

DAME WINEFRIDE PRUDEN, 1913 – 2008

remembered by Michael Day

Most members must now have heard of the death of our oldest member, Winefride Pruden, aged 95 years. It is always sad to hear of the passing of a good friend but, in Winefride's case, sadness seems hardly the appropriate sentiment. Thankfulness, glorious jollity and the gratitude of knowing her are, for me, much more accurate memories.

Winefride was born in 1913 at Richmond in Surrey and began her education at the Marist convent. She attended Richmond Art School as a painting student and then worked for some time as an art teacher spending the war years working for the NAAFI serving air force stations in Gloucestershire. She was introduced to the Guild (as it was then) of Catholic Artists by the sculptor, Arthur Pollen, and it was at one of its exhibitions that she met the distinguished silversmith, Dunstan Pruden. He was living in the Sussex village of Ditchling which had become famous (and some would say notorious) as the home of the artistic community, the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic, founded by Eric Gill and Hilary Pepler. The heady mixture of experimental communal living with artists and craftsmen and women, growing their own food, Dominican Catholicism and Distributivism in a muddy, country setting would have had a great appeal to a suburban girl from Surrey and Ditchling became her spiritual as well as her later, material home.

In 1965 Winefride married Dunstan Pruden, after an long period of waiting because Dunstan was already married. Separated from his wife, it was only when she died that he could marry again which they did in typical Pruden style; in a beautiful Norman French parish church, the ceremony taken by Fr Quintin, an old family friend. They settled at Ditchling and became members of the Guild, Winefride being the first woman member. Dunstan taught her silversmithing and, as well as her literary work – she had already written two books on modern Christian art - she helped him with his many commissions. Much of it was serious church work but an hilarious side often broke through as in the matter of the archbishop's crozier.

Dunstan was commissioned by the archdiocese of Liverpool to make a new ceremonial crozier for the archbishop. When it was completed Dunstan decided it would be nice for both of them to have a little holiday, drive up to Liverpool, deliver the crozier by hand and stay for the blessing. On the way they stayed a night at a small hotel and just as they arrived Dunstan said, "Oh Heavens! I have forgotten to insure the crozier. What can we do? We dare not leave it in the car it might get stolen." They tried the hotel safe but that was far too small to accommodate it so Winefride said, "We must not let it out of our sight. Let's take it to our room."

The room was old and cosy, the bed vast but there was no lock on any of the doors. "In case we have burglars we had better sleep with it," so they spent the night with the archbishop's crozier between them. "Don't tell the archbishop," said Winefride.



Dunstan died of multiple sclerosis in 1974 but by the time of their marriage Dunstan was already showing signs of the disease and Winefride had begun to take over more and more of the work of the studio as well as continuing with her journalistic work that included contributions to the Catholic weekly, The Tablet.

She had long been involved with the Society of Catholic Artists, the ecumenical Christian Arts Society of which she was chairman for several years, and with the International Society of Christian Artists. Her work with these prompted friends to recommend her for a papal knighthood. She never really retired but would spend summer months visiting obscure parts of France, Italy and Greece with a companion, sending back volumes of post-cards which were always a delight to read. Once back in Ditchling she would entertain her friends in her studio, a ground-floor room in a dilapidated warehouse stuck in a field and occupied by various artists. Not the kind of place one expected to find a genteel old lady but Winefride had worked her charm on the place with flowers at the door and the room crowded with books, silversmithing equipment and antique chairs piled high with magazines and cushions.

Her birthdays in May were always very special occasions with relatives, friends from the village and London dropping in to see her. The tales she related were many and always amusing but never malicious and her letters were a joy to receive even in the latter years when she would barely see to write them. She once said that being a catholic for her was not so much a matter of accepting a set of beliefs but of belonging with the faithful people of God. I am sure she was right and I hope she may rest in peace and rise in the glory of that belonging.



Photographs - previous page, an early black and white portrait of Winefride. Above, after the mass to celebrate Dunstan's life on what would have been his centenary two years ago.

Michael Day 2008



JACQUES DEVILLIERS, Former President of SIAC

We also remember Jacques Devilliers, a former President of SIAC, who died earlier this year. A calligrapher and graphic artist who designed our Christian Arts logo, those who met him will remember particularly his love of singing, and how every gathering was marked by Jacques singing us his own compositions.