



BY THE WAY

Occasional Newsletters from The P G Wodehouse Society (UK)

Number 45

September 2011

Wodehouse's Bishops

The September 2010 issue of *By The Way* considered the churches which were featured in Wodehouse's stories. It seems appropriate to mention his clergy also, and in this issue we start with the Bishops and those of even higher rank.

Archbishop of Canterbury

There were no suggestions that the Archbishop played an active role in the lives of any of the characters, the many references to the post being made invariably in passing. One example should suffice - in *The Mating Season* Gussie Fink-Nottle pointed out to Bertie that anyone (such as the Archbishop) could innocently wander into a room where frogs were hopping about.

Bishop of Bayeux

Odo, claimed as an ancestor by the Bishop of Stortford in *Gala Night*, had been famous in William the Conqueror's day for his work with the battle-axe, and now acted as a model for his modern counterpart when biffing an over-inquisitive policeman in the eye.

Bishop of Bognor

This post seems to have been rather more transient than would normally be expected of bishoprics. We learn from *Heavy Weather* that Galahad Threepwood wrote a droll anecdote in his *Reminiscences* about one occupant when an undergraduate at Oxford, although in some editions his see has been carelessly changed to Bangor!

Gally's friend may have been the Rev. J G Smethurst, later headmaster of Harborough College who, in *The Voice from the Past*, scared Sacheverell Mulliner so much that he took refuge in the middle of the night under Muriel Branksome's bed.

But we know more about the identity of two later occupants of the see - the father of Barmy Fotheringay-Phipps was in office in the 1947 story *Joy Bells for Barmy*, and Mrs Willoughby

Gudgeon recalled in *The Right Approach* that in her girlhood she had been great friends with the Rev. Theophilus Mulliner, later to become the Bishop of Bognor, and immediately claimed as a relation ('Uncle Phil') by Augustus Mulliner.

Bishop of Bongo-Bongo

Formerly the Dean of Bolsover, Lancelot Mulliner's saintly Uncle Theodore, the Bishop is best-known for his cat Webster, who turned from an example of upright conduct at the start of *The Story of Webster* into a feline plug-ugly, 'The Big Shot of Bott Street'. The Bishop soon resigned his African position for health reasons, and returning to the UK went to spend time with a shipboard acquaintance, the widow Lady Widdrington, the owner of a distressing orange specimen named Percy. The widow was clearly seeking a long-term relationship with the Bishop, but in *Cats Will Be Cats* Webster's new personality, superior to that of Percy in every way, commended itself to the Bishop by causing a welcome rift in the unwanted approaches of her ladyship.

Bishop of New York

In the normal course of events he would have been expected to preside over the wedding of Mortimer Sturgis and Mabel Somerset at St Thomas's Church, 5th Avenue, New York, where the organ would play *The Voice that Breathed O'er St Andrews*, according to the American magazine version of *Sundered Hearts*.

Bishop of Oswaldtwistle, the late

Algy Martyn and his sister Jane plotted in *Company for Henry* for Algy to take the vacant post of valet to J Wendell Stickney by fabricating the existence of a late Uncle Cedric who, before

he had gone to reside with the morning stars, had been the Bishop of Oswaldrtwistle.

Bishop of Runtifoo

Reprising his appearance in the *Bab Ballads*, he made a seventy minute speech (inaudible, as usual) before distributing the prizes at Eckleton School's speech day in *The Head of Kay's*.

Bishop of Stortford

There were at least three different appointees to this position, the least being known about the late Dr Brimble, who received a brief mention as Hermione's father in *The Right Approach*.

One of the two other Bishops of Stortford was single-handedly responsible for the success of Sir Raymond Bastable's sex novel *Cocktail Time*. Having found his daughter Kathleen reading what he had first assumed to be a book of devotion, he confiscated the book and retired to his study to scrutinise Chapter 13. On the following Sunday he delivered a sermon from the pulpit of St Jude the Resilient, Eaton Square, on the text 'He that touches pitch shall be defiled'. The burden of his address was a denunciation of this novel, in the course of which he described it as '... obscene, immoral, shocking, impure, corrupt, shameless, graceless and depraved', and all over the sacred edifice you could 'see eager men jotting the name down on their shirt cuffs, scarcely able to wait to add it to their library list'.

But the sermon had an impact different to that for which the Bishop had hoped. Just as all American publishers hope that their books will be banned in Boston, so do all English publishers pray that theirs will be denounced from a pulpit by a bishop. 'Full statistics are not to hand, but it is estimated by competent judges that a good bishop, denouncing from the pulpit with the right organ note in his voice, can add between ten and fifteen thousand to the sales.'

Adding to the gaiety of life in a more likeable way, though, was a previous incumbent, once known as 'Boko' Bickerton. Promoted to the post of Bishop in advance of his old school friend the Rev. Stanley Brandon, Boko was not above sending Brandon letters rebuking him for

wearing too many orphreys on his chasuble shortly before visiting his church to officiate at the Confirmation services. It so happened that Augustine Mulliner was the Rev. Brandon's curate, and just at this moment was in receipt of the extra-strong variation of 'Mulliner's Buck-U-Uppo', invented by his uncle Wilfred. He immediately rescued the Bishop from a rough, hairy dog, interceded in an increasingly personal discussion between the two clerics about their failings at school, obtained the Bishop's support for his desired marriage to Rev. Brandon's daughter Jane, and explained to the Bishop's wife ('England was littered with the shrivelled remains of curates at whom the lady bishopess had looked through her lorgnette') why it was inappropriate for the Bishop to wear thick winter woollies on a hot day.

The Bishop, recognising a good thing when he saw it, transferred Augustine to the Palace as his secretary. Almost immediately Augustine resolved the difficulty which arose when the Bishop and another old schoolfriend, the Rev. Trevor Entwhistle, Headmaster of Harborough College, consumed rather too much Buck-U-Uppo and painted pink a statue of Lord Hemel of Hempstead which was defacing the school grounds.

In *Unpleasantness at Bludleigh Court*, he earned a passing mention while discussing the difficulty he had in keeping his vicars off the incense, while his fourth and final appearance in the oeuvre, in *Gala Night*, reinforces our view of him as one of the most likeable characters in Wodehouse.

George Fish's Father

George Fish is a cousin of Ronnie Fish, his father being the bishop about whom Galahad Threepwood said in *Heavy Weather* that he knew a good story.

Viscount Belper's Uncle Francis

After Lord Belper's conviction for assault in *A Damsel in Distress*, his Uncle Francis, a Bishop, had tackled him on the subject of Intemperance, having assumed, like thousands of others, that the affair had been the result of a drunken outburst.