The Story of Reverend Densham

Within the old Rectory big red crosses are painted upon most of the upstairs doors. Upon each cross is written, in capital letters, a Biblical name, such as Pizgah, Emmaus and Cyprus. Bolts are fixed on the outside of the doors while some of the windows bear as many as five catches. The crosses and their names are cracked and darkened, but vivid still; and the rows of catches are there also.

Densham, himself, created the strange scene.

At the time of his appointment, the patron of the living was not known locally, and so the new incumbent was an utter stranger, unknown to the Parish Church Council. Very necessary was it for him to win, if not the hearts, at least the acceptance of his flock; and while he was doing so his past would offer, no doubt, fertile soil for speculation and rumour. Such interest is understandable enough in so remote a parish as Warleggan. Here, if you glance at the Church register or the headstones in the graveyard, you see the same names recurring again and again out of the years and you realise the rarity of a stranger, what a delight to local tongues he would be.

The verdict on Densham was that obviously he had never worked in a rural parish before. Several incautious actions showed this. For example, he very soon bought a litter of puppies, with no thought evidently, agreed his parishioners, of the havoc a pack of dogs can cause in a farming community, particularly one where the economy centred on sheep.

If you explore Warleggan Rectory, wander through its thirteen rooms, up and downstairs, you realise its size. The grounds too are extensive. Great rhododendrons, tossing pink and purple in the summer, flank the drive, while around are tall beeches, gay also on a bright day when their colony of rooks is busy and talkative about domestic affairs. But in winter the scene is different indeed. Then those beeches look rather like a huge elbow crooked protectively around the Rectory and sheltering it from the wind, rushing cold and rain-laden from the moors; the midday sky might be dark … and at such times you can only wonder how a man, knowing nobody in the parish, would feel alone in the many rooms of that house. Not one neighbourly light, even, was visible from its windows. Densham's purchase of the dogs is understandable. It illustrates also that impulsiveness which alienated people from the start.

As a clergyman he would already have moved several times in his life and taken leadership of people he scarcely knew. A parish of Cornish farmers, however, needed a specially cautious approach. Such dour men, caring nothing about their impression on Densham, took for granted that *they* did the accepting. But he was not at all tentative towards them. At his first Parochial Church Council meeting he made several proposals 'carried *nem. con.*, there being no response.' So from the beginning Warleggan was granite towards him. They resented his overriding of their opinions and some Council members ceased attending meetings. For this, Densham removed their names from the Parish Church electoral roll.

However, the bond between priest and flock remained in place – until two crucial events took place.

First the pups had grown. They were the Rector's companions in the lonely house, and he had affectionately honoured the largest by bestowing on him the name of Gandhi, his hero. What a shock when one day news came that his dogs were running across the moor slaughtering sheep, peaceful Gandhi their leader.

Whatever happened on that occasion, the dogs did cause damage at times and Mr Densham paid heavily, in money and congregation. Several farmers ceased to attend services – and several farmers meant quite a falling off in so small a community. Others demanded that the dogs be put down. Densham's servants now urged that the Rectory grounds, all three and a half acres, should be totally fenced, to keep in the dogs. The Rector agreed, and the vast project began. Months went by, till at last over six hundred yards of barbed wire more than eight feet high surrounded the property, making it look like a prison camp from within, and from the outside a house prepared for siege.

The few people continuing to attend Densham's services remained unresponsive. This led to the second crucial incident. He hit upon an extraordinary device to lift the spirits of his congregation; he painted the Church red, yellow and blue, such deep hues as were used in medieval church decoration. In that strange innocence so typical of him, he did the work in secret, preferring not to consult the Church Council. He wanted to spring a surprise on his people.

We can imagine him there at the porch that first Sunday after his labours, words of welcome ready on his tongue, while he glanced back several times no doubt to the predominantly red glow of the interior – then proudly leading his congregation. They were dumb-struck, probably standing stock still long enough for the consternation and horror on their faces to sink well into Densham's mind. Then murmuring began. It grew to a muttering till some self-appointed spokesman told Densham he had desecrated the House of The Lord, and walked out, followed by the others.

Things came to a head in 1933 when the parishioners of Warleggan petitioned the Bishop, Dr Walter Frere, to remove Densham. Studying their complaints, the Bishop elected to meet congregation and priest together, in their parish Church, a course of action hitherto unknown in Cornwall.

One evening then, Warleggan Church filled – for the last time in Densham's life – and now the congregation was a court. Light was requested. Densham complying, soon returned, bearing one candle. A solitary candle for so huge a gathering? To some such oddity illuminated, if little else, his impractical unworldly ways; to others, simply his witlessness.

