

## THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY: WHAT SORT OF PASSPORT IS ST. MARTIN'S?

'The Past is a foreign country' are the opening words of a well-loved novel: [The Go Between](#), by [L.P. Hartley](#). They should be set alongside words from a very different novel, [1984](#) by [George Orwell](#): *He who controls the present, controls the past.*

In *The Go Between* a young boy called Leo is invited by his friend Marcus Maudsley to spend the summer of the year 1900 at the family home, Brandham Hall. Only the Maudsleys don't actually own the Hall; they rent it from its kindly and impoverished aristocratic owner, Viscount Trimmingham. The Maudsleys may be wealthy but Mr. Maudsley is in business and they are on the way to higher things; a key to this process is their daughter Marian, of a marriageable age, and destined to be the Viscountess. But Marian Maudsley is involved in a secret affair with Ted Burgess, the local tenant farmer, and when Leo – a sensitive complex boy from a much poorer background – arrives at the Hall, she realises that here is someone whom she can manipulate into becoming the go-between for herself and Ted, making it so much easier for her to slip away from family duties to meet him in the old abandoned outhouses. When it all goes wrong, the consequences are tragic: Marian's mother goes mad, Ted commits suicide, and Leo is left emotionally scarred for life; even so, Marian is able to exert her will over him for one last time, asking him to go to her grandson – who strongly resembles Ted – to tell him that his grandfather was indeed the tenant farmer and not the Viscount whom his mother married, and that, in Marian's eyes at least, there was no shame in his father's conception: 'Our love was a beautiful thing, wasn't it?' she tells Leo, 'you remember that summer, wasn't the most beautiful thing in it Ted and I and our love for each other?'

Well, that's how she sees it; for Leo it was something else. But the Leo of 50 years on can only acknowledge that the past is a foreign country; in 1900, a woman in Marian's position could not easily escape from the destiny planned for her; nor could her aspiring family contemplate the fact that she could prefer a tenant farmer to a viscount. Those 50 years alone have wrought such huge changes that the past is indeed a foreign country in which things are done differently.

If that is true of 50 years, how much more is it true of 1430 or so years? Here my second quotation comes in: *He who controls the present controls the past.* At its extreme it refers to the role of [Winston Smith](#) in the Ministry of Truth – falsifying historical records to accord with the current received political wisdom. In [Soviet Russia](#) images of [Trotsky](#) standing next to [Lenin](#) were withdrawn and Trotsky airbrushed out, on the grounds that someone who became a public enemy to be hunted down and murdered could never have been a close friend and ally of the leader of the revolution. Well, that is extreme but it remains true that we cannot actually travel back in time so we must use what is known about the past to interpret it in the present and the purpose of that interpretation cannot but influence how we then present the past. We can also be selective about the past: many of us at some point in our lives will have been tempted to think how lovely it would have been to live in a time other than our own, indeed the [film of The Go Between](#) plays on that

yearning by intercutting the summer of 1900 with the ladies in their beautiful dresses and big hats and their carriages and gracious living with the drab, rain swept scenes of 1950 when Leo returns to Brandham in his ugly black car. But of course those fantasies themselves are very selective: we would prefer to be the beautiful rich lady or the man caught up in some great enterprise, to the beggar on the street, to the woman forced into prostitution, to the overworked servant. One strange by-product of the modernising and permissive age of the 1960s and '70s was the emergence of a devotion to the past: old photographs, pseudo Edwardian clothes, traditional washstands; but these things were taken out of their context; we could wear the Edwardian blouse skirt and choker without experiencing any of the constraints endured by women of those times. It all demonstrated a yearning for something less harsh, less crude, less relentlessly going forward than our own age, but to some extent it was an invention: we might control how the past is presented, but that will not necessarily help us to live well in the present, especially if it encourages us to feel that the present is somehow alien and wrong; it may amount to pure escapism.

When these [talks](#) were launched in January, the overall title was: 'St. Martin's Conversations: 'Going back to go forward' and this was clarified as: 'What can we learn from the past of St. Martin's to be the [24/7 discipleship](#) community we need to be now?'

When people come into the church on a Thursday at 12 noon and ask for an explanation of this church it is very easy to and enjoyable to tell the story of [St. Martin's](#): the Roman building whose purpose we cannot be sure of; the arrival of the [Christian Queen](#), and her Bishop, and her retinue, and the gift of the building for use as their chapel; their quiet worship going on day by day until the announcement of the mission of [Augustine](#), and the crucial decision made at some level that [Canterbury](#) would be the right place to begin: close to the coast and the home of a Christian Queen whose husband had permitted the continuing practice of her faith and might therefore be sympathetic to the mission; the meeting in the open air, the welcome and therefore the establishment of this church as the place where Augustine first celebrated and preached in England; the eventual baptism of the King and, in the meantime, of numerous others into the Christian faith. Our great source for this is [Bede](#) who gives us various clues as to what worked for the missionaries:

- They were unworldly and lived only on the necessities of life
- They preached a simple and comforting message to anyone who would hear
- They practiced what they preached, endured hardship and personal risk for it
- Their message was reinforced by miracles
- They presented a united front to those involved in heathen rites

Bede tells us that [Ethelbert](#) was determined that no-one should be compelled to accept Christianity but also that he favoured believers because they were fellow-citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Eventually Ethelbert granted 'his teachers' a place of residence *appropriate to their station and possessions of various kinds to supply their wants*.

