

Past, Present and Future at Home and Abroad

Sir Peter Bottomley MP

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Above the great west door of Westminster Abbey are statues of ten 20th century saints, including Oscar Romero. His name, mission and inspiration have been taken by the Roman Catholic high school where Arun District and Worthing Borough councils meet in the middle of the Goring-Ferring-and-Kingston gaps. These gaps have been, they are and they should remain the green lungs, the farm fields that give distinctive identities to our West Sussex villages, hamlets and towns.

In the Sanctuary outside the Abbey is a monument that visitors might think an Eleanor Cross. The wife of Edward the First gave birth to 16 children. She died in 1290. The funeral passage from Nottinghamshire to Westminster was marked by crosses at twelve places where her coffin rested at night. Three are intact; the one giving name to Charing Cross is a replacement.

The listed Sanctuary memorial is for nineteen boys from the local Westminster school. They died, some of illness, between 1854 and 1858 in the Crimean or Russian War and during the Indian Mutiny. One, Cornet Bankes was awarded the Victoria Cross; another was Field Marshal Raglan.

There were Anglo-Afghan wars 1839-42, 1878-80 and briefly in 1919. The present conflict lasted 20 years. Parliament was recalled to consider the situation. What will happen? What is happening? What has happened?

The range of views reflects the varied backgrounds, experiences and ideologies of fellow members of parliament. The tests we can choose to apply are: what actions are right? What actions are necessary? What actions might work?

There have been times when fighting has been necessary without the real prospect of success. The situation after the 1940 Norway debate was dire. Winston Churchill was chosen to be prime minister. We know how close our country was to defeat. Do read reports of the multi-day debate. I am one of those who feel that the mood and the result was swung in part by the Great War prime minister Lloyd George. He was Father of the House for 16 years.

This week I have been reminded of 1884, the year of the Worthing riots. Virginia and I attended Holy Communion led by the Rev. Roger Walker. The longest serving vicar at Christ Church was Francis Cruse, incumbent from 1864-1891.

Chris Hare is our distinguished local historian. He also volunteered to serve as member of parliament. Chris has done extensive work on the ministry and the life and times of the vicar whose population doubled. We know he did not lose heart. He remained constant in his faith.

Through Chris and John Bull, who I first admired at Worthing Hospital, we can read about the riots against the Salvation Army through the experience of the parish priest at the centre of trouble.

The lesson for me is to stand with victims, not the mob. Wise words: every saint has a past; every sinner has a future. It is a delight to me to see faiths and denominations working together locally and nationally. We can hope the same applies in countries where minorities and other religions are penalised.

When I visited our armed forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Falklands and the former Yugoslavia, I was with ordinary people working together to achieve remarkable results, of significance to us and often of life saving importance to others.

While the best still apply to join our Royal Navy, the Army and Marines and the Royal Air Force, we can have hope for the future. We weep for the losses; we acknowledge mistakes; we will remember them.