



St. Margaret's Church

I P S W I C H

The Reflections of the Steeple Keeper on the Great War, and its effect on his role and the people he knew.

In February 1896 St Margaret's Church, Ipswich, appointed a new Steeple Keeper. His name was William Motts and he continued in this role until the end of the First World War.

He was to maintain the bells, the frame and the associated parts of the tower. It included organising the ringing of the bells for Divine Service and as required during the week. He was also responsible for ensuring that the flag was flown on the relevant Feast Days and for important local and national events.



The Motts family had lived in Fressingfield a small village in the north of Suffolk. The father, William, was born in 1828 and died aged 46 in 1874. He was a butcher by trade but was also a renowned bell ringer. He married Harriet Whiteman in November 1853 and they had six children including William who was born in 1863. After the death of her husband, Harriet was described in The Suffolk Post Office Directory published by Kelly's in 1875 and later in the 1881 census as a Flour Dealer and was still living in Fressingfield. However by the time of the next census, in 1891, the family had moved to Ipswich and lived at 25 Orchard Street where Harriet was described as "living on her own means" and William, together with another son James, were "house decorators". At some point in the next decade William became the Assistant to the Inspector of Weights and Measures in Ipswich.

Harriet died in March 1914, William in 1919 and James in 1923. They had all been living in the house in Orchard Street at the time of death.

In many respects James, who was a composer and conductor of peals, overshadowed William in the world of campanology. Nevertheless William was “considered to be a first class ringer in every way and a fine gentleman as well.”

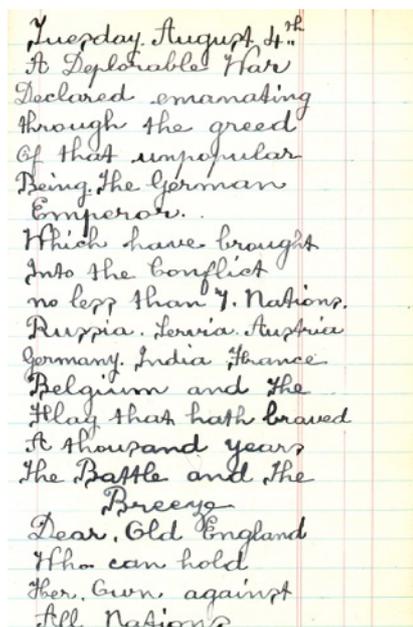
The first action of William following his appointment was to start a “*Book for the recording of Births, Marriages and Deaths In Connection with the Bells of the Church of St Margaret’s, Ipswich*”. It was in part intended to record each event and the fees due together with payments made and how they were distributed amongst the ringers. It recorded expenditure incurred in the maintenance of the bells and as time progressed it was also used to record events that took place within the church, Ipswich and the world, and his thoughts about them.

The following extracts are his reflections on the Great War, and its effect on his role and the people he knew.

Monday August 3rd 1914 was the August Bank Holiday. Although there was talk of war being declared William drove to Rendlesham Hall to the Scout Rally “..which was thoroughly enjoyed.”

However the next day, Tuesday 4th, his mood changes as War is declared.

He writes:



Tuesday August 4th
A Deplorable War
Declared emanating
through the greed
of that unpopular
Being, the German
Emperor.
Which have brought
into the conflict
no less than 7 Nations.
Russia. Serbia. Austria
Germany. India France
Belgium and the
Flag that hath braved
A thousand years
The Battle and the
Breeze
Dear Old England
Who can hold
her own against
All Nations

“A Deplorable War Declared emanating through the greed of that unpopular Being The German Emperor. Which have brought into the conflict no less than 7 nations. Russia, Serbia, Austria, Germany, India, France, Belgium and The Flag that hath braved a thousand years, The Battle and The Breeze.
Dear Old England Who can hold her own against All Nations”

He follows with a rousing extract from the Evening Star headed “We are going to win” which reported a speech by Lord Rosebury in Broxburn.

The men of the choir of St Margaret’s were to have held an outing to Woodbridge and Orford on Wednesday 5th but this year it was part of a four day Bank Holiday, which had been approved to stop any run on the Bank of England as war approached. William had been invited to go with them “..but owing to the Deplorable War now raging the...outing had to be abandoned to the regret of all.”

