

People of Purley on Thames

Hugh Evelyn Lister MC

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You may have noticed in the church, a plaque to the memory of Major Hugh Evelyn Lister MC who was killed in the Second World War on 9th September 1944. You may also be interested to learn that a Belgian town is planning to commemorate the 60th anniversary of his death by naming a street after him. It was felt appropriate to let the people of Purley know a little more of this 'famous son' and why a Belgian village should take him so much to heart.

He was born in Aberdeen on 15th May 1901 and was the grand-nephew of Lord Joseph Lister the father of antiseptic surgery (1827-1912). His mother was the niece of the poet Francis Turner Palgrave, noted particularly for his compilation of 'The Golden Treasury' He was educated at Lancing College and earned a BA in Engineering from Cambridge University where he rowed for Trinity College. After graduating he went to work for the Great Western Railway and travelling around in his job he used the workmen's dormitories and got to know something of the lives of industrial workers.

In 1926 his mother came to live in Purley and bought the old rectory. Hugh spent much of his time in Purley and although his family were Quakers, he often helped out at the church, having built a considerable empathy with the rector, The Reverend Ernest Skuse, who had himself experienced poverty and was living in one of the gatehouses to Purley Park as he was unable to afford to keep up the new rectory that had been built on the site of what is now Allison Gardens after the Lister's had bought the old one. The old rectory was later purchased by the County Council to be an old folks home but was later demolished to build Lister Close.

After listening to an inspiring sermon from the bishop of Zanzibar, Frank Weston, Hugh decided to turn his back on his engineering career and accepted a vocation to the priesthood in the Church of England. He was a student at Cuddesdon College along with Michael Ramsey, a future Archbishop of Canterbury. Hugh was ordained in 1929 and served as curate at All Saint's, Poplar, a run down parish close to London Docks. He became deeply involved in the Student Christian Movement and his discussions with students ranged over all the social and political issues of the day.

One of these issues was unemployment. He decided to try to live off the meagre sum supplied by the dole but the experiment was ruinous to his health and in 1932 he contracted tuberculosis and was sent off to a sanatorium in Switzerland.

Hugh returned to England in 1934 and in the Autumn of 1935 he took on a new curacy in Hackney Wick and also served as the chairman of the local branch of the Transport and General Workers Union. In this role he fought for better conditions for workers, organised strikes, wrote satirical articles and acted as amateur lawyer. He achieved national fame by challenging William Joyce, later to be known as Lord Haw Haw, and standing up to the fascists in Hackney.

When war broke out he enlisted in the Welsh Guards, although a committed pacifist, as he was one of the first to recognised the evils of fascism and nazism. He received a formal warning from Geoffrey Fisher, another future archbishop, who was then chairman of the

Bishops War Committee, that after his war service he would have to produce testimonials that he had conducted himself throughout his military career in a manner becoming to an ordained minister.

He went to France on the 24th April 1940 returning on 3rd June in the Dunkirk evacuation. While back in England he was posted to the school of infantry at Barnard Castle, County Durham, where his engineering skills were employed in improving the Bren gun carrier.

He returned to France shortly after D-Day and took part in the long drawn out battle for Caen. His new command was a support company in the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards with four platoons which were always deployed individually to support the four rifle companies, so Hugh was stuck at Battalion HQ. His determination to get the job done earned him a reputation for recklessness, imagination and sacrificial courage as he would go up to the front to urge on his men. On one occasion, on the 12th August 1944, he was sent up to protect a forward command post and finding another company in difficulty, took over command, reorganised it under heavy fire and got it to its objective. For this he was awarded the Military Cross.

As they fought their way across France he acted, not only as an officer, but also as unofficial chaplain, visiting base hospitals and casualty stations to give hope and comfort to the injured. From his experiences in London he was able to communicate with the men in a way utterly unlike most officers of his class. He also used to hold communion services which were always well attended. On one occasion he obtained two bottles of 1928 port and was so pleased with his achievement that he forgot altogether about the bread until it was time to consecrate it. His remarks were most unpriestly but someone found some bread in the nick of time.

He was part of the Guards Armoured Division and was part of a very rapid advance, driving flat out for 90 miles from Douai to Brussels, liberating the city on the 3rd September. Three days later they were ordered to seize the crossings over the Albert Canal and capture the roads leading towards Germany. They were faced with stiff opposition and, on 9th September, eventually reached Hechtel, in the centre of which the road forked, one fork led to Eindhoven, the other eastwards to Germany. After a prolonged battle Hugh went up to check on progress but this time his usual recklessness and his tiredness was his undoing. He had not checked the houses ahead properly and as he walked down a lane an enemy machine gun opened up killing him instantly. Hugh is buried in the British War Cemetery in Leopoldsburg.

The remarkable story of his life has touched the people of Hechtel, where he died, very deeply. The villagers are planning to mark the 60th anniversary of his death by a public lecture and the renaming of the lane in which Hugh was killed in his honour.

Eleven villagers were murdered by the Germans without mercy on the 11th September as a reprisal and memories run deep and bitter. Hugh's sacrifice as part of their liberation will not be forgotten.

I am indebted to Bob Vranken of Hechtel and to Professor David Hein for much of the information about Hugh's life. Also my thanks to Sybil Prior, his niece who still lives in Purley
John Chapman

