

*Ebenezer F. Robbins:
Kew's Centenarian Ironmonger,
& Secretary of Duke Street Church*

F. NIGEL HEPPER

One hot summer evening in August 1975 I sat with Ebenezer Robbins in the garden at his home in Raeburn Avenue, Surbiton, where he lived in retirement after being a respected shopkeeper at Kew for all of his working life. I tape-recorded our conversation as a souvenir of his memories of Kew and Richmond during the early and mid-twentieth century. He was then aged 93. This article is based on that recording with my own modifications of dates and additional comments.

Ebenezer Robbins lived to the great age of 101, passing away in August 1982. He liked his name 'Ebenezer' because it means 'hitherto hath the Lord helped me' which was symbolic of his whole life. However, to others 'Ebenezer' was a problem. His relatives reduced it to 'Eb' or 'Uncle Eb', while friends called him 'Robbie' - or more usually 'Mr Robbins' in a period of greater formality.

He was born on 9 November 1880 at 50 Seymour Place, Bryanston Square. The family removed to 22 Boscastle Gardens which was demolished to make way for Marylebone Station, so they went to 3 Mowbray Road, Brondesbury; then 17 Blenheim Gardens, Willesden Green, and finally to Sandycombe Road, Kew.

'I retired 26 years ago from A. & E. Robbins hardware shop at Station Parade, Kew. I was a real old-fashioned ironmonger. If you wanted a bit of lead piping or two or three feet you could get it; if you wanted a piece of iron sheet you could get it; a sheet of zinc; bar-iron; rod-iron; rain-water pipe; steam barrel - everything. The shop is still going, under different management. Much more household stuff now. Today they have a marvellous stock, twice as much as I had. I went to the shop in late 1900. The Kew neighbourhood then was absolutely first class; there wasn't a business there as now. Station Parade was of small shops and insignificant; if you wanted anything you went into Richmond for it. Very different today - quite a business centre.' (See the article on Kew Shops on page 27.)



Ebenezer Robbins standing in the doorway of his ironmonger shop in 1905, with 'F. W Carpenter Ltd.' on the head-board.

'My father [Richard Bridge Robbins] bought it from Mr F.W.Carpenter Ltd. - Mr Carpenter was a family friend. I was apprenticed with him (so was my brother at a different shop), four years before I had the business at 12 Station Parade, which was one of his 14 shops all over London. There was a central supplying depot - everything was supplied from there. It so happened our Kew shop was rather out of Carpenter's district. He was quite pleased to get rid of it to my father at a fairly reasonable price, so almost directly after my apprenticeship I went there. I had six months at Chesterfield; I went there with the idea of getting more experience and whilst there father wrote and said, "Come home, I've bought a business for you!"'

'I was living with our parents in Sandycombe Road at Kew when I had the shop. My brother got married much earlier than I did. When I was married I still lived in Sandycombe Road but in a different house. Then we moved to Ruskin Avenue for a short time. I moved there when the houses were being built; there was no Post-Office Savings Bank [later the Public Record office, now the National Archives] there then as far as I can remember. It was before the Great War; fortunately I was spared from that war, but my brother wasn't. When I was at the shop it was "A. & E.

Robbins" and it was a question of who should go to the war? He was three years older than me and he went into the Royal Air Force - he was sent to Canada for mechanical training and liked it so much out there that after the war he took his family there. He's never been to visit us: it would have been difficult with not much money about for either of us. My brother is 98 this week [August 1975]. My mother lived to nearly 80; my father to 70. Zeppelins went all over London in the First World War - there weren't any in the second war. My recollection is we did see them over Kew.' His daughter, Evelyn, who in her 90s still lives in Stanmore Road off Kew Road, tells me that she recalls as a small girl at that time seeing men cycling around Kew blowing whistles and shouting 'Take cover! Take cover!' when a German aeroplane or zeppelin had been seen. When all was quiet the same cyclists would shout 'All clear! All clear!'

'Whilst living at Kew I went to Duke Street Baptist Church. I was married 70 years ago [in 1905], and am a member for 70 years. When we were married we went to two or three of the churches and there was an exchange of pulpits as they often do, or used to then, for Sunday. We went to a Methodist church (my wife was a Methodist) and the minister was a good chap; he was the Baptist minister [Rev. Horace Warde] so the following Sunday we went to his church in Duke Street - we've been there ever since. It was totally different from now - the church was in awful debt.'