Life continued much as normal during September with the purchase of a Chiming Strap for the Treble bell (2s 0d) (10p), and equipment to grease the bearings (1s 0d) (5p).

In October general maintenance was carried out on the bells and frame *"..after an extraordinary Dry Summer commencing from the beginning of April until the beginning of October 1914. And only a brief thunderstorm in May during this beautiful summer."*

On Boxing Day 1914 an order was received from the War Office *"..that all the gas-lamps within the Borough would have to be shaded owing to probable aircraft about. And also owing to this deplorable war now raging the Annual Collection of Christmas Boxes [for the ringers] were Abandoned as the parishioners have had such a call upon them for Belgium Relief Fund that [William] thought it advisable not to approach the parishioners during this Christmastide which was a very Meloncolley Christmas 1914"*.

By 26th January 1915 an order had been issued to ensure that *"..all artificial lights within all Churches, Chapels, Buildings and every House be subdued embracing all the three counties Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk owing to the murderous German Aircraft fear now raging which have greatly disturbed numerous peaceful homes and families."* William ensured that the two windows in the belfry complied with the directive.

From 31st January the Sunday Evening Service in the church was moved to the Garratt Memorial Hall until March 14th when it was recorded that *"..it will shortly be held within the Church as the beautiful daylight is increasing."*

On Whit Sunday (23rd May) about *"..6 or 700 soldiers attended Divine Service"* in the morning.

On Saturday 5th June William records that his nephew, Stanley *"..and his companions joined the Army 1st Battalion of E A Howitzers Regiment RFA Suffolk. First sent to Peterborough and then moved nearer Ipswich to Thetford."* Stanley *"..had assisted in chiming upon the eight bells the Sunday previous to joining the Army."*

In response to an offer made by William for the bells to be rung for a wedding, the Rev Canon Williamson's reply was copied into the register including *"..it would not be fitting to thrust upon others the cloak of gladness when so much gloom either of anxiety or actual bereavement overhangs nearly every home and household."*

William also noted that no flag was hoisted for the Sunday School treat this year as it had been cancelled *"..owing to this Disastrous War now raging."*

In late August he records that the windows of St Margaret's were shaded with green material at a cost of between 15 and 20 shillings (75p - £1).

Once again no Christmas Boxes were collected for the bell ringers “*..owing to this Deplorable War*” however they were to get their glass of Port wine “*..which is an Old Custom of their Steeple Keeper William Motts commenced on Christmas Morning 1896*”.

Stanley returned to Ipswich and on 2nd January 1916 was able to “*..call some nice changes upon the six the bells, also upon the eight bells which was very much appreciated by the chimers..*” He returned to his base in Tuddenham St Mary on the 4th.

He was back again a few weeks later but the chiming was curtailed “*..owing to the Military Service continuing so long..*” The Military Service on Easter Sunday also continued so long that the chimers were restricted in the time available. However it was noted that since Palm Sunday, thanks to the permission given by the Chief Constable, Captain A J Schreiber, “*..that the chimers could, now the days were getting longer, commence to chime for evening service at 6pm for 6.30 Divine Service.*”

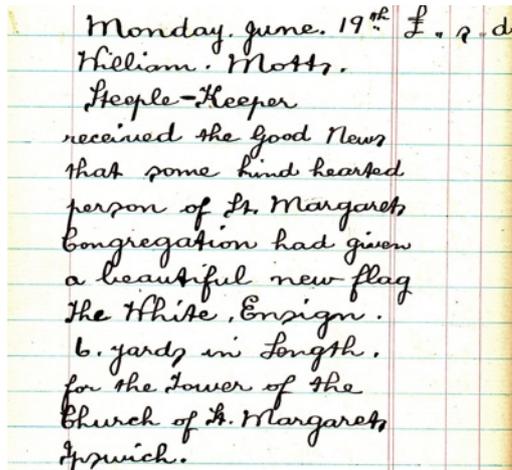
On Easter Monday William was to be found in the belfry at St Mary-le-Tower ringing “*..as is the Good Old Custom, which have been, the bell ringers are sorry to say, ..discontinued at the church of St Margaret’s since Easter Monday April 16th 1916 [Ed Previously noted in 1906] with feelings of regret.*”

