

**A brief biography, written by Canon John himself, to accompany a service form.**

**JOHN ALFRED THURMER** was born on New Year's Eve 1925, the younger son of Robert and Ethel, in a cottage almost in the churchyard of St. Mary's, Pulborough, Sussex, where he was christened soon after. His father worked for the Automobile Association and was moved around the country. John's particular 'burr' came from Gloucester in the 1930's and his youth was at Witham, Essex. Here he encountered the detective novelist Dorothy L Sayers who greatly influenced his life and thinking. He had experience of various schools including at Witham an early Victorian church school where the headmaster, an able man who taught everything, looked like Neville Chamberlain, the then Prime Minister. At King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford, he was happy and well taught.

At this time, 1941, he had the saddest experience of his life in the death of his older brother Jim in Colchester Military Hospital – a lifelong tragedy for John and his parents. They were both communicants and he was brought up middle-of-the-road Church of England, not going to church too much and with a considerable suspicion of clergymen. John encountered Anglo-Catholicism at St. Nicholas, Little Braxted, a mile from his home, on Whitsunday 1942, and, in spite of a conversion to which he owed a great deal, the earlier family never quite left him.

He was head of school for his last year, a fact he often attributed to the more extrovert taking the earliest opportunity to go into the armed forces [it was 1944] –whither he followed, serving for three years in the Royal Engineers. The regimental allocation may seem surprising, but in fact he was a clerk. His official army trade was Railway Clerk C III – a status which gave his later friends much amusement.

The accidents of posting, reflecting the British Army's commitments following the end of the Second World War, brought him to the Middle East, and in September 1945, to Jerusalem, where he was at the army headquarters for two years. To an 18 year old who had never been out of England, Jerusalem was a source of unending fascination. He spent all his available free time in the Old City [and at St. George's on the Nablus Road] and knew something of all the different Christian communities, then much more numerous than, sadly, they are now. Twice he was on the Abyssinians' roof to greet the Holy Fire at the Holy Sepulchre on Easter Eve. In 1947 on this expedition he narrowly escaped a charge for being outside barracks without adequate protection.

Another narrow escape was the terrorist bombing of the King David Hotel, where he worked, on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1946. It was a life-long sadness for him that the multi-racial, multi-religious Palestine which the army sent him to defend was abandoned in 1948, and in spite of his affection for the place and its people he never went back, a gesture of mourning for its tragedy.

John went up to Oriel College, Oxford at Michaelmas 1947 to read Modern History, and he retained a deep sense of gratitude to his college, as to his school. Among Oxford's many characters he was influenced by the preaching of Austin Farrer and the lectures of Alan Taylor and C.S. Lewis, those contrasted fellows of Magdalen.

After two years at Lincoln Theological College – also, but in different ways, a rich experience – he was ordained in the Diocese of Chelmsford for work at what the church called Little Ilford – a huge segment of what is now the London Borough of Newham. Here

he received much kindness from the Rector, his wife and family, for whom, as for many parishioners, he retained a life-long affection.

After three years he went to teach at Salisbury Theological College, one of those small semi-monastic residential institutions for the training of clergy now deemed unviable economically and perhaps in other ways.

In 1964 he began his long association with Exeter being appointed the second Lazenby Chaplain in the University of Exeter, combining this with part-time teaching in the departments of History and Theology. In the chapel, he was committed to proving both 'Anglican' and 'ecumenical' worship. This he did by a sung Eucharist [created by student initiative shortly before his arrival] and, after a coffee break, by an interdenominational University Sermon, rather on the Oxford pattern. In practice this did not work particularly well, the general style being too unusual for both preachers and customers. But for the chaplain who heard all the sermons it was a valuable experience.

The chaplain's tour of duty was ten years, and when it ended the Bishop, Dr. Robert Mortimer, invited him to become a residentiary canon and Chancellor of the Cathedral, a historic office he always felt honoured to occupy. Apart from general cathedral duties, which he shared with the other canons, he directed the post-ordination training of the clergy and recruitment of non-stipendiary, or self-supporting ministry. For ten years he continued to teach in the University, and then for five years he was the cathedral administrator.

His residence at the cathedral coincided with a period of great activity in the conservation of the fabric, inside and out, and in an increase of the use of the cathedral by individual visitors and groups, whether tourists, worshippers or cultural events. Everything in the cathedral is done on the corporate authority of the Dean and Chapter, but he was pleased to have played a large part in such developments as the restoration of the Lenten array, the Sung Eucharist at 5.30 p.m. on weekday festivals, the reform of the Easter Vigil, the refurnishing of the Chapels of St. Paul and St. Gabriel, the regular use of all side chapels, the shrine of the BVM in the Lady Chapel and the central altar in the nave, a feature which did not long survive his retirement.

This took place in January 1991, and for the rest of that year he helped the Revd. Peter Lee with the interregnum at St. David with St. Michael. During the incumbency of the Revd. John Henton [1991 – 2009] he served the parish as an honorary assistant priest and continued to do so up to the time of his death.

John wrote two books while at the cathedral, and added two more during his retirement. A small amount of work for the extra-mural Certificate of Theology at the University came to an end when the professor dismissed him for fundamentalism – appropriately for a disciple of Dorothy L. Sayers, because the particular issue was the Trinity; one of the books *A Detection of the Trinity*, was a study of her contribution to the doctrine. However, the University gave him an honorary degree of Divinity in 1991.