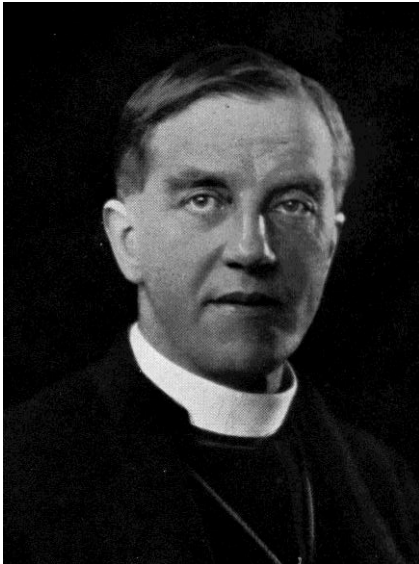
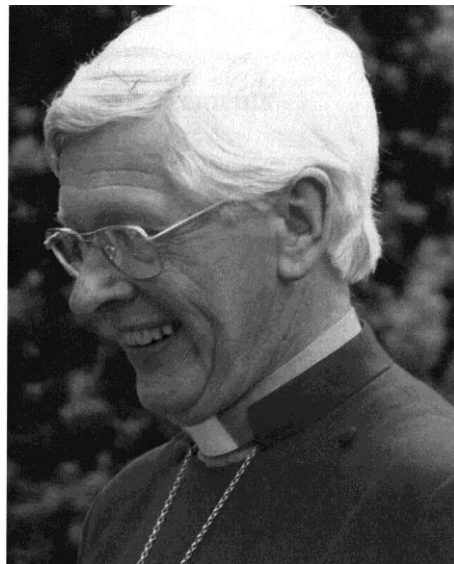


A TALE OF TWO BISHOPS



*Bishop Harry Woollcombe
Bishop of Whitby & Selby – 1923 to 1940*



*Bishop Kenneth Woollcombe
Bishop of Oxford – 1970 to 1977*

Without getting into the whole argument of ‘Nature vs. Nurture’ – you have to accept that those of us who do Family Archives believe that some, at least, of our characteristics are inherited from our family ancestors. While that might be troubling if your ancestors happened to be axe-murderers or people-traffickers, the more I study the family history of Woollcombes, the more I feel privileged to bear this name and have the genes of some exceptional ancestors flowing in my veins.

You should too! No two ancestors will make you feel more proud than the two gentlemen whose stories I’m featuring in this year’s annual Woollcombe Family Archive Update. Both were Bishops, both were outrageously beloved and respected by all who knew them, and both were what Brian Urquhart called Dag Hammarskjold: “That rarest of creatures: a truly good man!” And – happily for both sides of our family: one was an Ashbury Woollcombe, the other a Hemerdon (– *though study the two photographs carefully: is it just me, or is there a trace of a Family resemblance?*)

Certainly, as I read the memoirs generously loaned me – in Bishop Harry’s case – by his granddaughter, Click Mitchell, and in Bishop Kenneth’s – by his widow, Juliet, the similarities were glaringly apparent: both were exceptional, inspirational speakers; both had a great sense of humour and were enormous fun to be with; both had a modicum of hopelessness which required allowances to be made and practical assistance to be provided by patient spouses, friends and support staff. And – both had, and communicated, a robust and intelligent Christian Faith which informed every aspect of their lives.

I cannot, in one short essay, give you more than an introduction to each man drawn from the Memoirs I’ve been given. If there is interest, and permission from the families, I would be happy to scan the memoirs into the Archive: Kenneth’s is 82-pages; Harry’s 132. I also drew on the extraordinary book he wrote himself, *Beneath the Southern Cross*, about his missionary visit to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. This available on [Amazon](#) in a re-print – but it should come with a health warning to those unfamiliar with the Patriarchy of the British Empire: Harry was both a product and a victim of his times: nowhere in his 162-pages is there any serious discussion with, or mention of, women – surprising for a man who raised four daughters and who, apparently, was an early supporter of female priests.

Biographical Sketch: Bishop Harry Woollcombe [1869 - 1941]:

- **Born:** 27th December 1869, Highampton, Devon
- **Died:** 1st December 1941, Bolton Percy, Yorkshire
- **Parents:** Reverend George Woollcombe (b. 1819) & Emily Rose Stirling, 2nd Daughter of Charles Stirling of Buckeridge, Teignmouth, S. Devon
- **Siblings:** 2 brothers (Louis & Ernest) and 2 Sisters (Mary & Eleanor)



