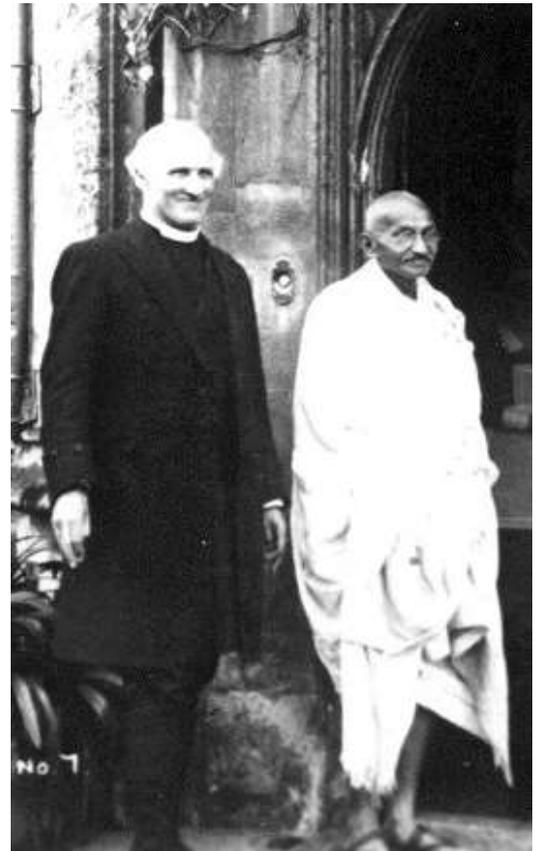


EARLY MEMORIES OF CANTERBURY

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Archbishop Cosmo Lang



Gandhi and the Red Dean

Archbishop Cosmo Lang provides my first Canterbury memory. He gave a Christmas party at the Old Palace to the children of vicars in the diocese. In 1938, aged 6 and 12, my brother and I arrived to a tea of fish paste sandwiches, cupcakes and lemonade. The harassed chaplain had to organise us all for 'Hunt the slipper' and 'Oranges and lemons' before the Archbishop shook our hands and blessed us as we left with our packets of chocolate drops.

Our Headmistress at Ashford School was a friend of the indefatigable Margaret Babington, organiser of the Friends of the Cathedral. Instead of our customary Saturday evening film we were occasionally obliged to listen as she enthused about the Cathedral at what seemed to us, interminable length; a visit would follow. When I, in later years, took school parties to view the miracle windows I always heard her voice 'Look, look, girls, at Adam the Forester with the arrow through his neck.' In 1938 and 1939 we came also to the city for the Kent Musical Festival. I well remember rushing about the High Street from St George's Hall to the Corn Exchange and the Guildhall for instrumental competitions. My impression was of a narrow St George's Street lined with tall, soot-blackened buildings such as Baker's Temperance Hotel. The choral competitions were held in the Chapter House and, as I rushed through the Cloisters, I thought how crumbling and dilapidated they were.

My next visit was in September 1944 when I was, as a student, lifting potatoes at Aylesham at a

harvest camp. I came on a Sunday train to a 2/6d lunch in what was left of Slatters in St Margaret's Street. After lunch I walked from Mercery Lane to what was still standing of St George's Church. Only Marks and Spencers was untouched. On either side bombed sites piled with rubble flanked the street with little notices planted in them. 'Barclay's Bank now operates in North Lane', 'Greenstreet gunsmiths still open in Upper Chantry Lane' and more. (I may not remember the new locations accurately). The first archaeologists were already working among the ruins.

When Lawrence and I finally arrived in 1955 I was surprised to see so many bomb sites still remaining, cars parked all over them surrounded in season by surviving buddleia and willowherb. When I decided to apply to be a city guide in 1957 I reflected that the city in 1540 must have seemed to the citizens much the same, with the ruins of St Augustine's Abbey, the nunnery and three friaries laid waste. My training as a guide was short and sweet. Mr Charles Baker took me on the sort of two-hour walk I would be asked to conduct. The route went from Mercery Lane to King's Bridge, Best Lane, Orange Street, a view of Palace Street, Sun Street and the Cathedral Precincts, through the Cloisters as far as a view of the Green Court. When we got there he pointed to a small dormer window at the left-hand end of the Deanery facade. He told me that, as a King's School boy, he had seen Mahatma Gandhi, cross-legged, in loin cloth and glinting spectacles, sitting on the ledge to meditate while a guest of the Red Dean in 1931. I cannot walk that way without a mental image of the scene and passed it on when I guided myself. I had to stand at Christchurch Gate and, if only two people turned up, I had to take them at 2/6d a head for two hours.

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