

St Jude's and the Great War: the first few months



Reverend Basil Bouchier

On the evening of Tuesday 16 December 1913 the St Jude's Young Men's group held a debate in the parish club room at 13 North Square on the motion Germany contemplates war. The Minister of the Free Church, the Reverend J. H. Rushbrooke, seconded the opposition, while the Vicar of St Jude's, the Reverend Basil Bouchier, argued that the peace-loving women of Germany would never countenance war. The vote was taken and the Chairman, Mr. Alex Richards, of 5 Hurst Close, Churchwarden of St Jude's, announced the overwhelming defeat of the motion. Germany did not contemplate war.

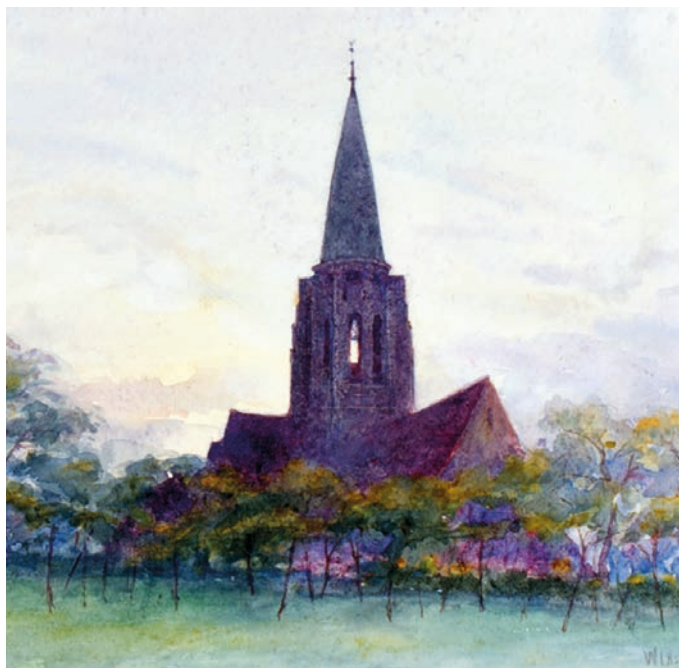
The St Jude's Parish Paper of 7 August 1914 carried the one-word headline: WAR! and continued, The direct challenge offered by Germany to Britain has been taken up and the declaration of war by this country has put an end to a tension which had become unbearable.

The previous June (1913) Bouchier had been appointed Chaplain to the 4th (City of London) Battalion, the Royal Fusiliers, with the rank of Captain. On the evening of Monday 17 August he was present at a meeting in the Club House, Willifield Green, held to bid farewell to a member of his congregation, Mabel St. Clair-

Stobart, and her husband John Greenhalgh, of 7 Turner's Wood, who were departing for the Belgian Front. In the previous few days Mrs. Stobart (as she liked to be known) had gathered an all-women team of twelve nurses, six doctors, and ten orderlies and an X-ray operator. Mr. Litchfield, one of the Co-Partners, handed over a cheque for £200, raised from residents of the Suburb and from a special collection of £36 collected at St Jude's, in support of her work. And then the vicar announced he was going with her.

Mabel St. Clair-Stobart was an extraordinary woman. She was a feminist and suffragist who believed that wartime service would prove women's worth and secure them the vote. Already in 1907 she had founded the Women's Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps to serve between field and base hospitals. When the British Red Cross refused the Corps's services in the First Balkan War in 1912 she went anyway, and with her all-woman unit set up a hospital in Thrace for the Bulgarian Red Cross. It was only eighteen months previously, in January 1913, that she had been in the Club House for a meeting welcoming them back to the Suburb.

The Greenhalghs and Bouchier arrived in Brussels on the 19 August, and set about transforming some rooms in the University into a first class hospital for the Allied wounded. The following day they found themselves watching the German army making a triumphant entry into the city. Their task now was to head off the rest of their team on its way from Ostend. When informed that no safe conducts out of the city were being issued, Mrs. Stobart decided to take her plea to the German commander now installed in



St Jude's, a watercolour painted by W. I. Aston in 1913

the Hotel de Ville. The officer who received her was married to an English woman, and after a few days the Suburb Three were given passes to the Dutch border.

They passed through fifty miles of German-held territory but were then arrested at Hasselt on 26 August on the grounds that their permits, though correctly stamped, were not correctly signed. It was insisted that the Vicar of St Jude's was only disguised as a minister of religion, and that Mrs. Stobart's Kodak proved she was a spy.

After being conveyed by train in a coal wagon to a neighbouring town, where they were held overnight in a verminous cell, they were sent to Aachen for trial. They needed to be protected from a violent mob calling for the deaths of the accursed English as they were marched to imprisonment below ground in the town's fortress. The Vicar's cell was the size of a coffin, had no window and just a small plank-bed. Mrs. Stobart, who understood German, kept from him and her husband, the promise of a Devil-Major that they were to be shot at dawn.

But then a miracle occurred. In his separate interrogation John Greenhalgh mentioned that he lived in Hampstead Garden Suburb. The judge immediately showed interest, replied, "I was in England in June, and know Oxford and Hampstead Garden Suburb." "Do you know Mr. Litchfield?" "Why, yes," said Greenhalgh, "he was my colleague in the housing scheme." The attitude of the Germans changed, they were released on parole to a hotel where they invited the supervising officers to dine with them, and after a few days were back on their way to the border.

Captain G. K. Butt, son of Major George Butt of 4 Meadway, a former Churchwarden, serving with the 1st Lincolnshire Regiment, wrote to the Vicar: While I am writing shelling is going on, but not doing much damage as long as we stay under cover. One feels like a rabbit - we leave our holes as soon as all is quiet. Then whizz comes a shell, followed by a whole lot more, and away we scuttle into our holes again. We are on a sandy hill, and it looks just like a rabbit-warren.

The mother of Lieutenant Russell Wilkinson, of 25 Coleridge Walk, serving with the Royal Army Medical Corps attached to the Second Middlesex Regiment, appealed for a box of comforts - mufflers, shirts, belts, mittens - for distribution among his sixteen stretcher bearers and the wounded. He received two.

At home Lieutenant Leslie Gamage, of East End Road, and the Reverend W. H. Baine, of 4 North Square, a teacher at Haberdashers' School and assistant priest at St Jude's, were instructing the thirty-two boys of the St Jude's Sharpshooters League in drill and shooting. Rifles and ammunition had been donated, and a firing range created in the Vicarage garden. By Saturday 5 December the embryo soldiers were ready to hold their first public parade



Mabel St. Clair-Stobart (Mrs. Stobart)

and receive badges to go with their uniforms of navy blue with brass buttons (five for each boy at 2d each).

The hour was three o'clock, and the Central Square was all animation. Hark! The tramp of the military is heard - left, right, left, right... Who approach? Have the Huns arrived? Or is it Kitchener's Army? Quite plainly it is some particularly distinguished body of MEN. Yes it is - the St Jude-on-the-Hill Sharpshooters... The end of the year found Mrs. Stobart back on the continent at the Women's Imperial Service Hospital at Chateau Tourlaville, near Cherbourg. Third time lucky, she wrote.

The beginning of the First World War will be marked at St Jude's on Sunday 3 August at 10.30am.

THE REVEREND ALAN WALKER



A memorial to the war dead at St Jude's, August 1916

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