

The Church of St James the Greater
Leicester

Doing the best of things in the worst of times

An address given by Canon Glynn Richerby
at the Battle of Britain Service
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THE PICTURE is of Staunton Harold in Leicestershire near the border with Derbyshire, off the Melbourn to Ashby Road.

Staunton Harold, with its Hall, church, park and lake has been a popular place for visitors for many years.

The Hall has been described as "one of the most beautifully proportioned and situated great houses in Britain" and the surroundings as one of Leicestershire's finest rural scenes.

That's all very well, but what's Staunton Harold got to do with our commemoration of the Battle of Britain?

Well there *is* a direct link in that for 30 years the Hall was a Cheshire Home. Group Captain Leonard Cheshire had been a pilot in the Battle of Britain and throughout the second World War. He survived the war – unlike over 55,000 of his comrades who did not – and was decorated with the Victoria Cross for his valiant service.

After the war, Leonard Cheshire took a dying ex-airman into his own home to look after him. The needs of many other former airmen became apparent to him and he established the first Cheshire Home with the express aim of encouraging disabled people to play an active part in making choices about their own lives, which was ground-breaking at that time.

From this small beginning grew the charity now known as the Leonard Cheshire Foundation, one of the leading disability charities in the UK, but also working overseas.

It now appears that today's trustees wish to rename the charity, reasoning that the Cheshire name is a "bar to reaching its objectives". And why is that? Because, they say, many under-35s do not recognise Leonard Cheshire's name, or his significance. Sadly, the comment about under-35s is probably true. As a nation we do seem to have stopped learning history, and the lessons of history.

For the special inspiration I want you to draw from Staunton Harold, I need to take you further back in history, and then come right up to our own time, so bear with me!

The story of Staunton Harold began a thousand years ago, but for our purposes this morning we go back to Sir Robert Shirley, who in the first half of the 17th century largely rebuilt the house.

More significantly, in 1653 he also built the church which, as you see, stands close to the house. This is one of the few churches built between the outbreak of the English Civil War and the restoration of the monarchy.

Oliver Cromwell and his puritan regime were causing havoc in churches up and down the land – smashing stained glass windows, throwing out organs and church bells and defacing all interior decoration. So that the building of a new church at Staunton Harold in a distinctly medieval style – with carved woodwork, painted ceilings, stained glass windows, an organ and church bells – represented a breathtakingly open act of defiance to Cromwell. Robert Shirley paid the price, being imprisoned in the Tower of London, where he died in 1656 – just three years after the completion of his church which survived him quite unscathed.



After the restoration of the monarchy, an inscription to the memory of Robert Shirley's work and defiance of Puritan rule was set up above the main entrance to the church for all to read on entering:

In the year 1653 when all things sacred were throughout ye Nation either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley Baronet, founded this church, whose singular praise it is to have done the best things in ye worst times and hoped them in the most calamitous.
The righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance.



Isn't that a wonderful epitaph! What an achievement to be remembered and revered as one to have done the best things in the worst of times, and to have hoped them in the most calamitous!

Our service this morning commemorates those who participated in the Battle of Britain and who share the distinction of having done the best things in the worst of times. As a result, not only was the freedom of British people preserved, but also a great and terrible enemy of civilised values was resisted, and later on defeated.

Those who gave themselves so unstintingly in the Battle of Britain – many of them making the ultimate sacrifice – were fired by a hope that enabled them to triumph against all the odds. That hope was for the best things for those who would follow them. And you and I are among the latest generation in this land to benefit from their legacy.

How can we be worthy of them? How can we add our own chapter to the history of this sceptred isle? Well, I suggest that we can all aspire to the British-ness of doing the best things in the worst of times, and to hope them in the most calamitous.

In the life of our city and county, the opening of the Highcross shopping centre is a very conspicuous endeavour to do the best things in the worst times. High Street shopping is experiencing a general downturn. On the face of it, now is not the best of times to be launching a massive retail development. And yet people are responding to the quality that has been made available, and there are high hopes that here in Leicester we may defy prognostications of gloom and doom about the economy.

But you might imagine from all that we've been hearing about this past week, that we are living in the most calamitous of times. Before last Monday, most of us were blissfully unaware of the importance of Lehman brothers and Merrill Lynch. But by Monday lunchtime it was being said that the bankruptcy of one and the take over of the other signaled the start of Armageddon!

Such sensationalist overreaction is unhelpful and counter-productive. Many ordinary, quiet and cautious people may well think it's a good thing that brute forces of reckless dealing and sheer greed have been brought to a shuddering halt. And maybe as a result our society will recover a sense of true values and a lot more kindness and consideration to one another.

No doubt the fall out from credit crunch is calamitous, but our remembrance of the Battle of Britain today puts things into perspective:

- We remember that our nation has a long history of facing up to adversity undaunted, as when Britain stood alone against the mighty Nazi war machine.
- We remember that God has so ordered things that the forces of good prove overwhelmingly strong in the battle against evil.
- We draw inspiration from an epitaph that belongs to Sir Robert Shirley but which epitomises all that is finest in our nation's faith and outlook: the resolve to do the best things in the worst of times, and to hope them in the most calamitous.
- And we also remember Group Captain Leonard Cheshire VC, whose vision for doing something of enduring worth began with his compassion for an airman dying from his injuries, and grew into a worldwide care organisation.

The righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance.