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Oranges & Lemons

**COVER STORY: Interview with
Officer Commanding the Red Arrows**



**The Friends of
St Clement Danes**

**Issue No. 50
Autumn 2020**

The Friends of St Clement Danes

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Daniel Kettle Esq (*Manager*)
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The Friends of St Clement Danes

Bulletin
No. 50
Autumn 2020



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“Enabling the sacrifices of the past to support the challenges of the future”

Editorial Note

Iza Seabrook



It is my pleasure to edit the current issue of Oranges & Lemons. In an ever-changing world, we all need some peace and time to reflect, rest. Our church is a perfect place for both - pending restrictions.

Please do share this magazine with Friends and Family. If you have articles or pictures you wish to see published, please email me:
iza.seabrook@gmail.com

THINGS TO DO

- **Tell your friends and neighbours about us**
- **Visit us whenever you are in London**
- **Help out on one Sunday a year**
- **Become a guide to a group of visitors**

Please contact us: 020 7242 8282 or **stclementdanes1@btconnect.com** or through the website if you can help out, especially on a Sunday; be a sidesman / woman, macebearer or read a lesson; we can support and encourage you in your new duties.

Chairman's Letter

Group Captain Mark D Heffron MA FCIS CMgr FCMI RAF



Welcome to the autumn edition of Oranges & Lemons, which despite Covid19 we are delighted to publish and share with you. I thank all those who have made this possible, despite the obvious hurdles which have had to be overcome.

Unfortunately and with great regret, I am afraid that due to the current pandemic, our Annual concert scheduled for the 26 November 2020 will not take place. The decision was not taken lightly, however we felt it imperative to keep all those

connected with the Church safe and well. We clearly must also adhere to government guidelines in these current times. In addition, I have taken the decision not to hold our Annual General Meeting scheduled for the afternoon of that same day, but promise that such a meeting will take place in late April 2021. The date and the associated papers will be sent to you in the spring 2021 edition of this magazine. We do hope that you will join us for the AGM in April 2021 and for our next concert in November 2021. We will work hard to make up for the loss of this year's event.

On a positive note, the Friends continue to support our church. We have provided a new RAF Alter Cloth, new kitchen equipment, a device in order to make our chamber organ mobile (!), a wheelchair ramp, restoration of kneelers, screens to facilitate the choir singing in number at services in the current pandemic and a host of other smaller items to assist in the running of the church as it gradually reopens. Finally, as you would expect, we fully support the St Clement Danes Trust Fund in its work to repair the steeple and to

make other large-scale repairs and improvements to the church building. We must all come together to support the Central Church of the Royal Air Force, in whatever way we can. Through being a member of the Friends, I thank you for your part in this.

Church Diary

There will be a Sunday service every week at 11am apart from Remembrance Sunday, when the service starts at 10.50am

No service will be held on 27 December.

We hope to hold a Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at 11pm and a Morning Service on Christmas Day at 11am

More details will be available on our website in due course.

From the Registers

We are delighted to have shared in families' excitement when they come to St Clement Danes for a Baptism or Wedding.

Baptisms

Archie Mark Long (1 March)

Weddings

Denis Finton Lalor and Jessica Ann Duckworth (28 July)

Requests for Baptisms and Weddings should be made to the Resident Chaplain

From the Resident Chaplain

The Reverend David Osborn BD AKC PGCE RAF



Hello everyone and welcome to the autumn edition of Oranges and Lemons. As you may imagine it has been an interesting spring and summer for St Clement Danes church as we went through lockdown and now face the challenges of emerging and moving back, albeit very slowly, to normality. I have written a separate piece about where we are at the moment if you wish to know more.

Long story short – we are open for visitors on most weekdays and for Sunday worship at 11am. Please keep an eye on our website www.stclementdanesraf.org which gives the up-to-date information. On a normal Sunday you won't have to book to attend but there are some Sundays when we will have to ask people to reserve a place, so it is wise to check either on the web or by phoning the church on 020 7242 8282.

In the meantime I send you best wishes from all of us at the church and look forward to welcoming you again when the time feels right.

Spring and Summer 2020

Since the last issue hit the streets, the church building has been closed as a result of the Covid19 situation. So, although this piece acts as a report to you all, it also acts as a brief historical account for the archive. It's more of a personal reflection than a straightforward factual report as I feel that we should begin to put the events of the past few months into context.

The Closure

Once the lockdown occurred we knew that we had to meet four challenges: to look after the staff and congregation, to carry on with worship, and to care for the building. The only way we could do any of that successfully was to use the new website, which fortunately was up and running just in time. We have used the website to carry the following: a daily prayer and reading, a 'Virtual Communion' service every Wednesday and Friday, a weekly address with spiritual resource material, and a weekly podcast.

