on to live a very full, productive and active life, unlike so many who ended up permanently marred.

Upon his recovery from PTSD David went up to Downing College, Cambridge and read Modern Languages, and in 1950 he graduated after only 18 months.

From 1950-58 David was an Assistant Master of Modern Foreign Languages back at Bedford School, and during this time their 3 sons (Jonathan, Ralph and Justin) were born. Sadly Ralph died at the age of 43 from the effects of the treatment for Hodgkin lymphoma, an uncommon form of cancer, which he’d been fighting since he was 17. David and Jean cared lovingly for Ralph throughout the many difficulties he faced.

In 1951 David’s mother Joyce died and he embarked upon his study of parapsychology which convinced him of the truth of Christianity and influenced his religious beliefs greatly thereafter, and during his time teaching at Bedford School, The Bishop of St Albans persuaded David to train for the clergy. Over two long summer holidays David studied at Westcott House, Cambridge, a training that put considerable emphasis upon intellectual rigour and Biblical and historical scholarship, and leading to his ordination into the Church of England. Upon no chaplaincy materialising at Bedford School, David became the Chaplain and Head of Religious Studies at

Stamford School in September 1958. For almost 30 years, he taught Divinity, Modern Languages, Psychology and Ethics, insisting that every pupil should question what they are told and putting religion into context in terms of science and history, distinguishing myth, propaganda and mistranslation from probable truth and ethics. As well as fostering intellectual rigour and debate, David was a sympathetic teacher and Chaplain who was utterly committed to pastoral care.

True to form, upon his retirement from Stamford School in 1987, David immediately volunteered as Confrator or Confrater (Chaplain) of Browne's Hospital, an alms' house for the elderly founded in 1475 by William Browne, a rich wool merchant of Stamford. Having recently moved from 20 Rutland Terrace to a modern bungalow and having carried out an extensive design and planting of the garden, and having removed all the lawns there so as to avoid mowing, he discovered that the gardener at Browne's Hospital had retired. As an avid gardener who had fed his family from his vegetable plot throughout their time living at 20 Rutland Terrace, David volunteered to take over the extensive gardening at Browne's Hospital which ironically included the mowing of the lawns!

Throughout his busy professional life as a teacher and Chaplain, David was also a devoted father to his sons, and a devoted husband to Jean. He was in some ways a "new man", a very modern husband, carrying out the roles of cooking and cleaning as well as all the other duties of a family man. Jean had trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and was a highly artistic and creative person. David was fully and instrumentally supportive of Jean resuming her career, undertaking further training, and enabling through his domestic roles that she had the time to found the Stamford School of Speech and Drama and later the Stamford Shakespeare Company. Jean remained the Artistic Director of the Stamford Shakespeare Company until her arthritis forced her to retire at 88, by which time the Company was the largest amateur theatre company in Britain, with the biggest open air stage and covered auditorium, running a 3 months summer season during which there has never been a cancelled show, no matter what the weather.

When David was about 89, Jean became an invalid after a serious fall and David lovingly cared for her for 2 years until she died on the morning after her 91<sup>st</sup> birthday.

He continued to live alone for 9 months until two years ago he too had a very bad fall. Although he loathed being what he called "a burden and of no use to anyone" he eventually came to admit that he needed more assistance than that which his excellent friends and neighbours could give him in his home in Stamford.

He chose to move to Whitchurch House Care Home, near Ross-on-Wye, where he could be close to his son Justin and live in the countryside. In so doing he was fittingly returning to the County of Herefordshire, the home of his ancient Harley ancestors dating back many hundreds of years.

On 9<sup>th</sup> February 2017 he moved into Gibraltar House Nursing Home, Monmouth, as his health had deteriorated significantly. There he received exceptional palliative care, and died a month later at 4 p.m. on Monday 13th March 2017.

David valued immensely his time at Bedford and Stamford Schools. His sons Jonathan and Justin both became teachers in comprehensive schools, and despite having taught in the independent sector himself, David said that - having seen the excellent education his grandchildren received in the comprehensive system - he hoped for the eventual union of state & private sectors.

One might say that, thanks to the invention of penicillin and the provision of whisky, David was spared to live a long and useful life. Some of his most formative years were undoubtedly spent in his wartime and subsequent military service. As he wrote: "However awful the war was, I think it has made those of us who took part in it realize what really matters in life, but I thoroughly agree

with my father who used to say that every parliament in every country should have a set of gallows outside it, so that all members on both sides of any government that decides to go to war can be publically hanged, as politicians make wars and then expect others to get killed and maimed in them.”

David lived by the words of the hymn sung at his funeral – his was a good life lived “to love and serve.”