



Farmer, Sailor, Preacher

An autobiography by L. Cottam

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Introduction

Why, at the age of 86, have I decided to write my autobiography when I have no skills as an author? It is because whilst sitting with Christian friends, talking about past experiences, many of them have said to me, “Lawrie, you ought to write these things down.”

Now as you know, the successful author can become so by adding colour, exaggerating and at times mixing truth with fiction. How can I compete with this, when I promise not to fictionalise or exaggerate any of the facts in this writing? Will the reader lose interest? Will this account of my life be exciting enough?

My brother-in-law, Pastor Raymond Westbrook, once called me the ‘Raconteur of Swinton’ implying that I was a good story teller, but that’s not the reason for my efforts to write this narrative. I’m doing it simply to encourage the following people;

- All those who think that they have no talent and cannot be used by God.
- All those who are in a hard place, perhaps holding a small congregation together with little help from the bigger churches.
- All those who are sad at heart, because their loved ones are not going on for the Lord, despite all the love and efforts they have made to win them for Jesus.
- All who read this autobiography, to realise that God can and does want to use you in His service and that the words of the hymn writer are definitely true. There’s a work for Jesus none but you can do.

There is no such thing as an insignificant member of the body of Christ.

Chapter 1 - Early Days

I was born on the 26th April 1924, in the village of Cadishead, situated on the A57 between Manchester and Warrington in North West Lancashire. I was christened Lawrence, but all my life I have been called Lawrie. My father John Cottam and my mother Martha Helen Miller both came from Yorkshire. My dad was a steel worker for Dorman Longs and my mother was the daughter of a shepherd, working somewhere on the moors. Both my parents were practising Christians and attended the Methodist mission in Cadishead, which later became a Pentecostal church.

Two years after I was born came the general coal strike, which developed into a full general strike with people desperate for fuel to keep their houses warm. They scavenged the coal dumps and railway sidings; some even went out to the moss land to dig peat, in an effort to meet the need for fuel. You see, every house depended upon solid fuel.

Then, in 1929 came the social disaster – The Wall Street stock exchange crash. Things went from bad to worse. The local penny bank closed down. People were desperate. To prevent the children from suffering with rickets, the local council started to tour the streets each dinner time with improvised soup kitchens. The children would go, with a bowl, for soup and a thick slice of bread. Fortunately for us, my father was a very hard- working industrious Christian, who did not drink, smoke or gamble.

We had a large garden in which we kept pigs and chickens and also two allotments which we all worked between us. Even the youngest child tried to help, for we knew it was a means whereby we could all eat well. I will always remember as a child hearing this song, a song which the ex soldiers in American used to sing whilst begging round the streets.

Half a million boots slogging through mud
Full of that Yankee doodle dum
Half a million boots slogging through mud
And I was the kid with the drum
Say don't you remember, they called me Al
It was Al all the time
Say don't you remember I'm your pal
Brother can you spare a dime?

This is the first time I have ever written this song down. I have had no need to, for it was impressed upon my memory as a young boy all those years ago. The severe conditions of the time created in me a certain utility mind set that has stood me in good stead for all these years.

The all important factor in the thirties, something that is sadly missing in today's society, was to get one's priorities in the right order; to stay out of debt, to save the money up first and then buy the necessary requirements. Emphasis on Necessary Requirements.

We clearly understood this concept, income £1 expenditure £1.10 = misery. Income £1 expenditure 90p = happiness. I have witnessed in the last two years, more than one family where the wife is unwilling to prepare vegetables to make a cheap meal, to economise, in case she damages her false finger nails that cost £20 plus £5 for each repair! Knowing full well that they cannot afford it, husbands and wives spend money on all kinds of pleasure, including sun bed tanning, tobacco, alcohol and take-away meals.

The Lord gives the Christian wisdom to put their priorities in the right order, giving them power over the credit card. I have just mentioned this to point out the great advantage that the Christian has through following the wise instruction given in the scriptures. The things I have mentioned are not sour grapes, but undeniable present day facts.

The apostle Paul declared in Romans 6 "Sin will not have dominion over the Christian." This gives the Christian a decided advantage, but having said that, it is a sin to be a lazy person. We are instructed, "Let him that stole, steal no more, but rather let him labour with his hands the things that are good, to give to those in need."

At the age of 12, I could rhyme off many breeds of horse, cattle, pigs, chickens, goats, rabbits and pigeons. Rabbits were a regular part of our diet. We ate at least one a week, so I sent away for a Belgium hare buck and two Flemish giant does. These were of course very large. I seriously set about supplying the same for our household. In order to do this I wanted another rabbit hutch, so I pestered my parents to allow me to build it in the back kitchen. Mother was not pleased, but Dad said I was better working there on a profitable project, than getting into trouble.

When I had finished building the hutch we all stood and laughed, for it was too big to fit through the back door! I had to pull it to pieces and re-assemble it in the back yard. Both breeding and eating the rabbits proved to be 100% successful. Let me just mention the meals we regularly sat down to.

Shin beef and rabbit casserole, tripe and onions, neck end of stew with suet dumplings floating on top, kippers, herrings rolled and baked in the coal fired oven, roasted rabbits and pigeons were a special delight. I cannot

remember anyone saying at meal times that they did not like the food. Every plate was licked clean.

During this austere period of my life, an incident occurred. I was forced into a crash-course in cooking (which, by the way has been very useful over the years). I was about 12 years of age and we were living in Albert Street, Cadishead. One day my mother took ill and after a medical examination she was diagnosed as having clots in her legs.

Now the only remedy in those days was to take tablets to thin the blood and to lie with one's legs raised, avoiding doing work. This condition was referred to as having white legs.

Doctor Drysdale came into our house and told us children that we would have to share the work between us. I volunteered to do all the cooking. John looked after the pigs and chickens and my other brother, Reg, did the garden and ran the errands. Helen did the housework and attended to any bills, paid the insurance man etc. Mother lay on the sofa and gave instructions. I had to go and trim my nails, then using carbolic soap I had to scrub my hands. Then, step by step mother taught me how to cook plain substantial meals and how to bake bread, sultana cakes and drop scones.

Looking back, with the benefit of hind sight, I am impressed by the way our family reacted to what really amounted to a disaster, seeing there was no National Health Service. Although only my younger sister and myself are still alive, I appreciate the way Helen and my two brothers all worked together without grumbling. After long analysis, I put it down to the excellent example set for us by our parents.

Just in passing, I remember one occasion when my mother announced to my dad that we hadn't got enough eggs to go around. As quick as a flash he replied, "Scramble them and we'll share them!"

My second interest or love was all things connected with the sea. I read every sea story I could get hold of, just skipping words I could not understand. My imagination helped me a good deal with this. I read all about Cortes, Magellan, Columbus, Blackbeard the pirate, Drake, Raleigh, Frobisher and even about Long John Silver and the Mary Celeste.

My friend Frank and I once built a small boat and spent a full day struggling twelve miles up the river Glaze, from Cadishead to Leigh Flash. I never dreamed that one day I would cross the Atlantic in a small landing craft (Ha! Ha!)

Because of over crowding, I used to share a bed with my older brother John. One night, after reading about Blackbeard, I nearly strangled my brother as he slept. Fortunately he was much stronger than I, so he suffered no harm.

So, how can I truthfully describe myself the day I left school? Strong, good looking, top of the class in wood and metal work, but sadly I was semi-illiterate. I used to spell phonetically. The only writing I did was to send away for seeds and livestock; I even spelt my own name wrong. Instead of writing Lawrie, I would spell it as a farm lorry. I left school at the age of 14, with no qualifications, at a time when farmers were finding it hard to make a living and many had gone bankrupt.

One farmer travelled three miles with horse and cart from Rixton down to Cadishead in order to sell his potatoes to the owners of chip shops. Also, he would go around the streets selling to anyone who would buy. When the farmer arrived at our door he asked me a question. "Why are you not working?" I explained that I had not got a job and he asked me if I would like to work for him. He said, "If you would, put your bike on the cart and help me carry the rest of this load off."

Two hours later, tired and satisfied, but so pleased I had a job, I returned to his farm in Rixton in order to find out where the farm was. From that day I worked for 3½ years and I took to farming like a duck to water.

It must be clearly understood that because of the shortage of man power owing to the war, men and women were called upon to do jobs they normally would not do. So, I was soon promoted to ploughman.

I loved working with the shire horses (Jerry, Captain and Prince). It is so different working with horses compared to an unfeeling, noisy machine. The most satisfying thing was ploughing, turning the ground over and burying the debris of last year's crops, resulting in a field of fine straight furrows of black soil.

I also found the same satisfaction in the road work, delivering produce to Cadishead and corn to the flour mill at Glazebrook. Although I was strong enough to plough, I was still immature. Our farm produced mixed crops, fattened cattle and also bred large white pigs. Consequently we kept a boar in the orchard which was surrounded by a low corrugated iron fence.

The early ripening Jargon Elle pears were just about ready, so one dinner time I went into the orchard, jumped up, caught a branch, shook it violently and two pears fell down. The boar and I raced for the pears and I beat the

boar, stuffing the pears inside my shirt. This procedure was repeated seven times.

Finally the frustrated boar attacked me. First he knocked me down and then, with his big side tooth, he slashed my leg open just below the knee. He then bruised my ribs and ripped the seat out of my pants. I was shocked and frightened, so I scrambled towards the nearby fence and did an undignified belly roll over it, to safety.

The farmer's sister made improvised bandages by cutting up a clean white pillow case and fastened my pants together with safety pins. I then rode three miles to the Doctor, who put ten stitches in my leg and gave me a tetanus injection. This incident proves the stupidity of greed. This was the first of many irresponsible actions.

From time to time the horses needed re-shoeing. When this occurred I would take the horse to the blacksmith at Hollins Green and spend my dinner time in either the Eagle and Child pub or The Black Swan pub. The motto of the landlord was, 'If he's old enough to plough, he's old enough to have a drink.' So, from the age of fourteen there was hardly a day went by without me drinking some kind of alcohol.

This really upset my parents. On one occasion, my elder brother John took me into the bathroom for privacy and remonstrated with me concerning my drinking, having been informed by a fellow brick layer, "Your Lawrie wasn't half knocking them back in the Nags Head, last night." So I doubled my fist and threatened to punch him if he didn't keep his nose out of my business.

How I have changed since that day. I now never laugh at a drunk. I feel so sad for the people who are addicted. So there existed in our home a strained atmosphere caused by my conduct and my behaviour.

Chapter 2 – Uneasy and Itchy Feet

The title of this chapter may seem strange, but it is a very good description of what took place within the heart and mind of a teenager who had a good home and a job he loved. Looking back I can now realise that I was blind in my mind, which is the very worst kind of blindness.

This is what took place. Every time the pastor or member of the church visited our house, as they talked about church activities and especially if the pastor, my mother or my sister played the old treadle organ and my dad led the hymn singing, I would feel uneasy and go out into the yard for a smoke. You see friends, sinners really feel uncomfortable in the company of saints. So this uneasy state of heart and mind, which was caused by conviction, resulted in me having a resentful, dissatisfied spirit and itchy feet.

I was living a completely different lifestyle to that of the rest of my family. Now at this point in time, Hitler had already invaded Poland, with his fast-moving tanks supported by Stuka dive bombers. Infantry riding in trucks and half trucks had successfully carried out his Blitzkrieg – his lightning war.

He failed to wipe out three thousand British and French troops at Dunkirk, who were rescued by God's grace, an armada of small craft and two destroyers. So I hit on the idea of using the war situation as an excuse to change the situation. I did this by leaving the farm and going to work for a brick works.

Farming being a 'reserved occupation' meant that I could have continued working on the farm for the rest of the war, but I had other ideas. I was just turned seventeen at this time and having left the farm I started working as a second mate, learning to drive a Foden diesel crash box lorry. I was dead keen to learn to drive and within six months I could drive that lorry as well as the regular driver. (This was to be the beginning of a sixty year career as a driver of all kinds of vehicle).

Then I secretly went to the recruiting office in Dover Street, Manchester and volunteered for the Navy. I presented myself as a brick works labourer and never mentioned farming. I also said I was eighteen and I did not have a birth certificate. I was fully prepared to use deception in order to get into the navy and was pleased to pass my medical. Three weeks later, a letter came to my home containing my call-up papers and a travel warrant with instructions to make my way to HMS Collingwood in Fareham.

