

Who Spoke for God in Aldershot in the Great War?

For some months I searched for the parish journals for the churches in Aldershot during World War 1. The mystery was that the home of the British Army had two declared vicars –Reverend F.O.T. Hawkes and The Reverend Senior.

My journey took me to the Archives for Hampshire at Winchester, Farnborough and Aldershot Libraries, The Prince Consorts Library in Aldershot and to the Imperial War Museum. All these journeys ended in failure. I had read with some admiration reports in the Aldershot News of the work Reverend Frederick Ocheloney Hawkes was doing the Institute attached to his church to raise a whole range of social issues. Born in 1878 he was educated at Magdalene College Oxford and ordained in 1903 He was designated in all I could discover as being the Vicar of Aldershot. The Rev. Hawkes was a well-recognised figure walking through the Town and Camp with his dog. He remained a bachelor throughout his life finishing his ecclesiastic career as Bishop of Kingston. However at a number of civic occasions especially involving intercession about the consequences of the war the Reverend Senior's name appears as being Aldershot's Vicar. His parish church in Aldershot was All Saints.in 1918 he nominated Lord Wolmer from the Conservative and Unionist Party to be the Town's MP. Is this case of two Popes presiding not over Avignon but over Aldershot?

It is more an issue of who exactly the Town's vicar was but who was the senior figure in the centre of the huge Aldershot Command operating out of an area spreading from the outskirts of London to Southampton. This is illustrated by a parish magazine for late 1918 I finally discovered at the Surrey History and Archives Centre in Woking. The Reverend Hawkes had clearly moved from working among his parishioners in Aldershot to a role as chaplain to the British Army overseas. He had followed the army into Germany after the Armistice on the 11th of November 1918 and writes in a frank and objective style of what he found in Cologne where he was based. Hawkes describes seeing underfeed children the direct result of over four years blockade by the British Navy of German Ports. Although fraternisation with the German population is not permitted he clearly has discussed the war with ordinary Germans. They are angry and disillusioned with where the Kaiser had lead them and with the Prussian dominance of German military policy by the Prussians. His inquiries revealed that they saw themselves as a separate state with different values. They were in genuine fear of bandit groups or Friecorps armed ex- soldiers at large in their region.

Hawkes has an opportunity to analyse elementary education in Germany. He praises the provision of elementary schools he finds there. This was an interest arising from his close involvement with community education in Aldershot. It was him who asked how soon the billeted troops would be out of Aldershot schools in 1914/15 so education of the town's children could continue. The facilities enjoyed by the German elementary school children were superior to those in Aldershot but he doubts whether the town's ratepayers would pay to bring local schools up to the ones he inspected. Clearly this follows the work he did in Aldershot advocating greater state involvement in the care of children through nursery education both within the town and in the military camp. Here is someone offering a platform for George Lansbury a socialist and future leader of The Labour Party at his Institute to speak on social and political affairs. The invitation was extended to Lansbury because of his Christian Socialist beliefs and also because Hughes realised that after the immense suffering of the war returning soldiers did not want to return to a town where the workhouse still existed. Incidentally Lord Glassman who spoke cites Lansbury's Christian Socialist ideas as being crucial to his "blue socialism."

What of his fellow Vicar Reverend Senior. I was able to read the parish magazines for Holy Trinity in each of which he wrote a commentary. He clearly was in competition with Reverend Hawkes for the Chaplaincy of the Army and expresses disappointment at not having secured the post. The difference in approach to the war between Senior and Hawkes might be described as that between the church temporal and the church spiritual. Whereas in all his sermons and public utterances about the War and its consequences Hughes is trying to establish a philosophical rationale for the just war no such doubts appears in Seniors writing. He extolls the "splendid patriotism" to be found at the recruiting stations throughout the Aldershot Command. There is just a hint of puzzling as to why the Almighty is allowing the terrible conflict to take place but "It must be for some wise purpose." In 1914 he was convinced through the War a true religious belief would return to national life.

Both men saw the availability of alcohol as being a great threat to national life. There were so many pubs in Aldershot quenching the thirst of the Camp that one wonders if figures such as Mrs Elizabeth Hacher presiding over her Tavern in Grosvenor Road throughout the War, Earnest Hobbs at the Beehive in the high Street, Matilda Vinson at the Cambridge in Queens Road or Emily Howe at the Crimean Inn in Crimea Road were in outright competition in shaping the lives of the men in the Aldershot.

Both men were at pains to argue against pressures from a wartime economy allowing trading on Sundays and against the advent of Sunday newspapers.

The real debate was between total prohibition and restricting the sale of alcohol. As the war continued into 1915 Senior expresses concern at the shortage of curates and Sunday school teachers. That the services he offered to soldiers in the camp is evidenced by a letter written from the trenches to Miss Poole one of his assistants. "I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for thinking of me in your prayers." However Senior's failure to cope with the demands and stress of providing spiritual succour to the thousands of men who poured into Aldershot is shown by the comment in his letter to his flock justifying a short holiday. "I need this or else I will break down." Senior writes in 1915 that "In the two and a half years in post he had preached 412 times at Holy Trinity and if other sermons were included 450 times."

In the church journal he makes the claim that the advent of the War has meant that more Christian men are now fighting at any time since the world began. Presumably he means only in the British Army. The vicar goes on to condemn a strike by Welsh miners as creating a "sorry picture" to the soldiers at the front. He welcomes a Mr Goodchild the new curate but records that like many in the desperately overcrowded town the curate has been unable to find anywhere to live. In this holy war to maintain Christian values he claims the British Army of volunteers is the largest, (that phrase again), "since the world began." He demands that a good soldier does not simply attend the services of intercession his ministry offers but approaches a programme of prayer in a similar way to his military training.

