

The Diver That Saved Winchester Cathedral

Intro: Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

Julie: Hi, and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. I'm Julie, and today I'm speaking with Gary Wallace-Potter about William Walker, the diver who saved Winchester Cathedral. Hello, Gary, how are you?

Gary: Hello, Julie. Yeah, I'm fine. Thank you very much.

Julie: Good. First of all, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your background?

Gary: Well, I was a commercial diver for many years, primarily working in the oil and gas industry. And I'd always, even as a child, had had an interest in diving. I started scuba diving at a very young age, and I'd always had an interest particularly in the history of diving, so would quite often go to my local library and pester the librarian for unusual diving books.

And then when the Historical Diving Society was founded in 1990, I joined as one of the founder members. And, I research particularly Victorian divers, of which, you know, William Walker was one of those.

Introduction to William Walker

Julie: So is that how you know so much about William Walker then?

Gary: Funny enough, I vaguely remembered this story about a diver working under a cathedral. And I collect lots of diving memorabilia. And many years ago, I acquired a couple of Edwardian postcards of William Walker when he was working at Winchester Cathedral. And I decided I would make a visit to Winchester. And, I had a look around the building and I purchased a book which was for sale in the Cathedral shop about the history of the Cathedral, which mentioned him and had a couple of chapters on the work he'd done. And that was the start. From there on I became more and more interested in this chap and started doing research, initially in the cathedral archives and then everywhere else I could find anything else out about him. The early divers had always fascinated me and he was just a bit of a character, I suppose. But equally it wasn't a lot known about him at the time when I first started researching him.

Julie: When did you first start researching him?

Gary: That's a long, long time ago. Probably in the early nineties. I haven't been researching constantly, but certainly, for the first few years it was my main research project.

Walker and the Cathedral

Julie: Can you give us the basics of who was William Walker and what was his role with the Cathedral?

Gary: He was the chief diver for a quite famous diving company, which were based in London called Siebe, Gorman & Co. And he had worked for them from about the mid-1890s, so by the time he got to Winchester, which was in 1906, he'd been working for the company for obviously a number of years and he was also one of their chief divers. So he was quite an important diver. And, originally, when they decided they were going to use divers at Winchester, which is obviously quite an unusual place for a diver to work, almost in the centre of Hampshire. The reason being was that the water table is quite high because of the proximity of the Cathedral to the River Itchen. And, the structure of the Cathedral was in a very poor state and had been deteriorating steadily for a number of years. And then, I suppose, this was really highlighted by a report for the diocese architect in 1905, where they realised that the actual structure of the Cathedral, particularly the eastern end was in a very serious state. Large cracks were appearing in the walls, masonry was falling. And they did some investigation work and then consulted with a civil engineer called Francis Fox. And Fox came down and made an investigation at Winchester and he wrote a report to the diocese, saying that there was a number of things they needed to do. And at the time when he wrote the report, which was in late 1905, there was no mention of divers at all. But what he did suggest, was to stabilise the building from sinking, which it effectively was they had to underpin the original Norman foundations by digging down under the Norman foundations down to a gravel bed, which was some 16 feet below the existing foundations. The Normans, quite interestingly, had managed to build the initial part of the Cathedral in 1070, or started in 1070. And they'd done so by driving beech and oak piles down through the soil and built a huge raft on which they effectively built the cathedral. And after 850 years, the weight of the cathedral, which you can imagine is obviously quite substantial, compressed the peat in the subsoil. And the whole building was starting to subside. So the architect and Francis Fox agree that the only way to stop this progressing any further was to underpin the cathedral foundations down to the natural gravel bed. So when they first started doing this, the idea was they would excavate a trench underneath the existing foundations and dig down until they hit the gravel bed. And then the masons could then build up from that gravel bed with concrete blocks to the underside of the original foundations to support it. The issue was, because of the water table being so high, when they dug down so far, they broke through the peat and the water would flood their excavations. And they spent many months trying to get around this problem with the water. And the work had started quite late in the autumn of 1905. And obviously with the winter generally being wetter, they had a lot of problems and it got around to March of 1906 and they'd made hardly any progress at all. And the problems seemed to be getting worse. So the architect did ask Francis Fox, the civil engineer, to visit the site again, which he did in March and having investigated it and seen how much flood water was sat in the trenches, came up with the idea of putting a diver into the trench who could work underwater. And if the diver was to lay hessian sacks of dry cement on the bottom of the trenches, it would seal the water down and they would be able to pump the trench dry and then the masons would be able to carry on their work in the dry.

Julie: That is a lot of work for one man, isn't it?