My mother was broken hearted. She had already said, "Goodbye" to my elder brothers, John and Reginald and now her youngest son was about to leave home and go to war. I had no considerations for my mother's feelings, only my own interest. As I left home, carrying a small case, I thought that I was at last foot loose and fancy free, but I did not realise the sinner lives in a mobile prison that does not consist of concrete and steel.

But for all the sins that dominate their lives and holds them in a vice-like grip, how meaningful are the words of Paul concerning the Christian;

Romans 6: "Sin shall not have dominion over you."

Wesley wrote these words:

He breaks the power of cancelled sin.
He sets the prisoner free.
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.

All too often the invisible, yet very realistic spirit of dissatisfaction can creep up on any person and deceive them into thinking that to get one's own way is real freedom. The truth of the matter is this (and I have proved this through bitter experience), that there is such a thing as spurious freedom.

This is where someone is deceived by the father of all lies, Satan himself, when in actual fact they are not free at all. I firmly believe this, because I was a genuine Prodigal myself. I only found true freedom at a much later date, which I will mention further in this narrative.

In the meantime I will continue by describing the long and sometimes amazing way in which God preserved me and eventually gave me lasting happiness.

Chapter 3 – Divine Preservation

When I finished my 12 weeks training at HMS Collingwood, I was sent to HMS Victory at Portsmouth, there to wait in a personnel pool. I had to be ready to go at any time to any ship that needed a seaman. This could be anything from a mine sweeper to a battle ship.

At 16.30 that very same day, I was making my way to the dining room when I spotted a large poster advertising that volunteers were wanted for Special service. I went into the office and made inquiries of the duty officer.

“What do you want volunteers for, Sir?” I asked.

“We want men to crew landing craft, to go on raids and invasions of enemy occupied territories,” he replied. He went on to explain that I would be living under hard layers (which means none of the facilities you would normally have on a big ship). The living conditions would be Spartan, with Skipper and mate all living in one room. I was promised neat rum to drink at dinner time and as much tobacco as I could pay for.

“When you’re at sea, you’ll think you’re on the back of a drunken crab and you’ll wish you had never volunteered. Your badge will be an anchor with a Tommy gun in the centre and air force wings at the top. Do you still want to join?” I told him that I did and he said, “You’re just in time. The draft goes out at nine in the morning, oh, by the way, it’s a one way ticket brigade. We guarantee you to go in, but not to come out!”

The next morning I joined about 200 volunteers of mixed ranks and we made our way to Troon, in Ayrshire, Scotland to HMS Don Donald. When we arrived, there was an air of urgency.

They lost no time in getting us on the landing craft to train for raids and invasions.

My new routine began with 5 O’clock reveille. After breakfast we made our way to Troon harbour in a wagon. Two of the men were detailed to carry a large cardboard box containing very large good quality Cornish pasties called Tiddly Oggies – one for each of the crew. This constituted our dinner, along with a mug of drinking chocolate.

We had to learn how to use the capstan, the winch and how to let down the ramp. The main objective was to set out in darkness and reach a certain stretch of beach just as the dawn was breaking. The timing was very important. It was bitter cold and very hard work, but we soon got the hang of it.

During my time at Don Donald, I had an experience that was to influence my life significantly. One day the camp officer came to us and requested of our officer the loan of a seaman to act as a temporary mp for that day. I was chosen. They gave me an mp's badge, a .45 revolver and a set of chain handcuffs.

My job was to take three prisoners, who were suffering with venereal disease like syphilis and gonorrhoea, down to the medical centre. As I stood inside the centre with my back to the door, I watched them strip off, exposing their many tattoos. I heard their cries of pain and I made two very serious vows; firstly, that I would never go with any woman during my time in the Navy. I was of course a virgin sailor. Secondly, I would never have any tattoo. I kept both these vows, although I never discussed them with anyone.

My shipmates just could not understand why I kept rigidly to these two things. Even the Skipper on one occasion mentioned this to me. We were actually in Malta and he invited me into his cabin to question why I

had not gone into Valletta, like the rest of the crew. He also wanted to know why I had not had even one tattoo. I just smiled at him and told him that was not the way I wanted to go and that was the end of it.

Years later, when I met Nancy my wife, I certainly appreciated and was truly thankful for those two strange vows that I made that day. It makes me think that the Lord had His hand on my life even at that early stage.

After we finished our training at Don Donald, the whole group, consisting of approximately 200 volunteers were transported to Greenock. We were of mixed ratings, Sub lieutenants, Midshipmen, Engineers, Stokers, Seamen, Radio operators, Signalmen and Cooks.

Late one cold, winter afternoon we arrived on a dockside in pitch darkness. We were told to form ranks of three and there on the open dock side, with no shelter whatsoever, we spent the coldest three hours of our lives. Even the officers were subject to this exposure. We were actually freezing. I promised earlier on not to exaggerate. I actually pulled skin off the lobes of my ears.

Finally an old passenger liner, that had seen better days, pulled alongside. It was called the Marapoza. Things were so bad that the officer in charge told us not to bother trying to find our own hammocks, but just to get the first we came to, sling it and get to sleep. I was one of the first to get hold of a hammock. I followed a member of the crew down a dimly lit tween deck.

Finally we came to a strange barrier stretched right across the deck. It was made from light chicken wire. I thought it strange, but was so fed up I just slung the hammock and because the old ship was a steamer, the tween deck was really warm, so we soon fell to sleep.

Because of our ordeal the night before, the officer let us have a long sleep in. I was wakened about ten in the morning by a voice with an American accent saying loudly, "Hey Limey. Wake up!"

I peeped over the side of the hammock and all I could see was a row of faces – some white, some black, peering through the chicken wire.

"Come over here, Limey we've got a deal for you." I soon got dressed and went over to the wire, where I asked what on earth they were doing there. They just grinned and then the one who had called to me told me that they were all Court Marshal cases, bound for the good old USA. He explained that many of them were charged with selling Government property, grievous bodily harm or rape. Silently I was concerned that all that separated me from them was some flimsy chicken wire.

The man saw the look on my face and said, "Don't worry guy. You're safe if you 'plait ball' with us." After mimicking the way I spoke and trying to sound like an English gentleman he explained that they would give me dollars if I went to the ship's candy store to buy them a carton of Lucky Strike (matches) and some chocolate bars. I hesitated for a moment then thought I'd better keep on the right side of them, so I said, "Ok. It's a deal." They kept me in cigarettes and chocolate bars for the next ten days, but as I had turned away from them it dawned on me that we must be going to America.

I heard a Bosun's pipe and a loud speaker blared out, "Attention all ratings! You are on an American ship. Make your way to the mess deck. Be sure to have good manners before, during and after meals, in fact all the time you are on this ship – or else! We all made our way to the dining room which was a large converted ballroom. The choice of food was amazing. We had just left England, with its severe rationing and now we were confronted with sausages, bacon and eggs, mushrooms, beans, tomatoes, loads of bread and butter with a choice of jam or marmalade. There was a box full of sugar on each table and beautiful coffee with cream. We thought we had landed in Shangri-La. A day or two later, one of the big American cooks commented to me that we were the most polite and appreciative men he had ever served. You see, we didn't waste food. We only took what we could comfortably eat.

I was so impressed with the food on the ship and in America that I broke the rules and kept a diary, just describing what we had to eat each meal time. Later on, my mother was amazed when she read that diary.

Well, the old Marapoza plodded across the Atlantic, never altering her speed. It took her ten days to get from Scotland to New York and what a pantomime we had when we docked. It was the middle of the night. In the morning our officer informed us that we were going to have breakfast then disembark and make our way to Virginia.

One very important point, which he stressed to us, was that we were not to offend the Women's Royal Voluntary Service. If they offered us anything to eat or drink we were just to smile, take it and thank them.

We all ate a full breakfast. The American dock workers attended to our luggage, kit bags and hammocks. We walked down the gang plank and were accompanied by what we nicknamed the "Piccolo Band". You see it was all light wind instruments and no base brass. They struck up with catchy tunes such as 76 Trombones and Yankee Doodle Dandy.

The Women's Voluntary workers were immaculate in their uniforms and they started handing out jam doughnuts and cartons of beautiful coffee with lots of sugar and cream. We did as we had been instructed and simply smiled and thanked them, before eating and drinking what they gave to us.

Then the Piccolo Band struck up and we all marched off in mixed ranks to the train station. I do not mention this to criticise the Americans, but to really show how generous they were. They just could not do enough for us all the time during our short stay in their country.

The train we boarded was a boat train. When we got to a certain estuary, the engine pushed us on to a ferry and we crossed over the water. Finally we pulled into Norfolk, Virginia where another piccolo band met us at the station. We marched through part of the town, finally arriving at two hotels side by side – The Astbury and the Marlborough.

It was about 13.30 when we went into the dining hall and the cooks apologised and said that we had landed between meal times. They then took cleavers and cut medium sized roast chickens into halves, telling us that one between two should put us on until tea time. Again we were overwhelmed by the amount of food that was available. It wasn't just a show, because during the five weeks we were in America it continued just the same. We all put on weight, but that was soon to change.

After spending the night in the hotel Astbury, all the volunteers were assembled the next morning on the car park. Much to our amusement the ban came and we all marched down to the dock area. There we were ushered into a great, empty warehouse.

Our senior officer stood on a podium alongside the petty officer with a powerful voice. He made the following announcement. "Each captain will be called out. Listen for your name, rank and number. Each captain will be joined by the various members of his crew. This will consist of 1 mate, 1 engineer, 2 stokers, 1 leading seamen, 4 deck hands, 1 radio operator, 1 signalman and 1 cook, making a total of 13 hands." This made up the crew of each landing craft – a total of 14 craft to make up the flotilla.

The captains were then allocated a landing craft number and were instructed to march their crews down to the dockside and find their particular craft. Ours was number 180. We were all total strangers and after locating our craft our captain assembled us on deck to tell us that we would be living and working together on the craft and that he expected us to work as a team. He expected the seamen and the engine room staff to help each other in any kind of task.

On that beautiful, sunny morning the leading seaman suggested that we each give a brief description of ourselves, giving our name and where we came from and what our occupation in Civvy Street was (bearing in mind that we were all volunteers).

The Leading Seaman began, "My name is Lofty. I'm a farm boy from Lincolnshire. My hobby is poaching." Next came the Engineer, who said, "I'm a bread delivery man from the Reading area. They call me Blondie and my hobby is anything to do with engines." And so it went on. One Stoker, Jack said, "I'm a builder's labourer from Glasgow." The other Stoker, John Harris, was a brick layer from the south of England. The radio operator said his name was Jack Wiggins, a butcher from Leeds.

Another man, who became my friend told us he worked on a sheep farm. One seaman said, "I'm J Hamilton. I'm a porter. I used to work in Billingsgate Market." I told them I was a plough boy from Lancashire. Forgive me for repeating this, but we were all volunteers and this made a tremendous difference to the camaraderie. There is of course a great difference between a volunteer and someone who is press-ganged into service. I can honestly say, the Seamen willingly helped the engine room staff and vice versa. We just did it automatically.

After his preliminary introduction, the leading seaman took charge of the deck hands and 'Blondie', the Engineer took charge of the two Stokers. The

Radio Operator and the Signaller worked together in their small cabin. The leading seaman wanted to know what our capabilities were and began by asking how many of us could splice a rope. Only two of us could; Coulson a trawler man and me.

Then he said we had to familiarise ourselves with the ship; the ramps and the emergency steering gear down in the tiller flat. You see, if the main steering gear gets knocked out you can go down in the tiller flat, which is immediately above the rudder, sit facing backwards and steer the ship by hand, reversing every instruction given, because you are sitting backwards. This is not as easy as you may think. The leading seaman said the guns and ammunition were out until we got them fitted in Bermuda. We got conversant with the ship assisted by the American dock workers, as did the engine room staff.

The next big question arose. Where were we heading? Our Skipper informed us we would have to prepare the craft for a long voyage, roughly 4000 miles. This entailed making some extra provisions which consisted of fixing extra fuel tanks on the deck, secured by deck bolts with reinforced piping down to the engine room. To counteract this extra deck weight, we stowed heavy cases of tinned fruit, meat and fish of all descriptions down the centre of each hatch, three layers deep, then on each side of these we stowed 'k-rations'. Each box contained all a soldier required on the battlefield.