There are also other podcasts and services on special occasions, notably Good Friday, Founder's Day and VE Day. The last one of those involved the choir providing music and singing, recorded in their own homes.

We left the carillon on as an audible signal to the local community that we would return.

What has happened recently?

The church is gradually coming back to life, which is both heartening and exciting. We re-opened the office in early July and began to open the church to pre-booked private prayer. In early August we re-started public worship, initially with Morning Prayer and although we were few in number on the first Sunday, we are now getting back to our normal attendance.

We chose August to restart as it gave us a few weeks to test the protocols before we got to the autumn and services such as Battle of Britain and Remembrance.

The church stood up well to being moth-balled, possibly helped by it being the spring / summer rather than the winter months. The few minor issues that arose have been dealt with and the building is fit for purpose.

We have held a wedding (a couple whose marriage was postponed at 24 hours' notice in March), the Sandakan Memorial Service, and said memorial prayers for VJ Day in mid-August. We started worship with just one singer but now we are moving to more voices in the coming weeks. Bell ringing has also recommenced with a complex risk assessment in place.

There is an overarching risk assessment for the church operating both in worship mode, rehearsal mode and in office mode (there are differences in guidance); we have a Covid training package for staff, the congregation can access QR codes for the contact form and for the order of service via the website, and we have a substantial amount of PPE for everyone.

As a result of all our work and planning the church has been given accredited status from Visit England's 'We're Good to Go' initiative.

What's happening now?

In September we will be opening for more days, as staff (both permanent and deputies) come out of shielding and return to work. We have force development visits pencilled in and plans for the Battle of Britain service are well advanced.

By early October we hope to restart mid-week Eucharists (in the main church at first as the crypt has several cleaning issues) and will be open to the public on a free flow rather than pre-booked basis. We hope to recommence rehearsals for singing groups like the Parliament Choir and our weekly choral group Vivamus, very shortly – although this requires a separate, and again complicated, risk assessment which we are working on.

Early indications are that many events will not take place this year (or at least not in the normal way) – restrictions on numbers, peoples' reluctance to come into London and general uncertainty

are just some of the reasons. That said, baptisms and wedding bookings are coming in for next year and postponed services and events will make 2021 a much busier year than usual, so hopefully we can make up some lost ground.



Trustees' Book

Located within the crypt at St Clement Danes is The Trustees' Book. The book contains the names of people who have died since leaving the Royal Air Force. Names can be included at the request of family members of the deceased, for which a fee of £40 is payable. To apply for an entry in The Trustees' Book please email: st.clementasst@btconnect.com and request an application form.

COVER STORY: Interview with Wing Commander David Montenegro, Officer Commanding of the Red Arrows and former Red 1

Daniel Kettle



David took over as Officer Commanding of the Red Arrows on the 23 March 2020, the same day that Boris Johnson announced the lockdown of the country due to the Coronavirus. Formal handover was set for the 1 April, but David made his first command decision minutes after the Prime Minister spoke, gathering the Squadron together virtually online, and taking the decision that no one comes into work as of tomorrow.

In all leadership roles, David notes that there is a need to find results and make an impression within the first 100 days. Citing that he is now 110 days into the command, he is greatly enjoying this time in his new role but he and his executive team have been forced to find solutions to overcome operational issues – in part due to the pandemic – but also in being fully operational.

In terms of flying however, they were only restricted from doing this for 14 days. Typically, the training schedule would be flying three times a day from Monday to Friday. There are also the ground elements of preparation, training, briefing and as mentioned the execution of the sortie. The display training sorties are typically 30 minutes each, anything longer and there is loss of full concentration. There is then a formation debrief of 30 minutes but this can be up to one hour in the early phases of training for new pilots. After this

they earn themselves a 30-minute break; repeat all the above three times a day in a quick tempo cycle.



In addition to training the pilots, the engineers have their own separate training syllabus to run through before maintaining the fleet. Some of these engineers have the unique opportunity to fly with the pilots throughout the season. There are around 110 support personnel in the entire team.

Taking over the command of the Red Arrows is in itself challenging even without the added challenges of Covid-19. In many ways though David thinks it is like taking the helm of a smooth-running ship. There is never really downtime in the display season and annual cycle, with UK-based training taking place from October to March, then deploying to perhaps either Cyprus or Greece for the last four or five weeks of training, then returning to the display season which might include both domestic and a European or global tour. Back in March, when David took over, they were weeks away from deployment of training abroad and it was only in early July, that

they achieved public display authority, so they have got there, albeit through a different route, this year.

