

The Ven Basil Wingfield Digby

Basil Wingfield Digby came of a Dorset family whose ancestors had lived in and around Sherborne for some four centuries, and which has for generations provided clergy to the Church of England.

Born in 1910, he was educated at Marlborough, where he was a friend of the actor James Mason, and at Christ Church, Oxford. He read for the Church at Wycliffe Hall and served a first curacy at St Paul's, Fisherton, before going to St George's, Oakdale. When the Second World War came he volunteered and ended up as senior Chaplain to the 7th Armoured Division, for which he was appointed MBE in 1944.

In 1940 he had married Barbara Budge. "Her quickness of perception and sharpness of judgement," writes the Very Rev Peter Baelz, one of his former curates, "admirably complemented his more deliberate and straightforward outlook." They had four children, the last of whom followed his father into the Church.

In 1947 Wingfield Digby became Vicar of Sherborne, where his father had been vicar before him. He thus returned to the home of his childhood. Sherborne was by then a large and active town and its abbey one of the greatest churches in the Diocese of Salisbury. It was a job which required vision and the ability to reconcile the demands of town and gown.

Wingfield Digby was "a friendly, faithful, four-square parish priest", Baelz writes, "thorough rather than imaginative, quietly competent rather than noisily original . . . His instinct for liturgy was matched by the clarity of his voice and the beauty of his singing. Above all he communicated both in word and deed a sense of the dependability of God. A man of deep faith, he had his feet firmly on the ground. Basil Wingfield Digby was the sort of person who, were the abbey to fall down, would simply say 'Too bad! We must see how we can build it up again.' "

He was greatly appreciated and respected in the schools and in the town as well as in the abbey. As Rural Dean he ruled over a happy chapter which at one time included Archbishop Fisher.

In 1967 Wingfield Digby became Archdeacon of Sarum. This gave him a change of territory and a wider sphere for his gifts. He combined the post with that of Treasurer in Salisbury Cathedral. The Dean with whom he chiefly served was the late Fenton Morley. Canon Cyril Taylor (100 Hymns for Today) was Precentor and I was Chancellor, with the Wingfield Digbys as next-door neighbours. One could not have asked for better. We were also a happy Chapter, which is a somewhat rare phenomenon in the Church of England (see Trollope passim).

It was a period of renewal and expansion. The cathedral began to take on some of the characteristics of a parish church. Congregations increased and there was a new feeling of fellowship, encouraged by Fenton and Marjory Morley and admirably supported by Basil

and Barbara Wingfield Digby. I remember that when any rather controversial change was to be put across, such as "passing the Peace", it was always Wingfield Digby who was appointed to preach. The ease with which this ancient custom of the Church was accepted by nearly all the congregation owed much to the respect and trust they felt for him.

It was at this time, too, that the Dean and Chapter re-introduced entry charges, or to be precise, rather firmly solicited voluntary contributions. Objectors were fairly common at first and Wingfield Digby was a sympathetic listener but a firm supporter of the principle.

He would have been the first to admit that he was not at home with modern trends in theology and I think he would have found life difficult in the quick sands of the Church today. His proper place was in one of those old country churches where the door was always ajar, the Bible open on the lectern and the altar flanked by tablets of the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments.

But for Basil Wingfield Digby there was an 11th commandment: Thou shalt fish. It was an occupation which he shared with the Apostles Peter and Andrew and, like them, he was called to become a fisher of men. I would like to suggest to the authorities of Sherborne Abbey that they erect a plaque to him with the quotation from Isaak Walton: "An excellent angler, and now with God".

Ian Dunlop

Stephen Basil Wingfield Digby, priest: born 10 November 1910; ordained deacon 1936, priest 1937; MBE 1944; Vicar of Sherborne with Castleton and Lillington 1947-68; Archdeacon of Sarum 1968-79; Canon Residentiary, Salisbury Cathedral 1968-79, Treasurer 1971-79; married 1940 Barbara Budge (died 1987; three sons, one daughter); died Sherborne 22 January 1996.

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