The great debt over the church was because when it was built in 1881 Duke Street had a mortgage. Shortly before Robbie and his wife joined the church the Star Assurance Company demanded payment of the outstanding sum or the place would be shut up. Notices were actually up on the doors that the building would be closed, as related in Harry Young's *Duke Street Story*. When it became known to the deacons that Mr Warde was giving back one pound of his salary they said that it could not go on. But what were they to do? Eventually it was agreed to invite the members of the congregation to increase their contribution by one penny a week! It would need 240d to meet the provision of £1 a week given by Mr Warde. That was when the well known Christian author Dr F.B.Meyer and one or two from the Baptist Union came in and rescued the church with a low-interest loan, so it carried on. The original loan was only £2,500 which today would be considered nothing, but it was a considerable amount in those days. The treasurer, Charles Leach, was satisfied if he could pay off the interest by £100-200 a year but the capital was hardly reduced. The new loan was finally paid off in 1917.

'My first job before the [First World] War was the Boys Life Brigade. I had about 20 boys; we had a Bible class every Sunday afternoon for them; we met for drill and that sort of thing mid-week, and first-aid work. We

had some grand times with them. At camp we used to go out with about 200 of them, united companies. They were fine experiences - reading and prayer at night time. Unfortunately, that was stopped during the War and never re-started after it. I suppose that was inevitable.'

'I was appointed Secretary 65 years ago in 1910 - really and truly that was very amazing. I had only been at the church barely 5 years. I was always a nervous, retiring sort of chap; a bag of nerves. The then Secretary of the church at Duke Street retired and they wanted a new secretary and they went round every man in the church possible. Nobody seemed available and my brother said to Mr Warde, "I wonder if my brother would take it up." So Mr Warde came to see me, asked me, "Oh no. I couldn't do it, I've had no experience." I hadn't been out in public life at all. Eventually he persuaded me. The Secretary of our church had to be a deacon, naturally, and they had the six deacons; if I came in as Secretary I'd be the seventh. I was still very doubtful if I could do it. 'Well, take it on for six months; see how you get on, but it must be understood that if you cannot do it you must stand down being a deacon.' So that was all right and I took it on for six months - and was there for 44½ years. I was with Mr Warde for 12½ years. After Mr Warde retired, Mr E.B.Greening came; he was with us for 3 years - a great man, very good but no preacher.'

After Greening, Fred Walter was at Duke Street for 13 years and had to resign in 1939 because of ill-health. During the interlude the church had a visit from Alan Redpath, a Young Life Campaign missionary. He had conducted a mission in Richmond and Mr Robbins and his family got to know him very well as he quite often went to their house. About a year afterwards he wrote to Mr Robbins that he was thinking of giving up YLC and would like something more settled and wondered if Robbie thought it worthwhile mentioning his name to the church. As to Alan Redpath's eventual appointment to Duke Street in 1940, Robbie was very reluctant to say too much since it was actually he and one other deacon who were responsible for Mr Redpath coming.

'When Alan Redpath's interest was raised in the diaconate it was objected to quite a lot. He was a non-collegiate man; he hadn't had training as a minister - this and that - a young man with only experience in YLC. But we had him to preach and he was liked very much; quite a few of us said, "O yes, he's the man." Others said, "He isn't the man." It came to this, that he was one of the men who were in a position to be considered for the ministry with others, and it came before the church; and we had a moderator at the time and he led us pretty well one way or another. The point was, we should write and get advice from the secretary of the Baptist Union. They had experience and they wrote back quite a nice letter that we

ought to be careful, but there was no reason why we should not consider him - he might be prepared to go through the BU exams. Eventually we decided to interview him by the Selection Committee. He came before the Committee, all sorts of questions were asked about clubs and Alan said, "Clubs as such I shall hope to do away with." So one of the Selection Committee members said, "So you're a kill-joy, are you?" Alan took that up as he was very far from a kill-joy. Our family knew him as the jolly, wonderful man; really, one could tell he'd make a good pastor. Eventually it would have to go to the Church for a vote. There were three or four of the deacons deady opposed and as the Secretary at the time I'm quite sure a speech I made and one other that converted the thing, and we got a vote that was necessary and sufficiently good to give the invitation.

