

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF CIVIC SERVICE

Ald. E. R. Oakley Retires at Christchurch Local Historian, Author and Food Officer in Two Wars

C.T. October 24, 1945



TWENTY-FIVE years ago, November 1, Eric Russell Oakley, a Christchurch accountant was elected to represent the Central Ward on the Christchurch Borough Council. On November 9, three weeks hence, his retirement from the Council will take effect. During the intervening quarter-century there has been only one short break, but for seven years, until his elevation as an alderman, he represented Jumpers Ward, as a councillor.

Alderman Oakley informed the Council by letter on Thursday that he would not seek re-election when his period of service as an alderman expired, and tributes were paid to him for his services to the borough.

WHEN HE WAS DISAPPOINTED—

Alderman Oakley's tenure of office has been far from tranquil. His high regard for tradition and dignity, coupled with an almost unmatched keenness for progressive development of land within the boroughs' boundaries, brought him into conflict with many of his colleagues on the Council and with sections of the residents, who did not always see eye to eye with him when he propounded certain schemes. But it was not an unusual experience for him to be approached at a later date by some of his opponents and told that their judgment was wrong and his was right.

When an "Echo" reporter had a chat with Alderman Oakley shortly before his impending retirement was publicly announced; he said that his biggest disappointment in his municipal life was the enclosure of the town common. On that question he lost an election by 16 votes, but at a by-election in 1927 he was returned for Jumpers Ward with the biggest majority any member had ever had.

—AND PLEASED

Turning over the pages of his books of newspapers cuttings he said he was most pleased with the reclamation of Quomps. At that time he was chairman of the Parks and Pleasure Grounds Committee, and Quomps was then a rubbish dump and an eyesore.

"There was a good deal of opposition to the scheme," he said, "as a portion of it was common land and we were accused of robbing the commoners of their rights. It took six or seven years to get the scheme under way, and then it was gradually whittled down to what you can see to-day. After the 1914-18 war we were able to get a grant from the Government on the grounds of protecting land subject to sea erosion by tidal water. We had to prove that the water alongside the Convent Walk and the Quay was tidal, and it was in consequence of that grant that the wall was built.

VARIED ACTIVITIES

The original scheme at Quomps was for the work of reclamation to be continued as far as Tuckton Bridge, but I had to promise to confine the work to the Quay end in order to secure agreement for any part of the scheme."

Outside Council work, many of the town's organisations have had the benefit of Alderman Oakley's experience: He was secretary of the Christchurch Hospital Carnival for many years; was the first chairman of Christchurch Toc H; chairman of the now dormant Christchurch Historical

Society which was formed in 1920; secretary of the old Ratepayers' Association in 1919; secretary of the Floods and Rivers Committee in 1916; secretary of the Peace Celebration Committee in 1921; one of the founders of Christchurch Bowling Club, secretary for three years and then its president; and chairman of the Borough Publicity Committee.

CHURCH AUTHORITY, WRITER AND LECTURER

But perhaps his greatest love is for the Priory Church, and the history and antiquities of the church and town. He is one of the few vestry clerks in England and secretary of the Church Repairs Committee. He has helped in publicising the Priory very largely by his pen, for Alderman Oakley is a prolific writer on subjects associated with the church. His latest book is "Legends of the Miraculous Beam and the Buried Treasure at the Priory Church," and he has also published an exhaustive guide to the fabric.

His other publications include "Smugglers of Christchurch, Bourne Heath and New Forest," "Unknown Christchurch," and "Chats about Old Books," and the author of the official guide to Christchurch and Highcliffe-on-Sea, and is now at work on a book about Christchurch Castle, few authentic details of which are known, and which requires him to make considerable research as its history goes back almost to prehistoric times.

Alderman Oakley is widely known as a lecturer, and claims to have spoken to gatherings of the Women's Institute in almost every village in Hampshire and Dorset. His subject is always associated with the town of Christchurch or the Priory Church. He was also one of the first people to broadcast for the 6 BM station at Bournemouth of the B.B.C., and when it was closed down in 1939 was invited to take part in the epilogue broadcast.

SERVICE AS FOOD OFFICER

Throughout the 1914-18 war he was Food Officer for Christchurch, and was reappointed to this post when rationing commenced in the last war, giving up the work in 1942 under a new rule of the Ministry that members of a local authority must not be employed in Food Offices. At the same time he relinquished his position as national registration officer, which he had held for three years.

Alderman Oakley came to Christchurch in 1906. His wife died early in the last war, and he has three sons and three daughters.

Alderman Oakley's letter intimating his forthcoming retirement from the Council was read at Thursday's meeting. He was not present.

CIVIC TRIBUTE

The Mayor (Alderman D. Galton) said he was sure they would all join with him in expressing regret at the severance of Alderman Oakley from public work. Alderman Oakley had told the Council that he had fought and lost more elections than any other member of that authority, and he (the Mayor) thought that went to prove the very keen interest he had always taken in local affairs. They regretted losing an old colleague, and he was pleased to record appreciation of his services during those years, and to wish him very happy days and the best of health.

Councillor E. J. Slinn said as a member of the Council of relatively short duration, he had recognised and appreciated Ald. Oakley's knowledge of Council procedures. They would miss his humour—sometimes rather pungent, but nevertheless put across with vigour when things were perhaps rather dull; He had a most profound knowledge of Christchurch history and its antiquities, and they all knew how he had stood up for the honour and dignity of the borough.