It had been the custom to ring the bells all day for payment of 2 guineas but in 1907 there was no ringing or hoisting of the flag due to the great expenditure by the church the previous year “*..which have never occurred for time immemorial.*”

In May William approached the Churchwarden “*..respecting a new flag. But he said the funds were £30 deficient.*” Later that month, on 24th, William received an Order from the vicar “*..to hoist the flag upon the Tower this being Empire Day*”. In the evening William noted that he had written to the vicar “*..stating to him the Deplorable state of the Old Flag which was purchased 14 years ago.*” On 10th June the flag was not hoisted on the tower for the King’s Birthday, as was the custom, owing to its deplorable state.

His nephew, Stanley, returned home for Whit Sunday and was involved in ringing the bells. He returned to his camp on Whit Monday which that year was not a Bank Holiday, it having been moved to the Tuesday after the August Bank Holiday “*..which everyone will appreciate when it arrives.*”

On Monday 19th June William was pleased to record the he “..received the



Monday June 19th F. r. d.
William. Mottz.
People-keeper
received the good News
that some kind hearted
person of St. Margaret's
Congregation had given
a beautiful new flag
The White Ensign.
6 yards in length.
for the Tower of the
Church of St. Margaret's
Ipswich.

Good News that some kind hearted person of St Margaret's Congregation had given a beautiful new flag, the White Ensign, 6 yards in length for the Tower of the Church of St Margaret's." He also recorded that the following Saturday he was informed that “..they had gave an order for a new Flag Staff which is to be 6 feet longer than the old Flag Staff which is about 27 feet long and also a new hail-yard cord all these have to be done properly weather etc permitting.”

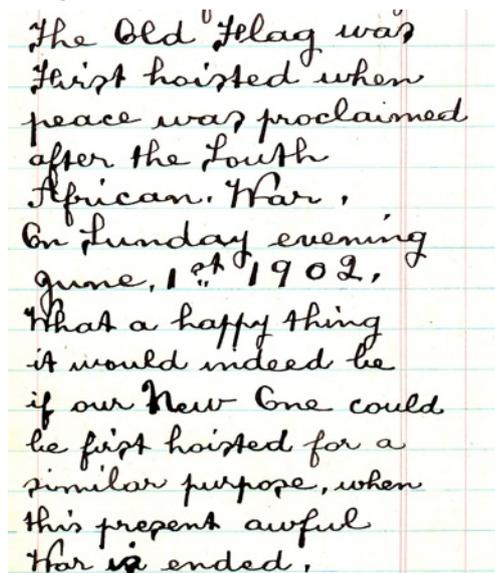
On 3rd August they “..took down the Old Flag Staff after a great number of years service but it began to show signs of decay where it was braced up with Iron Stays.”

By 11th August William was able to record that he had been given “..the beautiful new flag, The Union Jack, presented to the church by the kindness of The Mann family [although] at first it was thought that they should have, as in former years, the White Ensign..”

It was presented in memory of the Late Geoffrey Hatcher of the Suffolk Yeomanry who had died in hospital in Malta in November 1915.

He goes on to say: “The Presentation also includes a new flagstaff 35 feet in length, and a new hail-yard cord 60 feet in length.

The Old Flag was first hoisted when peace was proclaimed after the South African War, on Sunday evening June 1st 1902. What a happy thing it would indeed be if our New One could be first hoisted for a similar purpose, when this present awful War is ended. The Old Flagstaff was Erected by Mr George Gould during his Apprenticeship about the period of 1866 and therefore had done good service close upon 50 years. Let us hope that the New Flag Staff may last the same number of years.”



The Old Flag was
first hoisted when
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after the South
African War,
on Sunday evening
June, 1st 1902,
What a happy thing
it would indeed be
if our New One could
be first hoisted for a
similar purpose, when
this present awful
War is ended.

The new flagstaff was put in position on 15th August taking three workmen assisted by William and a colleague three hours to complete. A new tin box to keep the Union Jack in safely was also purchased.

