



William Walker

The Diver who saved the Cathedral with his own two hands!

About one hundred years ago there was a big problem at Winchester Cathedral. Cracks started to open up in the walls, cracks so big you could stuff several children in them! Large chunks of stone started to fall from the roof onto the patterned tiled floor below. Parts of the Cathedral had to be closed off. Something was not right!

The Dean called in the builders.

The builders went outside and started to dig holes. Down, down, down dug the builders. But the builders were not happy. The holes kept filling with water. The deeper they dug the deeper the water became. 'What we need is a deep sea diver.'

On 6th April 1906 William Walker arrived at Winchester. Age 42 William Walker had been a diver for most of his working life.

Each day William Walker turned up for work at the Cathedral and get ready to dive into the deep, dark water. He wore woollen underwear, big, thick socks and a woolly hat. Next he put on his big, heavy diving boots. He sat on a stool, to allow two men to pull on his rubber diving suit one leg at a time. His wrists were covered with grease, and then he stood up and pushed each hand through the tight cuff of the sleeves. William Walker didn't wear protective gloves. His body heat in the suit would keep his hands warm and he needed to be able to 'feel' what he was doing, especially as it was too dark to see!

A shiny brass and copper collar was put on his shoulders on which the heavy helmet was to be bolted. Then the helmet was lifted onto his shoulders and bolted down. The front eyepiece was left off so that William Walker could continue to talk with the men helping him to dress. An air hose was attached to the left side and a life-line, a rope, to the right. Extra weights were then fastened to his chest and back to make sure he would sink into the water. It was all very, very heavy and it would have made walking about very, very difficult.

There was one last item to add; the front eye-piece. The circle of glass which would be screwed into place and allow him to peer out from his big, shiny diving helmet. The air supply was tested to make sure the pump worked and William Walker was able to breath, then he walked slowly, slowly down the ladders and into the deep water.

It was cold and very dark. He had to walk very slowly, lifting up each heavy foot then putting it down again carefully. Stretching out his hands before him William Walker carefully edged forward, feeling his way through the water. Each time he breathed out, bubbles rushed from a tube in his diving helmet and danced their way up through the water to the surface where the men on the air pump worked tirelessly to make sure he had enough air going back down the tube and into the diving helmet.

Each day William Walker spent six hours under water with a break half-way through. He worked in darkness in tunnels just over a metre wide to remove the peat and beech logs upon which the Cathedral had been built hundreds of years ago and replace them with bags of drymix concrete. Some of the peat was so hard it had to be dug out using a hammer and pick, put into buckets and then hauled up to the surface by workers waiting there. The bags of concrete were lowered down to William Walker who laid them out like brickwork and a big machine was used to fill any gaps between the bags with cement. It took 24 hours for the concrete to set and stop more water flooding into the tunnel then the tunnel was pumped dry of water and bricklayers took over to build up the foundations with cement blocks. This was done a section at a time, bit by bit, slowly, carefully, thoughtfully.

William Walker worked for over five years, for two four-hour shifts a day, which allowed two hours for dressing and undressing and six hours for the work. At lunch time he kept his diving suit on, removed his helmet and ate a light snack. Divers never ate a heavy meal on days they were diving.

In September 1911 William Walker's work was complete and the Cathedral was saved. No more cracks appeared in the walls. Stone stopped falling from the roof. The big holes dug by the builders were filled in. The scaffolding was taken down. On July 15th 1912 a special service was held in the Cathedral to give thanks for the saving of such a beautiful cathedral as Winchester. King George V and Queen Mary came to the service, everyone wore their best clothes and the city of Winchester was decorated with flowers to mark this wonderful event. William Walker was thanked in public for all the good work he'd done along with everyone else who had worked on the project.

Today there is a small statue of William Walker in the Cathedral, right at the far end, close to where he worked and under the statue on a bronze plaque you can find the words; 'The Diver who saved Winchester Cathedral with his own two hands.'