The complaints against Densham took five different shapes. First, his critics complained, he had closed the Sunday School. Secondly, he had refused to hold services at convenient times. Thirdly, he had converted Church property to his own use. Fourthly, he had threatened to sell the Church organ, a 1914-18 war memorial. And fifthly he had erected a barbed wire fence inside the grounds of the Rectory.

Densham, however, told the Bishop that he was under no obligation to open the Sunday School, and that the reason for building the barricade around the Rectory grounds was to stop his dogs from worrying the farmers' sheep. Then came a sensation when the secretary of the Church Council alleged that the Rector had

written to him threatening to kill him when he, the secretary, had prevented him from tearing up the Church. The Rector, however, told the enquiry that the secretary was mistaken – and the incident closed with the two men shaking hands.

The vituperation of Densham's accusers surprised the Bishop, but he determined on reconciliation, averring that the Rector had faithfully and constantly fulfilled his duties of office. He had never omitted to say services every Sunday. Therefore by ecclesiastical law he could not be removed. Emphasising Densham's loyalty to office, Dr Frere enjoined all to a fresh start.

And in a way that occasion did herald a fresh start, a new turning in the sad tale of the Reverend F.W. Densham. For that night the parishioners left Warleggan Church never to return, while for Densham began more or less two decades of silence ending in death.

What lay at the heart of parochial resentment as expressed that night was the Rector's authoritarian manner. For innocent though he was in day to day dealings, as a cleric he was authoritarian and this angered them. For centuries almost every acre of Warleggan, apart from glebe, had been owned by three squires. They and the Church had ruled the parish. In the thirties, however, the great estates were broken up by death duties; tenants bought their land, and for the first time were free to choose whom they did or did not respect. Church attendance ceased to be obligatory. Congregations began to diminish all over Cornwall. It was only in Warleggan where transition to a new order became a conflict; and a recalcitrant old-fashioned clergyman was broken by social change.

After the Bishop's visit that high fence around the Rectory suddenly changed in significance. It had been erected to keep in his dogs; now its purpose was to keep out people. The barbed wire at the gate was raised to twelve feet and then the unprofitable workmen were dismissed. Bitterness grew in his heart. Rejected, he rejected. Now any workmen or caller arriving had to bang a petrol drum at the gate. Dogs would then charge down the drive followed slowly by the Rector calling upon the visitor to shout out his name and his business. Only then would he approach and unlock the gate. If the arrival was a workman hired to do a particular job, Densham would keep an eye on him all the time to see nothing was stolen. Sometimes when wages were paid, a workman would be told to look out of the window while the money was being counted.

Densham became more and more, in the true sense of the word, eccentric. His life revolved not around the parish community but around his own increasingly bizarre world at the Rectory. However, for all his oddities, Densham had his supporters. One clergyman not far away recalls the Rector as 'no clown. I remember him coming to visit us; a thick, solid man … cheerful and bright … a bit odd perhaps, but then a lot of the Cornish clergy, in those days, *were* odd. They said if you stayed in Cornwall long enough, you went that way! There was something childlike about him. Yet, at the same time, he was a very sincere man. There was a spirituality about him that I don't think the Cornish people saw or understood.'

Of his quarrel with the Warleggan people, Densham once said, 'Before I came there was a daily Mass. I cut it out because it was illegal … and the Mass people stayed away. Then I refused to allow dancing or whist drives and the amusement lovers left.'

Gradually Densham became a near hermit. He avoided his parishioners, but welcomed visitors, provided they wrote and made an appointment. Once a fortnight a Bodmin grocery roundsman delivered a supply of oats, cheese, butter and margarine, leaving them in a box, just inside the entrance of the Rectory grounds. Densham relied on a daily diet of just one meal, with porridge as his main course. He never consumed meat or fish or poultry.

One man who remembers the Rector well is Harry Willcock of Cardinham, the son of Herbert Willcock, sometime church warden at Warleggan and a loyal Densham ally. 'My father,' he recalls, 'would hear no bad against the Rector.'

However Harry, himself, reveals a few quirks in the man's makeup. 'He hated being watched. "Get on with your work, " he'd say. He was also a stickler for time. He'd be waiting at the gate at five to eight in the morning, and if you were a few minutes late you'd have to hammer on the petrol drum and shout that you'd arrived. He could be a mistrustful man. If you were putting nails into something, he'd count how many nails you'd used. I used to post his letters, and he'd watch me from the kissing gate … I'd have to put one letter in the box at a time … and he'd count to make sure.'