David's career with the RAF began in 1999 but this latest role is his third 'stint' with the Red Arrows, the previous times being 2009-2011 and 2015-2017. In his second stint David was Red 1, the Team Leader. David is the first Red 1 to return as Officer Commanding and he reflects that his role now is very different to that of Red 1. The role of commanding the Red Arrows is very much that of a senior supervisor of the squadron and a progression of the leadership challenge into a broader role. He enjoys mentoring and working in the background and likens it to not being front and centre but leading from the shadows, though from experience he acknowledges that the Red 1 role is in itself an enormous task.

When comparing his current role to the Red 1 role, in the main David finds that commanding the Squadron is personally more fulfilling. However, on occasion, he would swap dealing with a full inbox for flying on a beautiful day! On deeper reflection, David highlights that the role of Red 1 really is quite unique. In addition to the flying skills, it allows the incumbent to develop their own leadership style and the consistency of the daily approach in all aspects of leadership and has to set a level of trust quickly and be implicit. The individual needs to communicate a very balanced perspective to all areas of the team. Awareness, intelligence and competence are crucial. David sums it up as having a very high degree of emotional competence and being able to balance that with operational challenges. For example, switching from high-end flying to stepping out of an aircraft to meet a four-star officer on a national TV programme!

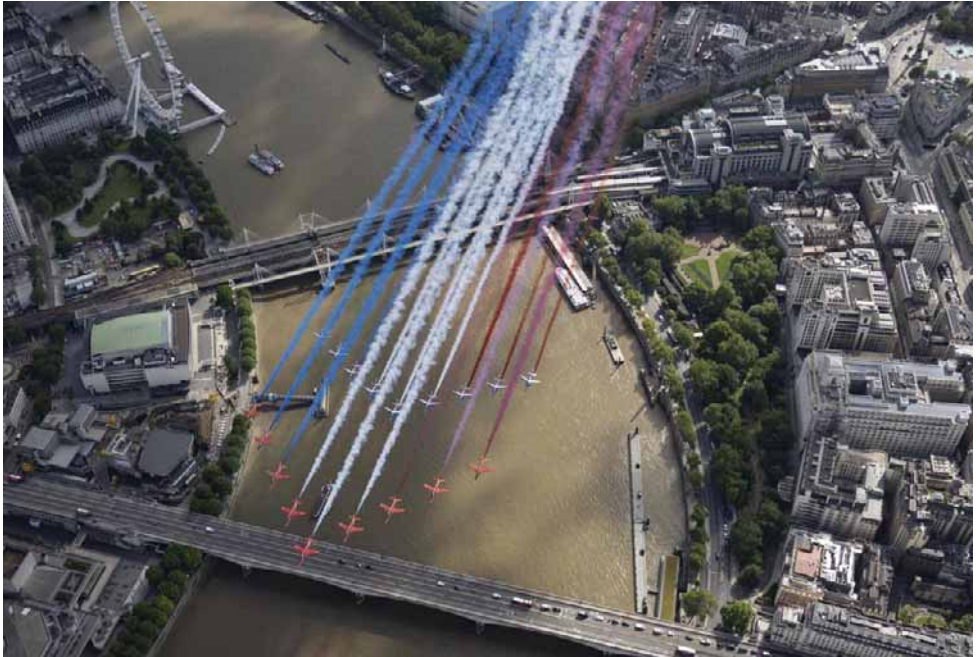
David is now able to manage his diary, time and duty away from home, with more flexibility as he doesn't have to deploy on every appointment. With two young children and his wife working full-

time, that flexibility is very useful. A normal day for David, certainly with the Covid-19 situation, involves a lot of time in the office. There is a weather brief at 8am followed by shareholder meetings with operational, engineering and support staff. He may fly with the team as part of the training or supervise from the ground. There are always a number of admin projects to be addressed, however there aren't many 'normal' days in the role and, when the team get deployed, every day is very different.

David sometimes flies the 11th aircraft to the deployment, as aircraft 10 and 11 are taken as spares over and above the nine jets that perform. Much of David's work though is leading the ground engagements including meeting senior industry and military leaders. Every year there are usually between 55 to 95 displays and tours. This effectively means between 100 to 150 fly-pasts, including events for government, defence and strategic tasks (Prime Ministerial requests, major air-shows to fly-pasts for village and school fetes). However, a 20-minute air show is the core activity. Over 1,000 fly-past requests are received every year!



Very recently they had just two to three weeks' notice to organise, prepare and perform a joint fly-past with the French aerobatic team, La Patrouille de France, to celebrate the 80th Anniversary of Charles De Gaulle's historic speech 'Appeal of 18 June' which was broadcast from London to occupied France. The event was marked by the dual formation, in both Paris and then a little later in the day London, by both air display teams.