Bede clearly admired the people he is describing, but writing at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century he is already telling us that while many people were attracted to the Christian faith by word and by example, there were other reasons why it was a good idea to be a Christian: the identity of a fellow citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven brought favours from the King, and the monks who had begun with such a simple lifestyle would move into residences appropriate to their station with possessions of various kinds. Maybe that's not part of the talk we would want to give to visitors, but in fact it is a very key element of the whole story of the Christian faith in this country and indeed in the world: that the Body of Christ, the Church, has to have a way of being in the world, being an institution; and the history of Christianity is not just about a history of faith but of a complex institutions evolving through crisis, reformation, growth and decline – and whatever is yet to come.

The great thing about St. Martin's is its survival as a witness to those times and in particular as a witness to some of the earliest of those times. A few weeks ago some of us went to [Bradwell](#) and visited what is in effect a truncated fragment, all that remains a large Christian Church and complex: I ask myself, why is it so meaningful to make that long journey there, to walk towards it, to worship in it, to sing and pray in it, to sit around it afterwards? I felt personally that desire to say to the shade of [St. Cedd](#) who landed there and began it all in 654. We're still here: after all those centuries, Christians from Canterbury went to commune with those early days. And when I celebrated the [Eucharist](#) here at St. Martin's the following day, I looked up at that far West wall, with all its structure and marks of age, and I thought - we've got that here too, here in our midst, every Sunday or whenever we want – we don't have to travel hundreds of miles to find it. The past is a foreign country: our representations of it are almost always idealised – that [statue of Bertha](#) for instance is a beautiful idealisation of a Christian Queen. The fact is that we cannot travel backwards in time, only forwards; if we want to visit the past we turn to books, to stories, and also to places; these are the only passports as it were that will enable us to have any idea of what happened then; nor can they ever be completely accurate for history is always interpreted and, as Orwell said, those who control the present control the past. In the 1980s a book was written about the doomed expedition led by [Robert Falcon Scott](#) to the Antarctic. I think the author was [Roland Huntford](#). This was not an account of a brave man among other brave men dogged by misfortune but dying heroically: it presented a very different and critical view of Scott and I remember it being discussed at school among the history staff, some of whom thought it was about time the myth of Scott was exposed. It was even said by somebody that [Oates](#) left the tent to die because he could not stand being with Scott any more. For those of us brought up with the image of brave, stoic John Mills in Scott of the Antarctic, it was a bit of a shock. But it was of course entirely consistent with an age that just didn't like heroes, and did a lot of sneering at institutions; a few other books were no doubt published but it was eighteen years before [Ranulph Fiennes](#), whose personal experience makes his opinion worth listening to, produced a book that similarly caught the public's attention and balanced the earlier book's attack with a more considered and sympathetic view of the man Scott and the reasons for the decisions that were made. But sympathetically presented or not,

none of knows what happened in that tent as the blizzard closed in, who said what, thought what, did what. There are no passports to actual moments of history before the advent of recording. We can only interpret the information available to us. And even some of those most well documented events of recent years, such as the horrific [assassination of President Kennedy](#) on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1963, filmed from so many angles, remain unresolved in the public imagination, the target of conspiracy theorists.

The 24/7 Confident Discipleship is a diocesan initiative that belongs very much to our own day and age. 24/7 is a contemporary way of saying 'All the time. Since perhaps the [Great War](#), the Church has struggled with a crisis of confidence: people question and dismiss religious belief; they have other things to do with their lives on Sunday; a few years back however, a day entitled '*Confidence in our Calling*' in this Diocese indicated that we should not be afraid to lay hold of this word and realise its meaning; we can be confident about being Christian clergy. The present initiative is taking that word beyond the clergy and to all the people: if we think of the disciples as only being the twelve before eleven of them became apostles, then we are wrong; we are *all* disciples, and our daily life and the lives of the ordinary Christians illustrated on those [postcards](#), are lives of discipleship, of purpose and meaning in the service of Christ and his Kingdom. It is also indicative of another response to the crisis that has faced the church: a move towards centralisation. One of the great things about the Church of England is I believe, its local variation. The theme of these [evenings](#) has been to anchor this initiative in the peculiar history of this church and what it uniquely offers to the world. What it offers is a story of survival: as you can see in the photographs here reproduced: this building has changed over the years, and will no doubt change again. There would once have been a roodscreen, ripped out of its holes by reformers or puritans, I'm not sure which; there would have been chapels to Mary and the saints, long since suppressed; people in Canterbury were burnt at the stake for their Protestant beliefs in Queen Mary's reign, and no doubt Catholics suffered at other times. The history of the Church has its dark places, but like every institution it is part of the truth of our journey through life and time, and every stage of it has something to say to us. Augustine and his companions faced their challenges but they didn't have to shut their church for fear of drug dealers. Even so, it is as well we don't know everything that happened in their time. The fact that St. Martin's is a parish church that has been altered so often is a disadvantage and yet a strength: we don't entirely have that exposure of rugged age that Bradwell has which ensures that thousands will make that pilgrimage as we did; but then Bradwell does not belong in the community as this place does, witnessing all that a parish church witnesses - baptisms, marriages, funerals, good and bad sermons, hymns, and the presence of regular worshippers living out their Christian lives rather than just paying a single visit. We must do our absolute best to make St. Martin's available to everyone who wants to see it, and make it known; but I believe that the remarkable truth of this building will tend to remain hidden to many, overshadowed by the obvious claims of the [Cathedral](#) and the ruins of the [Abbey](#), simply because it appears to be nothing more or less than a Parish Church.

To conclude: The great strength of being able to make contact with the past lies in that feeling that we are in touch with the foundations of our faith and thereby encouraged with a sense of being, well grounded and better able to deal with whatever comes our way today. But we are of today and not yesterday – and St. Martin's greatest strength is that it *is* still here today, and has changed many times in order to be so, in order to survive to serve [Christ](#) and his kingdom.