The true Christian ideal is not represented by occasional attendance at an intercessional service for the successful outcome of the war. "Satisfactory drilling and preparation of a soldier is a lot more than his changing out of civilian clothes into a uniform and appearing on parade. Our religious life is suffering from a systematic approach to prayer," Senior states reflecting some impatience as the war drags on into the last months of 1915.

So much of church and civic life in Aldershot is devoted to the collection of money for a whole range of causes. The church magazine records how half the collection at services during the month of September 1915 will be sent to a field hospital in "gallant Serbia." Some of it will go towards the provision of church tents in Malta, Flanders and Egypt. Money has to be found for the maintenance of 50 motor ambulances. A continual demand supported by F.O.T. Hawkes is for money and foodstuffs to supplement the almost starvation rations endured by British prisoners of war in Germany. Because collection boxes were being rattled for a whole range of war causes necessary donations were reduced for Aldershot civilian hospital which relied on public philanthropy for its existence. Finance seemed to be the basis for the church's

existence because in every issue many pages are devoted to listing gifts and donations. As the war progressed the state stepped in offering war bonds to support the prosecution of the war.

In the congregations of both men armies of women were working to produce bandages, splints, bed jackets, pillowslips, towels for local hospitals. A similar demand was coming from the new hospitals being sent up in Farnborough by the Red Cross. However when the War enters 1916 Senior is lamenting about how little religion seemed to be affecting life in Aldershot's Camps. He does note however a comment by a military expert that people are now kinder to each other than they were before the war. As universal conscription is introduced he addresses serving soldiers as "children of God." The constraints of the war are closing in on his parish as the size of its parish magazine is reduced drastically. In the autumn of 1916 there is a crisis in agricultural production because not enough agricultural labour is available to bring in the crops. In the Aldershot News Hawkes writes about the consequences of a change in women's labour towards forming a land army replacing men called up for the army. His Institute pushes at the narrow boundaries of conventional attitudes towards labour following gender stereotypes. Hughes is however on record expressing doubts about how wisely women earning good wages will spend them and whether it will lead to immoral behaviour.

By 1917 Senior's drastically reduced magazine is discussing the bread ration weighing just four pounds per week or half a pound per day. His congregation was supporting the Cambridge Military Hospital with foodstuffs indicated by a letter of thanks from the Hospital expressing gratitude for eggs and fruit at Easter. A sum of £40 is collected for the supply depot for Aldershot's military Hospitals. After the black period at the commencement of 1918 Senior is counselling how victory will come quickly "if we say our prayers." When victory finally comes there is a huge open air service on the 11th November and another of thanksgiving on the 17th November. Senior instructs his readers to vote in the hastily convened Khaki Election of the 14th December which the Aldershot News describes as a non- event because so many of the electorate were excluded.

Our two clergymen provide differing perspectives of the post war world in welcoming home the town's soldiers on the 12th of March 1919. Senior talks with disgust about the tyrannous regime in Soviet Russia and criticises the striking railway workers. On the other hand Hughes recognises the demands of working people for a reconstructed more equal society but cautions Both are united in a practical concern about memorials in their churches for our the sacrifice of the War would be remembered.

What of the other dominations? At the time of enlistment it was said the 75% defined themselves as C of E. In 1858 someone from the Wesleyans surveying Aldershot and the army made the following comment:

"The British Army is itself a class separated almost entirely from civil society. The soldier occupies a position of his own. Ordinarily he is under extremely demoralising influences against which the utmost effort to discipline are ineffective to counteract. There is constant neighbourhood of vice." For the 15,000 troops there was at the time of writing no established place of worship. In response to this the Wesleyans appointed a minister, Reverend Bachelor who set about trying to establish a congregation for the Camp and Town. He encountered considerable opposition from the military hierarchy who believed that there was no role for non-conformist religion within the Camp. Only C of E padres and chaplains could be paid for working in the regiments of the Camp. An approach by the Wesleyans in 1858 for access to the army for one of their chaplain's to The War Office was greeted with the response, "I am unable to accede to you application."

However each of the reforms to the army such as the Cardwell Reforms of 1872/3 resulted in a growing number of non-conformist chaplains being accepted into the army. By 1908 Wesleyan chaplains were playing an active role in the exercises of the territorials, although there was a considerable debate about rifle practice taking place on Sundays. In the build-up to the war the aspect of the churches its amenities providing vital social amenities were in place. An example of this was the Percy Illingworth Institute costing £5,000 set up by the Baptists and opened by Lloyd George. By 1915 the primitive Methodists had set up 8 huts offering support for the troops, while the Presbyterians opened the halls attached to their churches for a range of amenities for the troops. The Wesleyans pioneered the development of homes for soldiers, established temporary institutes linked to local churches and 34 semi-permanent huts. Despite all this activity the C of E slipped effortlessly into providing the overwhelming number of chaplains in the Army.

They shared the Reverend Senior's consternation that the advent of the War had not bought with it a return to Christianity. Their role increasingly was a social one leading the struggle for awareness among the troops of VD which was at one stage invaliding twice as many soldiers as the medical consequences of life in the trenches. The difference of approach towards religion in wartime transcended protestant sectarian divide. Asked how a chaplain would approach the last minutes of life of a mortally wounded soldier Catholics and High Church Anglicans would give him the last rites while the advice to other chaplains was to offer him a cigarette. Least it be thought that

the religious divide had disappeared by the end of the War it should be noted that the Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists, Methodists, and Baptists all represented in Aldershot were not invited to the Thanksgiving Service marking the end of the War at Westminster Abbey in 1919.

As I follow Aldershot and the Camp throughout the War the experiences of other chaplains will be considered. Frederick Hawkes went on to be Bishop of Kingston till he retired in 1952.