

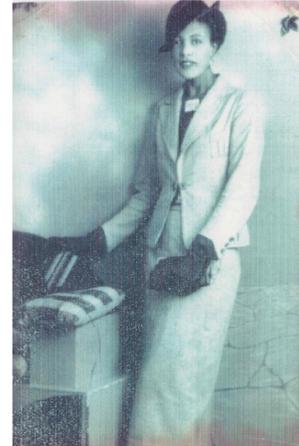
Philly's Place, Rwanda, the Sandhurst Churches, and a bell.

This is the story of a bell – but it all begins with people.

Philly's story



Phyllis Ethel Quirke (known as Philly) was born in Battersea on 14th June 1917. As a young woman she moved with her mother to Sandhurst during World War 2 to escape the bombing of London.



She initially lived in Green Lane near the recreation ground in Sandhurst, and only a hundred yards or so from St Mary's church.

She married and had 4 children – 2 black and 2 white, including one black and one white twin.

The children were christened in St Michael's Church and attended St Michael's School.

Life in Sandhurst was hard. At times Philly had to work 4 jobs in order to make ends meet and provide for her family.

As they grew up, 2 of Philly's children chose to continue living in this area, including Jacqueline, Sam Hunt's mother.



Sam attended St Michael's School and was christened in the church like her mother before her.

Philly died aged 90 in 2007 and is buried in the St Michael's Churchyard.

The church bell's story

At the time Philly lived in Sandhurst the town was served by two CofE churches – St Michael's and its daughter church in Wellington Road, The Mission Church of St Mary's.

The church, built in 1889, was equipped with a single bell to call worshippers to services.

For many years St Mary's flourished as a daughter church, and it became the home of a thriving play group for younger children. Every morning the bell would ring to bring the children to the group.....



In time however the old St Mary's church began to decay and fall into disrepair. In order to keep safe the main church was demolished, but the church centre remained, complete with the bell, as the meeting place for the nursery.

Toddler time at St Mary's (1990's) – a mother's recollection

We gathered in the hall for a while until late comers had arrived and then we went out into the entrance hall to ring the bell. The children loved this. The long rope was unhooked and everyone took their place along the rope with a leader at the bell end and the bell was rung and a song was sung – "Ring, O Ring the bell"!

Then we went into the chapel for our service. Afterwards there was tea and snacks, chatter and playtime

At the same time the town of Sandhurst was growing fast. In 1973, the small church of St. George, in Owlsmoor, was transferred from the parish of Crowthorne. As it grew and flourished, in 1985 it was decided that it should become a separate parish in its own right – St George's, Owlsmoor. The old wooden church was replaced by a substantial brick building in 1993.

By the late 1990's the old St Mary's hall was falling into disrepair, and in 1998 the decision was taken to demolish the remaining building on the basis of safety and cost. Nothing remains of the old building, and little of the contents – the old bell was moved to the back yard of St Michael's rectory, and there it languished for the next 20 years.

Sam's Story

Philly never achieved fame or fortune during her life but she was so enormously loved by me and the rest of her family. She was a truly wonderful person – kind, funny, outgoing, loving and the life and soul of every party. Not a day goes by when I don't miss her enormously.

Philly was my greatest inspiration. She was born in an era when the colour of her skin marked her out as being different. She often told me of how the local policemen in London used to call her the "little piccaninny" (a racial slur referring to a dark-skinned child of African descent) when she was a child. When she moved from London in the 40s she truly stood out in rural Sandhurst and experienced great racism.

It was clear that Philly was brought up to be deeply ashamed of the colour of her skin. She always believed she was somewhat of a lesser person and could never be convinced otherwise. Both when I received my degree in 1989 and won the Teacher of the Year award in 2001, Philly refused point blank to accompany me to the ceremonies and celebrations. Even though she was desperately proud, she would not be persuaded, however much I pleaded. She once explained to me :

“When people see you they see a white woman. If people see you with me, they will know your background and they may not give you the chances you deserve in life.”

Those words broke my heart. No human being she be made to feel that way about themselves, to hate who and what they are. It was those words which really set me on the path my life has taken. I became an RE/ Citizenship teacher in the belief that, through education we can teach the next generation to be more kind, tolerant and less ignorant than past generations. My work with genocide survivors in Rwanda, people who have suffered so much as a result of racism, has been inspired by her.

The school I am currently building In Rwanda will be called “Philly’s Place” in her honour.



A conversation, an idea, and plan

In late 2020 St Michael’s churchwardens started a conversation about what to do with the old bell from St Mary’s – sell it? Scrap it?? It can’t just be allowed to rot in the Rectory yard.

The bell has marked the time through the whole of the story of Philly, her daughter Jacqueline, and Sam – ringing out first to bring worshippers to the church, and then later for the children.

What if it could ring out once again for Philly – in the school named in her memory?

Slowly a plan was formed.....

Sam Hunt has confirmed that it is both technically feasible to have the bell at the school, and that it would be acceptable in the neighbourhood. A new frame would be constructed to allow the bell to be rung by the children, much as it was at Toddler time when Sam was a child.

Sandhurst Youth will take care of demounting the bell from its existing frame, cleaning and servicing the bell, and then packing it for transport to Rwanda. It is hoped too to bring this story to life in a video as a resource for both Philly’s place, and for the churches here.

Costs for the refurbishment and the transport will be raised by Sandhurst Youth, and will be underwritten by a personal pledge from a church member.

In January 2021 the PCC agreed the plan subject to a final check on any legal restrictions following from the demolition of St Mary’s.

Let’s make it happen!!

For more information or to get involved contact dave.percival@btinternet.com

