

**E. GORDON SELWYN, DD, Dean of Winchester 1931-1958**  
**FOUNDER OF THE FRIENDS**  
*by Lindy Bradley*

**INTRODUCTION**

The brass cross on the High Altar was given to the Cathedral in 1966 by the Friends of Winchester Cathedral in memory of their founder, Dean Gordon Selwyn. It was designed and made by Leslie Durbin who was, arguably, one of the finest silversmiths of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in England. The cross is made of numerous small brass crosses. Leslie Durbin wrote: "The positions and forms of these crosses have been so arranged as to give an undulating effect to the surface of the cross. This irregular surface is the cause of changing highlights which differ as the sun moves during the course of the day." This catching of the light symbolizes the description of the Dean as a many faceted man, as indeed he was. He served the Church with distinction both as a scholar and as a priest, but his life was overshadowed by sadness.



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**EARLY LIFE AND CAREER**

Edward Gordon Selwyn was born in Liverpool in 1885, the eldest son of the Revd Edward Carus Selwyn and Lucy Ada (née Arnold), a granddaughter of the famous Dr Arnold of Rugby. His father was Headmaster of the public school, Liverpool College and subsequently Headmaster of Uppingham School in Rutland. Gordon was to have four brothers and two sisters. Tragically, his mother died at the age of 36, leaving seven very young children. Gordon was only nine years old.

Gordon Selwyn was a top scholar at Eton and Kings College, Cambridge, moving in 1908 to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge where he became a Fellow and was awarded a D.D. While at Corpus he was ordained deacon in 1908 and priest in 1909. It was also at Corpus that he came to know Edwyn Hoskyns, son of the Rt Revd Sir Edwyn Hoskyns, Bishop of Southwell and in due course met Edwyn's sister, Phyllis, whom he married in 1910. They were to have four children: Lucy, Edward, Christopher and Jasper.

In 1913, aged 28 with a young wife and family, Gordon Selwyn was appointed Warden of Radley College. In 1919 he became Rector of Redhill, near Havant and, shortly after arriving in Redhill, in 1920 he launched the liberal catholic journal, *Theology* and was its editor until 1933. Later, in 1946, his essays on the Greek text of The First Epistle of St Peter were reviewed in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* as "..... penetrating and even profound in theological analysis and exposition, it is clothed in rare beauty of language and style, so that from every point of view it is a delight to read and most instructive to study." He was to have an extremely distinguished academic career, writing and editing many theological books, essays and papers. As well as publishing many learned theological works, Gordon Selwyn was a great preacher of university sermons, the sermon being a very important part of his ministry.

Thus Gordon Selwyn brought in 1931 a wealth of knowledge and experience to Winchester, where he remained as Dean for 27 years during the episcopates of three Bishops. Cyril Garbett, 1932-1942, in his autobiography, describes Dean Selwyn as "a scholar, a very loyal Anglican, widely read and with the gift of courage.....We became real friends, and the more I knew him, the higher was my regard for him." Garbett, on his translation to York as Archbishop, was succeeded by Mervyn Haigh who, as Bishop of Coventry, had witnessed the destruction of his Cathedral. Haigh retired in 1952 and was followed by Alwyn Williams, Headmaster of Winchester College.

## FOUNDATIONS

1931 was a momentous year! Not only did Dean Selwyn found The Pilgrims' School, to serve both as a Choir School and a Preparatory School, but he was also the founder, in that same year, of the Friends of Winchester Cathedral. The first headmaster of The Pilgrims' School was Humphrey Salwey, under whose guidance it flourished and the music of the Cathedral and College was enriched.

On 15<sup>th</sup> July 1931, St Swithun's Day, the Association of the Friends of Winchester Cathedral was founded. The first patron was HRH The Duke of Connaught and the first chairman Sir William Portal. Their policy was:

1. To undertake schemes of repair which the Dean and Chapter consider necessary.
2. To collaborate with the Dean and Chapter on schemes considered to be desirable and which commend themselves to The Friends.
3. To support the Dean and Chapter in cases of special emergency.