After our sea trials we finally made sail for Bermuda. We arrived at this beautiful island and we took on a supply of bread and Mc.Ewan's Export ale, which we lashed down on the deck in a great stack covered with canvass. The gun fitters also came on board and fitted each craft with 4 Swiss-made long-barrelled anti-aircraft guns, plus a great amount of mixed ammunition; high explosives, incendiaries and tracers.

Blondie topped up the water and fuel tanks and we set sail for Gibraltar. Apparently the supplies that we picked up in Bermuda had been delivered by the battleship, King George a few weeks earlier.

We had only been out of Bermuda for about six hours, when the sky went black. Everything went dead quiet. Then a storm broke-the likes of which none of us had ever before experienced. It was lightning and thundering all night long and I thought the landing craft was going to turn turtle on us. What a battering we took that night. It was nothing at all like you hear on the films with the swishing of water and violins playing. It was just as if a giant was standing outside with a great sledge hammer, bashing the ship every few minutes. I found out that millions of tons of water are not soft. No one dare go out on deck.

Fortunately we could actually get to the wheel house and the galley by a covered passage. This was a real blessing. The following day, at dinner time, after the storm had subsided, one of the seamen discussed with the Skipper that he thought the craft was down at the head. The Skipper said that the helmsman had been complaining that the craft was sluggish and slow to respond. On investigating, the seaman reported several feet of water in the forepeak. A welding seam had split on the port side of the bow. I thought this was not a very good start, considering we had 3000 miles to go across the Atlantic. So this is what we did.

Fortunately the tiller flat was completely empty, so we carried all the gear out of the forepeak and put it in the tiller flat. The engine room staff rigged up a mobile diesel pump on the bow. After they had pumped the water out, I went down with specially shaped wedges, a hammer and some canvass and plugged the split. On closer inspection the split was found to be actually just about the water line, so we suffered no more intake of water and we got it welded in Gibraltar. One very interesting thing was the poor radio contact. Today, with cell phones, you can phone long distances.

After we had sailed 1000 miles, we actually lost contact with America and we didn't get contact with Gibraltar until we were within 1000 miles. Each day consisted of plodding along, hoping we didn't run into a German submarine and each night we followed the purple light that was fitted in the stern of the lead craft. You see, we only had one professional navigator on the lead craft and we all followed like Mother Carey's ducklings!

The very first thing that we did when we reached Gibraltar was to send for a welder and get the seam on the bow welded up. Then the extra empty fuel tanks were taken off. We filled up with water, fuel and fresh supplies during our long journey from Virginia to Gibraltar. Apart from the leak in the bow and the storm, we had no more major incidents. One problem we faced was the bread turning green. When this happened we just removed the affected parts of bread and ate the white parts. Then we started to eat good quality ship's biscuits. We supplemented our meagre water supply by drinking one bottle of ale each dinner time. As far as the tinned food and the K rations in the holds, we only used these sparingly.

We did find it rather trying with all eleven men living, eating and sleeping in one small room, so whenever the weather was warm enough, some of us used to spend a lot of time on deck. One good thing was that the Skipper got the leading seaman to pipe pirate rig. This meant that we could wear a warm duffle coat, woollen hat and sea boots, so keeping warm wasn't too much of a problem.

After we had sorted things out at Gibraltar, we made our way up the North African coast, calling at many little ports. Each time two of the craft would discharge their cargo of goodies, much appreciated by the eighth army lads who had been fighting Rommel in the desert for a long time. Following El Alamein, Rommel retreated in a great hurry

We called at Benghazi, Cape Bon, Tarsa Bay, Bone, Sousse, Bougie, Didgelie and Tripoli. We came in very useful at Tripoli.

You see the axis had tried to block Tripoli harbour by tying two cargo vessels together, stern to stern with wire ropes. Then, as they scuttled them, the wires snapped and they drifted 20 feet apart. This meant that because of us only being 18 feet in the beam we could unload big ships and sneak through the gap into the harbour; thus unloading all kinds of supplies. We could also take personnel and light equipment out to the waiting cargo ships. For about a month we were kept very busy, but of course there was always plenty of labour, both civilian and army, to do the heavy loading and unloading.

Then one day we were ordered to go to Digelie, where we took on board a full contingent of assault troops and set out on the invasion of German occupied Sicily. It was called Operation Husky. We had plenty of time to examine those men and we found they consisted of complete teams such as: a machine gun team, a mortar team, a flame thrower with his assistants, a medical unit and two field radio operators. All the rest were Commandos.

Those men were all lying on the deck in the sunshine, when suddenly a cranky old gramophone started to play the singing of Joseph Lock, the Irish tenor. He sang, "In country and cottage there's no place like home sweet home." We thought it hilarious. The Skipper went bananas and wanted to know who had put it on the gramophone and told us to, "Throw it in the drink." None of us dare sing or hum that tune again, but those soldiers who had been in the desert for such a long time just didn't bother. Like us they were actually thinking of dawn the next day.

During the night, we slowed right down. You see the leader was trying to judge the time and distance, just as we had practiced in Scotland, so we could land at the right time and take the Germans by surprise.

When we got near Sicily, opposite a place called Avolah, all the craft lined up abreast then a certain distance from the beach we all dropped anchors together. Play wire out, the engines roared and we all went line abreast and landed on the short beach. The Germans opened up. Lofty and I were line men. We ran down the ramps carrying a rope, tied it round our waists and

hung on, while the soldiers holding the lines made their way on to the beach.

One good thing about the Mediterranean Sea is that there is very little tide movement. We managed to get in and out without getting a direct hit although we had bullet holes in the superstructure. Our skipper soon got us off and out of it. By the time we had gone out to the waiting troop carrier, reloaded and returned, the beach was quiet, so we made our way back to Digelie.

As we marked time in the harbour, waiting for our next assignment, it was a bit boring. The skipper tried to keep us busy painting ship and generally cleaning and polishing. So he started splitting the crew into two watches and giving us a day ashore in turn.

One day, the cook came back drunk. He went onto the top of his galley, for some unknown reason and broke one of his knee caps when he fell off. The medics came with two stretchers; one for the cook and the other for his gear. We never saw that man again. Now out there, in the Med, you could not get a replacement cook. There simply wasn't any around, so at tea time the skipper sent a messenger. "Tell Cottam I want to see him immediately, in my cabin."

I wondered what on earth I had done and why he wanted me. When I knocked on the cabin door, the skipper opened it and invited me in. He asked if I wanted a drink and I smiled, thinking he wanted me to commit a crime; Lofty and I had already pinched a card table for him on a previous occasion!

As I sat sipping the glass of rum he gave me, he smiled again and I felt like a mouse that was being played with by a big Tom cat. After checking that I knew cook wouldn't be coming back, he appointed me as the new cook. I told him I couldn't boil a kettle of water, being hopeless at cooking, but he just grinned again.

"Haven't you forgotten something? The mate and I never discuss your personal affairs, but we have the onerous job of spot checking all the mail that leaves this ship." (He never called it a craft; it was always 'My ship' with him.) "Have you forgotten, Cottam, when your mother was so ill you rallied round and soon became an expert in cooking plain substantial meals and baking bread and sultana cakes?" He paused then said, "I'm quoting what you wrote in a letter that it was my duty to read. You can bake bread and sultana cakes. I love sultana cakes. You start first thing in the morning." He assured me that if I had any difficulties with the protein, carbohydrates or vitamins, then he would give me a helping hand.

I was so determined to get out of the job that I reminded him of my duty as a bow gunner. Smiling again, he replied that that situation was all sorted out. He had switched me with the galley gunner, so that all I had to do when the alarm went was to switch off the stove and run up the ladder outside the galley door. I would be the first to man a gun. At that I was dismissed.

When I told Jack, the radio ham, what had transpired, he roared with laughter at the cunning old skipper. However, I got my own back on Jack. After a month being the cook and manning the gun, I lost my appetite through the heat of the galley and the diesel fumes from the primitive drip-feed stove. I requested that I could really do with a relief and suggested that Jack (who had been a butcher in Civvy Street), was also a good cook, so we ended up doing a fortnight each cooking in turn.

One day the entire flotilla moved down the coast to a small harbour called Bougie. There we went through the same routine, on assignment loading a self-contained assault troop. We set off and made our way to a place called Salerno, on the Italian main land. There we carried out a dawn landing which was a bit rough. Only one of our craft came to grief. Again we had several near misses.

It's a strange feeling to be on a beach and not know if you were going to receive a bullet or some shrapnel or even be blown to bits by a Stuka's bomb. I often thought about those 3,000 English and French soldiers pinned down on the beaches at Dunkirk being strafed and bombed continually. Yet we came away from Salerno practically unscathed. We only lost one landing craft. We all wondered how long our good fortune would last. After Salerno we returned to Malta.

Again they pushed us up out of the road into Sliema Creek. You see the landing craft were a bit of a nuisance to the dock authorities. Sliema Creek had what is called a hard shoulder. That's a sloping bank of gravel. Each landing craft rammed its bow onto this bank. They were lined up side by side with a fibre between each craft.

One morning at about 6 O'clock, I was sitting on a ramp, when up came a young girl. She would be about 7 years of age. I was just coming to the end of morning watch. She spoke in perfect English, telling me that her name was Marlene Virgason and that her father was an English sailor. She lived near the Busy Bee and could say the Lord's Prayer. She also told me that she was hungry, so I went to see what I could get hold of.

I can remember exactly what it was that day, breaded liver with onions. I cadged a plate full and a slice of bread. Marlene ate the lot. She was very

poorly dressed and I could tell she had had a hard time. Bear in mind that Malta was in a desperate situation. Jerry was determined to starve them out. I gave Marlene some sweets and a small tin of corned beef and off she went.

I did not think I would see her again, but every morning there she was, at the end of the ramp. She got to know Lofty and I well. I scrounged a t-shirt from one of the smallest men on the ship, thinking Marlene's mother might be able to alter it for her. She rolled up the next morning wearing this white shirt. Her hair was long and so beautiful. When our first daughter was born, Nancy and I called her Marlene after that little girl in Malta. I wonder just how she went on.

How true is the title of this chapter- Divine Preservation? I don't know just how many died in the four landings at Sicily, Salerno, Anzio and Normandy, but one thing I am conscious of is I was divinely preserved. But, I am jumping the gun a little.

We spent some time in Sliema creek, during which time we learned of the defence line set up by Kesselring right across the mountain range, starting at Mount Casino. Try as they may, the allies just could not break through. So we received instructions to load assault troops and go behind Kesselring's Gustav defence line and land at a little place called Anzio. We were all apprehensive. Surely the Germans would give us a warm reception, so we again loaded assault troops. We were getting used to the routine by now. We set out from Malta.

The flotilla regulated their speed so as to land just at day break, but this time they got it wrong and we arrived late, in full daylight. This caused our apprehension to increase. Surely we would get a pasting this time, but to our surprise the Anzio beach was as quiet as Southport beach on a Sunday morning. Not a German in sight. No machine guns. No eighty eights. There was complete silence.

It was rather a longer stretch of beach than usual, but the soldiers just walked in single file across that long stretch of sand and not a single shot was fired. We just could not believe it. We had actually unloaded our troops when we heard the drone of a couple of aircraft.

They came up the coast, dropped their bombs long before they reached the landing zone, then turned round and quickly disappeared into the distance. Anzio was the quietest landing we ever made – not one single casualty.

Let me mention this strange truth. After I had been demobbed out of the navy, a film called Anzio, was being shown at the old Globe Cinema in

Cadishead. I told Nancy that although I didn't usually go to the cinema, I was going to watch that film, because I had been to the place. Well, you never saw anything like it in your life. There was smoke and bombs, explosions and bullets and men dying all over the place. The main actor was Robert Mitchum. I came out of that cinema and was amazed at Hollywood's version of the landings at Anzio. Having said that, Hitler ordered Kesselring to wipe the landing out and several divisions of tanks and infantrymen were actually sent to try and kill off the landings. After four days of heavy fighting they failed completely and the troops were able to go and finally reach Rome. After Anzio, we again returned to Malta. There we rested for a while before loading assault troops.

