



WORCESTERSHIRE
WORLD WAR 100

Woodbine Willie Trail

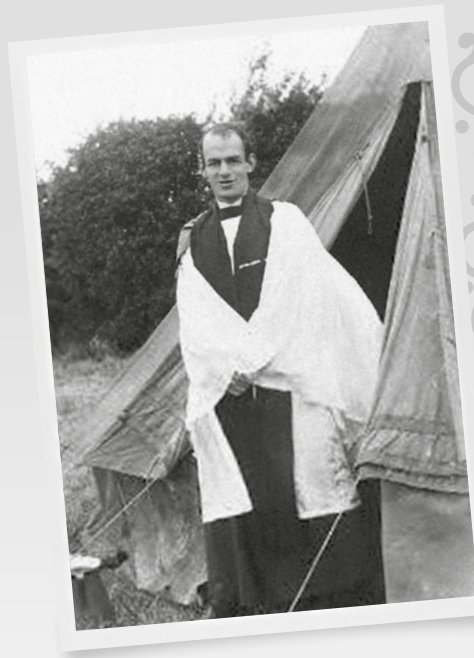


Goffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy was better known by his affectionate war-time nickname: 'Woodbine Willie', which captures his ability to connect with British soldiers as they faced the battlefield.

'Woodbine Willie' was moved by a profound empathy for the suffering of the human spirit, for those living in the impoverished streets of Leeds during his childhood, the Worcester people of his parish St. Paul's, and the deprivation of the 1930s Depression.

But it is the role he played in the battlefields of France for which he is mostly known, tending to the suffering of men at the front and bringing his unique personal qualities to empathise with them.

Woodbine Willie was born Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy in Leeds on 27 June 1883, the son of an Irish priest of the Church of England, who was the father of a large family and vicar of the impoverished parish of St. Mary's.



Studdert Kennedy was educated locally and in 1904 graduated from Trinity College Dublin in classics and divinity. He started his degree by distance as a 14 year old grammar school boy.

Following graduation, he taught for two years at a grammar school in West Kirby, Yorkshire before following his calling when he attended Ripon Clergy College.

In 1908, he was ordained in Worcester Cathedral and appointed a curate at Rugby Parish Church. This rapidly expanding industrial town was making the most of the railway network and had a high proportion of working class people. Geoffrey was ideally suited to leading a mission in the poorest reaches of the town. Under the encouragement of the rector Dr Albert Baillie he instigated Sunday activities for children, a mission service for adults and services at Holy Trinity Church. His approach drew mixed responses, in the public houses he captivated the drinkers with his singing, but in Holy Trinity his criticism of materialism drew criticism from the middle-class congregation.





In 1912 Geoffrey returned to Leeds to act as curate to his now elderly father. As a schoolboy he was a keen sportsman, and whilst there he joined a tennis club.

Through the tennis club he met the sister of John Catlow, Emily. They developed a relationship over the summer with Geoffrey's persistence and they married 25 April 1914. Three months before the wedding his father died.

The esteem with which the parishioners held him led to the bishop being petitioned to appoint Geoffrey to his father's living, but the church authorities thought his talents could be used to better effect elsewhere.

He was offered a number of parishes. He chose St. Paul's in Worcester, having asked his wife to look over the house to see if she could make it work, he concluded that because 'it has the smallest income and the poorest people' he felt that this was where he could do his most useful work. He began his ministry in Worcester on 9 June 1914. Two months later, Britain was at war with Germany.

Studdert Kennedy served his parish for eighteen months, during which time he started boys' and girls' clubs, organized the collection of boots for poor children, and taught boxing.

By late 1915 his request to enlist as a chaplain had been approved by the Bishop of Worcester and on 21 December he was appointed a chaplain to the British Army. Whilst serving his congregation at St. Paul's he was also preaching to the recruits from Norton Barracks at Worcester Cathedral.

His charismatic preaching to a reluctant congregation proved to be good training for his work at the front and when he arrived in France just before Christmas, he was soon sent to Rouen. On Christmas day he held a service in the pouring rain for 400 men.

Rouen was a staging post where men bound for the frontline savoured a few moments before fighting. He set up a mission in a canteen, leading the men in singing sentimental songs, preaching and writing letters home for them. When the troops left for the front, he would walk along the platform, offering cigarettes and Bibles, which earned him the nickname of Woodbine Willie. Woodbines were a brand of inexpensive cigarettes.

His next postings were to an infantry camp and to the front, where he mixed freely with the troops, sharing their lives and dangers, tending their wounds and earning a Military Cross at the battle of Messines Ridge in 1917 'for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty' in bringing wounded men to safety. He also spent time as part of an entertainment troupe touring the battlefields.

He was ill several times during the war, his asthma aggravated by trench fever. He was sent to the south of France to recuperate, and was also sent to a military hospital in Birmingham. When home in Worcester on sick leave, he would preach at St. Paul's or the Cathedral.

