Winchester Cathedral: Safe, Sound and Secure

Centennial commemoration of William Walker at Winchester Cathedral

During 2018, two events were held to mark the centennial commemoration of William Walker’s death. The first, on March 17, was the unveiling of a plaque on his home in Portland Road, South Norwood, London. (See Record Extra, September 2018, p.1)

The second event, shortly after the publication of the 2018 article, took place when the Dean and Chapter held a commemorative evensong service in the Cathedral on October 6. More than fifty descendants of William Walker, six members of the Historical Diving Society and ten members of the People for Portland Road Community Group were welcomed by Cathedral Guides during the afternoon. The guests joined Dean Catherine and the Mayor and Mayoress of Winchester for tea in the Paul Woodhouse Suite.

One of several grandchildren present was Margaret Warner, youngest daughter of Nancy (christened Hannah), the sixth child of Walker and his second wife Alice (right, with her daughter Nancy Mansfield). In June 2001, Margaret had the honour of unveiling the new statue of the diver by Glynn Williams. It was her mother who had unveiled the first statue sculpted by Sir Charles Wheeler on March 21, 1964. Margaret recalled her mother saying how disappointed the family had been with the lack of resemblance of the statue to Walker, especially as there was no ‘trademark’ walrus moustache. “That's not our Bill”, one descendant was clearly heard to say! (Bruce Parker revisited this story in the Winchester Cathedral Record 2018).

Other notable guests were a family group (left) who travelled from the USA to attend the service. They were Lorraine Walker McLaughlin, from Kentucky, daughter of Walker’s third child (also William) and his first wife Hannah, Lorraine’s husband Harold, and their family from Rhode Island comprising daughter Gwendolyn, her husband Jeff and daughter Charlotte.
There are many descendants in the USA because one of Walker’s sons, William stowed away on a ship to Canada where he enlisted in the Canadian Army and fought in World War I. On returning from the war, he found his way south to New York where he lived an adventurous life: jobs included movie stunt work and bare-knuckled boxing. He ended up in Oyster Bay on Long Island, near New York City where he ran ‘Bill Walker’s Bar and Grill’.

The presence of so many descendants contributed to the moving commemorative evensong planned by Canon Sue Wallace and Director of Music Andrew Lumsden. The antiphon was one composed by William Prendergast, the Cathedral organist at the time of the foundation underpinning, and the hymns were those sung at the thanksgiving service held on completion of the works on St Swithun’s day July 15, 1912. On that occasion King George V, on shaking Walker by the hand, said “I congratulate you on your feat of saving the Cathedral”. When asked if he would do it again, Walker replied that he would. “It wasn’t easy”, he said, adding, “I am a proud man to have been able to help in so grand a work”.

The service concluded with a procession to the East End where the Dean paid tribute to “Diver Bill” and spoke of the obvious love of his work and his pride in being able to contribute to preserving the building for future generations. The Dean and the descendants were joined by representatives of the People of Portland Road group and the Historical Diving Society to lay wreaths beside Walker’s statue (right), which has a plaque referring to him as “the diver who saved the Cathedral with his own hands”.

The family’s continuing pride in “Diver Bill” was shown on the card attached to the wreath (left) laid by his granddaughter Margaret Warner: “We are so proud of you and your great achievement of saving this magnificent Cathedral”.

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