The flying element of these tours and displays is only part of the picture. It is in conjunction with the ground engagement that the full strategic benefits and impact of the Red Arrows plays out. The Red Arrows represent a portal into the RAF and are the only squadron that the public and industry has access to, including live briefings. In the winter period, they undertake a series of lectures and presentations at schools, universities and museums. In the display season, when they go overseas, they support the Foreign &



Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Trade and the GREAT Britain campaign, in addition to Defence interests.

Within the tours it is a combination of diplomatic, ambassadorial and convening tools that bring together, engage and influence the national strategic interest. Aviation is going through tough times with the effects of Covid-19 but flying will remain a global narrative.

In 2016, the Red Arrows toured China with ground engagement across four days, spread in different cities, before the displays even started. Chinese state TV broadcast for three days during the breakfast slot highlighting the route and what the Red Arrows were doing ... approximately half a billion people watched them! The networks and connections that were made will remain and be an enduring memory for both the British and the Chinese. Within the tour they also met the Chinese display team 'August 1st', named after the founding date of the People's Liberation Army, 1 August 1927.



In the 2019 North American tour, there were over 100 ground engagements across the US and Canada. The tour was seen as enormously successful, but not all the benefits are tangible, as it is not always easy to quantify. The Red Arrows are open to scrutiny on every annual and five-year defence review with the question asked: 'Is this worth it?' So far they've seen 55 years' worth of engagements and the tours east to west have increased in the last five years, so perhaps there is growing justification for the Red Arrows and the goodwill it generates. Direct requests, tasks and engagements are made from right up to the Prime Minister's office. The next tour could be in 2021, although nothing has been formally announced yet.



Being in the Red Arrows offers team members a once in a lifetime opportunity not available within other areas of the RAF. The breadth of perspective is greater and gives a better view of life outside of the force. Within the RAF, being part of the Red Arrows

doesn't offer a fast-track or more opportunities, but some of the different skills required and experiences are recognised within the appraisal process. To get selected for the Red Arrows, pilots are required to have an above-average grading and at least one front line tour – so effectively they have paid back their operational training. Not many come to the Red Arrows and it is not a traditional route. In the short term it is viewed as losing traction in a traditional RAF career but more of the unique specialist roles in the service are being recognised and overall it is a level playing field. The majority will go back to front line service and quickly regain any lost currency there.

David will be in-post as Officer Commanding for two and a half to three years. The Red Arrow pilots also serve with the squadron for up to three years. In the intervening period of Red 1 to Officer Commanding, David held two separate postings. One of these was 18 months at Typhoon Force HQ at RAF Coningsby where he got promoted to Wing Commander. As he then puts it, he got lucky to be selected for staff college where he did a Masters Degree in Defence and Military studies at the Australian War College in Canberra. The Masters and the location was a wonderful opportunity. There were 28 different nationalities, including a number of Australians, on the course. His trip to Australia was family-accompanied for the year making it a fantastic experience. Whilst studying in Australia he found out that he had got the Officer Commanding role at the Red Arrows, so once the Masters was finished it was straight back to Lincolnshire.

I asked about the longevity of The Hawk aeroplane used by the Red Arrows. The Mark 2 variant is still manufactured and other variants are flown around the world. The Red Arrows, however, fly the Mark 1 originals. These can be flown for 25 to 40 years and are maintained and replaced on a specific schedule. Realistically there is another 10 to 12 years left in the fleet. No decision has been

made yet on a replacement aircraft and of course it will have financial implications. The Hawk is old but of such simple design and there are very little electrical systems onboard and so not too much can go wrong. The Chinese Chief of the Air Force was impressed that the Red Arrows can deliver so much in these old aircraft! The Hawks though have proved they are perfect for their purpose. There are also no plans to move to drones for aerial displays. There would be skills attributed to controlling a drone but it would be devoid of the human elements of challenge and endeavour, including pilots experiencing up to 8Gs that are such important factors. That said there is a Virtual Red Arrows team that was formed in 2005.



When asked for his thoughts on the next best aerobatics display team in the world after the Red Arrows, David rightly would not be drawn to give a definitive answer. He thought though that if you like the Red Arrows, the team with the most similar choreography and outlook is the French team, La Patrouille de France. This is perhaps not too surprising as the platforms are so similar. But if you want high intensity noise and music then the Thunderbirds (US

Airforce team) or the Blue Angels (US Navy team) offer a different perspective on display flying. One can ask the question: do the national teams unwittingly display stereo types of their nations?!