Our orders were to sail up the river Tiber and land the troops on the North bank. As soon as we got underway, our Skipper ordered us to take the emergency axes and cut down the wooden mast. You see we all had a large sail, which we could use if our engines ever failed. We never used it, of course. The idea of cutting the mast down was to enable us to go under any low bridges as we sailed up the river, but we never got there. A strange thing happened.

As we proceeded up the coast we ran into a group of Italian ships. We were alarmed at first, but then our look-outs reported their guns were still under canvas. The crews were all on the bows waving and cheering, so as the two flotillas came together, one of the Italian ships lowered a boat and the officer came aboard our craft.

In perfect English he told us that they were our prisoners.

Their country had capitulated. Our Skipper gave a sigh of relief and welcomed them aboard as guests. He ordered our steward to bring out a bottle and they all had a drink, then the Italian's ships steamed away in the direction of Malta. Then, to our surprise, our senior officer flashed a signal to all our flotilla that the mission was aborted and we were all to return to Malta. That heralded the end of our service in the Mediterranean. As we entered Malta harbour and made our way to Sliema creek, we past several Italian submarines. All the crews were on deck smoking and smiling. I think they were all glad to be out of the war. We hung around for a few weeks, then we all received orders to return to Blighty (Britain), via Gibraltar.

Whilst in Gibraltar, thinking we would be home in a few days, we all bought oranges and very green bananas. We set sail from Gibraltar and headed west, miles and miles out to sea. I thought we were going back to America. What we were really doing was making a great detour of the Bay of Biscay, to avoid the U-boats and torpedo boats that were based on the French coast. Finally we turned and headed for the English Channel.

But a terrific storm broke out. We were low on fuel and water. We had no ballast whatsoever as we were a flat-bottomed vessel. We were all struggling to even keep on course. After a while, the leading craft flashed a signal for us to alter course and head for Milfordhaven, for shelter. As soon as we got in the lee of the Welsh mainland, things quietened down and we limped into Milfordhaven. We were all glad to tie up and get a nights sleep.

The next day we discussed what we could do with all the oranges and bananas as they had started to ripen in the heat of our mess deck. So we decided to go ashore and give them to the children on the streets.

Some of the children had never seen a banana or an orange, but they were highly delighted to have them. After sheltering in Milfordhaven until the weather improved, we set sail. Our next port of call was up the River Humber, into King George's dock in Hull. Two ladies came aboard; a mother and her daughter called Alice. They were gun fitters. We, as gunners, were instructed to help them with the heavier parts of the guns. Alice asked me when I had last washed my dirty overalls and I explained that they had never been washed. We did not have the facilities on board the 'sardine tin'. Her mother then invited me to their home, so that I could have a bath and they could wash my clothes. There was no 'funny business', they were very kind, friendly, decent people.

The people in Hull were as kind as any we ever met in our travels. We repaid them by obtaining some rations; things that they just could not get hold of. We were sad when we had to leave Hull. Our next port of call was a small fishing jetty at a place called Invergordon, on the Murray Firth, up in the highlands of Scotland. To be honest, we all thought it was a dump. It did nothing but drizzle that kind of small rain that soaks you through in no time, but we were soon to get more water than we bargained for.

After we had been in Invergordon about two weeks, the engineer went ashore one night and didn't come back. At least that's what we all thought, but he did come back about midnight. He was blind drunk. He went down to the engine room and opened the sea cocks before getting into his bunk fully dressed. All of a sudden there was such a hullabaloo. One of the lads shouted that we were sinking. Soon there was several feet of water in our quarters.

We all scrambled to salvage the clothing that was in the top half of our lockers –clothing that was still dry. Then we all made our way to the wheel house and the galley.

These two areas, along with the Skipper's cabin were all dry, being above decks. The craft filled with water and soon settled on the bottom, alongside

the fish jetty. Fortunately, it was not very deep. The military police came and took the engineer away. We all made our way to the recreation back room of the shore canteen, which had a pot-bellied stove. We were in a real mess. It was a freezing cold night.

The Skipper sent for the Inverness fire brigade, then he ordered Lofty and I to go down to the engine room and dive down and keep taking turns at the two wheels, in order to close the skittle valves. The firemen from Inverness thought it a huge joke that the English had scuttled their own ship.

The Skipper assembled us all in the back room of the canteen and told us there was only one thing we could do. He intended to split the crew into two halves. Half the men were to go home on 14 days leave, then when they returned the other half would go on leave. The six men left on the ship would have to manage in the heel house, the Captain's cabin and the galley. You see all the electrics had to be stripped out and sent down to England to be cleaned and reconditioned. This is the only thing they could do. The steering gear, tiller flat equipment and engine room all had American fittings. We were the joke of the flotilla and constantly ribbed. "What men will do to get out of the next invasion!" We didn't think it funny at all, but that's exactly what took place.

While we were in Invergordon, our officer told us to let it slip that we were going to invade through Norway. This was a ploy and it actually worked. Hitler did send divisions to Norway, expecting us to invade there. Fortunately for us, after our ship was repaired and tested, we suddenly on the 1st June, 1944 were told to head post haste right down the coast to Brighton. We reversed into the canal, between Brighton and Hove gas works and were packed in side by side.

On 3rd June, the wagons started to roll up on the dockside bringing loads of assault troops. The soldiers simply walked across to the outside craft and filled each craft to the limit. It wasn't a bit like summer. The weather was dull and grey and cold. We set sail and sailed all night. Early the next morning we landed on the beach in Normandy. D-Day had started. There were five beaches.

The British landed at Sword, Gold and Juno. The Americans landed on Urah and Omaha. It was rough on the three British beaches with an average of about 400 dead on each, but the Americans suffered severely; especially at Omaha, where three thousand young men were all dead, either on the beach or floating in the water. It was terrible. Even the German machine gunners confessed, at a later date, that they were sick of killing young men – many of them only 19 and 20 years of age. D-day was the last action I went through. Later on, the Government sent

me about five medals for war service. I don't know if I'm right or wrong, but I just could not bring myself to wear them, not once. In fact I gave them to my son, Mark. You see, there are so many people who spend their lives saving people and caring for them.

I admire the old man who has been caring for his wife and pushing her around in her wheelchair for years. I admire the doctors, nurses and welfare workers who spend their lives caring for the sick and wounded and children that are in such desperate need. So forgive me, but I just cannot wear war medals. This is the first time, in sixty years, that I have declared this in print – not trying to set a precedent, but just stating how I feel.

Chapter 4 - Crossroads and Mrs W.

The war ended and all England celebrated VE day. Landing craft 180 was no longer any use, so the British government gave them to the French government to use as coal barges up and down the River Seine. So, we were ordered to sail old 180 right up the Seine, to a small wharf, just outside Paris. On our way up the river, we pulled in at a small town called Morlais and we all marched into town accompanied by the local brass band. Our columns of three were soon demolished by local French girls, who seemed very interested in British Matlows.

The working people were genuinely pleased to be set free from German oppression. When we reached our destination, we were bungled into open-topped trucks. It is a good job the sun was shining! We were driven to the coast and went aboard an American destroyer, called the Marine Wolf. We sailed over to Southampton. Then I was sent on to Stranraer, across to Larne and finally ended up in the Queen's Hotel, Belfast, there to wait until another landing craft was fitted out. Then we were bound for Rangoon.

We spent three weeks in Belfast, during which time we ate too many duck eggs and bacon and drank too much port. Unexpectedly one night, I received a signal from England. Able Seaman Cottam was to be demobbed immediately and returned to brick making. Because of the bombing there was a severe shortage of bricks. I sailed from Belfast to Liverpool, the only passenger on a very smelly cattle boat. I continued to Ashton-on-Mersey, to an old cotton mill.

There I was demobbed and fitted out with a military mac, an Al Capone trilby, a cheap grey cotton suit, with a twisted leg and some brown shoes. All I wanted to do was to get home and see my people once again.

I got off the bus at the Red Lion in Cadishead and went down the side of the pub, across the fields, to our small farm on the north banks of the Manchester Ship Canal. It was an old hall with 17 rooms, stables, cow byres, pig sties and a double-door barn. As I walked along the bridal path in the pasture field, my mother, who was hanging out washing in the farm yard, spotted me and ran down the path. She flung her arms around me and kissed me and was overjoyed that her young son had come home with very few physical defects. I was deaf in one ear and had a hernia and bruised spine. Other than that I was okay. I suddenly blurted out, "Mother I'm going straight. No more coming home drunk." Mother was delighted. My Dad and all the family made me welcome.

My release from the navy was on conditions that I started immediately at the brick works, so I only had two days at home. Then I went to the works

and again I was made welcome. I asked the boss for a job outside. After being on the sea I didn't fancy an inside job, so he set me to work down the clay pit. I joined a gang comprising of six men. Our job was to keep the brick works supplied with clay.

After the first day at work, the foreman told me that the manager of the Eagle and Child pub would be glad to see me and that the first pint would probably be free. I told him I had promised the old lady I'd go straight, so it would have to be a quick drink. True to his word, the manager was pleased to see me. The first pint was free, but of course I had to reciprocate and buy Sid and the manager a round. I left, but the next night I stayed a bit longer and then when pay day came, I went out and again I went to my old haunts, The White Horse, Irlam. I came home a bit tipsy, but within the fortnight I was back to square one and my mother must have been broken hearted when she heard me fumbling around in the old farm house, worse for wear.

I began to realise, for the very first time, that I was addicted to alcohol. It had got a vice-like grip on me. This went on for a few weeks, until one day I arranged with a pal called Ray, from the clay pit, to meet him outside Harrop's sports outfitters shop at 7.15pm. We planned to go out and have a night in the White Horse. I was sort of half sitting on Harrop's shop window when I heard a house door shut to my left and out of the house porch stepped a middle aged lady with silver hair. She was clean and was holding a Bible in her hand.

"Oh, hello Lawrie," she said. Her name was Mrs. Annie Westbrook. I told her I was okay, then she continued, "Will you come into the Church, to say hello to all the folk?" I flicked my cigarette end into the gutter and told her that wasn't my line. "I'm going to the White Horse in a few minutes. I'm just waiting for my pal, Ray." She said it wouldn't take long to go in and say hello to the people who had sent all the parcels to me and prayed for me while I was away in the war. I hesitated, but there was something about this woman that compelled me to respond to her request, so I said, "Okay, I'll compromise. I'll come in for ten minutes and then I'm on my way to the White Horse.

So we both crossed the main road and entered the old gospel mission, which had been a fashion cutting shop in days gone by. Everyone shook my hand and made me welcome, then in came the pastor, Tom Morgan. He walked to the front, took a salvation testament out of his pocket and said, "I'm going to read two scriptures to you. First John 3:16, 'For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever should believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' The second scripture is found in Corinthians II chapter 5:17. 'If any man be in

Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away, behold all things become new.' One translation reads, 'A new life is started inside.'"

When I heard these scriptures, I thought that I needed a new start, then all the people stood up, took the cushions they had been sitting on and dropped them on the floorboards. They knelt down and one by one they started to pray. I counted them. There were nineteen in the meeting. Then something unexpected took place. I started to cry; just quietly at first, then I began to sob and sob. As I wept, I felt a strange change take place. I felt a kind of release. Now I know the psychiatrists will say it was a reaction to all that I had gone through during the war – a kind of traumatic stress thing, but I know this wasn't the case.

Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Pastor Morgan. I looked up at him, through the tears. He smiled and quietly said, "Lawrie, will you receive Jesus Christ as your Saviour?" I nodded and said that I would. He then gently said to me that he was going to help me to pray a sinners' prayer, which he did, then we all sang a hymn:

Once I thought I walked with Jesus,
Yet such changeful moods I had
Sometimes trusting, sometimes doubting
Sometimes joyful, sometimes sad.
Oh, the peace my Saviour gives
Peace I never knew before.
For my way has brighter grown,
Since I learned to trust Him more.
The last verse goes like this:
Now I'm trusting every moment
Less than this is not enough
For my Saviour bears me gently
O'er the places once so rough.

Then the pastor closed the meeting. He and all the other people shook my hand and everyone of them was delighted that I had been saved by Grace. Then the pastor told me the times of the meetings and I simply walked slowly out of that old mission.

