

## **REV. SABINE BARING-GOULD: LIFE AND WORK**

### **EAST MERSEA FLOWER FESTIVAL 1989**

As all organisers of the Flower Festival must find, it is very hard to think up a theme which is different. As Chairman of the West Mersea and District Flower Club, it has been up to me to do the thinking for the past three festivals. In 1987 "Gems of the Rainbow", 1988 first verse from hymn "Lord to you we bring our treasure" 495 A & M New Standard.

This year all my mind kept going back to was Baring-Gould. All I knew was he had written the novel, 'Me-halah', about Mersea and district, together with "Onward Christian Soldiers" and "Now the day is over". He was Rector at East Mersea for ten years, 1971 to 1981, and hated the place. Not much to go on. All my committee felt the same, but had no other suggestions. So this, it was decided, would be our theme.

I was then lent various books from a private collection. His two books of reminiscences, Troubadour Land, also the books by Dickinson, his grandson, and Purcell. I was not really looking forward to reading his books, but I found myself thoroughly enjoying them and read them all from cover to cover. In the end I decided he must have been quite a difficult man to have dealings with. He had a sense of humour and was able to laugh at himself. He had no patience for anyone who was uneducated, although he seemed to be very happy if they were willing to learn, as at Horbury Brig, where he mentions his students sat on his coat tails after class, until he told them a story. I should not think there were many teachers at that time you could do that to. He loved to travel. He wrote and published many books, sermons and hymns. He married a mill girl many years younger than himself and they had fifteen children. In his writings he does not mention Grace much, but one gathers she was a gentle, strong and willing helper to him, as on her death he said, "half my soul gone".

Now we had more to work on.

I should perhaps say East Mersea Church is very old - there has been a Church on the spot since Saxon times. It is dedicated to St. Edmund and is a Crown living. So it was, in fact, Gladstone who offered it to Baring-Gould. I felt we should cover all aspects of his life, so we finished up with, I think, a very effective festival. We had a list of dates printed for visitors to give them a little background about the man.

How do you describe a flower festival? I think my best idea is to take you around the Church as if you were a visitor. The Porch was decorated with pink flowers on one side along the seat, twice the length of the blue on the other side.

Ten girls, five boys. And across the door was an arrangement of dark foliage to represent Baring-Gould, and red and white for Grace, as her red scarf and white apron when she was a mill girl. As you go through the door, the font is in front of you. This was a mass of pink and blue. Spray carnations, monkshood, blue and pink gypsophila, and grey foliage (15 children). It is a very old, octagonal font with a list to one side. Turning to the left inside we had 'A memorial to Horatio Nelson', a biography. This was done in red, white and blue flowers, with a red ensign, telescope and a square rigged mast. The flowers included gladioli, carnations, gyp and

monkshood. Across the aisle in the corner on top of the bookcase, we had a photograph of Baring-Gould which was surrounded with pink and white spray and single carnations with senecio and jasmine foliage.

In front of the organ was a multicoloured pedestal which, among other things, included achillea, alstroemeria, carnations, chrysanthemums, dahlias, gaillardia, golden rod and lavatera. This represented 'Wagner', one of his favourite composers!

Next was a mauve arrangement with buddleia, heather and driftwood. This was 'Dartmoor - his favourite haunt'. Against the very old west door was our largest arrangement. This represented his writing room. One of the husbands had made a replica of a Victorian high writing desk. Baring-Gould always wrote standing up.

Other accessories were a screen covered with a tapestry, a chair and rug. There were two large arrangements, one being a pedestal, a couple of small ones, and the chair. All were done in white and blue with lilies and larkspur, carnations and chrysanthemums, iris, etc.

We now turn to face the Lady Chapel. There are three windows on the left.

First was 'Mehalah'. This included a blue and a red arrangement, and all the accessories that are important to the story: lamp, red cloth, cap, lantern, anchor, pistol, and in the background was a black and white painting by the arranger's husband showing the Church, House and Ray Island which were all part of the story.

Second, was 'The Tragedy of the Caesars'. With marble columns and white flowers, including roses and lilies, plus vine leaves and black and white grapes, another biography.

Third was 'Sowing and Reaping', a sermon. A harvest scene with horse and cart laden with stooks of corn, fruit and vegetables.

In front of the altar was a flower carpet to show the mosaic he found and excavated at Pau. This was done in four seed trays filled with oasis and just short pieces of foliage and heads of flowers. (It was amazing, at the end of the week, it looked as if it had just been done). The window behind the altar was an all white arrangement, laid out on polystyrene. This was 'Icelandic Scenes & Sagas', a guide book.

On either side of this window is a beautiful carved wooden statue, St. Mary, 'Virgin Saints and Martyrs'. This was white and blue, and St. Edmund, 'Lives of the Saints', was mostly red and included arrows, which is how he was killed. The window and pedestal to the left of the main altar was in the colours of Clare College where he was a classics student, gold, red and black. Gladioli, golden rod, carnations and bullrushes were used in these.

Turning our back now on the altar we pass through the choir, where all the candlesticks and the two large candlesticks before entering the nave were all arranged with flowers from the marshes at East Mersea.

On the left behind the choir, the window was a Christmas nativity scene, with a white and red arrangement. Holly and ivy were the foliage and silk Christmas roses and poinsettias were used. 'Christmas, a pattern of worship', sermon.

We are very lucky to have a narrow stairway leading to an arched opening. This, of course, had to be 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. Red gladioli went up the stairs in ranks and in the arch was a cross of white and red carnations.

The old wooden pulpit comes next. This was originally reached by steps which were taken down some time ago, so the arranger either has a ladder or has been known to climb on the back of the chairs! Anyway, again this was a mainly white arrangement. It was done as a pedestal and the door into the pulpit was left open so you could see the small shelf seat inside. A trail of ivy was used for the bookmark in the old bible.

The final window had verses 1, 6 and 7 portrayed from 'Now the day is over'. This hymn, it is said, was written at Mersea together with the tune, for the West Mersea Church bells. It is played every Sunday night on these bells.

Those were the main arrangements. The Church has many nooks and crannies which are filled with flowers. We have a squint which still used oil lamps. Only around the organ and by the lectern are there electric lights. At least twelve oil lamps are attached to the pillars and a mainly foliage arrangement was hung under each of these.

We had 21 ladies and 1 gentleman making the Church as beautiful as we could. Needless to say, most of us were there for the full day, having taken a picnic lunch. We returned home weary but, on the Saturday morning after the final touches were made, I think we were all delighted with the finished look and had many words of approval from the visitors.

(Many thanks to Anne Deere of West Mersea for this article, Ed.)