The Red Arrows community has two big get-together events each year. The first is a conference, held at RAF Scampton, for the current and all the former Team Leaders (Red 1s) at end of the training season. It's the chance to observe the team and individuals in action and then share stories over dinner which leads to a wonderful evening of Red Arrows and RAF history. This is an invaluable day for Red 1s. In 2015, David's first year as Red 1, they managed to get 14 Red 1s back to the event. That day David flew accompanied by 1972 leader, then Squadron Leader Ian Dick. David was nervous with the presence of his passenger. However, Ian commented to David that the way David has approached a barrel role was exactly how Ray Hanna - a founding member of the Red Arrows - had taught him, so the same methods were continuing. David thought this was gold to hear and it affirmed to him that he was going about the job in the right way! The second event is an end of season guest night, usually held at RAF College Cranwell. This comprises sponsors, those closely related and external contributors. There is also a large civilian guest list and it provides brilliant insight into the Red Arrows.

One of David's last visits to St Clement Danes Church was just over four years ago when the Red Arrows Squadron Crest was unveiled (pictured on page 21). It is located on the floor within the front of the church. He is due another visit soon as he recognised that, for the RAF community, it plays an incredibly important role allowing people to re-live, understand their history and the sacrifices made. On another of his latter visits David went with his parents to look through the scrolls and remember a Great Uncle, on his father's side of the family, who had lost his life in a Blenheim Bomber.



Within his time at the Red Arrows, David has experienced the full gambit from a mid-air clipping of wings collision whilst flying as the synchro pair in a training sortie in 2010, the complexity of the Red 1 role, right through to the deeper fulfilment of managing and guiding the Squadron. But I asked him what might come next? Whilst he still has plenty of time left in his current role and there is no rush to put concrete thoughts together, he reflects that he

has had two options previously to leave the service or return and has chosen the latter on both occasions! He has had a huge amount of professional fulfilment in his service career – particularly the last five years where he has travelled, studied, represented the RAF and the Red Arrows. Perhaps a future opportunity might involve further international engagement aspects. However, he aims to do an Operational tour next to keep his skills set current, so the next role is likely to be as an Expeditionary Air Wing commander and then perhaps look to avenues to open up further academic opportunities. We watch this space with interest.

Introducing our new Trustees



Scott Williamson is our new Treasurer.

He is a solicitor based in Dundee and Edinburgh. He has recently stepped down as a Partner and Chairman of his firm after 40 years and became a part-time consultant.

Scott served part-time in the Royal Observer Corps for 25 years, the last few of which were spent at RAF Leuchars working with the Station Regiment Flight.

He was a Churchwarden at the Station Church at Leuchars and several of the Chaplains with whom he worked later

became Resident Chaplains at St Clement Danes, including the Reverend Richard Lee.

Scott and his wife Dorothy live close to Leuchars and regard St Clement Danes as their “London Church” and attend services when they are in London.



Gavin Turnbull is our new Membership Secretary.

Brought up in Yorkshire, Gavin joined the RAF in 1965. He graduated from RAF College Cranwell as a pilot and flew the Victor tanker from RAF Marham and the Nimrod in the maritime patrol role from RAF Kinloss and RAF St Mawgan.

In 1983 he left the RAF and joined the tourist industry in Cornwall. Following a short spell with the RAuxAF at RAF St Mawgan, in 1997 he rejoined the

RAF and spent eight years at the HQ at Northwood followed by six years seconded to the Civil Aviation Authority in London, which was where Gavin got to know St Clement Danes.

He now lives on the South Coast with his wife Celia and maintains his RAF connections by volunteering in the Library at the RAF Club and running a team at the Royal International Air Tattoo every year.

The Birth of Air Power

Robert C Houchin



My father, Harold W Houchin (pictured left), was proud to serve his country in its hour of need.

Underage and defying his parents he signed up to the Royal Flying Corp and was trained as an observer responsible for directing artillery fire from the aircraft when over enemy lines.

He never talked of his war but lost many friends when their aircraft were shot down or crash landed.

After 1918 he would never fly again.

108 years ago, in 1912, The Royal Flying Corp was formed and in July 1914 the RFC's naval wing was detached to form the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS).

At the start of the war in 1914 the RFC consisted of only 84 aircraft, the Royal Naval Air Service had 71 aircraft and 7 airships: 162 flying machines in total.

On 1 April 1918 the two services were merged to form the Royal Air Force. A commemorative plaque can be found at 80 Strand, once the Cecil Hotel, where the RAF had its first headquarters in London (pictured on page 25).

This was the first time that an Air Force had been formed without subordination to the Army or Navy Commands. It was entrusted to Major General Sir Hugh Trenchard and consisted of a bombing



force of nine squadrons with one squadron of Sopwith Camels for escort work (pictured below).



The new Service had its own Ministry under a Secretary of State for Air. It was the most powerful Air Force in the world with approximately 291,000 personnel by the end of the year.

