

## *The Carrier Pigeon from the Rectory*

BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 1879 AND JANUARY 1883 a monthly magazine, *The Carrier Pigeon*, was edited and produced at the Rectory, Great Haseley, near Thame, Oxfordshire, by Dorothy Ellison; in all 38 editions appeared. Of the ten which survive today nine were published between September 1879 and December 1880, and the tenth in January 1883.<sup>1</sup>

Dorothy Frances Ellison was 19 years old in 1879, one of seven children of the rector of St Peter's Church, Canon Henry John Ellison\* and his wife Mary who had died in 1870.<sup>2</sup> Little is known about Dorothy's childhood and early adolescence, but in that home she would have been expected to follow the upper middle-class social conventions of the time—to marry young, support her husband, raise children and manage the household. Any thoughts she might have had of an independent professional career would have been a radical move into the unknown. For Dorothy, living a respectable life in a rural parsonage, editing *The Carrier Pigeon* was a socially acceptable way of giving an early voice to her emerging intellectual, aesthetic and literary talents.

Dorothy produced a single copy of *The Carrier Pigeon* each month, which was handwritten either by herself, or by each individual contributor. The copy was collated and edited by Dorothy and then circulated among subscribers, mostly her brothers and sisters and their friends, who each paid one shilling a year subscription.

Dorothy's editorial in the first edition of September 1879 looks forward with confidence, declaring that the magazine 'will be a delightful jumble of everything which is worth reading and knowing'. She is clear that editorial control will rest with her alone. The contents page lists items which became standard in later editions. These included an editorial, 'Personal and Fashionable Intelligence' (news and gossip of family and friends), 'Sporting Intelligence' (mainly tennis, rowing and cricket), 'Doings at Great Haseley' (including the flower show and the school treat) as well as travel and other articles. There were also riddles and jokes, and a correspondence column.

Subscribers to *The Carrier Pigeon* were encouraged to write articles for it. Two pieces, one describing a holiday in Ireland and the other travels through Germany, are thoughtfully written and describe the delights and difficulties of overseas travel at the time. Other pieces are much lighter in tone. It was reported that a 'Miss Sophie Norton had her portmanteau stolen by a man who took it from the platform. He was caught in the act and "had up". We trust that he will be rewarded for his impudence.' Political jokes reflected the gossip of the day, as shown by an example in the July 1880 edition: 'How would you reform Gladstone?'—'Turn him round till he became Dizzy.'<sup>†</sup>

Much is written of the social life of the Ellison family, and always with a certain subtle irony. For example: 'Canon and the Miss Ellison's have been entertaining a select circle of guests at their country mansion during the last month.'

Village events are recorded in some detail, often with unattributed cut-and-paste extracts from local newspapers. One such report was of the annual under-17s cricket match held on 4 September 1879 between Haseley and District and Wormsley and District at the Wheatfield cricket ground, which Haseley won by an innings. The match was not just a sporting occasion; the reporter declared that 'During the afternoon a large and fashionable assemblage of ladies gathered to witness the play.'

The Haseley school treat featured prominently in autumn editions of *The Carrier Pigeon*. Canon Ellison was chairman of the governors of both the boys' and the girls' schools in the village, and the treat was held at the start of the harvest (summer) holiday in the rectory grounds. The report of the

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\* Ellison, appointed rector *aet.* 63 in 1876, pursued two crusades: temperance and 'the improvement of the spiritual and temporal life of the rural working class. For his many village initiatives see 'The Haseley Community plan of 1876', a paper by John Andrews, held in the Haseley Archive.

<sup>†</sup> The Liberals led by Gladstone had decisively beaten the Conservatives led by Disraeli (nicknamed 'Dizzy') at the general election in April of that year.

August 1879 treat is elegiac.

'On Thursday afternoon one hundred and sixty children belonging to the schools were entertained at tea with teachers and friends. They marched in procession to the rectory grounds, where they were met by the rector, the Misses Ellison, and other ladies. Cricket and other games were indulged in till the shades of evening reminded them that it was time to disperse. The Rev. Canon Ellison, after a few words, distributed the prizes. The national anthem, sung by the children, brought this most happy day to a close.'

The annual flower (and vegetable) show had been founded by Canon Ellison in 1878 and by 1880 had become an established event. *The Carrier Pigeon's* report of August 1880 records that, despite unfavourable weather, there was a large attendance of visitors, with the judges making special mention of the quality of cabbages and potatoes. The condition of the gardens and the allotments entered for the competition was also seen as 'specially good'. Prizes were presented at 6 pm by Mrs. Muirhead of Haseley Court.