Bishop Harry & Hilda on their Wedding Day



Bishop Harry with Geoffrey Smith, his Son-in-Law

- **Married:** Florence Hilda Argles, 29th October 1913
- **Issue:** Richard (died aged 10), Joan, Lorna, Rosamond and Carol
- **Early Life & Education:** Harry's early life was spent in the North Devon moorland countryside – where he rejoiced in field sports (hunting, shooting, fishing) and being close to nature. At age 11, his father retired and moved to Clifton, Bristol where Harry went to school. He went up to Keble College, Oxford getting a Third in Modern History and a Second in Theology;
- **Professional Life:** From Oxford, Harry went first to Oxford House, Bethnal Green, where he worked as a layman amongst the poor and the destitute of London's East End. Most working there went on to be ordained and so it was with Harry: after 4 years at the Wells Theological College, he was ordained as a priest in 1896 by the Bishop of London taking up the position as the vicar of St Faith's, Stepney. In 1901, the headship of Oxford House fell vacant and Harry was asked to take it. Because at Oxford House he didn't have a parish, he was offered many and various tasks as a freelance preacher, trainer and motivator. But his big Sunday afternoon services at the Oxford House always drew a congregation of about 300. From 1909-10, Harry travelled to Australia on a mission for the Church of England Mens' Society (CEMS). On his return, he became chaplain to the Archbishop of York before moving to the great industrial parish of Armley in Leeds in 1913. From there he moved to Coventry as Vicar of St Michaels, sub-dean of the Cathedral and leader of the Coventry Crusades. Thence to the small parish of Bolton Percy outside York and the house where he lived for the rest of his life. He was a wonderful, and much-loved parish priest, but in 1923, Archbishop Lang of York invited him to become Bishop of Whitby (formerly Beverly – a huge diocese of 40 parishes) where he threw himself into his work with great ardour and enthusiasm. He also arranged large public meetings with great speakers – where he himself spoke with great force and honesty. He carried on his crusades – with a memorable Teeside Christian Social Crusade in September 1925 which he saw as a challenge to both non-Christians and practising Christians alike. He retired from Whitby in 1939, and became Bishop of Selby – a post he stayed in for a year before retirement. He died a year later.
- **Personal Recollections:** Bernard Heywood, who edited Harry's memoir, recalls him as a "man much loved. A man whose notable gifts of enthusiasm, earnestness and eloquence were combined with an almost childlike simplicity and transparent sincerity of character. Minor defects, like his occasional forgetfulness, only seemed to endear him more to his friends." Geoffrey Smith, husband of Ros and father of Humphrey, Oliver and Clarissa, remembers him thus: "He was a wonderful friend, with a cheerfulness of spirit, generosity and charm, and a truly amazing fund of human sympathy and understanding. In time of need, he was always there to help and encourage. No trouble was too great, and he never spared or considered himself at all. He just spent himself for God and his fellow men and went on until he could do no more."

There are hundreds of other tributes in the same vein in the memoir, talking of the "passion of his public speeches," "the burning zeal of the man..." and his empathy with all classes and kinds of men: "Every Saturday saw him watching the village lads at cricket: they were his children and he was their trusted guide and counsellor: and he was supremely happy." He also adored his daughters – Joan, Lorna, Ros and Carol (Mick) – and they adored him, so it is perhaps their memories – conveyed through his grand-children, that should be most trusted. He married late in life (aged 44), but his wife, Hilda, was the rock on which his success was founded. Harry was a terrible driver – so Hilda had to

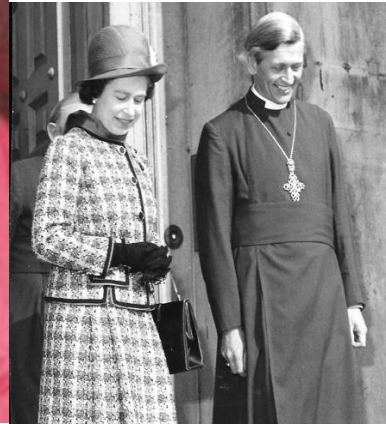
drive him hundreds of miles across Yorkshire and Teeside to get him to meetings and appointments. He was also wonderfully absent-minded, one-time turning up to an important service holding a gun instead of his crozier; at others, leaving the house in some one else's coat – not his own! All such vagaries would be laughed off with his deep chuckles and crinkling, impish grin. For all the seriousness of his faith and calling, he didn't take himself at all seriously. He is buried at Bolton Percy and his epitaph reads: "One who made faith in goodness easy to other people."



Gwenda and his daughters



*Bishop Kenneth Woollcombe with
Pope Paul VI*



Her Majesty the Queen

Biographical Sketch: Bishop Kenneth Woollcombe [1924 - 2006]:

