

The Belching Boiler of Colmworth

Thelma Marks

In December 1962, on the first Sunday after my arrival in Colmworth, I went to the morning service in St Denys church. As I wrenched open the heavy door, immediately my nostrils were assailed by thick fumes, which were coming from a large coke-burning stove, almost opposite to the right hand side of the north door.

My first decision was where to sit. I glanced towards the back of the church, where a lady was playing the organ. She was flanked on either side by a group of people sitting in the back row of the pews, obviously as far from the stove as possible. Then I turned towards my right, where there were two people sitting towards the front on either side of the aisles. Later, I learnt that these were Mr. Slow, one of the churchwardens with his wife, and Miss Church with her housekeeper, Miss Watkins. Then I noticed a gentleman sitting close to the wall to my immediate right. I recognized Commander Newton, whose wife and daughter were customers of mine, so decided to follow his example.

Albert Morris, the sexton, then ambled in just before the service and began to add a shovelful of coke, so that the stove did not go out before the end of the service. Singing is not my forte, so I turned the collar of my coat up in an endeavour to mask out the fumes. I then resolved that I should either have to find another church in which to worship or try to get rid of that horrible stove.

The Reverend Leonard Impson stood by the door to greet everyone as they left the church. A lady who came from the back of the church immediately asked "Where are the Parish Magazines?" The Rector apologized and said that he had problems getting them from the printer. She amplified the situation by saying "People pay six pence a year for the Parish Magazine and need to have them by the 1st of the month at the latest." His reply had obviously not satisfied her and feeling somewhat sorry for him, I asked if he would like some help with the magazine, as this had been my role at the previous church that I had attended. He gratefully accepted my offer.

Immediately, I was invited to join the Parochial Church Council and shortly afterwards found myself perched on a child's wooden chair in the Victorian schoolroom, alongside a goodly proportion of the members of the congregation.

It was very cold and uncomfortable in the old school, so it was not a long meeting. Certainly, no one could sit on their dignity under such conditions. Discussion ensued and I made some suggestions. On leaving the meeting, Commander Newton put his hand around my shoulder in a fatherly way and said "You will not be thanked if you try to alter anything in Colmworth." I assured him that I was not expecting any thanks...

And thus began my long association with St Denys church.