It possessed 200 operational squadrons and nearly the same number of training squadrons, a total of 22,647 aircraft. General Jan Christian Smuts, a military leader, politician and statesman from South Africa (1870-1950) who was called to London to join the Imperial War Cabinet, was quoted as saying of Air Power: 'There is absolutely no limit to the scale of its future independent war use.'

During WWI, members of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) and the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) worked on air stations belonging to the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS).

When the RFC and RNAS merged to form the Royal Air Force, concerns were raised about the loss of their specialised female workforce. This need for a separate women's air service led to the formation of the Women's Royal Air Force on 1 April 1918.





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FORCE

The Early Days of the Parish

(continued from Issue 48)

Chris Hill

The Holborn Estate almshouses at Lamb Yard were moved to Tooting in 1848. Forty new almshouses, designed by architect Robert Hesketh, were built on land at Garratt Lane. The formal opening of the premises was on 12 July 1849. There was a large garden in front of the houses with a gardener's lodge at the entrance.

The buildings consisted of a main block and two wings, a plain chapel in the centre with a committee room and lobby on each side, and were flanked by the rooms for the matron and superintendent. There was also a laundry and bath house. Each house had a living room and kitchen, with a bedroom and lumber-room above and closet and coal cellar at the rear. Behind the houses there was a kitchen garden with an allotment for each house. A matron and superintendent, whose duties included reading prayers to the others each morning, were to be chosen from among the almspeople.

A memorial tablet was unveiled at the almshouses by Elizabeth, the Queen Mother to celebrate the centenary of the almshouses in Tooting. The site at Garratt Lane was sold in August 1965 for £167,500 (a profit of £52,580) and new almshouses were built at St Clement Heights, Upper Sydenham, for £511,770. A new set of 'retirement housing' was completed in 2016.

Around 1855 the Peacock Inn, 19–20 Houghton Street and 1 & 3 New Inn Passage were acquired. The Charity's property included the land used for the site of the Holborn Central Hall later, called the Holborn Stadium, which covered 24–27 Eagle Street, 1–5 Rose Alley, 1– 3 Fishers Court and 85 High Holborn. The stadium had stabling for approximately 100 horses and was used for boxing tournaments and as a circus.

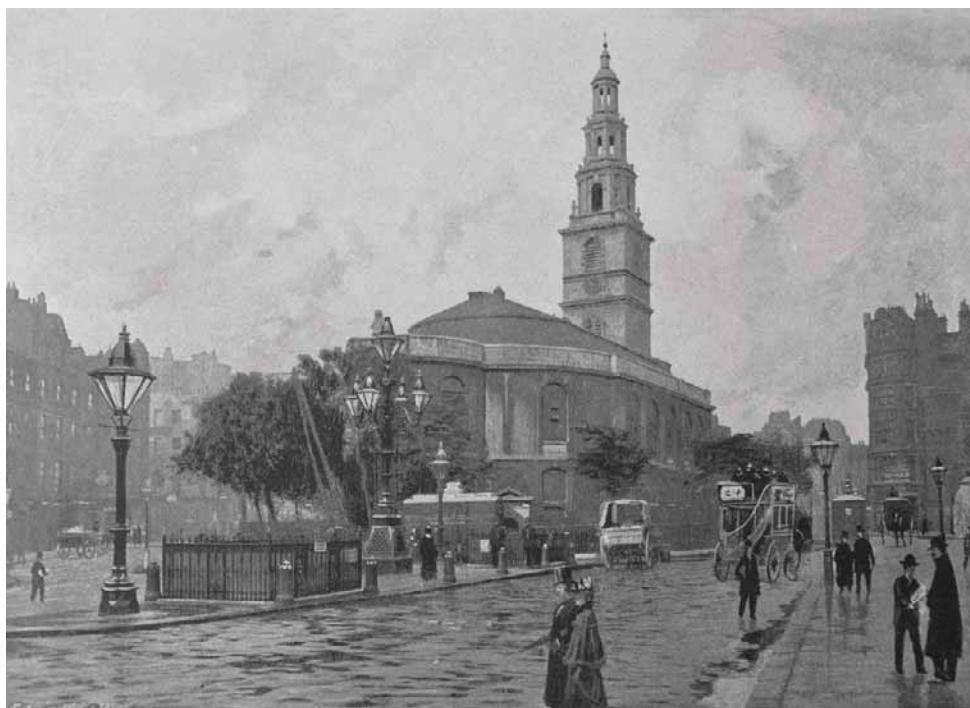
There were changes to the scheme on 3 May 1882 as well as in 1907, when the members who represented the Strand Ward of the City of Westminster were co-opted as managers.

The annual income was divided by the Holborn Estate Charity, with £1,500 going to the governors of the educational arm and £300 to King's College Hospital. £100 was given to the Public Dispensary Fund, which had moved to the parish of St Clement Danes. This was conditional on the trustees dispensing such medicines, free of charge, to the poor people of the parish. The gifts to lying-in-women and the District Visiting Society remained the same.

