

This month, Mervyn Banting celebrates 50 years in the ministry. In recognition, we are reprinting Pat Fenn's biography of Mervyn, originally published in Bosham Life in September 2010. Please come and have a celebratory drink with Mervyn in Holy Trinity after the 9:30am service on Sunday 5th June.



THE VENERABLE

Whatever were Mervyn Banting's parents thinking of when they gave him, third on a list of four, the name of Lancelot? Showy, dramatic, he is not. Rather, a modest man, content to accept the vicissitudes of life, grateful for the opportunities he has received to work at a career which suits him well and at which, in a quiet way, he is exceedingly good.

He claims he was lucky that when the time came for him to leave Pembroke College, Cambridge—the governors of Winchester College were looking for an assistant master who could teach history and theology; those were the subjects he had read for his degree and so he filled the job nicely, especially as he was also known to have enviable rowing skills. Quite a challenge for an inexperienced young man, straight from a sheltered environment, to be thrown into teaching extremely clever boys who would make no allowances. One way he devised of holding their attention was to teach alternative theology; Mormonism and even Witchcraft soon made them sit up; he quickly gathered confidence and enjoyed his three years' stint in Winchester.

However by this time he had come to realise that fulfilment lay not in teaching but in the ministry. Hitherto, with the natural perverseness of youth, the fact that he had been brought up in an ecclesiastical family—the son of a Canon—prompted him to resist this obvious choice of career, but now, with no outside pressure, he felt the priesthood calling. Cuddesdon, a theological college, was his alma mater, and it was there that he came under the influence of the Principal, the future Archbishop, Robert Runcie. In 1966 he became ordained and returned to Winchester College as one of the chaplains.

Five satisfying years went by and he began to think that perhaps a spell in a totally different environment might enlarge his vision and experience. The parish of Leigh Park, near Portsmouth, needed a curate and Mervyn was accepted. His brief in this urban,

housing-estate, working-class parish could not have been more different from the somewhat precious Winchester remit.

In 1970 he married a physiotherapist, Linda Gick, from a well-known Bosham family, who brought with her an enviable dowry—her family home, which occupied one of the most magical sites on Bosham Hoe. She and Mervyn spent every moment that they could, escaping down to Bosham, where their four daughters led a ‘Swallows and Amazons’ existence, as their mother had done before them. Throughout the rest of Mervyn’s life, Bosham has been an anchor, and when you look out of the many windows of his house on to a dramatic sunset or sparkling water you can understand why.

Robert Runcie put in a further appearance when Mervyn wrote to him, asking for advice on his career. Dr Runcie introduced him to another very different parish, Hemel Hempstead, followed by Goldington, Bedford, his busiest appointment. In 1988 Mervyn and Linda returned to the south coast to a parish in the middle of Portsmouth where they stayed for over eight years. Then came recognition of his lengthy and effective service to the Church by the award of the title of Honorary Canon, Portsmouth Cathedral. It seemed that Mervyn’s experience of totally opposite parishes should be complete. But now for something completely different.

When the appointment of Archdeacon of the Isle of Wight came up, he did not hesitate to accept. This proved to be one of the most interesting and rewarding jobs of his career, covering the whole island, and he and Linda settled down to enjoy it for seven years. Towards the end of this time, a tricky assignment came his way. When the Dean of Portsmouth Cathedral resigned unexpectedly, Mervyn was appointed Acting Dean and held this post for seven months, much enjoying being part of cathedral life during a busy summer.

By now the lure of retirement by the sea was becoming ever stronger and Bosham was the obvious choice of home. But Winchester would not let go and a year into retirement it so happened that both of Winchester’s chaplains had been given the sack and a substitute was urgently being sought. Mervyn was approached and agreed to return to his old base part-time, on a temporary basis. He ended up teaching five days a week for two years.

Retirement sometimes means that Mervyn is busier than ever, frequently covering during vacancies in nearby parishes. His sermons are attention-grabbing and I doubt if he sees many nodding heads when he is in the pulpit. He is a much loved and respected part of our village.

Patricia Fenn