Once again at Christmastide he records that no boxes were collected owing to "*..this Deplorable War.*"

On Palm Sunday, April 1st 1917, the bells were rung "*..for morning and evening services ... by kind permission of Captain Arthur J Schreiber, Chief Constable for the Borough of Ipswich, and was much appreciated by all the chimers.*"

Stanley had returned home for the Easter services that year from his camp in Doncaster. On Easter Monday "*..the flag was not hoisted this being a New One and are waiting patiently for the Restoration of Peace, which every British Subject is longing for.*" Stanley was back again at the end of May for Whitsuntide from his camp, which was now at Welbeck Abbey in Nottinghamshire. He was in Ipswich once again at the end of August conducting "*..a nice musical piece upon the The Old and Beautiful ring of six bells which are just upon or are 300 years old in the year AD 1730 [Ed Note actually 1630s].*

On 1st September William was given permission to purchase new bell ropes for the Treble and Tenor, each of 70ft in length. He wrote to John Nicoll, a church bell rope manufacturer in Peckham, London, and received the following reply. "*Dear Sir Your kind order came duly to hand. I will get the ropes made up as soon as ever I can and under the present conditions it is impossible for me to say more. Yours Truly, John Nicoll*"

Chiming ceased once again on 23rd September, owing to the lighting restrictions.

On the 29th he recorded the usual information about remuneration, it being Quarter Day, but closes his account of the day with the following tribute:

"Mr Leonard Cooper's youngest son Herbert Cooper who formerly chimed at the Church of St Margaret's, Ipswich has been killed in action in France. The Deceased used to Chime the second bell to the ring of eight bells and was a promising young man. May He Rest In Peace."

It is interesting to note that his name is not recorded on the War Memorial in St Margaret's Church, but rather on the Memorial in the Presbyterian Church, Barrack Corner, in Ipswich.

In November Stanley returned to Ipswich on six days leave but "*..unfortunately he was taken ill and had to go to the Ranelagh Road Hospital where the Doctors discovered that he was suffering from a septic throat where he received good treatment for a week returning to Luton on Wednesday November 14th 1917.*"

On 17th November William received the two new ropes from John Nicoll, both 70ft in length, with red white and blue sallies at a cost of 20 Shillings (£1) each “.. *this being an advance since March 1911 of 6 shillings and 6 pence (33p) each rope. This is owing to this deplorable war.*” These were stretched on trees in the churchyard and treated with a mixture of soft soap, Neatsfoot Oil and a small quantity of Linseed Oil before replacing the old ropes which had lasted 10 years.

In December William recorded that Stanley “..*left Luton, Bedfordshire after only returning after his recent illness a month back for Southampton on Wednesday December 12th 1917 and sailed from Southampton to France on Thursday morning December 13th for the base in France at 10am.*”

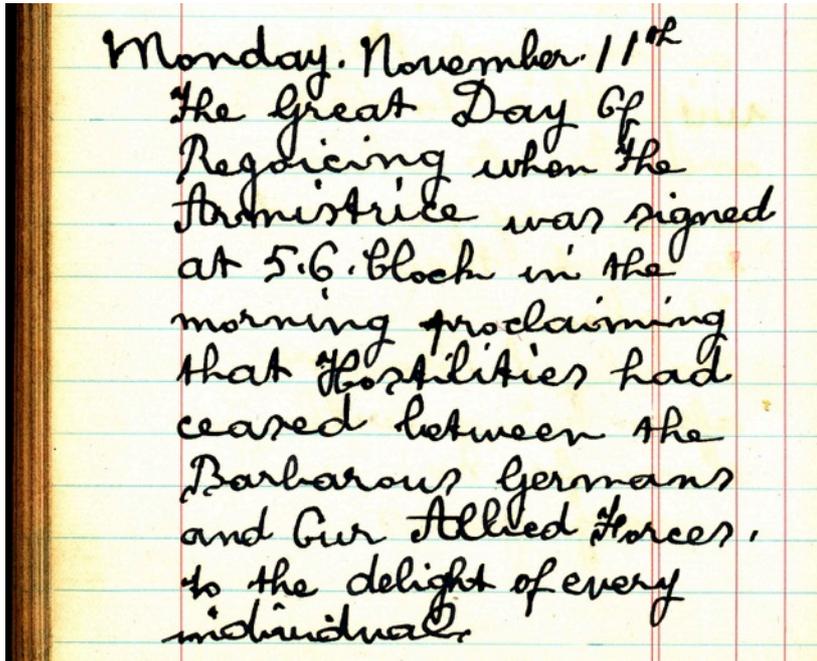
The Quarter Day nearest Christmas came with the usual distribution of funds. William noted that there were once again no Christmas Boxes for the Chimers and also that Stanley was still in France.

