

Parish People

Revd. Raymond S Wilkinson

In his book about Abbots Langley, Clive Clark describes how a tall, sandy haired young man of 30 'strode' into the village in April 1950 to become the new incumbent of St Lawrence Church, the only young healthy vicar so far of that century. What he found must have been demoralising for him. When he arrived the church building was closed as the heating system had collapsed, the Chancel roof leaked, the expenditure was far more than the revenue, equipment was poor and threadbare and the prayer books were in a dreadful state. Also the churchyard wall in parts was in ruins. He knew that the days of patronage had gone so, undaunted, he set about raising funds himself in order to get the church open as soon as possible.

He held a fete in the Vicarage Garden and asked Major Ronald Henderson to open it, the fete raised £400, twice the usual amount raised by fêtes. In October 1950 he and his curate sat under the Lych Gate in the cold and wet, begging from passers by and raised over £200. He made sure that he was a seen presence in the village. By sheer boldness and effort he ensured that the various faults in the fabric were soon remedied and the church open again. A new curate, the Revd Peverall was appointed. Raymond Wilkinson was a dynamic preacher and soon had full pews on a Sunday, a Bible Class of 40 teenagers and a large Sunday School. He also displayed a new concern for Bedmond and worked hard to bring it into the orbit of the parish church. He soon showed himself to be a man who got things done – either by charisma, force of personality or guile. However one thing that he accomplished brought the village together more closely than anything else. 70 years ago this autumn, in September 1950, he founded the Abbots Langley Gilbert and Sullivan



By Brenda Southorn

Society and saw it rise from a small village group to one performing at The Palace Theatre, Watford. In a letter that he wrote to the society on the occasion of our Ruby Anniversary he said *"I had the fun of assembling locals with pretensions to singing (and others decidedly without them) to stage The Mikado in the cramped Memorial Hall, where my headdress was on one night lifted off by low hanging scenery. It was tremendous for the village and everyone came, perhaps never again to have quite the same idea of the Rector and his Curate who was playing KoKo."* He also involved the church choir and singers from other churches.

After eleven years in the village Raymond Wilkinson moved on to Merseyside and finally to Solihull before retiring to Warwick. He also became a Chaplain to the Queen. In both his subsequent parishes he formed G & S societies and in his retirement he gave many illustrated lectures on the works of Gilbert and Sullivan.

The present ALGSS has tried to build on the legacy he gave and we became International Champions at the Harrogate Festival in 2017. We should have been there this year as well but Covid has halted our singing activities at the moment. I feel that Raymond Wilkinson would be proud to see how his little village society has progressed over the years as we celebrate our 70th anniversary this year. In 1990 he finished his letter to us by saying:

"I count myself one of the most fortunate of men. Not only have I loved my job, but also my main relaxation – and in every place I have been the two have managed to come together. But never to happier effect than in the remarkable village of Abbots Langley, which showed what a united community could produce by way of delicious entertainment."