

Round and about in the parish...

The Rev. Pym Cornish wrote about Danehill in his memoirs and describes some of the houses and its occupants. He said, "beyond the Heathfield's teashop, and still on the main Lewes-Forest Row road through Danehill, were a few more small houses, in one of which lived a young woman so largely incapacitated that she had not walked unaided for some time. In my time she was to be sent to Guy's Hospital for what I can only name, as a layman in such matters, 'hole in the heart surgery.' At that time this operation was in its infancy in the UK. But already successful operations had taken place in the USA. We owe it to the munificence of the London Clothworkers Company that a surgeon was brought over from America to teach our people the necessary skills. I had the joy of preparing my parishioner for the operation at Guys Hospital the day before this took place."

In 1947 Mr Henry Hawkins Turner who lived at Shotover (next to the Church) was the Master of the Clothworkers Company in London, which is a Livery company involved in charitable works. Whilst their researcher Jessica Collins has looked through their records for me, she cannot trace anything about the Clothworkers Company paying for surgeons from the USA. However, Jessica tells me that each Master had his own "pot" which he could use for charitable works during his term of office, in which case they would hold no records. In view of the Rev Cornish's remarks it seems possible that Mr Hawkins Turner arranged for the operation to take place. He would certainly have been aware of the plight of the young lady and could well have taken it upon himself to help out.

(pic left, Mr Hawkins Turner in 1947 in his ceremonial robes as Master of the Clothworkers co.).



Vi Etherton who knew Rita well has told me the background to this story. Rita's father, Bert Cragg came to Danehill to collect the fruit going to Brighton and Vi's father suggested Rita stay with them during the war. Rita did come and stayed with the Dixon family who lived at Beech Cottage (a beech tree was outside the house). Rita was confined to a wheelchair and when the weather was good she would be pushed to the end of the drive so she could talk to people, but of course if a bombing raid was taking place it would be hard for the young ladies of the house to get Rita safely back in the house. Somehow or other, the Canadian soldiers who were stationed at Sheffield Park got to know of this, and they made sure there was always a soldier at the ready, who came complete with helmet and rifle, to help push Rita inside sharpish if an enemy aircraft flew overhead, but it never did.

Rita *(pictured with her twin sisters who were then 9 years old)* had to sleep downstairs on the sofa as she could not get upstairs. The house had no facilities, only an outside toilet and a bath with a cold tap, no running hot water, but they managed.



The Rev Pym Cornish continues "The patient not only recovered but

married soon after and later migrated to Canada, happily well." Well, that's not correct. Rita had a stroke during the operation which left her paralysed down the left side, but she could walk, albeit with a limp and her left arm was paralysed. Also, Rita never married. She did however make friends with what was known as a 'sky pilot' - i.e. a vicar who used to take her out and about in his car. But it's true she did emigrate to Canada with her other sisters, two of whom married Canadian soldiers from Sheffield Park.

The Rev. Pym Cornish recalls he had tremendous backing from Mr and Mrs Hawkins Turner and, at a time when the church needed substantial repairs, they pledged themselves to give pound for pound the money raised elsewhere in the parish.

My thanks to Jessica Collins (Clothworkers Co), Ian and Vi Etherton, and Laurence Hardy.
Jill Rolfe