4. To set up a Reserve Fund to meet unforeseen emergencies. Friends promised to pay a certain sum each year.

At this point some background is needed. The diocese of Winchester was, until 1927, huge, encompassing much of southern England, including the Channel Islands, and bishops of Winchester lived at Farnham Castle. In that year the diocese was divided into three dioceses: Winchester, Guildford and Portsmouth. (Gordon Selwyn was made an honorary canon of Portsmouth Cathedral.) Farnham Castle was now in the new diocese of Guildford and, for the first time in centuries, bishops of Winchester began to live at Wolvesey, the first one being Theodore Woods. Bishop Woods wished to refurnish the chapel at Wolvesey and, having come to know Louisa Pesel and her embroidery skills when he was Bishop of Bradford, he invited her to design and execute kneelers and cushions for the restored chapel at Wolvesey.

When Dean Selwyn saw these embroideries he decided that the Cathedral should be furnished in a similar way and he invited Miss Pesel to undertake this larger enterprise. Miss Pesel replied: "Dear Mr Dean, I shall be very pleased to undertake the work you propose & feel honoured that you are willing to trust it to me. Miss Blunt will be a very able assistant as you know.....I think we should be able together to produce some good work. Anyhow we are prepared to do so. £25 will go a good long way in wools & canvas .....Yours sincerely, Louisa F. Pesel"

Louisa Pesel duly invited Sybil Blunt to help her and together they trained women, made the designs and supervised the whole enterprise over a number of years. The work was finally completed in 1936: 360 kneelers, 96 alms bags, 36 long cushions, 1 lectern carpet, 1 litany desk kneeler, 3 seat cushions and 1 book cushion for the Bishop's throne, 6 long seats for lay clerks, 2 bench cushions for choristers, 18 yards border for five communion rail kneelers and 25 borders for chapter kneelers. These tapestries depict the history of Winchester Cathedral (until 1936) and the whole magnificent project was funded entirely by the Friends. The Friends of Winchester Cathedral were well and truly launched!

In 1934 Raphael Tuck & Sons published Dean Selwyn's excellent book, *The Story of Winchester Cathedral*, which he dedicated to the Friends and is a 'must' for all would-be guides.

#### HEATING AND LIGHTING

Soon after he arrived Dean Selwyn set about improving the heating, installing electric light and, later, a sound system, using the firm of Dicks & Sons, founded in 1860. Miss Jean Dicks, the daughter of one of the sons, though not an electrician herself, was the first female member of the Electrical Contractors Association. She employed 90 good and reliable workers and personally supervised all the jobs. She wasn't an easy person to work for, but she was fair and all her employees stayed with her. Having won the Cathedral contract, they found that replacing the choir-stall gaslights involved running cables through the crypt. The nave was the largest operation but Miss Dicks had seized the opportunity two years earlier, when central heating pipes were being laid, to move in with electric cables. Coffins had to be

removed and reverently reburied – except for Jane Austen, whom they managed to move gently to one side.

The total estimated cost of heating and lighting was £10,000. In July 1934 a 'Festival of Music and Drama' was held, with a view to: "helping the effort which the Dean and Chapter are making to raise £6,000 this year for the purpose of lighting and heating the Cathedral." A play, *The Marriage of Henry IV*, was especially written for the Festival and the Band of the Rifle Brigade played before each performance. The Patron of the Friends, HRH The Duke of Connaught, came to watch it. Dr Harold Rhodes organized carefully chosen music at services throughout the week, including an Easter Anthem from the *Winchester Troper* (c.1,000) and conducted Madrigal Concerts in the Deanery garden. There was an exhibition of the work of the Broderers and Canon Goodman gave a talk on the Cathedral Library and showed its treasures to "those who desired to see them more closely."