Introducing Divers

Gary: Yeah, the divers arrived at the beginning of April in 1906. And I say divers because they were two. There was William Walker and another diver from his company and their attendant and they arrived in early April. And the plan was that they would come down, work when there was work for them to do and then they would go back up to London when they weren't needed. The idea of this was to keep the cost down. So when they first arrived, they decided that they would do split shifts. So the other diver whose name was Rayfield, he would work Monday to Wednesday and William Walker would work Thursday to Saturday. Anyway, as the work progressed, it was a bit hit-and-miss initially, but once they got into a flow and what they were doing was getting labourers to prepare the trench and let it to the point of where it would flood. And once it flooded, then they would get the divers down to remove any remaining material and then put these cement bags in. So initially there were two of them for about a year, and they continued to work this alternate shifts. And the clerk of works kept meticulous notes and his notebooks are still in the Cathedral archives and are fascinating reading. And he would often annotate little notes in the column, personal notes, more than anything. And he made several references to the fact that when William Walker was working on-site, they got more achieved than when his colleague, Rayfield, was working. And after a year, so in early 1907, they decided that because of cost they couldn't afford to keep two divers on-site. So they said they wanted to keep William Walker. So they let Rayfield go, he returned back to London, but Walker was to stay to complete the job.

But the original estimation of work was only for about 12 to 15 months of work, but the more they underpinned the cathedral, the more problems they found and realised that the actual problem was the entire building and not just the eastern end. So consequently, William ended up staying there until the end of the diving work, which was five and a half years. It sounds like it's a massive underestimation, but I think they didn't realise the sheer amount of work which was actually needed. But then as they started looking at other parts of the cathedral and realised that they were just as bad and would need underpinning as well. So it ended up rather than just being the eastern end of the cathedral, the entire building. The work sort of snowballed, if you like, really. And in hindsight, I think if Siebe Gorman had realised that their chief diver would have been tied up for so many years on one job, I think they probably would have never sent him down there in the first place. They would have sent another diver or other divers down there, because he was quite a senior diver within the company. So, to have him tied up on one job for such a long period of time was quite unusual.

The Working Day

Julie: Do you know if William Walker spending so many hours underwater under the cathedral a day, would that have impacted his health in any way?

Gary: Well, I suppose there is a possibility. In the grand scheme of diving the work was fairly shallow. So, there was no possibility of getting decompression sickness because it wasn't deep enough. But there were a few incidents during the time he was there. The actual trenches they worked in were very narrow and on the eastern end of a cathedral, they were only about 16/17 feet deep. So they would have a ladder. They would board the sides out to stop them collapsing in. And he would climb down a ladder into, and then literally crawl underneath, the hanging foundations of the cathedral. So there was an element that if that collapsed then obviously he could have been buried alive, although there was never anything like that happened. But I'd

found a couple of notes where it said that first thing in the morning, before anybody had been in the water, the water would go very clear overnight where the sediment was settled. But as soon as the diver went in the water and touched his boots onto the bottom, it would stir all the sediment up and for the remainder of the time, the diver would work in nil visibility. So all the work he did was done by feel. And as the work progressed, on some of the trenches, which they did in other parts of the cathedral, particularly when they got round to the northern transept, the gravel bed of which they wanted to use as their foundation, gradually sloped away. So, they had to dig the trenches much, much deeper. And, a couple of the trenches, certainly on the North transept side, were getting close to sort of 20/24 feet deep. And therefore were requiring a lot more work, a lot more of these cement bags as well. And all these bags would be either dropped in or lowered down and he would then hand place those. And he would do about three or four layers of the bags, which when they reacted with the water, they would then go hard, and then put a water pump down and pump the water out. And the masons could work in the dark. Well, they said there'd been a couple of times where the water pump, draining water from one of the trenches, and somebody had shouted 'Stop the pump' and the attendant, which you would turn the wheels on his air pump to give him air, actually stopped, thinking the instruction was meant for them. So they'd effectively cut his air supply off. And on the couple of occasions apparently that happened, he quite calmly just climbed back up the ladder so his head popped above the surface, and his attendant then would realise what was going on. Whether there were any words said, we'd be none the wiser.

Physical Signs in the Cathedral

Julie: So it was a massive amount of work. Can we see any signs of this work today in the cathedral?

Gary: It's not obvious because obviously it's all underground. What you can see is some of the, I suppose if you like residual effects of the damage which had occurred to the cathedral prior to the repairs. If you were to stand at the eastern end of the cathedral, looking at the actual eastern end, and the most obvious place to look is the windows. And on the Eastern end, the outside walls were over one and a half feet out of perpendicular, which meant the top leant out one and a half feet more than the bottom did. And obviously the underpinning stopped any further movement or any further sinking subsiding. But if you look at the eastern end even today, it is obvious that there was some serious subsidence to the walls. All the cracks have been repaired, they filled those with a liquid cement. And the building is still monitored to this day. And they put these, it's like a little glass plate, are bonded to the walls across a crack. And it's thin glass, so if there's any movement on either side of the crack the idea is, the tell-tale sign is it breaks the glass. And apparently, the structures obviously monitored very carefully, but to this day I don't think any of those have ever broken, which proves that the work they did back in 1906 to 1912 did its job and the cathedral's as good as it's going to be.