When I came to the road, it was a matter of turn left, to the White Horse, or turn right and go back to the farm. At 9pm I made my way slowly back to the old farm house and ducked under the very low, thick, living room door. It was a very old building. My mother looked at the clock and said, "Why have you come home? Are you sick? Are you in trouble?" I said, "No. I've been to church and received Jesus Christ as my Saviour." There was a stunned silence, then my Dad, in his Yorkshire accent, said, "You will never

regret it lad.” He shook my hand. My mother hugged me and burst into tears and for the first time in nine long years, I sat and ate supper with them, cold sober!

The next morning I went to work. We always got there early and had a smoke and a cup of coffee, whilst we chatted. The boiler man used to light our stove for us. As we were drinking coffee, I spoke out loud and clear and said, “Fellas, last night I went to Church and became a Christian.” There was stunned silence until one man asked me if I was serious. I told him I was and explained that from now on, if I trapped my hand between the tubs or hit my thumb with the hammer, I was going to try not to swear. I knew it was going to be difficult, but thought I’d have to learn a better language. The foreman said, “Tommy Morgan has brain washed you, Lawrie.” I replied that he had not, but that he had preached on John 3:16 and that it made good sense to me.

Up until then I felt that my life had been going down the drain, but now, I told them, I was in for a better life. They then started laying bets on how long I would last as a Christian. Sid, the foreman said, “The first hot summer we have down here in the pit and you will be the first in the Eagle and Child. No one can sink a pint of bitter faster than you can Lawrie!”

I disappointed him. About 15 years later, when preaching in the open air, in Lancaster Road, Cadishead, an old man, who was leaning on the garden gate, beckoned me and said it had lasted longer than he thought he would. It was Sid the foreman from the clay pit.

To a workmate I gave away my cigarette case that was made for me by the Italian prisoners in North Africa. I also gave my Ronson cigarette lighter. The very first pay day after I became a Christian, I made it my business to be the first at the pay window. I put my wages into my pocket, then stood and gave every worker in the brick works an invitation to come to the gospel mission in Cadishead to hear a visiting evangelist. Word soon got around that I had got religion and I quickly acquired the name, ‘Preacher’. One thing no one could deny was that my life had changed completely. I was a different man altogether. I committed my life to the work of the church completely, hook, line and sinker.

This chapter would not be complete if I did not tell you how I met Nancy, my dear wife. One sunny Sunday afternoon, I went to my brother’s house in Lord’s Street, Cadishead. John was busy in the back kitchen, preparing for tea. I went and stood alongside him and said, “I’m going to marry that girl in your front room and we will have six kids.” He told me I was crazy and that she was only 17 years old. After tea, I asked Nancy if I could take her home. She was agreeable, so I went to Mrs. Westbrook’s house. I told her

that I was going to marry her daughter and she was shocked and just said, "Oh!" I also told her that I was prepared to court Nancy for as long as she liked. I would make sure she was home before ten o'clock each evening and if, for any reason, we were delayed, I would phone Mr. Pook, the grocer to pass on a message about where we were.

Nancy did not have good health. She suffered from kidney trouble. After about six months, one Saturday dinner time, the local Scottish doctor, named Drysdale, visited Nancy, who had been ill.

Mrs. Westbrook simply told the doctor that I wanted to marry Nancy and asked what he thought. Doctor Drysdale said, "I believe this is the best thing Nancy could do. Lawrie will look after her." So when Nancy was 18, we got married in the old gospel mission, in Cadishead and we lodged in Hayes Hall Farm. It was an old hall that had 17 rooms and we lived with my mother and father. In our section of the house there was no water, gas or electricity. All we had was paraffin Tilley lamp. In fact there was only one gas lamp in the entire building.

We cooked in two large ovens and a skillet that swung over the fire in a great Yorkshire range. Our pantry was as big as the modern-day living room. Around the walls we had benches made of Welsh slate, on which we cured ham and bacon. We had shelves full of preserves – jams, marmalade, fruit and pickles. We had a large white, enamelled bucket in which we preserved a gross of eggs in icing glass- a liquid preservative. We had a barn full of all kind of vegetables, protected from the frost by bales of straw. We may have been primitive, but we certainly had plenty of good quality food, including an ample supply of bees' honey, from my own hives.

The first year we were married, Nancy and I ate 13 large Muscovy ducks accompanied by roast bramble apples. (Muscovies are native to Mexico and Central and Southern America.) Nancy has never looked back since the day we were married and we spent 13 happy years in that old farmhouse. She has been the main reason for me going on for the Lord all these years and has never objected to me giving the Lord everything I have; including time. No man has had a better partner and when I've been down and almost out, she has revived me and picked me up and helped me to go on for the Lord. She is still helping me today, at the age of 81. It's her birthday today, 24th June.

The very purpose of this autobiography is not only to encourage the reader to go on, but to be a blessing to your wife, husband and family. The very best way of doing this is by example.

Chapter 5 – The Call of God

Immediately after being saved by grace, I threw myself into the work of God, assisted by my dear wife, Nancy. Whatever Pastor Tom Morgan asked me to do, I would do it. He never exploited me or abused my trust in him. He was kind, honest, faithful and loving. He was the one who encouraged a semi-illiterate young man, who had very limited talent, to try and do something worthwhile for Jesus.

He always said there is no such thing as an insignificant member of the body of Christ and that no Christian should have a superiority or inferiority complex, but should endeavour to be Christ like at all times. It's absolutely amazing what the Lord can do with a person who is surrendered to His will; who is obedient to the leadings of the Holy Spirit. We should never say that we cannot do anything for God. The hymn writer is true when he declared, "There's a work for Jesus none but you can do."

The call of God does not always come like a sudden flash of light, but gradually as you are involved in the church, busy in the work of God, as you sit listening to the various speakers relating their various experiences, as you see the needs, there rises within you a quiet definite desire to be involved, to play a part, to be used in some way by the Lord. In my case, this was very prominent when I was listening to a preacher, who was lacking in passion or faith, or the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

My job, working at Partington coaling basin, was based on peace work. We only got paid for the work we did loading the ships with coal, coke and pitch. When there were no ships, we were paid a small retaining fee, but this meant that some times we had a lot of time on our hands.

During these slack times I used to go straight to Mrs. Westbrook's house. I nearly drove her crazy.

I would ask her all sorts of questions, such as, "What is the difference between the Calvinists and the Armenians?" or, "Tell me about the pre-tribulation rapture or the post-tribulation rapture." Or, "What does the mark of the beast mean?" I used to bombard her with all kinds of enquiries. Mrs. Westbrook and Pastor Morgan taught me to read and understand the meaning of words and certainly grounded me in the scriptures. I also did a bible correspondence course under the guidance of Mr. Gee, who was the Principal of Kenley Bible College. I also learned a lot from Elisha Thompson; both were good men of God.

Now at the ripe old age of 86, I would just love to be able to tell of great crusades of thousands getting saved and healed, but each of us must

travel the road that God has planned for us and my ministry has been as follows. Yes I have seen people saved and healed. I have been used in the gifts of the spirit. I have built churches. I have been healed myself and I know what the anointing of the Holy Spirit is all about, but I have never been the Pastor of a great congregation. I have never attained prominence as a leader in Assemblies of God. I have been primarily a local church pastor.

I have always felt very comfortable encouraging a small congregation and preaching in both Kirkham and Strangeways prisons. I have been happy actually working with bricks and mortar, building and restoring churches. In recent weeks I have been thrilled at the wonderful work John O'Conner has done on the church that I helped to build in Cadishead. Why have I laboured this point? Simply to encourage you, by saying Jesus knows exactly what each of us does in our lifetime.

He will reward us according to the deeds done in the body, so I think it appropriate to present you with this poem at this point. It's called, Behind the Scenes.

Behind the Scenes
Behind the scenes there are workers,
Oft hidden from public gaze.
No dazzling rays of limelight,
No constant streams of praise.
But the ministry of the workplace
Is true evidence of Christian Grace.

Behind the scenes, which many shirk
The mundane tasks to do
Hidden, thankless, essential work
Oft in numbers just a few.
This work that's done in the hidden place
Is true evidence of Christian Grace.

Behind the scenes is the prayer place,
Not overcrowded you know,
But indispensable to every saint
Who has a desire to grow.
For the work that's done in the prayer place
Is evidence of God's wondrous Grace.

Behind the scenes stands a woman;
Frail, yet tough as steel.
Poor, yet rich beyond measure,

Willing to help and to heal.
There in the daily family place
Is where you will find true Christian Grace.

Behind the scenes your works unknown
No, no, this is not true.
For Hebrews chapter ten declares
That God remembers you.
Of all the works in every place,
He sees most clearly works of Grace.

One day the curtain will be drawn
And every truth revealed.
Your hidden ministry, my friend,
Will no longer be concealed.
And when you see your Saviour's smile
Behind the scenes will be worthwhile.

Chapter 6 – Building of Cadishead Church

One day, the Pastor came to me and said that the church secretary had had to go and live down South, because of ill health. He wanted me to take his place. Well my concept of a church secretary was a bald-headed man wearing horn-rimmed glasses, with a top pocket full of pens and the 'gift of the gab'. (Apologies to all church secretaries.)

I soon found out this was not the case. I, like Moses, made an excuse that I'm not educated enough for that job. The pastor said he would help me with any paper work and my spelling and writing too. Also he intended to assist in building a new church. I asked him exactly what the job would entail and he told me, "Well, we are going to form a work team. Your brother, John, will be the brick layer. I'll be the carpenter. You will be in charge of buying all the materials and building a Sunday school on the spare ground alongside the old church. Of course, being a sailor, you will be also in charge of the rigging lifting the girders etc. All the rest of the men will find their own ministries and we shall all be labourers for one another. You will also be responsible for the scaffolding your brother will need."

Friends, I could write a book on the four years it took to build Cadishead Church, but I'm only going to explain in detail one aspect of the work that involved Nancy and me; especially Nancy's willingness to sacrifice in order to forward the work of the Lord. You see Nancy and I had left the old farm and we were now living in a small cottage situated on Liverpool Road, only a matter of 200 yards from the old mission. With the help of my brothers we had refurbished it and it really was nice and comfortable. Well, the church held a council meeting about starting work.

Before the church project could start, we had a problem to sort out. Right in front of the proposed new Sunday school and church was an old double-fronted barber's shop, in which lived a couple who did not attend the church. Now the church project could not start until they vacated this property. You see, the level of the drains would have to be established and a manhole built and the pipes laid through this house, because when the new church was built there would only be 4 feet between the back of the house and the front of the church. It would be impossible to even open the church.

Houses were scarce and this couple had no chance of being re-housed. Because they were already living in what the council described as 'suitable housing', there was no chance of the building project starting. It could have taken many years before this problem was solved. Then an amazing thing took place. On the Sunday afternoon following the meeting, Nancy and I

had just finished tea, when she quietly said to me, "We can solve the church problem, Lawrie. Let's swap houses with the couple who live in the barbers shop." I looked at Nancy and asked if she would really be willing to leave the nice little cottage and go and live in the tumbled down old shop.

Would she really have a trench dug through the kitchen and sewerage pipes laid down? Nancy said, "Yes and the old shop can be the store house for all the building material, such as cement, glass, paint and damp course. We can be resident watchmen and receive all the materials that are delivered to the church during the construction of the whole project." I was lost for words, but Nancy thought it was a marvelous idea. So I went to the couple in the barbers shop and put the proposition to them.

They thought Nancy and I had gone mad, but jumped at the swap, so I obtained a civil lorry and we exchanged furniture. Nancy and I moved into the old barbers shop. On Bank holiday Saturday, John and I dug out a manhole and laid the concrete foundations and sewerage pipes in it. Then on August Bank holiday Monday, John and I built a manhole and broke through the wall into the kitchen of what was now our house. We dug a trench through the back kitchen and out of the back of the house and we laid sewerage pipes. In the meantime, Nancy had to walk across the trench on two planks, to get to the sink and cooker; to prepare meals and do washing up etc. She never grumbled once.

