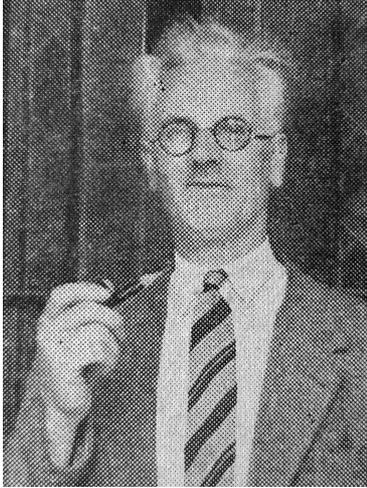


Mr. W. R. Bingham

"Christchurch Times" Reporter 1948



You don't have to be in Christchurch very long before you hear name of Bill Bingham. It's a name that's always cropping up and there's a reason for it

Bill is a man of the people, interested mainly in the ordinary folk around him. That is partly why he is a Socialist—and proud of it too—but there have been many other things that have made him believe that Socialism was the right political faith.

His life has been full of ups and downs, but not without variety and excitement. Third son of the late Malcolm Bingham, an Irishman in the 5th Dragoon Guards, Bill was born at Plymouth.

Part of his early childhood was spent in Ireland, but then the family moved to Plymouth. Here ships and sailors fascinated the young Bill Bingham and it was not surprising that he decided to go to sea.

CUFFED, BUT ENJOYED IT

At 14 he joined the crew of a fishing smack and, in his own words, "was buffeted and cuffed but enjoyed every moment of it."

Cooking became his line on the fishing vessels and he quickly earned the art of preparing and dishing up meals in cramped spaces. As time went on Bill's attention turned to bigger ships, so in 1912 he signed on in the Royal Navy. From Able Seaman he graduated to a Writer, and although he was for a short time on H.M.S. "Agincourt," the biggest battleship afloat at the time, most of his naval service was in light cruisers.

Of World War I, Bill's most vivid recollections are undoubtedly of the Battle of Jutland, and he has on more than one occasion given talks on this historic naval action. He was serving on the light cruiser "Fearless" when she was the first British vessel to enter the forts of Heligoland.

BACK TO FISHING

In 1918 Bill Bingham left the Navy, but not the sea. For him it was "back to the fishing boats," but this time it was in deep-sea trawlers from Boston and Hull.

"My experience of trawling makes me wonder sometimes what people in factories have to grumble about nowadays," he said. "Trawling isn't work—it's toil."

When trawling in the North Sea he would be away ten days, but if Iceland was the destination then it would be six weeks before he got back. "And it's not only fish you bring up in the trawl," he went on. "I've seen cases of tinned fruit, pieces of motor cars, bags of cement, and more than once a human body."

Life as a lower deck hand made Bill realise that fishermen were not always getting a square deal, so he decided to do something about it. He joined the National Union of British Fishermen, and the members, realising his ability as a spokesman, soon elected him branch secretary and then national secretary. That was in 1922, and thus Bill launched out on his trade union and political activities. For the fishermen there were victories and defeats, and eventually their union became incorporated in the Transport and General Workers Union.

Thus ended Bill Bingham's association with the fishermen, and he turned his attention more actively to politics. He became a political organiser in the north of England. "You see, in those days my chances of getting permanent employment after being a trade union official were negligible, and if there's anybody, excluding Aneurin Bevan, who should feel bitter, it's Bill Bingham," he said.

Here are some of the other jobs which he found himself compelled to take to get his livelihood: boiler man (jam factory), building operative, newspaper man, mental orderly, commercial traveller, and fitter's mate.

"In most of my spheres of activity I have come across cases of injustice against the workers and it was because of this that I've felt compelled to work for social reformation," he continued.

NOT SO BITTER NOW

He feels that progress has been made to this end and that there is not now so much bitterness as there was in the old days.

In old fighting days he recalls a "free for all" when addressing 5,000 fishermen at Grimsby. Police charged the crowd and Bill got knocked off the platform. "Nevertheless we enjoyed it, as we felt we were fighting for something worth while," he says.

Christchurch will remember Bill Bingham mostly for his work as chairman of the Housing Committee when on the Town Council, and his name is perpetuated in "Bingham Road " on the Burton Road housing estate.

His hobbies are literature and music, but most important of all "trying to help those less fortunate than himself."