THE RT REVD FRANK COCKS (1913 – 1998)

**(An obituary from The Guardian)**

ONE OF the criticisms levelled at bishops today is that they lack colour. Such a charge could never be laid at the door of Frank Cocks, Bishop of Shrewsbury from 1970 to 1980, a man who loved life and revelled in its variety and surprises.

Born on 5 November 1913 (he records that he "narrowly escaped being called Guy or, even worse, Basilai, which had been the Christian name given to both my grandfather and great-grandfather"), he moved to Felixstowe in 1921 when his father was appointed to the living of St John the Baptist.

It was an incumbency that was to last 41 years, and the large seven-bedroomed vicarage, lit by gas and mostly unheated, became home to the family of three with two living-in staff. Already the young Cocks was a voracious reader, well into the works of G.A. Henty, Percy Westerman and Conan Doyle, and here he made his first acquaintance with the theatre (through concert parties appearing at the Spa Pavilion), the Royal Air Force, cricket and tennis, all of which were to play such a significant part in his life.

He was educated at Haileybury (of which he later became a member of Council and Chairman of Trustees) and St Catharine's College, Cambridge, where he read History. His theological college years were spent at Westcott House, Mervyn Stockwood and George Reindorp being among his fellow students. Here he distinguished himself not by application to his studies, but by becoming a rugby Blue.

On Trinity Sunday 1937 Frank Cocks was ordained in Winchester Cathedral to serve in the parish of Highfield, Southampton, the Vicar being Stretton Reeve, who later became Bishop of Lichfield. It was the example of a dedicated pastoral ministry as portrayed first by his father and then by Stretton Reeve which had a profound effect on Cocks's ministry, as did the Principal of Westcott B.K. Cunningham's frequent quoting of the words of the theologian Von Hugel: "Christianity taught me to care. Caring is the great thing. Caring matters most."

It was early on in his service in the Royal Air Force that Cocks first hit the headlines: "Padre to Wed Dance Girl", screamed the Daily Mirror. The evening at the cabaret which ended in a proposal of marriage to one of the dancers left his parents and friends flabbergasted. But, despite the attempts by his father, Stretton Reeve and others to get him to change his mind, the wedding to Barbara Thompson took place in 1940, and for almost 50 years they were happily wed, bringing up their children, Michael and Tina, and coping with the extraordinary demands of a ministry that was to include postings to RAF Leuchars, to India Command at the time of the granting of independence, to Dowdeswell Court where he served as Commandant of the Chaplains' School, to Bomber Command, at which time, to his delight, he became the Chairman of the RAF Cricket Association responsible for sides including Fred Trueman, Jim Parks, Fred Titmus and Tony Lewis, to Singapore and the Far East.

On 19 March 1959 his appointment as Chaplain-in-Chief of the Royal Air Force was gazetted, followed by his being made a Companion of the Order of the Bath. The six years as Chaplain-in-Chief engaged his organisational skills, in shaping the Chaplain's Department to meet the demands of a much-reduced and completely professional service and dealing with various aspects of the life of St Clement Danes, as well as his pastoral gifts, in visiting RAF units at home and abroad. They were necessarily high-profile years, with many demands for sermons on state occasions, demands which were to continue throughout his retirement.

Following his 26 years in the RAF, Cocks's appointment to a living in the diocese of Lichfield again brought him into the headlines. As Rector from 1965 of St Peter's, Wolverhampton, a large town-centre civic church with links into all aspects of community life and a big commitment to education, his Member of Parliament was Enoch Powell, who regularly worshipped at St Peter's. In 1968 Powell made his famous "Rivers of Blood" speech and, as Chairman of the local Council of Churches, Cocks wrote a carefully worded letter to The Times distancing the churches from the views expressed. The result was a deluge of correspondence and constant demands to comment on any subsequent utterances made by Powell.

It was while Cocks was attending the weekly lunch of his Rotary Club in Wolverhampton that the announcement of his appointment to the bishopric of Shrewsbury was made. His consecration, together with that of Robert Runcie, took place at Westminster Abbey on St Matthias Day 1970, at a service largely remembered by those present for the fact that Harry Williams preached a sermon lasting three-quarters of an hour. In Shrewsbury the new bishop and his wife soon became known for their warmth and hospitality and quickly established themselves in the life of the Church and the Community, whether visiting Shropshire villages, discussing with churchwardens the future of their parishes, or engaging in the planning of Telford new town, he brought to his episcopal task a wealth of experience and very considerable gifts.

The chairmanship of Shropshire Community Council, the presidency of the prestigious Shrewsbury Flower Show, the appointment as Archbishops' Adviser to the Headmasters' Conference, the membership of many diocesan councils and committees all demanded a great deal, and all received a generous response. Moreover he was an invaluable member of the diocesan staff, as ever a good team player.

His retirement years were happy years with time for his beloved Barbara, his children and grandchildren, his golf (he became captain of his club in 1985) and sport, his home and his books, his after-dinner speaking and meals with friends, as well as responding to calls for help from the local bishop and surrounding parishes.

Back in his father's retirement house, he and Barbara became part of St John's again for nine years before her death in 1989. Throughout his last illness he was able to read, to keep an eye on the Test match score, and to enjoy remembering. There was a lot to remember.

John Waine

Francis William Cocks, priest: born London 5 November 1913; ordained deacon 1937, priest 1937; CB 1959; Chaplain-in-Chief and Archdeacon, Royal Air Force 1959-65; Rector and Rural Dean of Wolverhampton 1965-70; Bishop Suffragan of Shrewsbury 1970-80; Honorary Chaplain to HM the Queen 1959- 65; married 1940 Barbara Thompson (died 1989; one son, one daughter); died Felixstowe, Suffolk 19 August 1998