

Memories of Mount Zion 1958 – 1967

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This account of life at Mount Zion, is recorded in Margaret's own words. Her husband (the sexton) was called Ken. Margaret's sons were called Ken, Alan and Richard.

A night to remember

It was a night to remember, early in our time at Mount Zion, and I shiver as I recall it. Back in November 1958 my husband became the new sexton and I became caretaker at Mount Zion. We and the family had moved into the little cottage adjoining the church. Situated in the middle of the graveyard and on a dank November day it was anything but inviting. Instead of the electricity being re-connected the electricians had condemned the wiring and refused to permit the lights to be turned on. Instead we were using three oil lamps, which we had placed at the ready and soon it was dark enough for them to be lit. They brightened the rooms but also cast shadows which by no means improved their gloom. Tea was served and the washing up done. The boys (Ken and Alan), quite enjoyed the novelty but it was decided they would be able to do nothing much and hunted around until they found board games to while away the evening.

By 7.00pm that evening my husband had to go out, something which I would have given anything for him not to do. With trepidation I tried to hide my fear of the dark, of the eerie gloom, of the graveyard and first night nerves of the unknown way of life they had entered into. Ken (my husband) had instructed us to lock the door behind him, and on no account to open it until they heard his pre-arranged signal. He went out into the foggy night with their words, in chorus, "Don't be long will you?"

The house had a long narrow hallway and the front room off to the right had already been warmed by the coal fire while we had tea in the kitchen, so the oil lamps were carefully transferred to the front room. The family settled to play games by the poor light. For some time we enjoyed playing old-fashioned games, there was no radio or television - no electricity! As time went on, we became bored. It was far too creepy to think of splitting up and going to their beds, indeed the boys had been elated when their father said they might stay up until his return.

The wind whistled in the chimney and their nerves began to play tricks. "Someone is playing the organ". Quietly spoken. "Someone is playing the organ". Through the wall came a definite sound ... of music? Who could be in the church? No one had advised that the church would be used that evening. The sexton come caretaker was the key holder - the only key holder they had understood. Their nerves reached

a frightening peak - what to do?! Who could be in there? Sideways glances through the curtains showed no sign of lights in the building. Who could play the organ in the dark? "Only a ghost" proffered Alan, the youngest child. Ken the eldest agreed!

As the wind howled outside the carpet beneath their feet billowed, there had been no opportunity to tack down the carpet square. The lamplight flickered, it was indeed a November nightmare. Just as their imaginations reached breaking point a knock on the door - "Shh. I think it is Dad's knock". They listened - yes it was Ken's signal. The boys fell over each other to unlock the door, and words fell over each other as all of them tried to tell of the organ sounds. There came quietness as each listened, quietness for a whole minute, then Dad heard it too.

"I had better go and have a look" he said, and taking the huge chapel key from its hook he walked into the hallway. The letter box was flapping frantically as the wind outside blew against it. He closed the door behind him. The music again. Suddenly the man of the house laughed out loudly and returned to the room. "Come along into the hall". He commanded, they obeyed, and the door was closed. The music again. Gradually each one began to laugh as Ken explained that the draught along the passage was vibrating the metal draught-excluder around the door. A draught-excluder which did not quite work! I still shiver as I recall that night and church music has never been the same.

More memories

As in my own childhood when all the family had worked together, I had the boys helping me. They came with me in the evenings to help me to move chairs and benches to prepare rooms for meetings. In winter there were paths up to the chapel and through the graveyard to keep clear, sometimes 3 feet deep in snow. In the summer we helped Ken in the graveyard watering the young plants and generally doing odd jobs.

There were lots of weeds to clear on the paths too and when the dandelions were out I would say 'It's war on dandelions tonight' and they would get out the huge wooden wheelbarrow, spades and hoes, and away we would go up and down the paths. Soon it would be lupin time and we had war on the tall blue lupins which had grown profusely amongst the neglected graves. They came up easily. All these jobs were done voluntarily and they were work which now men would want payment for doing, but we made a game of them. There were usually 3 or 4 other boys helping, because they took turns in riding in the wheelbarrow when they had tipped the load on to the rubbish tip. They loved to squirt each other with the hosepipe when watering and we had lots of fun - whilst working.

Often, they played in the fields behind the Chapel hiding in the grassy ditches in the uneven fields. Sheep regularly used to get into the graveyard and had to be coaxed

back into the field, whilst they kept leaping amongst the gravestones. I remember the funeral of one lady, who was a well-known singer, and as the long funeral procession went down through the graveyard I looked out of the window there were three or four cows sedately following on behind all keeping in line. The particularly amusing thing about this was that the lady's name was Mrs Bullock!

Although we had a bath and washbasin in the cottage, our toilet was outside around the corner of the cottage and along the path. My Cornish sister-in-law came to stay and when we went to the loo in the dark we went together. One moonlit night we were returning when she said 'Look, you have a ghost!' 'A ghost?!' I said. 'Yes', over there, can't you see a little lady standing over there?' Sure enough, there, amongst the gravestones, was a tiny lady in white. We saw her several times and called her Mary, for she looked like Mary bending there with her head covered. For a couple of years we saw her on and off, usually when it was moonlight. Eventually the gas lamps along the lane were replaced by electric lights and we never saw Mary again - for she was the reflection of the gas lamp and the moon on the corner of curved shapely gravestone.

Talking of graves, we had a funeral one misty November day at 2.30pm. When the mourners had left, Ken came in for a cup of tea and then said that he had better go and fill in the grave. By then it was dusk. 20 minutes later he came rushing in and asked if I had seen a lady running past, I hadn't. 'Well, he said, 'I was in the grave when I heard footsteps, and thinking that it was you I stood up and looked over the edge, and this woman turned on her heels and flew up the path calling 'Oh, Uncle Joe, Uncle Joe!' She must have arrived late or come back to look at flowers on the grave - we were never able to find out who it was to explain that it wasn't her Uncle Joe rising from his grave, but I bet she never came back on a dull foggy day!

We had very happy times at Mount Zion. The community was a very caring one and I will always cherish those memories.

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