We did become resident watchmen. Nancy received all the deliveries of materials and supervised the storage of the same in the old barbers shop. Consequently, nothing was ever stolen from the building project and nothing ever spoiled. Odd ones in the congregation criticised what Nancy and I had done, but we just took no notice. We furthered the work of God in no uncertain manner, but this was just the beginning of the many times our family sacrificed, in order to further the work of God in various places. We had completed the Sunday school, pulled the old mission down and had started on the main church building.

A few weeks before Christmas, on the Saturday morning of the Sunday school party (which we were about to hold in a rented church hall) a knock came on the front door. What a shock I got, for standing there was my old ship mate Jack Wiggins, the radio operator of old 180. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, he looked at his watch and said, "The pub's open Lawrie. Let's go and have a drink for old time's sake." He stood nonplussed when Nancy confirmed what I told him about me being a Christian and not having been to the pub for about 10 years.

"I just don't believe it. I've put you to bed dead drunk scores of times. You were never sober for three years."

Nancy announced that dinner was ready and Jack was invited to eat with us, which he did. After dinner I asked John how he was fixed for giving me a lift with the children. I'd drive the bus and he could be the conductor! Jack asked, "What kids are these?"

I explained that it was the Sunday school Christmas party and to cut a long story short, Jack helped me with the children. He watched me playing party games and then he came back to our house for some supper. I then walked to the station and put him on the train, to go back to Woodhouse, Leeds. As we stood waiting for the train, Jack turned, took my hand and said, "I'd have laid 100:1 against you becoming a Christian. You are not the same man that I lived with for all those years on landing craft 180, but you are a far better man Lawrie. You've got a wonderful wife and family." That's the last I ever saw of my old shipmate.

About this time, just before the building project was completed, my faith was really tested. One morning I was working on no.2 tip, loading coal. I was the table man on the hoist. It was winter time and the canal was in full flood. A young deck hand had been across the canal to Cadishead for a few basic groceries, which he was carrying in a cardboard box. He belonged to an Everhard ship, called the Angularity. As he climbed up the ladder, balancing this awkward cardboard box, he lost his balance. He tried to save the groceries, fell off the ladder, banged his head against the side of the ship and fell down in between the ship and the quay.

I spotted him fall, jumped off the hoist and ran as fast as possible down the quay, shouting to my pal (Fred Yates), as I went. "Hey, Yatey, throw me a rope!" He did and I took hold of it and dropped down alongside the drowning sailor. It was too thick to put a bowline round him, so I put a timber hitch under his arms and shouted to Fred to pull him up. Assisted by Terry and George (two more of my mates), Fred started to pull the young sailor up from between the ship and quay. As they were doing this, I thought that if the ship came in, my only hope would be to go down into the water and get under the quay. Fortunately it didn't. The men dropped the rope down and pulled me out.

Now, the reason I'm telling you this is because of what transpired after this incident. You see, I was about 45 minutes wet through, in freezing cold water. I had to cross the canal and then ride home on my bicycle before I could get thawed out in a bath of warm water. Fortunately, it was Monday morning-wash day, so Nancy had plenty of hot water available, but I started after this incident with asthma. I had it very bad for a number of years; more than seven.

The doctors tried everything; inhalers, tablets containing creosote and even breathing the fumes of crystals in hot water. Nothing seemed to work, so the doctor suggested I move to live in a pine forest in Wales. I applied to the forest commissioners and had an interview for a job. They were impressed that I had farming experience with both horse and tractor. I had been a sailor, so could handle ropes, blocks and tackle. I didn't smoke or drink and they told me I was just the man they wanted. When could I start?

I returned home and informed my Sunday school class that I was going to leave them and go to Wales, because I could not breathe. One boy spoke out saying, "What about divine healing? You have been teaching us these past years." I had no answer, so after talking it over with Nancy, I decided to turn the forest job down, even though there was a newly built cottage, in idyllic surroundings, with the job. A few weeks after this, a man came to our church, from Belfast. He called himself a back street preacher. His name was George Montgomery. He was to preach two nights, Saturday and Sunday. He was so good that Pastor decided to have an extra meeting on Monday night. As I sat in the meeting, George preached on faith and he used a very unusual illustration. He pulled a shilling out of his pocket and said, "This is faith. If any of you believe I will give him this shilling, come out and take it from me. No one moved, but as I sat there, something started to move within my chest, just as if something alive was inside. I jumped up, ran to the front and took the shilling off George.

He whispered, "Give it back afterwards, that's all I've got!" Then he anointed me with oil, laid hands on me and prayed. I was instantly healed of asthma. I was so thrilled to be healed; I went knocking on house doors and got an extra 50 children to come to the church the next Sunday. The primary class teacher, my niece, said, "Uncle Lawrie, it's all your fault. What on earth am I going to do with all these children?"

Pastor Morgan said, "Lawrie, tomorrow I want you to take a sledge hammer and knock this wall down and make these two rooms into one big classroom. That will solve the problem." So Nancy and I did exactly that. I did not wear a face mask as I knocked the wall down. Nancy carried the debris outside. When we had finished, I turned to Nancy, who had black hair and said, "Love, you will look beautiful when you are old." Nancy's hair was white with plaster dust! During a full days work I had no difficulty in breathing. Praise the Lord!

Chapter 7 – Influenced by Fire

When the building project finished, all the men had lots more time on their hands, so Pastor Morgan started to teach us and to give each man an opportunity to practice preaching on a Saturday night in our home church. My first effort was the subject of the tongue. 'The tongue is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.'

After the service, Pastor Morgan came to me and smiled and said, "You are going to preach again next Saturday night." I looked surprised and thought, 'am I that good?' He continued, "Next week, you are going to preach on the exact same text, but this time you are going to give us the positive, beneficial ministry of the tongue. Tonight you were 100% negative. It's a wonder they don't all go home and cut their tongues out. Fortunately, they have great sympathy with a novice." Faithful are the wounds of a friend and he was indeed my very best friend.

One day Pastor Morgan got a phone call from Jim Holland, the senior elder of the Pentecostal Assembly in Widnes. Apparently their pastor had moved to Yorkshire. They held their meetings in a small Boy Scout's type of hut made of tinder dry wood, with tarred felt on the roof. Over the years, the whole building had received many coats of tar. They held a meeting on bonfire night. The last hymn sung was, 'Send the Fire.' They closed the door and went to their various homes.

Someone put flammable materials, or maybe paraffin or petrol through the letter box and the building went up like a tinder box. With it being bonfire night, all the fire brigades were busy, so there was some delay in responding to the call. Consequently, when the fire brigade did arrive, it was a flaming inferno, so they just stood by and let it burn out completely. When the church elders came the next morning, all that remained of the assembly building was an oblong block of foundation concrete, covered with grey ash. So Jim Holland's request to pastor Morgan was that he send a man over to help them and lead the church. Pastor Morgan told me to drop everything I was doing in the church and go to Widnes to help them, until they got another pastor. So it was that I became the caretaker of Widnes church, for approximately two years, during which time we moved from place to place. First the community centre, then the first aid centre, then the Methodist church. Each service was in a different venue. The church secretary carried the hymn books and the communion things in a small case.

We just went in early, swept up the cigarette ends, arranged the chairs and held a communion service. The members of Widnes church were brilliant.

No caretaker pastor had an easier time. Every meeting the church members would bring in unsaved. People got saved. The church grew. They bought a piece of land in Coronation Drive. I went to the local brick works and selected the bricks and then advised the men to build the church higher, so in future days they could tuck the roofs of additional rooms under the eaves of the church. I really enjoyed my time at Widnes. They have been and still are very good friends, especially the Holland family.

They built a new church and the time came for them to have a regular resident pastor. I was their obvious first choice, but strange as it may seem, I did not feel called to take Widnes church on as a permanent situation. At this time, within a matter of weeks, I received an invitation to be the pastor of Goulburn church and an invitation to go to Buxton on a six month trial. If suitable, I would then become the pastor.

This put me in a dilemma, so I phoned Raymond Westbrook, who was at that time the pastor of Bromley church, in Kent. I told him my situation and he advised me to wait on the Lord and give the Lord time to work, rather than make a mistake, so this is what I planned to do.

At this time I was working as a heavy goods driver, for Tarmac Roadstone Holdings, delivering tarmac to the various motorways. The Lord told Nehemiah He could lift a nation up or pull a nation down, but I just didn't realise how fast the Lord can actually work. This is exactly what transpired.

One morning I went to work at 6 o'clock. In came the manager. I asked, "What's the matter Alan, can't you sleep?" He said, "I've come to have a talk with you Lawrie. Come out on to the car park." There he told me that the plant was stopping production in six weeks time. It was going to be a convenience transport depot, with only twelve wagons servicing the area; running out of Ashton, Whit Lane in Salford and Buxton.

"You have a wife and six children. You like working in Buxton. I can get you a very good job – a 'money spinner', working out of Waterswallow's Quarry on piece work. You will get a shilling on top of your wages, for every mile your wagon carries a load. Do you want to work in Buxton?" I just stood for a while and silently thought, this is the Lord working, so I accepted Alan's offer. He sent me to Buxton to have an interview with the manager and arrange my transfer to Waterswallow's. This I did. That same day I bought a local Buxton newspaper and came back to Cadishead.

As Nancy was getting tea ready, I read the paper and there, in large print, was this advertisement.

WANTED

Manageress florist

Roseman's Store

Main Street

Buxton

Rent free 3 bedroom flat available to successful applicant

I turned to Marlene, who had just come into the house and said, "Would you like to be a manageress florist in Buxton?" She said she would, so I phoned Roseman's, who said they would wait for us to come to Buxton straight away for an interview. Marlene and I shot off to Buxton and by 9 o'clock that night, Marlene, her sister Naomi and I all had a job in Buxton. Plus we had a rent free three bedroom flat.

Now can anyone doubt the Lord's ability to work wonders in record time? Marlene and I moved within the week. The family followed a few weeks later. Sylvia got a job in a corset factory and Rhoda started school. Can anyone doubt the ability of the lord to move like lightning? All this took place in one day.

So we settled into Buxton church. The condition being that if I was suitable, at the end of six months, I would take over as pastor. I don't want to go into the details of what transpired at Buxton, simply to say that after about ten months there was no prospect of me ever becoming the pastor of Buxton church. Our entire family worked so hard and we filled the church, but the harder we worked, the harder we were treated. I kept absolutely quiet and never grumbled. I never poisoned my four girls with complaints or criticism. One Sunday afternoon, just after tea, our four girls, Marlene, Naomi, Sylvia and little Rhoda, all lined up in front of the open fire. They stood in a row. Marlene was the spokeswoman. She said, "Dad, we don't want to go to that church any more." There was a moment of silence, only broken by Naomi's fierce declaration, "We've all gone on strike!" (Naomi is the one with the temper!) I smiled at my four lovely, hard-working daughters and simply said loud and clear, "I'm joining you. I've gone on strike too!"

The girls just stood and laughed. Then I informed them of what was going to happen next. We were all going to go to the evening service, after which I was going to quietly tell the pastor that we were all going to leave the church and move to another one.

There were not going to be any arguments or harsh words or comments. We were simply going to leave – and that's just exactly what we did. The pastor just gave a grunt and moved away. We returned home to the flat and during supper I said to Nancy and the girls, "When the student was cutting down trees to make a bible college in the Old Testament, one

student lost his axe head in the water. The old prophet said, 'show me where you lost your axe head.' The student showed him and the axe head floated and he was able to continue cutting down trees. So, I'm not twisting scriptures, but I think it would be a good idea for us to return to Cadishead for a while and give the Lord time to direct us to where we should really be. We will pack sufficient food for ourselves and Granddad and Grandma Westbrook and stay each Sunday with them.

Then suddenly, a knock came on the door. I answered it. It was the Pastor. He said, "I want you out on the yard." We stood together on the cobblestoned service yard, at the rear of Roseman's store. There he continued to tell us that he would not let us leave the Church, because we were the best workers they'd ever had. I simply told him that he and his family had no intention of turning the church over to me or to anyone else. We had made up our minds to go back to where the axe head had fallen in the water, but that if we were making a terrible mistake, we would return and take up where we left off.