- **Born**: 2nd January 1924, Sutton, Surrey (?)
- **Died**: March 3rd 2008 in a Worcester Care Home.
- **Parents**: Reverend Edward "Percy" Woollcombe (b. 1888) and Elsie "Bill" Ockendon (b. 1897)
- **Siblings**: 11 Children – Kenneth being No. 9 – with two sisters after him, 8 and 12 years younger than him; apparently he felt sometimes like an only child.
- **Married (1)**: Gwendolyn Hodges ("Gwenda") on 28th December 1950;
- **Issue**: Meg, Philippa and Frances
- **Married (2)**: Juliet Dearmer on April 12th 1980
- **Issue**: Catherine February 1981
- **Early Life & Education**: Sandroyd Prep School; Hailebury(Scholarship); St John's College Oxford (Exhibition); Westcott House Seminary, Cambridge;
- **Professional Life**: His Memoir by Derek Anderson is subtitled "From Sea to See" – as Kenneth's early career was in the Navy where he started as an Engineer Cadet at Wednesbury Technical College and moving on to being a Sub-lieutenant at the End of the war; after studying theology at Oxford, he followed his father into the Church becoming first a Curate in Grimsby before being appointed professor of 'Dogmatic Theology' at a Seminary in New York from where he was parachuted in to become the Principal of the Coates Hall Theological College in Edinburgh. It was from there that he was appointed Bishop of Oxford in 1971 retiring only 7 years later following the early death of his wife, Gwenda, from cancer. He then moved to London as the Assistant Bishop of London before becoming a Residentiary Canon of St Paul's Cathedral. When he left London, he became an Assistant Bishop at Worcester before he retired to Upton Snodsbury where his wife, Juliet, was in charge of 5 Parishes. She was not a Priest [women were not allowed to be back then!] so Kenneth helped with the Communion Services, preached at Pershore Abbey and did some Lent Courses as well. Teaching and Preaching were his greatest gifts and what he enjoyed most - though Juliet adds: "You wouldn't guess it when he was "stewing" one of his Sermon!" Sadly, almost none of his sermons or ex tempore prayers were written down.
- **Personal Recollections**: Juliet, recalls Kenneth as "a great communicator – one who could go into a pulpit without a note apart, perhaps, from a bible or a few quotations which he wanted to get right and preach a powerful, coherent sermon." A Professor colleague in New York recalls him as "a great hit as a teacher..." while a colleague recalls Kenneth's own reaction to a near death experience when he lolled against a switch marked "DANGER 33000 volts." Kenneth laughed it off writing: "If readers condemn me for frivolity, it is because I remember laughter more readily than tedium." His sister

Caroline remembers Kenneth supporting her in her desire to be married to a man 35 years older than her – a marriage her parents condemned. He also, according to Juliet, supported gay and women clergy. (As Juliet was ordained, he could scarcely have been opposed but his support was genuine and an example of his open-mindedness and complete kindness.) Most of us remember Kenneth with his shock of white hair, his twinkling grin and his endless good humour but these words from two of his parishioners, Anthony Gell and Cyril Baines in Pershore seem to capture the man: “Kenneth stands out in any crowd with his wise face, the authority of his opinions, the honesty of his advice and his slightly unnerving sense of humour. He was a humble Bishop, always referring to Juliet as “The Boss.” He has the marvellous gift of being able to empathise with people under a wide range of circumstances. In Upton Snodsbury, he was a real presence with his ever-cheery smile and greeting, whether in the Church, the High Street, or in the supermarket. How fortunate we were in Pershore to have our own Bishop who is a true man of the people – who, in popular memory, is immortalised in the lines written by Ken Parton about him in a lyric to be sung to the tune of John Brown’s Body / ‘Glory, glory alleluia’

*“The Bishop Kenneth Woollcombe is a man we much admire!
He came to live amongst us and he set our hearts afire
He loves our congregation and he even likes the Choir
And his voice goes marching on*

CHORUS: as is – with the last line changed to: *And his voice goes marching on!*
*It’s forty years ago today the Bishop joined the church
And forty maidens back at home were left there in the lurch
He preaches mighty sermons but his voice is just the same
And his voice goes marching on*

Envoie: Harry: “The real thing that matters is a personal faith in the power which Christ sends into the world. If only we believed – if only we believed that behind the church, with all its faults, there is the power of Almighty God – that Christ did mean what He said: if only we had the faith really to pray, the age of miracles would come again, and mountains of difficulties would be removed. And to our faith, we must add love – a personal devotion to our Master. He won the world from sin by the Agony of the Cross. He blessed the world by bleeding for it, and we can never bless the world in any other way. It is selfishness, and the luxury which engenders selfishness, that keeps men away from God far more than anything else, and the sad fact is that so often those who bear the name of ‘Christian’ are only too unwilling to set the world the example of simplicity and self-denial which it so badly needs to follow.”

From the closing pages of Harry’s account of his Christian mission to Australia and New Zealand.

Envoie: Kenneth: “Christmas means that God is at the heart of things, not just as a creative force but as a Person who loves what he has made and will not rest until He has restored it. The baby who drew three Kings to his cradle is the man who will win the world to his cross; and the man who will win the world to his cross is none other than the Lord of all that is, has been and will be. He made us, he saved us, and He will bring us to our destiny, which is to respond as a united family to the love which brought us into being.”

From Kenneth’s Christmas Message to the Diocese of Oxford in 1972



Kenneth and Juliet on their Wedding Day



Juliet, Kenneth & the new-born Catherine



At Amen Court

The Snowfields of the Spirit

Teach us, Lord God, not to rest in this life, but to watch, to expect, to love, as those who look for the morning. Inspire us to use our gifts, to spend our love, for beyond us are the Hills of God, the snowfields of the Spirit, the Other Kingdom
A Prayer which Kenneth loved and which he used at Gwenda’s Funeral