Geoffrey came home from the war in March 1919. He resumed his duties at St. Paul's, but he always wanted to do more than look after the spiritual health of his parishioners. He was disappointed that the war did not change society much. His parish was still poor, because women had lost wage-earning husbands and sons, and many returned soldiers were injured and unable to work. Unemployment rose as more soldiers returned home and demand for British goods decreased. Geoffrey advocated for the rights of the working classes. He said 'If finding God in our churches leads to us losing Him in our factories, then better we tear down those churches for God must hate the sight of them'.

The Church of England was losing members and Geoffrey became involved in the Life and Liberty Movement established by ministers who wanted church reforms. He became well-known as a speaker and was appointed as a Royal Chaplain to King George V. The Industrial Christian Fellowship (ICF) asked him to become their main speaker, and he left St. Paul's in September 1921. His ICF income was not large, so he was appointed to St. Edmund the Martyr in London. This was intended to give him an income without making too much demand on his time, thus freeing him to work for the ICF.

Travelling became almost constant. He spoke at meetings all over Britain, and visited the USA and Canada in 1923 and 1924, advocating peace and better conditions for working people. There were many invitations from countries around the world but he declined them in order to concentrate on working in Britain and maintaining some family life. He moved his family to a house in Bromyard Road, but was able to spend only two days a week in Worcester.

In 1918 collections of his poetry and prose written during the war were published to great acclaim. During the post-war years he wrote a number of books, especially concerned with sexual relationships, marriage and divorce in Church of England teachings, unconventional topics for the time. These too were very successful, but the strain of overwork took its toll. In March 1929, he went to Liverpool to deliver a series of Lenten talks. Already ill with flu when he left home, he quickly developed pneumonia and died on 8 March.

Thousands of people lined up to pay their respects both in Liverpool, where his body lay before being returned to Worcester, and in Worcester Cathedral, where it lay for the two days prior to the funeral. On 12 March, after a service in the Cathedral, thousands more formed a long procession following the coffin through silent streets to St. John's Cemetery.

On the same day there were memorial services held in St. Martin-in-the-Fields, St. Anne's in Manchester, in Liverpool and in Risca in south Wales, where he was held in great esteem by the local miners. Tributes poured in from across the country, ranging from the King and Queen to humble poor people and the unemployed. There were obituaries in all the leading newspapers and a memorial fund was started to support his family.

He is remembered on a plaque in Worcester Cathedral, which reads in part 'A poet: a prophet: a passionate seeker after truth: ardent advocate of Christian fellowship'. There is no mention of his famous nickname, which seems a pity, as it is likely that many people will be aware of Woodbine Willie without knowing his real name.



The Woodbine Willie Trail



1 THE GUILDHALL

After the First World War, Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy led a march of 800 jobless men from Worcester Racecourse which finished here. Upstairs in the Assembly Rooms is his portrait while one of a series of statuettes can be found in a cabinet in the Lower Hall.

When you come out of the Guildhall, turn right and then first right down Copenhagen Street, cross Deansway at the lights and walk left, up towards the Cathedral. On your right is...

2 THE OLD PALACE

Studdert Kennedy's great friend, Dr William Moore Ede, Dean of the Cathedral, lived at the Old Bishop's Palace which was at that time the Deanery. Along with the Cathedral, this is the oldest building in the City and its café and some rooms are open to the public. Moore Ede's family were surgeons, living in College Yard.

Back onto Deansway follow the road round into College Yard and you will see the Cathedral North Door.

3 WORCESTER CATHEDRAL

Studdert Kennedy was ordained here in 1908 as Rugby was then part of the Worcester Diocese. From June 1914 to December 1915, at Church Parade, he gave regular sermons here to troops (2000+ men at a time) preparing for the Front. His funeral was held here on 12 March 1929; 100 unemployed men marched from the Labour Exchange in Pierpoint Street to the Cathedral to pay their respects. There is a memorial plaque to him in the St. George's Chapel and he features in the stained glass Millennium Window in the Cloisters.

Turn right from the Cathedral and walk down College Street into Sidbury, crossing over the road at some point in order to join the canal towpath immediately before the entrance to the Commandery. Along the tow path, on the other bank is the Fownes Hotel, a former glove factory where Studdert Kennedy held open air services. Exit at the first lock gates and you will see...



Lock Street

4 LOCK STREET

The houses here are now mostly demolished but Andrews' Fruit Shop was situated on the corner of Lock Street and Park Street. Studdert Kennedy would give local children 6d to buy tiger nuts and pomegranates from there. Many of the local shops collected donations for Woodbine cigarettes which Studdert Kennedy would take back to the front.

Turn left into Lock Street and follow the lane around the back of the houses and right into...

5 LITTLE PARK STREET

Mrs Hope's fruiterer's shop was at No.17 where Studdert Kennedy would purchase 2/6d worth of groceries for the needy of his parish. Vesta Tilley, Worcester's international music hall star was born in Beaver Row, just around the corner, in 1864.

At the end of the street turn right again and come past the blue former cinema, over the canal bridge and into Foundry Street. On the right was Hardy and Padmore's works.