I promised him that we would do that and we shook hands before we left Buxton. I found out later that several couples had been used in the very same way, as we had been used, some before and some after we left. Now to put the record straight, much to the credit of the pastor and his wife, they came to us and apologised when we were at the Minehead conference. They admitted that they had not treated us right during our time at Buxton. Nancy and I shook hands with them and everything has been fine since. Now the reason I have described our Buxton experience is this: during our ten months at Buxton, we learned a very valuable lesson. John mentions the principle that it is difficult for us to decrease whilst others increase, because the old unregenerate man doesn't like to give the pre-eminence to others. Now, at the age of 86, the lesson that Nancy and I have learned in Buxton has stood us in good stead, proving that all things work for good, to those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose.

Chapter 8 – The Buxton Vision

We now had a regular routine, preparing food on Saturday night and setting off to Cadishead church early on Sunday morning. The old assembly welcomed us with open arms. Grandma and Granddad Westbrook were so pleased to see us and we made sure we left ample provisions to last them through the following week.

At this time I was employed driving a tarmac wagon on piece work, making a very good wage. This meant that every night when I got into bed I slept soundly. Nancy and the girls joked that they could strip the bedroom and redecorate it and I would not wake up, but one night something very unusual took place. Now I had never been one to claim visions or dreams, or even hearing voices, but I do believe in divine guidance. Paul is clear proof that the Lord does direct people through dreams or visions. That's how Paul got the call to Macedonia. He actually saw a man and heard that same man say, "Come over and help us."

Well, one night, or shall I say early morning, at about 3 o'clock, I woke up and sat up in bed wide awake. The first thought that came to me was, why I had woken up. I wasn't ill. Then on the blank wall at the foot of the bed a picture of a stone church with a high apex roof appeared. There was an opening in the gable end and Nancy and the children (all six of them) were standing in the opening. Paul had a hammer in his hand. Mark had a plank of wood. Quiet Sylvia was standing holding a tray of tea cups. They were all smiling. The Lord spoke to me and said, "I'm going to give you this church. You will build living accommodation for yourself and you will restore this Church and be the guardian of it or the rest of your natural life." I was absolutely amazed as I sat looking at his strange life-like picture. It just faded away. I could not get back to sleep again.

I was on an early shift the next morning, so I phoned the quarry about 4 o'clock and told them I could not go into work, because a domestic emergency had arisen. They said it was ok and that someone else would drive my wagon that day. When Nancy woke up, she asked me why I had not gone into work. After Marlene and Naomi had gone into the store and Sylvia to the factory and Rhoda to her school, I first told Nancy about the vision. Then we went into the store and told Marlene we were going out for the day and we might be home late.

After filling the car up with petrol, we set out looking for this stone church. You see, I had never had a vision, so I went to all the places where I had preached and to places where I thought we might find it. By dinner, we were in the Widnes area. I called in at Jim and Gladys Holland's house

about 12 o'clock. They invited us to have some dinner with them. After dinner I told Jim about my vision. He sat for a while and then said slowly, "Lawrie, you are so sensible and practical. I believe you have had a genuine vision, but my advice to you is to stop this searching for the Church. The Lord will prove that your vision is genuine by showing you this church at exactly the right time. You see, Lawrie, Joseph's vision took the best part of twenty years to be fulfilled. The Lord could show you this church tomorrow, or it might be in several years time." I received this advice from Jim Holland, but naturally I wanted the Lord to show it to me sooner, rather than later.

A few weeks later, on Saturday morning, about dinner time, we were all going down the A6 road to Cadishead to visit Grandma Westbrook. We stopped at the traffic lights in the Denton area, when Nancy said, "There's a man over there in a green mini. He is signalling you to stop." It was Ernest Anderson. We both parked up and walked back to the lights. He said, "You're just the man I want to see. I've just come from the district counsel meeting. We have been talking about you and your family. There's a small church in Swinton, called the Mount of Olives, that's just on the point of closing down.

We think you would just be the right family to take it on." I silently thought, 'Oh no-not Swinton'. Ernest asked what I thought of the idea and I told him I'd put it to the rest of the family, who were all in the car. Through the window of the car I explained to the children what Pastor Anderson had suggested and within a split second, in one voice, they all said, "Let's go to Swinton."

Now to the Christian reader, this doesn't sound very spiritual, but it's exactly what took place, so to cut a long story short, I went that same day to Bollington to see the chairman of the district council, Glyn Thomas. Together we went to Central Drive, Swinton, to see John Bell, the secretary of the Mount o Olives. He invited me to start a six week trial. After one week, John said, "Scrap the trial. Buy a house and come and live in Swinton and be the pastor of the Mount of Olives."

This presented us with another problem. How was I to get a house and a job in the Swinton area? How were Marlene, Naomi and Sylvia to get jobs too? Well, the Lord started to work another miracle. First we started travelling down to Swinton each Sunday morning, bringing a supply of food. Sometimes it was a big Dixie, full of stew. Winter was coming on and travelling back we experienced fog late on a Sunday night. So, I applied for a job with my old manager at Cadishead Transport Depot, still working for Tarmac. He told me there was absolutely no chance at all of a vacancy for

me, since he only had 12 wagons now, but the Lord works in wondrous ways when He wants to accomplish something.

This is what transpired; a driver came into the depot under the influence of alcohol and was given a warning by the manager. Subsequent to this, he came in worse for wear again. The manager was sure he would take heed to the second warning, but not so. The very next week, he was again under the influence of drink, so the manager was forced to sack him.

He phoned me up straight away and said, "Turn your wagon in at Water Swallow's and come here and start in the morning."

This I did and began to lodge at Grandma Westbrook's house. Marlene was such a good worker for Roseman's that they offered her the manageress position in their florists shop in Whitefield. Now all I had to do was find a house and that same week I bought a Swinton newspaper. There was a house for sale in Sefton Road, so I walked up the path and said, "I want to buy your house." "You're too late," said the man. "I've just sold it. I'm going to emigrate." I asked him who he had sold it to and he told me he'd sold it to a man who lived just round the corner in Station Road, only about 75 yards away. I thanked the man and went round the corner. I knocked on the door and told the man there that I'd like to buy his house. "How on earth did you know I was selling my house? I haven't told anyone yet." I just smiled and explained that I'd assumed he'd be selling, since I'd been talking to the owner of the house he was going to buy.

So, I was invited to have a look around and after agreeing on a price, the owner said he could be out within the week. So, that's how I came to move to Swinton. Within about two weeks, I was working at Cadishead Tarmac depot and Marlene was the manageress of Dingle's Store at Whitefield. Sylvia got a job at Dorma bedding and Naomi started work on the check out at Asda. We all began the restoration of Swinton Church.

Swinton Burnt Out

As a family, we set to and started refurbishing the church. We scrubbed and painted and generally smartened the church up. The members of the assembly took heart and things began to look up, in fact several members who had left the church, returned. After we had redecorated the church, the district council sent little Pastor Barrett and Joe French to visit us mid week, to listen to me preach and to have a look at the church. They commented on how beautiful the church was and how things had certainly picked up. That was mid week. On the following Friday night, Nancy and I decided to have a break and go over to Cadishead to see Pastor Morgan. As we sat in his living room, drinking coffee, the telephone rang and Auntie Alice

answered it, saying it was for me. Marlene was in tears as she said, "Oh Dad, come home. The church is on fire." I flew to Swinton as fast as I could.

When we arrived, the street was full of people and two fire engines. White foam was pouring out into the street. The window had gone, but the roof was still intact. The superintendent of the fire service said it had been caused by an electrical fault, but I disagreed with him. I was always the last person to leave the church and I switched off the gas and the electrics. On further investigation, we found that vandals had used white spirit and paint in several places. They were two local boys; one of them was member of our assembly.

As I looked at this burnt out mess, I prayed for the Lord to give me a cheerful spirit and that's exactly what He did. We swept an area in the centre of the church and then I took the large, turquoise carpet square out of our front room and put it in the centre of the church. We cleaned some chairs and on the Sunday morning we held our communion service around this blue carpet. As we finished, in came a Salvation Army officer, Mr Williams. He said that we could go to their citadel each Sunday morning where we would preach in turn, until we got the church sorted out. Then, in came another man and said, "You can hold your mid week services in our Saint John's Ambulance rooms." This we did. I will always appreciate what those two men did for us.

The Ansvar insurance company were very good, but oh, what a picnic I had with the builder. He had too many jobs going at the same time, with only four workmen and one of them was an alcoholic. My two sons, Mark and Paul and myself had to finish off the work, restoring the church, but we took this opportunity of turning the church around completely. We built a proper church entrance, in the form of a double door porch, so really after the fire the church was indeed a better place. In order to be more reliable and to have more time for the church, I left Tarmac and took a job as a caretaker in a remedial centre in Victoria Park, Swinton. One difficulty was the fact that I had to go late, every night, to close the windows, set the alarms and generally secure the centre.

I was wondering what to do, when the superintendent of the centre came to me and said, "Lawrie, I believe you can write poems. Will you write one about the centre so I can put it in the monthly magazine?" I agreed. So, I wrote one about every hobby that was catered for in the evening classes: gardening, soft furnishings, the choir, the art class, the drama class, the fibre glass. In the last verse I wrote about myself as a heavy goods driver, not having to worry about the fog and going over Wood Head in the ice and snow. The superintendent of the parks department bought a copy of this

magazine and when he read the poem he sent for me. He asked if I still had an HGV licence and what vehicles I could drive. I told him I could drive 'anything with wheels and a steering wheel!' I could drive any wagon, bus, road roller, tractor, JCB, boat or winch.

He said, "I've got a proposition for you. If you will work for me as a floating driver, that is; you will drive any kind of vehicle at any time, anywhere; I'll give you top grade." So I said, "I've got a proposition for you. I will work at any time, on any emergency, even if it's out of hours – in the middle of the night, or when a certain football match is on. I won't book any time at all, but in return, you will agree to let me have time off if I need to take a funeral, a wedding or to visit someone in hospital. I give you my word that I will not abuse this arrangement." So, we had a deal and shook hands. I agreed to work for him on these conditions.

When I informed the superintendent of the remedial centre that I was leaving, she offered to give me a big increase in wages, saying that I was the best caretaker she had had. She told me she could rest in peace, knowing that I could be trusted at all times. Now, the reason I have laboured this, is to point out that a Christian should be a hard working and trustworthy person. It bodes well for the Christian testimony.

One sunny evening, after I had worked for the council for a few years, I was going to take a group of people to hear an evangelist, in Manchester. Marlene was sitting in the passenger seat, alongside me. I pulled onto the petrol station forecourt, when suddenly in my arms and across my chest, I had these pains. I could not reach out my hand the 24 inches, to the dashboard, to switch off the ignition. Marlene said, "Dad, you look awful." I told her to come round and open the door for me. I then slid down off the seat and shuffled around the back of the bus. Marlene opened the back doors and helped me up. I sat alongside an old man called Mr. Gladman. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a small brown bottle. "Here, take one of these, under your tongue. You've had an angina attack."

Marlene filled the bus up with petrol and drove it back to our house in Station Road. She opened the front door to let me in, and then I told her to drive the minibus to Manchester. I was going to go to bed. I slowly went up the stairs, took off my shoes and my tie and undid my belt. I lay on the bed, looked up at the ceiling and simply said, "Lord, I can't die tonight. What about the vision you gave me at Buxton?" Then I went to sleep. Marlene returned home about 9.30p.m. I had a cup of tea and went to sleep again. The next morning, I went across the road to the surgery of Doctor Brown. I told him what had transpired and he said, "Man alive! You could have died last night. What on earth possessed you to do a thing like that?" He sent me to Hope Hospital.

There they wired me up and gave me another cardiograph, after which they told me I had had a heart attack. They gave me white tablets and pink Beta Blockers and told me I was not to lift anything heavier than a tape or a book. Then the doctor sent me to a dietician, who gave me a diet sheet. I had six months resting, then I persuaded the doctor to let me return to work. After five days, I collapsed over the controls in my JCB, so there followed another few months resting.

During this time I did something which I hesitate to tell you about, in case you think I'm setting a precedent for you to follow. I am not. I believe every person must only do what they think the Lord wants them to do and it is wrong for one person to legislate for another. I decided to stop taking the tablets, so I disposed of them. After about two months, I went to the doctor for an examination. He told me I was doing fine and gave me a prescription to buy more tablets, which I reluctantly did. I disposed of them and never told a soul about it.