'It was far from what we would like it to be, but the invitation went. Three or four deacons resigned right away. I had to write to Alan and tell him that the vote was small, not anything we'd like it to be and unfortunately three of the deacons were resigning (and the treasurer was one of them.) When we mentioned the salary we were going to pay him the treasurer said, 'My bank is not big enough for that, and somebody else can take the job.' We invited Alan to preach, not with a view to the ministry and our family heard that if he got a conversion that day it would help him to make a decision. Of course, he got the conversion.

'I would say that before he came the church was truly evangelistic and from the normal Baptist church we were in good standing. The ministry had been good; Fred Walter could preach well, he was good but he was with us for 13 years and his time was up [as his health was poor]. The church was not in low water, except financially as we never had too much. From an evangelical point of view the church had very good standing. When Redpath came in a most remarkable way he turned it upside down. Before you could look round we had got sections of the church united and taking meetings here and there. He trained them for it - I hardly know how the transformation came about, but it did. In war-time he was outstanding, going into air-raid shelters and that sort of thing in the Richmond area.

'The remarkable thing was that at his induction service and at others the little old Duke Street building was absolutely packed in spite of the resignations, and we didn't know what to do. The vestries were packed with people sitting there and eventually we had to have services downstairs [in the basement], first of all relayed for a time, and for a time we did try a dual service: one upstairs and one downstairs with a shortened same sermon. Eventually, the church couldn't hold the people, so one Good Friday we held the service in Richmond Theatre. It was made known widely and the place was full. It was so good we thought this is too good,

what shall we do? We took it for a few Sunday evenings - eventually it went on for 15 years without a break and the theatre was packed.'

At the first service in the Theatre the atmosphere was very hot and Redpath told the people 'You may take off your coats!' Mr Robbins was amazed that no sooner had he got into church life than he had the congregation taking off their coats - this at a time when people dressed in their best Sunday suits! Alan Redpath's ministry had a profound impact on the church at home and worldwide, as many members were called to the mission field. He set an evangelical preaching pattern which has been followed by successive ministers ever since.

Mr Robbins continued for over 44 years as church secretary until 19 April 1954. He and his wife always occupied seats in pew 52. As a Life Deacon he laid a foundation stone of the modern church building in 1961. Sadly his wife, Alice, passed away on 21 August 1968. In November 1980 there was a great celebration in Princes Hall for his 100th birthday.



Ebenezer Robbins laying the foundation stone of Duke Street Baptist Church in 1961. Behind him stands the Pastor, Rev. John Bird, and nearer the camera Rev. John Caiger of Gunnersbury Baptist Church.



Ebenezer Robbins cutting his cake to celebrate his 100th birthday. His daughter, Evelyn, stands on the left.

In his heyday he was keen on bowls and won many trophies. During my interview with him in 1975 he said, 'I'd love to be on the bowling green; not now as I can't see. But I did go down on the bowling green on Tuesday and I got somebody very kindly to help me. We threw out the jack, he'd tell me just where it was, I'd just say wood's out and he'd say the jack's just on the left of the white board, and for an hour we had a jolly good roll up. He was so kind helping me; I was getting the jack all right; oh yes, but I couldn't hit it on the jack.'

While his sight lasted he also contented himself with avidly watching his favourite cricket matches on television. He also continued to cycle on his sit-up-and-beg bicycle until well into his 90s, although his progress along streets full of cars caused relatives many an anxious moment.

When Ebenezer Robbins died in August 1982, John Baldock, the then Church Treasurer, gave the funeral oration on 1 September. He referred to his long stint as Church Secretary - the highlight of the annual church meeting being his reports which were 'masterpieces of conciseness and fairness and always revealed keen spiritual insight giving all the glory to his Lord and Master.'

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Evelyn Robbins for additions and correction to the text and for the loan of photographs. There are currently plans to redevelop parts of the church building - the vestibule and church hall, and some of the facilities.