Julie: It's truly a great piece of work they did then.

Gary: Without a doubt, if they hadn't had done the approach they had, I mean, obviously there was no intention of using a diver originally, but they had to adapt the method to get the job done. And without that work, it's very unlikely the cathedral wouldn't have suffered some serious structural problems. Even if not a partial collapse of the building.

Julie: Without them it would not have been a cathedral today, possibly?

Gary: Yeah, very likely, you know. And there was a lot of people involved. The contractors, which did the work, they were a company based in Peterborough and they specialised in ecclesiastical buildings and historic buildings. And they had already had done some work at Winchester in the mid-1890s, they'd repaired a section of the roof. So this company was the main contractor. And so they brought down their carpenters and their masons and all their trades people. But obviously the divers came slightly later. And there was a small group which worked with the diver most of the time, which they nicknamed The Divers Gang. So he had a small team working with him, but I think at one point it was over a hundred people working on the site.

The Statue

Julie: So I guess there's a good reason why his statue is in the east end of the cathedral?

Gary: Yeah. Although, there's a little bit of history behind the statue. The one which is presently in the eastern end is not the original statue, which was there. The original statue was put in there in 1964, to commemorate the work which William Walker had done, although many years after he'd actually done it. And there's quite an unusual history about it because the cathedral, the Dean and Chapter, originally approached a local sculptor from Winchester and he was a good sculptor. And his name was Norman Pierce. And they approached Mr. Pierce and asked whether he would produce drawings for a suitable statue to put in the cathedral. And he modelled it in clay, but then having done that was then told by the Dean and Chapter that they didn't want to use his statue, they were going to use another sculptor, who was Sir Charles Wheeler. And Charles Wheeler was at that time the President of the British Arts Academy. And again, was a very good sculptor. Anyway, he apparently had been commissioned to do the sculpture, which he did. When they unveiled it in March 1964, there were quite a large number of the Walker descendants present in the cathedral at the time, which had been invited down for the unveiling. And when it was unveiled, it was discovered that the likeness wasn't of William Walker, but was of Francis Fox, the civil engineer. And it was one of those things where you think 'how could you make such a mistake?' But I believe, and Norman was of the same opinion, that the photograph which Charles Wheeler was given to work from, in the photograph, William Walker is in his civvies, but he stood next to Francis Fox, who's stood in the diving dress without the helmet. So they believed it was a genuine mistake. Anyway, when I first met Norman Pierce's wife, and I said I was interested in the statue which Norman had made, and she said 'Oh, he didn't just do a statue, he did this large oversized bust as well.' Which she had in the house. So I went to visit her and saw this bust, which is an amazing piece of work. And one of my Historical Diving Society colleagues and myself decided that we would go and speak to the then Dean of the Cathedral and ask them whether they would change the statue for one of the likeness of William Walker. And, they didn't take the bust, the bust is actually in the Cathedral Refectory garden. So it can be seen by everybody. But the statue which you refer to, which is presently in the cathedral, was done by a more modern artist, Glyn Williams. And that was unveiled, I think it was about 2005 or something like that.

Julie: That is really interesting. I did not know that.

Gary: Yeah, it's one of those unusual little stories. Some years afterwards, they added a plaque to the bottom of the original statue saying that it was to sort of honour the work which William Walker had done, but it wasn't a likeness of him.

Julie: Is there anything else you would like to add about William Walker?

Gary: Well, following the work, he became of national interest. Newspapers from all over the country reported on the progress of the work being done by the diver and I think that was partly for the fact that it was such an unusual place for a diver to work. You expect them to be at sea or in a harbour or dock or something, but not under, as one reporter put it, 'under the swathes of lawn in the centre of Hampshire.' And on the completion of the work, he left, his job was done and he was on to other things. But the actual cathedral, they had a

reopening of the cathedral with the King and Queen present on St. Swithun's Day in 1912. And Francis Fox got knighted for his work at the cathedral. And then William Walker was asked to make his presence at the Buckingham Palace and he was awarded the MVO, the Royal Victorian Order, by the King in late December of 1912. I think he was quite a humble man, and I think he was highly embarrassed by the attention which he received. As far as he was concerned, he'd done his job to the best of his ability and he didn't think he needed any special recognition, but I think other people saw it otherwise. The more I learn about him, the more I, you know, I understand the type of person he was. He always put in, you know, 110% on anything he did. But I think, you know, in the late Victorian Edwardian period, people were generally like that.

Julie: Thank you so much for joining me today, Gary.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you for listening.