The accepted social order was largely unquestioned by contributors to the magazine; there is no sense in which Dorothy and her friends gave much thought to the nature and causes of poverty and inequality in society. They led lives of social privilege and exclusivity. The 1881 census shows that the overwhelming majority of the population of the Haseleys were farm labourers and their families, most of whom, at a time of deep agricultural recession, would have been desperately poor. The life of village people had little impact on *The Carrier Pigeon*. They appear only as part of a class known as 'servants'.

Attempts at humour in *The Carrier Pigeon*, even allowing for the youth and naivety of the editor, may appear to be lacking in empathy and sensitivity. The following examples are illustrative. In the January 1883 edition a number of 'satirical' advertisements for servants are displayed. One such reads:

An unfortunate young woman with suicidal tendencies, about sixteen, wants a place. [As a servant at a large house.] She has already run away from two places. Her temper is awful. Strongly recommend?

A short insert in the September 1879 edition reads without explanation or clarification:

On the day of the Windsor Regatta Mrs. Gaskell's boot boy went to bathe and it is supposed that he got into a hole and drowned, for his clothes only were found. The body has not yet been recovered.

The final edition of *The Carrier Pigeon* appeared in January 1883. For just over three years it had provided an outlet for the creative energies of Dorothy and a network of social contacts, and enjoyment for her family and friends.

As she moved towards adulthood Dorothy became increasingly involved with the work of the Church of England Temperance Society, founded by her father in 1862,<sup>3</sup> and later with a sister organisation, the London Police Courts Mission (LPCM).<sup>4</sup> The latter organisation recruited volunteer 'missionaries' from 'the respectable classes' to guide, admonish, and befriend offenders. Missionaries worked closely with magistrates to develop a non-punitive, community-based alternative to prison. Offenders were released on condition that they kept in touch with the missionary and accepted help and guidance. In 1907 the Probation of Offenders Act gave LPCM missionaries official status as 'officers of the court', popularly known as probation officers. The missionaries' involvement with the courts ended in 1938 when the Home Office assumed control of the Probation Service.

Dorothy also became involved with the work of the South African Church Railway Mission (SACRM); it had been founded in 1885 by Father Philip Graham Simeon who saw the possibilities of establishing travelling 'railway churches'. A small carriage, refurbished as a church, would be attached to the rear of a train on the burgeoning South African and Rhodesian rail networks. This carriage, together with a priest who lived on board, would be detached into a siding at a halt on the line in rural areas of the veldt to serve communities which priests rarely visited, and where traditionally established churches did not exist.<sup>5</sup> In 1892 Douglas Ellison, a younger brother of Dorothy, was appointed as head of the mission which by 1911 had expanded to reach along 4,000 miles of track.<sup>6</sup>

By 1899 a London Committee of SACRM had been established at Church House in Westminster, to publicise its works and raise money to fund them. It was with the London Committee that Dorothy

Ellison volunteered her personal and professional energies and skills.

In the late 1920s she was asked by the London Committee to tell the story of the mission. The result was her book, *God's Highwaymen: the story of the South African Church Railway Mission*, a beautifully written evocation of the joys and hardships of 'keeping the flag of religion flying in places where otherwise no witness would be borne'.<sup>7</sup> And in 1936 Dorothy also completed an unpublished account of the work of the London Police Courts Mission, the nine-volume typescript of which is held in the archive of St George's Chapel, Windsor.

After a long and purposeful life of service and devotion Dorothy Frances Ellison died in 1950 at the age of 90.

## Notes

1. The ten surviving editions of *The Carrier Pigeon* are: No. 1, September 1879, (18 pp); No.2, October 1879, (24 pp); No.3, November 1879 (38 pp.); No.4, December 1879 (44 pp.); No.8, April 1880 (18 pp.); No. 11, July 1880 (36 pp.); No.12, August 1880 (32 pp); No.14, November 1880 (56 pp); No.16, December 1880 (48 pp.); No. 38, January 1883 (18 pp.). None of these editions have page numbers.

2. Frederick Sherlock, "*Henry John Ellison – Founder of the Church of England Temperance Society.*" (London, 1911) pp 36-41.

3. *Ibid.*, p 27.

4. *Ibid.*, p.35.

5. Dorothy Frances Ellison, *God's Highwaymen: the story of the South African Church Railway Mission* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.1930), pp 13-23.

6. *Ibid.*, p 16.

7. *Ibid.*, p.93.