

Rev Preb Austen Williams CVO - An Appreciation

Austen Williams died on Sunday 9th December 2001. He was a giant of a man who drew enormous strength from his belief in Christ. From 1956 to his retirement in 1984 he was the Vicar of St Martin's-in-the-Fields. Everyone currently living or working in Covent Garden has much to thank Austen, especially for his loyalty to the area and his

“Austen was made for the Covent Garden battles. Without his wisdom and guidance the CGCA's effectiveness would have been much reduced”

dedication to help the poorest and oppressed, to quote one of the many obituaries:

“Austen's main concern was to fly Christ's flag as he understood it and from his observation from the variety of life in the passion around him.... he had a deep suspicion of institutional life and he had a mischievous delight in crisis and untidiness - and much of this led him into trouble!”

A ministry would consume any incumbent at St Martin's especially someone with Austen's drive and desire for life. Austen became world renowned thanks to his frequent broadcasts on the World Service. He was inundated with demands and requests from all over the globe to lend his name and that of St Martin's to some campaign or another. He recited gleefully that once when he visited Nigeria a boy of eight ran ahead to tell his mother that St Martin had arrived!

During his ministry at St Martin's its Social Service Unit dramatically expanded, so much so that in the 60's its Youth and Homeless Programme undertook more work than the whole of Westminster City Council Social Services Department. He helped establish War on Want, set up the Chinese Community Centre at St Martin's, organised the first Interfaith service which earned Austen a motion of anathema (close to excommunication) by the then Bishop of London.

But those who lived and worked in Covent Garden in the

1970's and early 80's were largely oblivious of the extent of Austen's other commitment and responsibilities. He was our champion and leader in the struggles to protect the 100 acres that make up the Covent Garden neighbourhood. He always led from the front in the battles to preserve some humanity in the mad rush by property developers to exploit the area as a consequence of the madcap redevelopment plans.

When a few of us were plotting to start a protest movement to thwart the redevelopment proposals, it was not surprising that we turned to Austen. As a very scruffy, young and arrogant student, I visited Austen in the vestry in St Martin's Place in March 1971. He remembered me taking him to task: “You really should take an active interest in the GLC development proposals that would raze much of your parish to the ground”. With his characteristic raised eyebrow look he took the bait and stuck with the struggles until he retired in 1984!

He came to the protest meeting, arranged on April Fools Day at Lord Soper's Kingsway Hall and was amazed by the huge attendance and remarkable mix of class and ages. He later said he could not refuse to get involved having heard the brilliant oratory of John Toomey, the depth of feeling from Sam Driscoll and other 'born and bred' locals. Austen was immediately accepted as the area's leader, and became the first Chairman of the Covent Garden Community Association, not as 'The Vicar', but as Austen, cutting across all religious, class and age divides. Last autumn he chided me that it was a bit thick that I accused him about the parish, as St Martin's' only incorporates a very small part of the 100 acres that makes up Covent Garden.

It is worth recounting what was at stake and what Austen actually did. Over 3/4 of the 100 acres that makes up the Covent Garden neighbourhood bordered by Kingsway and Charing Cross Road to the east and west, and High Holborn and the Strand to the north and south respectively, was destined to be demolished. All the local politicians had agreed to the proposals, representing Westminster (Conservative) Camden (Labour) and the GLC (both Labour and Conservative). Central Government welcomed the comprehensive redevelopment as did the specialist press, and the construction industry. The forthcoming public enquiry was to be a mere formality and indeed redevelopment had already commenced in anticipation of the formal adoption of the