Little Park Street



Guildhall: Portrait



6 BLOCKHOUSE CLOSE

A reminder of the name of the slum district around St. Paul's, made up of cheap housing, often 12 houses sharing one toilet and one wash house, which made up Studdert Kennedy's parish. He would also hold outside services and preach in the streets around here.

On the left, down Charles Street, is the site of Williamson's which eventually became the Metal Box Company. A little further along, into St. Paul's Street is...

7 ST. PAUL'S CHURCH

Studdert Kennedy was instituted Vicar here on 9 June 1914 to a population of about 4000. He enlisted as an Army Chaplain on 21 December 1915, but returned to St. Paul's on his leaves and after the war. The War Memorial, now restored, was designed by him, causing controversy as Christ's head is held in triumph. The blue plaque on the outside west wall was unveiled in 2014 and there is a stained glass window inside the church. The St. Paul's School of his time was situated next to the church and was demolished in 1964.

8 THE STUDDERT KENNEDY MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCE CENTRE

A slight detour past the north side of the church towards the City Walls Road takes you to the Studdert Kennedy Mental Health Resource Centre, named after the priest shortly before it opened in 1976. The current new building retains the name.

Retrace your steps along the side of the church and turn left where once stood...

9 ST. PAUL'S VICARAGE

Further up St. Paul's Street, where Studdert Kennedy and his family lived from 1914 to 1921, has, with a second primary school, been demolished. Vicarage Court now stands on the site of these.

At the roundabout turn left, cross and then cross the City Walls Road into...



Map showing site of St. Paul's Church Vicarage

10 THE CORNMARKE

A newly designed statue of Studdert Kennedy can be found in the centre of the Cornmarket, alongside one of Vesta Tilley.

Leave the Cornmarket at the north end and follow Sansome Place, under the railway bridge into Sansome Walk and turn left into...

11 PIERPOINT STREET - THE LABOUR EXCHANGE

Now called International House, the former Library and then School of Art at No.13 was the City Labour Exchange up until the late 1930's and it is from here that a group of unemployed marched to Woodbine Willie's funeral in 1929.

At the end of this street, turn right and walk along Foregate Street and turning left to go downhill towards Pitchcroft Racecourse.



Cornmarket: Studdert Kennedy Statue

12 THE ROYAL INFIRMARY

Now Worcester University City Campus and Infirmary Museum, after his resignation as Vicar of St. Paul's in 1921, Studdert Kennedy preached at the hospital many times.

To continue, you now have a mile walk along Croft Road and North Parade, across the river, along New Road and into St. John's. At the junction by the church, turn left, keeping on the left hand side of the road to...

13 67 ST. JOHN'S, STOKES' BARBERS

Studdert Kennedy would cycle over to have his hair cut here. Sometimes he would walk back, having absentmindedly forgotten his bike!

Returning to the church, turn left into Bromyard Road and take the right hand side until you get to...

PLEASE NOTE - 46 Bromyard Road is still a private residence so please do not enter the premises.

14 46 BROMYARD ROAD

The Studdert Kennedy family lived here after he resigned from St. Paul's in 1921 until after his death in 1929 when his widow moved to College Yard.

Round the corner and follow Comer Road, taking the second left into MacIntyre Road where, at the end, you will find...

15 ST. JOHN'S CEMETERY

Head for the centre of the cemetery and you will see the memorial to your right where Studdert Kennedy is buried. Ex-servicemen threw packets of Woodbines onto the coffin as a mark of respect for his work during WW1. Every year, at 3pm on Remembrance Sunday, the Mayor of Worcester lays a wreath in his memory.



Painted by David Birtwistle

SOURCES

Grundy, Michael

A fiery glow in the darkness

(Worcester: Osborne Books Limited, 1997)

Holman, Bob

Woodbine Willie:

an unsung hero of World War One

(Oxford: Lion Books, 2013)

Mozley, J K ed.

G A Studdert Kennedy by his friends

(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1929)

Purcell, William

Woodbine Willie

(London: Mowbray, 1962)

Brant, J

Running into No-Man's Land:

the wisdom of Woodbine Willie

(CWR 2014)

Studdert Kennedy, G A

Democracy and the dog collar

(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1921)

Rough rhymes of a padre

(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1918)

Rough talks by a padre

(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1918)

The unutterable beauty

(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927)

The best of G A Studdert Kennedy

(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1947)



About Worcestershire World War One Hundred

Cultural and heritage organisations from across Worcestershire have come together to commemorate the 100th anniversary of World War One with an outstanding 4 year programme of events and activities under the banner Worcestershire World War One Hundred. The programme, which received the largest Heritage Lottery Fund Grant outside of London for a project commemorating the First World War, will commemorate the role Worcestershire played in World War One and tell the stories of Worcestershire people, their involvement with and personal legacy from the War.

Worcestershire World War One Hundred

www1worcestershire.co.uk/
www1worcestershire.co.uk/enquiry/

Worcestershire Archives and
Archaeology Service,
The Hive, Sawmill Walk,
The Butts, Worcester. WR1 3PD
Tel: 01905 845790