Any surplus income was to be divided into two equal parts, one for the Educational Endowment and the other in purchasing securities. By 1915 the contributions to the King's College Hospital, for lying-in-women and the district visiting society had all ceased, although the £100 to the Public Dispensary continued.

In 1979 a new scheme was introduced which stated that the annual income of the charity should be applied in the following order of priority: £20,000 a year to the trustees of the Grammar School; to maintain the almshouses; in making further payments as Commissioners approved to the trustees of the Grammar School; and in relieving either generally or individually persons resident in the City of Westminster and former residents of the almshouses who were in conditions of need.

Between 1986 and 2012 the Charity disposed of its property. In the year ended 31 December 2012 the charity's income was £787,857 with expenses of £934,063. It had net assets of £13,673,099 of which £890,799 were the almshouses at Sydenham. It also had investments of £12,616,441 in equities and fixed interest securities.



An annual grant of £60,000 is required to be made to the Trustees of St Clement Danes School Charitable Foundation. The total grants made in 2012 to the school were £229,887.

Eulogy to the 76

St Clement Danes 19 September 2019

Air Marshal E J Stringer CB CBE

The escape of 76 Allied Prisoners of War from Stalag Luft III prison camp during the night of 24-25 March 1944 was an exceptional feat of arms. Seventy five years later, it has become part of our national story – and of other countries too – with an enduring impact on the national psyche. It rightly speaks to courage, selflessness, resolve, dedication, grit ... and sheer bloody-mindedness, the refusal to accept both defeat and to surrender to individual and collective fate. The 76 knew the risks they faced, the thin probability of success and the daunting odds against making a 'Home Run' back to England ... yet were determined to be masters of their own destinies, and not merely observers of a failing totalitarian state, awaiting their release.

The ambition was staggering – the largest prison escape ever conceived of an intended 200 POWs from a camp population of around 10,000 prisoners.

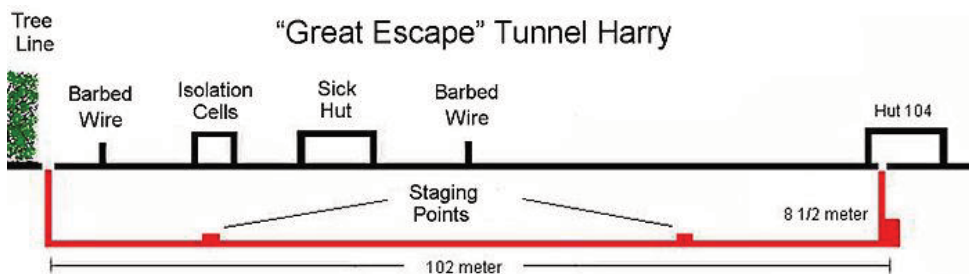
Exceptional intent as well, harnessing every POW's duty to escape ... and to make life as difficult as possible for their captors and impede Germany's overall war effort.

An allied effort and Hitler's revenge was felt accordingly – of the 50 murdered by the Nazis, 20 were British, six each from Canada and Poland, five from Australia, three South Africans, two from Norway and New Zealand, and an Argentinean, a Belgian, a Czech, a Frenchman, a Greek and a Lithuanian.

It was an epic undertaking, brimming with imagination and initiative, and on an industrial scale, conceived and directed by Sqn Ldr Roger Bushell, 'Big X'.

600 prisoners were engaged in the design, digging, forging, cajoling, intelligence collecting and manufacturing – essential to the escape.

Three tunnels: Tom, Dick and the tunnel that was used in the escape, Harry, stretched out from Hut 104 to the north of the compound.



Pilfering (or perhaps more accurately 'repurposing') happened on a huge scale too. After the escape, the Germans' catalogue of missing items included the following: 4000 bed boards; 90 complete double bunk beds; 635 mattresses, 1700 blankets, hundreds of bed covers and pillow cases, 52 twenty-man tables, 76 benches, 1,212 bed bolsters, well over 2000 items of cutlery, 30 shovels, 300 m (1,000 ft) of electric wire, 180 m (600 ft) of rope, and 3,424 towels.

A fresh air pump was designed by Sqn Ldr Bob Nelson, with piping fashioned from Klim powdered milk tins. The 'Penguins' dispersed the tell-tale yellow sand across the compound. There was space for humour too: the magnetic button compasses fashioned from gilette blade shavings and melted gramophone records were stamped 'Made in Stalag Luft 3 - Patent pending' on their bases.

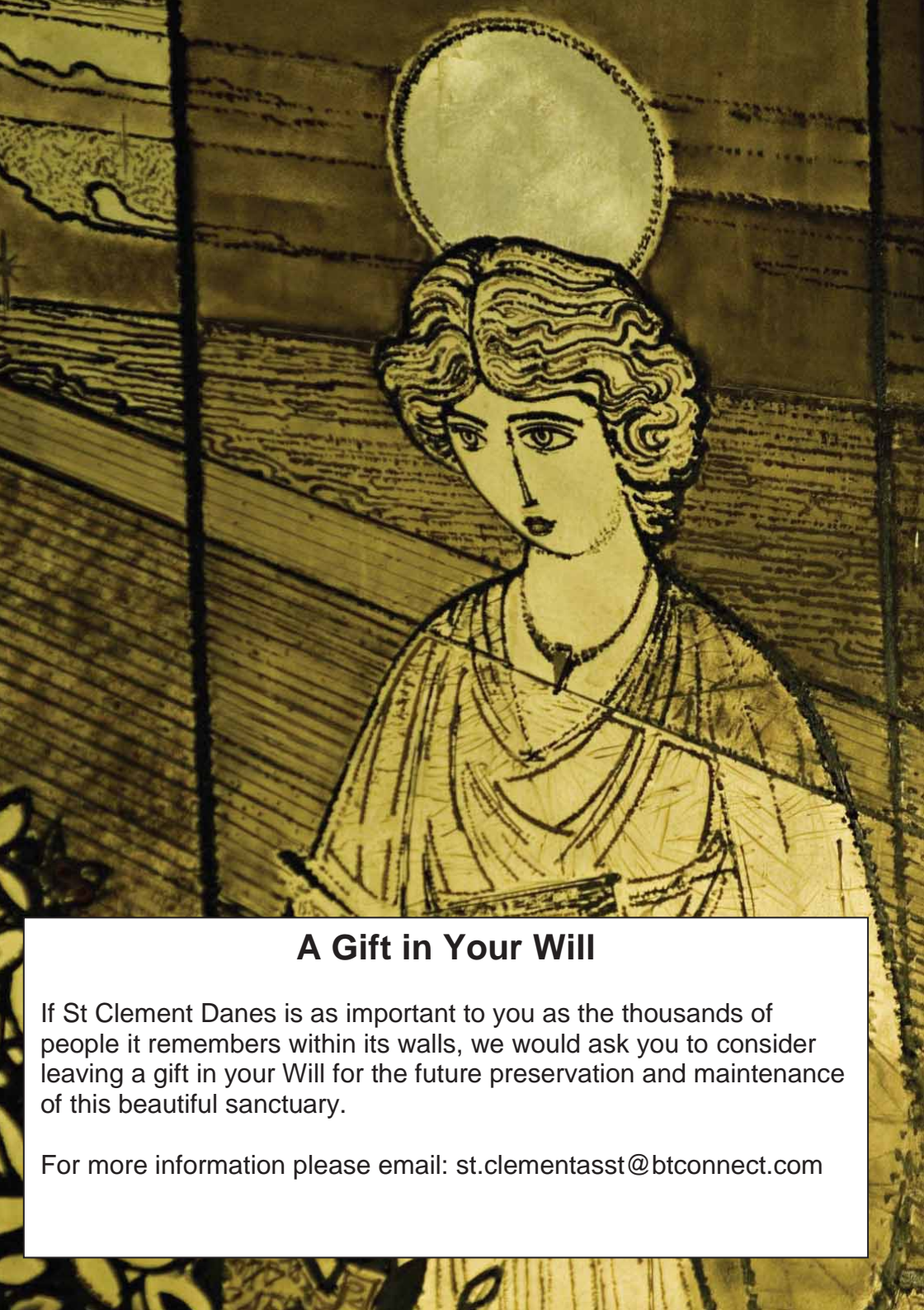
Why then do the 76 who escaped on the night of 24 March 1944 still strike such a chord, historically and emotionally, with the British public? For me, there are three elements: firstly, their courage and, for the 50 murdered by the Gestapo, their sacrifice.

They fought against tyranny and despotism, refused to give up and thus put their own marker down on confronting and defeating evil, as true now as it was then. Secondly, they represented the best of all of us, drawn from across British society and from other countries and there is an enduring connection with society that transcends birth or background. Finally, the 76 also represent the triumph of the human spirit, individually and collectively.



With the passing of Dick Churchill (pictured above), we may have lost our last survivor of that famous and inspiring escape, but his memory and legacy – and that of the 76 – lives on, brightly and assuredly.

On behalf of the Royal Air Force, thank you.



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For more information please email: st.clementasst@btconnect.com

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Our mission is to encourage growth in the membership of the Friends of St Clement Danes through promotion of what St Clement Danes provides spiritually, socially and culturally.

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