

MY FIRST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

By David Turner, February 2022

I was admitted as a member of the Guild of Stewards in February 1997. In July of the previous year, I applied to become a member of the Guild as the result of an announcement in the Ravenshead Parish Magazine. Mary Skinner was the Chief Steward at that time and she asked me to come over to Southwell for an interview.

We had a cup of tea and a chat in the Minster I think, because at that time there was a small tea stall and a little bookshop in the North Transept. (The building housing today's Refectory and Bookshop had been completed, but was still being fitted out).

Mary and I had a friendly chat and she said something encouraging, but added, "will need Referees, of course". I said to her that the Rev Alistair Conn, Rector of Collingham and sometime Vicar of Ravenshead, was a good friend of mine. "Oh, said Mary, "I know Alistair very well: that sounds very satisfactory." She didn't exactly say "You're in!" but it felt like it.

I assume everything went through the proper channels, because a letter followed, dated 23 October 1996, from Christine Whitehouse (Secretary) confirming my acceptance as a Member of the Guild.

It was arranged for me to shadow an experienced Steward in order to find out what my duties would entail. I was also given Fact Sheets and other material to read. But my preparation fell far short of the sort of detailed training that new recruits receive today.

I must have made a suitable impression and I was duly presented for admission at the Candlemas Evensong in 1997. As we all know, it is a memorable and unforgettable experience, with the procession round the Minster and the singing of the Processional Hymn a wonderful highlight.

New Stewards were admitted by David Leaning, the Provost of Southwell. In those days, we were all proud of the fact that David was a Provost (the term used when a Cathedral was also a Parish Church) rather than a Dean. Subsequently, however, in the year 2000, all Heads of Cathedrals had to call themselves Dean and the ancient title of Provost was no more.

I settled-in to the routine of stewarding and after several years, I was proposed for the Guild Committee. This was in 2003 and a short time after that, perhaps only a year, I found myself Rota Secretary, taking over from Christine Whitehouse.

Joan Hiller had become Chief Steward in the year 2000 and she did four years before she was replaced by Margaret Henson. Margaret did a five-year stint, ending in 2008, but her final year was a very difficult one, however. She had a bad fall in the Minster, broke her leg and had to spend time in hospital and then in rehab, so I took over as a sort of "Deputy Chief Steward", although no such post existed.

This shadow activity was a good preparation for me. because I was elected Chief Steward in 2009 and served until 2012. David Leaning had retired in 2006 and was replaced in 2007 by John Guile. John was very different from the "old-school" David: much more visible in the Minster and anxious for Stewards to be more pro-active.

I arranged a series of small “get-togethers” so that the new Dean could put his ideas across. One simple move he wanted required Stewards to take visitors forward to the centre of the nave in order to point out the full glory of the building. Working with John was stimulating and exciting.

One day he said to me, “I want us to have a better Visitor’s Guide”. I had compiled an earlier Guide which we called “YOUR WALK-ROUND GUIDE”. It had been adapted from various sources, including earlier booklets, with the addition of new material. It was an inexpensive black and white production and was published in 2004. I set to work on a revised Booklet and called that one THE CATHEDRAL COMPANION again in black and white.

John Guile liked this and it was well-received by visitors and sold well. Later it was revised and rewritten by Revd Nigel Coates with the aid of a professional designer and published in full colour.

I ceased to be Chief Steward at the beginning of 2012, when Glenys Herbert took over for three years and at that point I also left the Guild Committee.

During the subsequent ten years I have been a foot soldier in the Guild, watching our organisation grow and prosper to become the thriving, well-organised outfit we see today.

As I entered my eighties, I began to find stewarding and tour guiding somewhat too demanding, so I gave up “proper” stewarding and switched to sitting quietly on the Information Desk. It was around that time – on 28 January 2017 to be exact - that I was made an Honorary Life Member of the Guild. This is a signal honour, rarely conferred, and I was very moved and gratified to receive it.

In the considerable period since I held office in the Guild I have carried out various pieces of research into the Minster and its history, leading to quite a number of Fact Sheets under my name. Major investigations involved the East Windows, the history of the Prebends and the development and demise of the original Chapter.

So I celebrate twenty-five years as Steward, Tour Guide, Committee Member, Rota Secretary, Chief Steward, Guide Author, Researcher. Honorary Life member and Information Desk sitter. It has been a wonderful quarter-century and I have enjoyed every minute of it. Thank you to all my fellow stewards, past and present, for their friendship, camaraderie and ever-willing helpfulness.