On Monday June 3rd 1918 William wrote “*Owing to this deplorable war no Union Jack or Flag has been hoisted upon the Tower of St Margaret’s Ipswich for the past 4 years to the dismay of all the parishioners. As the New Union Jack, which cost £3 was presented to the Grand Old Church of St Margaret’s Ipswich by Mrs Mann In Loving Memory of the Late Geoffrey Hatcher of The Suffolk Yeomanry who died..in Malta Hospital. Greatly Respected. William Motts The Steeple [keeper] is anxious to Hoist this beautiful Union Jack when Peace is Restored.*”

On Thursday September 19th William noted that he and his brother welcomed Stanley back. He had “ *arrived at Dover and proceeded by way of Victoria Station, London having been at Armentières, France on The Western Front for about 9 or 10 months arriving in Orchard St. enjoying fairly good health at 12 o’clock or Midnight. His people being very pleased to see him being absent for so long or it seemed rather long.*” Stanley was able to call “*a nice piece of chiming upon the Old six bells.*” on the following Sunday.

A week later William recorded that Stanley “..*returned to Ipswich from Dovercourt after staying a week with his sister Dora, enjoying the week very much. Thursday morning September 26th he travelled by the 6:30 am train to London thence journeyed on to Dover en route for France on to the Western Front after having a fortnights leave. His Uncles being very much affected by His speedy return as it seemed a very short stay with His Uncles and Aunt who were very pleased to meet their Nephew...after being with them for so many years.*”

Just over six weeks later William was able to record on Monday 11th November 1918 that:



Monday. November 11th
The Great Day of Rejoicing when the Armistice was signed at 5.6. o'clock in the morning proclaiming that Hostilities had ceased between the Barbarous Germans and Our Allied Forces, to the delight of every individual.

"The Great Day of Rejoicing when the Armistice was signed at 5 o'clock in the morning proclaiming that Hostilities had ceased between the Barbarous Germans and Our Allied Forces, to the delight of every individual.

Later that day he records:

"The Great Day of Rejoicing when the Armistice was signed William Motts, The Steeple Keeper assisted by [a fellow chimer] Hoisted the beautiful New Union Jack upon the tower for the first time in honour of the Great Events and then William Motts, The Steeple Keeper, proceeded to [a local premises to telephone the Churchwarden] but he was in London and [his wife] received the telephone message as follows 'Would you like the bells of the Church of St Margaret's rang for this Great and Glorious event?' She replied 'O yes Mr Motts certainly'"

In the evening of the same day he recorded that:

"The Great Day of Rejoicing the following Church Bell-ringers took part in the ringing during that day combined with the Church of St Mary-le-Tower."

They ceased ringing at 8 o'clock for the Thanksgiving Service.

On 13th November William writes in his penultimate entry that the Churchwarden had paid for the ringing for the Armistice and the money had been shared out.

Over the 22 years that William kept this record of his activities as the Steeple Keeper the number of entries each year had decreased. In the final entry on Saturday 30th November 1918 he noted that he had purchased *"..2 pints of the best engine oil as a substitute for Castor Oil as it cannot be obtained for lubricating the 16 Bell-bearings or gudgeons."*

We know that William died on 29th September 1919 at 57 years of age and was interred in Ipswich Cemetery on 1st October in a service conducted by Canon Henry Williamson, the Vicar of St Margaret's Church. His nephew, Stanley, returned safely from the war and moved to Essex where he died in 1966.

David Evans
John Girt
October 2018