

GERMANSWEEK AND ITS PARISH CHURCH

In the 1970s, while working for the EU in Brussels, I acquired, as a holiday home and general base in Britain, a former “Parsonage” in the little hamlet of Germansweek in West Devon, just to the north of Dartmoor, the Tors of which stood along the southern skyline. St Germanus of Auxerre had visited the spot and evangelised the inhabitants in the early 400s. There was a Saxon wayside cross, around which services were originally conducted. Details of the hamlet were listed in The Domesday Book. And, in the late Twelfth or very early Thirteen Century, a granite church was erected, to which additions were made in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries.

By the time of my arrival, the population and – very much so – the congregation having shrunk, the Diocese of Exeter was considering closing the church. This was not what the locals or I myself wanted – it would have taken the heart out of the community. So I organised a massive petition, the signatories of which included all my numerous then staff in Brussels and some of the troopers of the Royal Scots Greys in Germany, where I knew a Squadron Commander. The Bishop relented, but, to clinch the deal, I agreed to begin training as Lay Reader, and take Morning or Evening Prayer on Sundays without further delay. I duly took my ‘A’ level in Biblical Studies with the Rapid Results College and then completed a correspondence course, first from Brussels then from Tokyo, with Church House Westminster. The congregation grew again. Finally, the Bishop of Plymouth swept in and formally licensed me in the church in 1981.

To help things along, I wrote the history of the place in 1977 and organised a Village Pageant in 1978 (which was in rehearsal for a year, and which was finally to take place, unanticipated by me at the onset, during my honeymoon at the Parsonage, before moving off to Japan to take up my new job as EU Ambassador).

A second edition, enlarged and brought up to date, with details of the latest improvements to the edifice, was published by the Parish Council in 2014. The concluding section, entitled “Germansweek Today and Tomorrow”, written by me, reads as follows :

Modern times brought many blessings in their wake. In 1851, there were five paupers living on Parish relief ; today such distress and humiliation are unknown. Near where the war Memorial and Village Hall were subsequently erected, an oak tree was planted in the village to commemorate Queen Victoria’s Jubilee. While this oak tree has been growing, we have acquired electricity and piped water. From the acorn, the oak. The bus and motor car and the telephone and whole march of modern life have served to draw the depopulated Devon Parishes together and help keep them collectively alive, sharing shops and schools and pubs, as well as priests, where individually they would each by now have come to a dead end. From the oak, the acorn. New faces have come to replace the old. The bells continue to peal out, and Divine Service is regularly conducted. The village of Germansweek lives peacefully on, as does its Parish Church. Their ancient past does not deny them a long and happy future. The world changes and moves on. But there is continuity also, across the Centuries. The Christian faith of the first Apostles, in which Saint German shared at the outset of the

Dark Ages, and which moved Norman lord and Saxon labourer to build a House of God in our village, remains today in all its essentials one and the same. That faith will still be cherished by some of our descendants when, at the end of the human era, Germansweek finally comes to judgment. St Paul says that, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. In this ancient church, beside whose sturdy granite walls so many faithful Parish people of this and past centuries lie buried, these words are a message of comfort and joy, both for us and for them :

“What is Man, that Thou are mindful of him : and the Son of Man, that Thou visitest him? Thou madest him lower than the angels : to crown him with glory and worship.”