Densham had a complex about hygiene. For example, he preferred rain water to well water. There could be an explosive side too. Harry Willcock recalls carving his initials on a door. 'The old man played Hell, and threatened I should have to pay for a new door!

'There were certain things he didn't like, and one of them was smoking. When I came home on leave, and he saw me smoking, he asked, "Do they let you do that in the army?" I replied, "Yes, they give us ten minutes in every hour for smoking." Densham was disgusted and walked away.'

It was now wartime. The downstairs windows were protected with sandbags, a look-out post and a fire escape were constructed, a multitude of catches were screwed in a row upon windows, three bolts were fitted on the front door, while on bedroom doors bolts were set not on the inside but on the outside. Densham was shutting himself in. It was apparently the German invasion that he feared, but partly too that of his parishioners. Meanwhile outside the house natural activity furthered his aim. The great rhododendrons spread new growth and linked branches across the drive so no vehicles could enter. The laurels bordering the road grew so high that they blotted out all view of the parish.

The Rectory roof leaked apace. Ceilings cracked and fell. Throughout the house damp and decay took over the echoing rooms. Densham wrote to the District Council complaining that rates of £50 per annum were excessive for a house in such dilapidation. He complained that repairs were so costly that they, with such rates on top, left him scarcely any money for food out of his income of £265 per annum. The reply he received was a suggestion that as rates are based on rentable value he should advertise for tenants to take over some rooms. When, however, applicants saw the Rectory, its lack of electric light, of running water, of any amenity, none stayed.

Perhaps this attempt to find tenants suggested to Densham the idea of getting an organist to live at the Rectory. He was prepared to pay someone to live with him. He wrote to a choir school in the Midlands, stating that he had a vacancy at his church for an organist, who would live at the Rectory and play at Church services. A young man came and one can readily imagine the effect that remote Warleggan, the desolate Rectory within its jungled grounds, and the bedraggled old man had upon him. He stayed one night only. Densham was in the habit of locking bedroom doors at night and it was probably the sound of the bolt being pushed on the outside that most unnerved the organist. That room, in which no one had slept for many years, saw little sleep that night either. It was almost as though the Rector was prepared temporarily to imprison the organist in order to have company. No doubt, the young man was also dumbfounded to realise that no only would he have no choir to train but no congregation to play to. He left hurriedly the next morning.

After the disaster of the organist, Densham made yet another bid for companionship, and at accomplishing his pastoral trust. The Bishop, in that church scene long ago had suggested that he should concentrate his efforts upon the younger generation. If he won them over then their parents might think again about him. So Densham turned his attention to the children. He made prolonged efforts. He used to buy sweets in Bodmin and offer them to the children on his way home, but some mothers had warned their offspring not to accept anything from him. He did far more; part of the Rectory grounds still shows what he did. There, wrecked, but still recognisable, is the paraphernalia of an ambitiously constructed children's playground. You can see, amid leaves and brambles, the big cartwheel pivoted to serve as a merry-go-round, the rotted seat of a swing that hung between two trees, the cemented depression which was to be a boating pool, and the sandpit. A few evacuee children billeted nearby used the playground; no local child came near.

Densham also purchased a lantern slide projector and made blackout boards for the barn windows. Here he planned to give exciting shows. Fantastic Greek legends and stories from the Arabian Nights were to be shown. Some of his slides might be considered nightmarish – such as the portrayal of Polyphemus with his one eye gouged out; but Densham only thought such scenes would be extra thrilling for the youngsters. When the barn was ready, all apparatus set up, Densham announced the date of his first show. The time came. He waited expectantly in the dark – and once again his plans collapsed. No one came. What mother would allow her child to go into a dark room with the notorious Rector? His lantern slides still exist, in good condition. They include many that deal with 'health and hygiene in India'. Had he shown these to the children it is possible that in giving a commentary he would have unlocked the mystery of his past, describing perhaps a missionary life in India.

Evacuees were being billeted on sometimes unwilling households in the country. Densham informed the authorities responsible that he could accommodate many persons at his Rectory. He built cupboards and shelves, erected bunk beds and bought quantities of potatoes, which he stored carefully under mounds of earth. He purchased a large chip fryer.

The authorities visited his premises and were shown all that he had done. He mentioned too his magic lantern apparatus. A few days later he received a letter explaining that, as no woman was available to look after the children, the Rectory could not be considered.