Work in the Cathedral was finally finished by the end of 1938 and, the following year Miss Dicks, now aged about 50, married Mr Ian McVean, a traveller for Beeston Boilers. Dean Selwyn married them in the Cathedral and all the staff were invited to the service. As a wedding gift Dean Selwyn inscribed a copy of his book, which had been especially bound in white vellum.

#### WAR

The second world war brought changes to the Close, namely the evacuation of 93 children from the Atherley School in Southampton, who were billeted around the Close and at Wolvesey. Younger children were accommodated in Kingsgate Street and College Street with College masters and their wives. Meals were cooked by ladies of the Close.

Maggie West (Margaret née Dawson) was an evacuee Atherley pupil: *On Sunday mornings we all attended Matins in the Cathedral. It was at this service when Dean Selwyn announced from the pulpit that the Prime Minister was to speak to the Nation at 11.15am and that his speech would be relayed throughout the Cathedral. We sat in our pews, wearing our large black velour hats, and heard the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, utter those historic words: "..... I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received and consequently this country is at war with Germany." The Dean then called us to prayer and from under the hideously large brim of my hat I remember looking around at the Cathedral and seeing the men grim faced and the women weeping. This was not surprising as it was only twenty years since The Great War and the congregation would be well aware of the horrors it had entailed.*

Official government policy was that cathedrals were not to be camouflaged and bells were to be rung only as a warning of invasion. In Winchester the crypt was prepared as an air raid shelter and a lookout post was established on top of the tower. In the event, the only damage to the Cathedral was a few panes of clear glass broken by a blast from a distant bomb.

But personal tragedy struck the Selwyn family. Phyllis died in 1941 as the result of an accident and their son, Christopher, a lieutenant in the 13<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Parachute Regiment, was killed on active service. Thankfully, Gordon Selwyn found happiness again when, in 1943, he married Edith Barbara Williams, a widow, who brought her daughter, Jane, to the Deanery. Jane, Lady Portal, has very fond memories of her stepfather and tells how her mother brought laughter and fun once more into his life.

Dean Selwyn possessed a wonderful preaching and reading voice and, during the war, he loved to read to groups of small Pilgrims' boys who were ready for bed in their dressing-gowns, in front of the fire in their small sitting-room, and Maggie remembers: *On Friday afternoons Dean Selwyn invited the Junior School to his study in the wonderful Long Gallery. We sat there, cross-legged on the floor, whilst the Dean, at his huge desk, read **Winnie the Pooh** to us – beautifully. No doubt he thought, quite correctly, that it would be comforting to children who could be missing their mothers.*

#### LATER YEARS

This short poem, written by Gordon Selwyn on Sark in 1954, where they were enjoying a family holiday, gives a small glimpse of the man and his charming mind:

*A butterfly sat on my hand  
Nothing doubting,  
I asked him, just to understand,  
What he was wanting?  
"Nothing to eat, no thanks,  
Just have a talk", he said  
Neither like men, do  
Butterflies need only bread.*

Gordon Selwyn was the longest serving Dean of Winchester in the world's most destructive century. He had wide interests and a deep personal faith. He knew the joys of family life but also personal tragedy. In a farewell sermon preached to the Friends on St Swithun's Day, 1958, he reflected:

"So I lay down my charge. I have had some great sorrows, but I have received wonderful sympathy too, and always I have loved the life and work, so demanding yet so rewarding in its infinite variety. So I feel full of thanksgiving. I am conscious of many faults and mistakes, but I think of them as occasions when the forgiveness of God – and I hope also of men – has been plentifully extended to me, and for that too I give thanks. I shall greatly miss the congregations large and small, on Sundays and on weekdays, which have sustained me by their friendship and support throughout the years; and especially in those years of the war, which seemed to draw us ever closer together."

In July 1959, after only one year in retirement, Dean Selwyn died aged 74. His widow placed a memorial plaque next to Prior Silkstede's pulpit, the pulpit that he had known so well.



*Portrait of Dean Selwyn that hangs in The Pilgrims' School*

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