

The Case of Padre Parry

A chance discovery in an antique shop led Jenni Crane on an unexpected trail of discovery. She talks to Sarah Meyrick

IN MARCH 2014, the TV presenter Jenni Crane was browsing in an antique shop in Crystal Palace when she happened upon an old brown leather suitcase. Deciding it would be a decorative way of storing her shoe collection, she bought it and took it home. The decision, she says, changed her life.

"It's never had a shoe in it," she says now. "That very first day, I realised I had something special." On closer examination, she found that the suitcase was labelled with the name "Rev GEM Parry". She immediately went online. "I typed in his name and up popped a picture of his grave in Normandy. I saw at once it was a war grave, and that he had died on D-Day."

The next search brought up an entry from the memorial list of King's College, London, which revealed more. The page records an extract from Parry's obituary in *The Times*, written by the then Bishop of Barking.

George Parry had been born in Romford in 1915, was one of the four sons of Canon Allen James Parry, who was Vicar of St Peter's, Upton Cross. The younger Parry studied theology at King's College from 1933 to 1937, before training for holy orders at Bishop's College, Cheshunt. He was ordained in 1938, and served his curacy at St John's, Leytonstone, where he found himself unexpectedly in charge when his training incumbent died suddenly on the day the Second World War broke out.

According to the Bishop, Parry "won the love of the people, as he did some months later when he took charge of a Forest Gate parish, whose vicar was a chaplain to the Forces". Parry himself joined up as a chaplain in 1941, and served for 19 months in West Africa. He was transferred to the Parachute Regiment in 1942, and landed in Normandy with the 6th Airborne Division as part of Operation Overlord.

There was more: Leonard Mosley, a war correspondent with *The Daily Sketch*, had reported that Parry was unlawfully killed "with a knife or bayonet" while defending wounded men during a German raid on a medical-aid post. "The Germans set upon the wounded in a frenzied state, shooting and bayoneting them, [and] the Revd Parry threw himself between the Nazis and the wounded troops," the report said. As a result, Sir Herbert Williams, Parry's MP, asked a question in Parliament about his death, and Sir James Grigg, the Secretary for War, stated that the matter would be investigated.

"So by this stage," Crane says, "I knew who he was, and that he'd been to King's College. I knew he was popular, and that he'd been killed unlawfully. All these clues made me want to find out more."

Further research showed that, although he had died on D-Day, his death had not been reported in the UK until 28 June, when his name

appeared in the List of Casualties in *The Times* and other papers. (His death was reported in the *Church Times* on 30 June 1944.)

Leonard Mosley's article was published in a number of papers, including the *Chelmsford Chronicle* where it was prefaced by words from the Bishop of Chelmsford, who wrote: "This is a great shock to me. It is like a personal bereavement. . . I had known him from his boyhood. He had irresistible personal charm. Everyone who knew him called him 'George'. He was one of those you instinctively call by his Christian name. It seems such a tragic thing to lose young men like that. He was sincerity and goodness blended."

CRANE's next visit was to the Museum of Army Chaplaincy in Hampshire, where the curator, David Blake, told her more. Of the approximately 3000 British military chaplains who served in the Second World War, 96 lost their lives, and 21 of those died in Normandy between June and September 1944. The other discovery was that Parry was Welsh, and his family came from only 20 miles away from Crane's home town of Pontypool.

"That was the moment in my research that changed everything," she says. "The personal connection gave me the green light to keep going."

At this point, Crane spoke to a radio-producer friend who assured her that the story would be perfect for BBC Radio 4. By the end of 2014, she had a commission to make a programme that will be broadcast after Christmas.

The programme tells the story of Padre Parry's short life — he was only 29 when he died — and Crane's quest to trace his story. During her research, she went to Parliament to try to find out whether his "unlawful killing" had been investigated; and she visited his grave in the war cemetery in Bénouville in northern France.

She also worked hard to find out about his family. It turned out that all four Parry brothers had served in the war. George's brother Peter died in action in North Africa in 1942. Another brother, Major Allen Parry,

also served with the Airborne Division on D-Day, but he survived, as did the fourth brother, Roden.

Roden's daughter, Lt-Col Lizzy Bernthal, is the only surviving direct descendant. She knew next to nothing of George's life and death before Crane tracked her down, because her father never wanted to talk about the loss of his brothers. Crane says that Lizzy feels a particular connection to her uncle's story because of her own military career.

But, perhaps most movingly, Crane uncovered the story of George Parry's sweetheart, Daphne Carr, née Horne. Daphne was a parishioner at Leytonstone, and a young teenager, when she met Parry. He prepared her for her confirmation, and she became a Sunday-school teacher. Before he left for his training as a chaplain, Parry asked Daphne to write to him, only discovering a few months later that she was just 16.

According to Daphne, he assured her that they would get engaged when she was 18, and married when she was 20. There was some suggestion that the Parry family didn't consider Daphne good enough for him. The two corresponded, however, and met as regularly as the war allowed, but broke up in 1943 without becoming engaged.

None the less, Daphne appears to have carried a torch for George until her dying day. Towards the end of her life, she wrote a book called *One Single Poppy*, published in 1997, which Crane tracked down in the British Library. According to her son, Bernard Carr, a Professor of Mathematics and Astronomy at Queen Mary University College of London, she never stopped loving him, Crane says. This was borne out by an audio recording he gave her of Daphne's memoirs.

"Talking about him in the recording, she breaks down, all those years later. And it was George's picture she kept by her bedside, not her husband's. Knowing George was loved was very special to me."

FOUR veterans who served with Parry in the 6th Airborne Division are still alive today. Crane spoke to two of them to find out

GLENN COPUS



Treasure trove: Jenni Crane with the suitcase

don't think there was a man in the whole battalion who that day did not fight to avenge the death of Padre Parry."

Crane felt a further sense of connection when one of the veterans, Nick Archdale, who is in his 90s, showed her a picture of the training ground where the parachutists had prepared for the Normandy invasion. "I looked at it and said, 'Is that Crickhowell?' and he confirmed it was, that it was part of a big estate," she says. "And it's where my fiancé and I are getting married next year."

Part of the way through her research, Crane organised a special service at St John's, Leytonstone, to give thanks for George's life (News, 15 July). The idea came about when she was talking to the Vicar, the Revd David Britton. The service brought together a number of the key players in the story. The Bishop of Barking, the Rt Revd Peter Hill, preached, and the prayers were led by the Archdeacon of West Ham, the Ven. Elwin Cockett.

Crane says that what she has learned has changed her life. "Before this, I was working as a presenter on the Bingo Channel, and then as a TV researcher for Channel 5. But finding the suitcase showed me life isn't all about money. When I met Nick Archdale, he told me about the escape money they used to keep in their pockets, hidden in their trousers. They all knew they could be dead tomorrow. His life ever since has always been about living, and not letting money get you down."

"I came away from that conversation and quit my job, because I needed to be true to myself. It's about finding a shining light in something, and trying to follow that through to the end. It's all about keeping on going to tell the stories that really matter. It's totally changed my life. If I hadn't found that suitcase, I'd still be presenting on the Bingo Channel."

The Chaplain's Suitcase will be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 at 4 p.m. on Tuesday 27 December.



Son of a preacher man: Padre Parry

more about Parry. Both agreed that he had been popular and well-liked by the troops. They felt, however, that Leonard Mosley's description of his death and the response to it was exaggerated. The reporter concluded his piece with the words, "I

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