After this, Densham accepted that there would be no one to whom he might minister. Yet he provided himself with companions of a sort: those members of the Church who were not now living on the earth. He made out cards bearing the names of past Rectors of Warleggan, propped these cards around the church pews and preached to them. These past Rectors became his closest and most real companions, sharing his suffering, for they in their time would have known, if not as greatly as he did, the coldness and rebuffs of their flock in this moorland parish, where, in a thousand years of Christian witness, fewer than half a dozen people had chosen to build their houses near the Church. They were surprised at times, no doubt, by a voice from a box, for Densham not only broadcast sermons to them but occasionally relayed the Brains Trust too. 'I am not sure that I do not prefer my congregation of ghosts,' he once confessed. 'They cannot object to any innovations I might make.'

After his congregationless services, the Rector made the habit of locking up the Church and joining the Methodists in their nearby Chapel where he exhorted them to abstain 'from the Hellward follies of the world,' which included such activities as reading a novel or going to the cinema or having a drink in a pub.

He was also occupied with another enterprise, that of transforming the Rectory into the Bible lands. You travelled from Cyprus or Alexandria across the landing to Pizgah where Moses first saw the Promised Land. Thence to Bethany, where Christ raised Lazarus from the tomb and to Emmaus where He Himself appeared after rising from the dead. Densham lived in his territory of spirits and sanctified the rooms by painting names and crosses on the doors. Small wonder that subsequent inhabitants should report that the house was haunted.

Down the years Densham chronicled his lonely services in the Church register. Under *Attendance* we see written 'No congregation at any services' over and over again right through the year even at Christmas. Occasionally he wrote 'Rectors cards put out'. Under *Remarks* he invariably included comments on the usually inclement weather. He wrote: 'Severe gale with hail. Very cold' and 'No rain, no wind, no sun, no congregation. Both stoves burned excellently.'

In his last years one good parishioner did help him, lighting his stove and tending the garden. In the Church, the lettering in the register progressively charts the weakening hand. The records of his final annual parish Church meeting are similar to many previous ones:

> 3.15 p.m. Annual Parochial Church Meeting. Only the Rector attended; no quorum, waited until 3.40 p.m. No outstanding liabilities.
>
Holy Communion collection	NIL
Per Boxes	1 0
For Church Account	11 3
Special Collections	NIL
Total in respect of year	£ 12 2

On Christmas Day in 1952 no one attended the Church, as on the all the Sundays of the year. The sermon was 'God is Love'.

In the New Year, however, he had an unexpected audience. A reporter and a photographer from *Life*, the American Weekly Journal and a reporter from *The Western Morning News* attended the service. Did he sense how the public who had shunned him were now to turn their curious gaze upon him? The sermon, 'On level headedness' is almost a cautionary warning to journalists not to distort the facts of his life.

Strangely, on the same day came another visitor too late for the service. Densham records cryptically: 'At 3.10 came Tom Webster, British Railways.'

The following Sunday Warleggan Church held a large congregation and a good collection was taken – by a new Rector. Densham had died that week.

He had known how near death was. He placed on a table groups of apples with labels beside them, to be distributed to the sick of the parish. Then, this last act of charity accomplished, he went upstairs to die in bed. But he could not get there; three steps from the landing he collapsed, dead.

His body lay there for two days.

Now above the rhododendrons one chimney could be seen from the village. And from it in Densham's day smoke was ever wont to rise. When the villagers realised the fire was out they gonged the petrol drum at the gate, but there was no response. Now it would be an intrepid local indeed who would break through the fence, even when such ominous silence reigned. So the police were called and the defences were breached.

Some time before his death he had given instructions that his ashes should be scattered in the 'Garden of Remembrance'. This was his name for the plot of land ringed with laurels. His wishes were brushed aside. After his funeral attended by only one man – his solicitor – his body was cremated and the ashes scattered not in the land he had prepared but in another Garden of Remembrance, the official one in Plymouth.

One wish, however, was readily granted: that no memorial should mark his resting place.

Warleggan Church was thoroughly whitewashed, and the Rectory sold. There has never been another resident Rector of Warleggan. Shortly after his death, his possessions were auctioned, an event which drew a huge crowd of the curious to the Rectory. But no personal mementoes to give a clue to his life were under the hammer. A brother had arrived beforehand and Densham's papers, including several hundred files had been burnt. In the pigeon holes covering every wall of his study the Rector had kept a vast collection of items, storing information and thoughts there, parochial, theological and philosophical.

A page of jokes and some lecture notes, taken or given at Oxford in the last century were blowing around the cellar when we took over the house. A more baffling clue to the still mysterious Rector can scarcely be imagined.

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