After a further month, I went to the doctor and said, "I want to go to hospital and have a test." He told me there was no point doing that, since he already knew what was wrong with me and he didn't think I'd ever work again. However, I persuaded him, so off I went. I was wired up and put on a running machine.

The operator advised me that he was not concerned about me puffing and blowing (because I was out of condition), but was concerned about me being in pain. At the slightest sign of pain I had to nod my head and the machine would be stopped. I did puff and blow, but had no pain, so the speed of the machine was increased. Then the treadmill was elevated and again made to go faster. Eventually, the machine was stopped and I was asked if I was sure I had no pain. I told him I had no pain at all, so he said, "There's not much wrong with you." And I was discharged.

Now I had a problem. You see, I had promised the Lord that if He healed me, I'd go full time as a Pastor, even though the church offerings were not sufficient to support me. Well, one girl said, "I buy far too many clothes. I've got a wardrobe full, so I'll put the money in the offering." Another said, "I buy records I don't need. I'll do the same."

Then I got a phone call from a pastor who had been offered a pastorate in an American church in Mississippi. He asked if I would be kind enough to fulfil all the engagements that he'd made, preaching at different churches, and I agreed to do it. I went full time. First of all, I went down to the Social services department and asked them to tell me the most money I could receive per week, from a church, without paying tax.

That figure became my weekly pay and I have never paid one penny tax from that day to this, but of course it was a very small wage.

Chapter 9 – Discovering Christ Church

My house on Station Road, Swinton was right next door to the rugby club house, frequented by some doubtful characters. We had trouble from these few rogues, so one night I reluctantly called the police to settle some disorder. As I stood talking to the police officer, who by the way came from Bolton, he said, "If I was you, with four daughters, I'd buy myself a good working German Shepherd dog. I asked him if he knew where I could get such a dog and he told me that on the outskirts of Bolton there lived a man who was a prisoner in Germany, during the war. This man had married the daughter of a German man, who was a judge of working German shepherd dogs. These are not show dogs. They can herd ducks as well as sheep.

So, I got the address and Rhoda and I went to Bolton. Rhoda just stood and one of the pups left the mother and came straight to Rhoda. It was black and gold. Rhoda said, "I'll have this one." It cost me a fair price, but it was a beauty. We called it Guida, after my Granddad's dog. Remember Granddad Miller, the shepherd. Each day I would take it for a run on the rugby training field.

One day I was on the field, kneeling on a plastic sheet and combing Guida's hair, when a very strange man came and stood over me and started shouting, "Get that mangy dog off my field! I've been coming on here for years. Get off this field!" I thought the man was mentally deficient, so decided I would not argue with him.

I hurriedly picked up the plastic sheet and walked quickly off the field.

Then I realised I'd not used my usual entrance, but was now standing in Fraser Street. I started to walk down the street; turning to take what I thought might be a short cut into Pendlebury Road. As I entered the graveyard, I looked up and there in front of me was the very stone built gable end I had seen in my vision at Buxton, 16 years previously. I just stood and looked. It was the back of Christ Church, Pendlebury. I walked round the church.

As I was crossing the main front door, which was open, a man nearly threw a bucket of water over me. He said, "Sorry Mate. I'm bailing out. The roof's half gone, you know." I introduced myself to the man, who was the voluntary caretaker, called Fred Parker and I asked if I could have a quick look inside the church. He didn't mind at all, saying that I could take the dog in too. Since they were flooded out anyway it would not make any difference.

I started asking Fred questions about the church and he told me that things were in a bad way. There was practically no congregation; only four old ladies, the church secretary and a resident minister, who lived next door in the church bungalow.

The main nave was flooded. There was no supply of water or gas. There was no toilet in the church either. Only the chancel was cleaned by the four ladies, who brought their cleaning water in plastic bottles on the bus from Clifton.

I got the phone number of the Anglican minister. In this district it was Wilfred Gash, of Saint Ann's parish, Clifton. So, I phoned Cannon Gash and introduced myself and told him that I was interested in buying Christ Church when it came on the market. He told me that they were currently in discussion concerning closing the church down, but that nothing had been decided yet.

A week later, I read an article in the local paper, written by the secretary of Christ Church. It went like this: 'It will take a greater miracle than Jesus turning the water into wine at the marriage in Cana, of Galilee, than to restore Christ Church. There is no hope for a church in this area.' She went on to describe the sad state of affairs.

I contacted Cannon Gash again and asked if I could visit him in his home. He agreed. During that visit, I told him of my vision in Buxton and my desire to buy Christ Church, fully restore it and run it as an open evangelical church. It would be open to anyone in the district, including any members of Christ Church. At first he did not know what to think of me. Later on he confessed that when he first met me he did not know whether I was crazy or a man of faith.

Well, a strange, but wonderful series of events took place; events that I believe no man orchestrated or designed. First, Cannon Gash confirmed the closure of Christ Church to be a fact. Secondly, the Anglicans would not sell it to Pentecostal people, so I requested a meeting with the Anglican officials. This took place in Saint Ann's manse. After the meeting ended, I asked them permission to pray about the situation.

I just knelt down on the living room carpet and prayed a very simple prayer. First, I asked the Lord to bless the minister there, then I quoted the wisdom of Gamaliel, who said, "Brethren, we might find ourselves fighting against God. If this thing be of God, it will prosper. If it be of man, it will come to nought." Then I said, goodbye and came away.

There followed a few weeks of silence, but I thought since I'd waited 16 years I'd have a bit more patience, but my faith was to be tested once again. It was Sunday dinner time. I went to the front door for a breath of fresh air. On the pavement was a group of men arguing over something. One man said, "We've got to get rid of the damned thing. We should never have bought it before we got permission."

Now I did something entirely out of character. I went to these men and said, "Can I help you? What do you want to get rid of?" They glared at me, as if to say 'mind your own business', but one of them asked me who I was and I told him I was the pastor of the Pentecostal church in Clarendon Road. "What do you want to get rid of?" The man, who seemed more reasonable than the rest, said, "We dropped a clanger. We bought a wet canteen and the council flatly refuse us permission to put it up. It's stacked on the outfield of our training ground, just near Christ Church."

"Oh, you mean that stack of steel girders, chip board and glass frames etc. How much do you want for it?" I said.

"How much money have you got?" "I have £200." He said, "£200? That's only a fraction of what we paid for it. What do you want it for?"

I told him I was going to restore Christ Church and that having measured the girders, had found that they just fit into the church and would make a strong ceiling for the minor hall. One man turned down my offer straight away, but as I was turning away, the reasonable man said, "Hold on a minute. Give us a little time to discuss this." So, I went back to my front door and stood on the step. After they had talked a little while, they beckoned me. I went to them. The leader said, "We will let you have all that material on these conditions; first that you only use it on Christ Church and that you don't resell it for a profit, secondly it must be off the rugby ground within seven days. Finally, you must not use any vehicle on the rugby ground. You must not put one mark on that pitch. Do you understand?"

I replied that I did understand and I repeated the conditions he had just declared, stating that we would adhere to each of them. We then shook hands. Apparently, the local council had been very severe with this rugby committee. As I went back into my house, I thought, "What on earth have I done? Where am I going to store all that material, especially those long, steel, lattice girders."

I hadn't even got any sign of buying Christ Church yet, but I had a strange, but wonderful assurance that everything was going to work out; that the Lord was going to do miracles for us. The following day, Monday, I was going through Swinton in my old estate car and on the main road some gas workers were struggling to get a damaged gas trolley into a skip. It had four

wheels and a tubular frame. I suddenly had an idea. I jumped out of my car and said, "Can I have that trolley?"

They said, "Yes." So, I dropped my rear seats down and made a cargo space and they put it into my car. Part of it was sticking out of the back, but I only had a short distance to go. I examined the trolley. The front axle wasn't damaged. The wheels were set in very good roller bearings and the whole thing was bolted together, not welded. So, I just took the front axle off with the wheels and put the rest down the tip. I then set to and made a wooden platform truck, similar to the kin used by welders, for their equipment. Next, I had to find somewhere to put all this material.

Now, my son, Mark had just finished building a large workshop at the rear of my house. It covered the entire back garden, big enough for him to work round cars, when he was repairing them. It was high enough to lift an engine out of a car. When he came to my house that night, I asked if he would do me a favour and let me borrow his workshop for a while and he said, "Sure." I told Mark I had bought a considerable amount of building materials to use in the Church, but that I did not know how long it would be before we got Christ Church, in fact the Anglicans had told me they wouldn't sell to Pentecostal people.

I was convinced the Lord would keep his promise and fulfil the vision He gave me at Buxton. Mark looked at me for a moment and said, "It's a good job I haven't taken on any repairs. Yes, Dad, you can have the workshop for as long as it takes. I believe you will get Christ Church." I just thanked him, but I was so proud of his faith in both me and the Lord.

Now, round the rugby field was an outstrip of land, where the spectators stood to watch the match. It was hard ground and the weather was dry. To cut a long story short, when the men assembled at Fraser Street that night, I said, "This is what we are going to do. You see all this material? We are going to carry what we can and push what we cannot carry, on this truck through that gap in the hedges. We will load it onto the wagon and take it to my house in Station Road, to store it in Mark's new workshop. One man said, "There's tons of stuff. Have you got permission to buy the Church?" I said, "No, but I will get permission."

So, by faith this is what we did. Mark's workshop was chock-a-block full. You could not get another piece of wood or steel inside it. The gates just closed. We had worked for three nights and we still had 14 long girders. I went home. On the Thursday I went down to the church to pray. As I pulled alongside the kerb, I realised that between the kerb and the council-owned pavement, was a concrete apron, about 12 feet wide and about 36 feet long. I had a bright idea to make two wooden frames with an open cradle in

the middle. We would stack the girders inside them and when all 14 girders were safely installed, I would finish the centre wooden cradle off and they would all be safely stored. That is exactly what we did.

Church – when the Lord gives us the church. They are exactly the right size and type for the minor hall.” He asked me if I had Christ Church and I had to reply, “No. The Anglicans have had a meeting and they say they cannot sell an Anglican church to a group of Pentecostal people.”

He told me I was mad and he was very serious. Most of the assembly and all my family really believed we would get Christ Church. There were two people who had absolutely no faith at all. During the Tuesday night prayer meeting, I took out of my pocket a blue piece of scrap paper. I laid it on a small card table in the middle of the room and told the congregation that I had written on it a list of everything we would need when we got the church.

The list included:- a main sewer about 90 feet long, five toilets, one boiler room, one kitchen, new gas, water and electricity supplies, a flat for me to live in at the rear of the main building, a minor hall, a large games room upstairs, two rooms for counselling people, lots of sand, cement, bricks, slates and glass.

All the roofs needed repair. In fact the main church roof needed completely renewing on the west side. The small rooms at the rear needed to be re-slatted. I asked that everyone who had faith to believe that the Lord would give us all these things should come out and lay hands on the piece of paper. Everyone came out. Those who could not reach the paper laid hands on the shoulder of the person in front of them. The man I mentioned earlier was not in the meeting.

We all prayed. One dear man, a rough diamond named Albert Oakes from Bury, prayed and said, “Lord, give him the lot. He deserves it.” The Lord certainly answered Albert’s prayer. He not only gave us the lot, He also provided a lot of money to go along with the abundance of materials, which again were supplied to us in a unique manner.

One day the district council asked me to go, for a week, to the International Bible Training Institute, to sit and listen to a series of lectures given by overseas missionaries, at Burgess Hill College.

About the middle of the week, Phyllida, the secretary sent for me. I was wanted on the phone. It was Nancy. She was excited and said, “The Anglicans have had a meeting and decided to sell you Christ Church.” I was so thrilled. The week could not pass fast enough for me. When I came

home, I went straight to Cannon Gash's house. He said, "Lawrie, I've never known the Anglican church move so fast. They usually take ages to make a decision, but I've been given instructions to arrange for you to meet the Anglican redundant church officer, to fix a price for the church. How much money have you got?" "Not a penny," I replied, "but the lower the price, the more we will be able to spend on the restoration. It will never be used for anything else other than an open church for all the people of Swinton, Pendlebury and Clifton." Cannon Gash then asked me if £10,000 would be too much and I told him that would be fine.

I talked to Nancy and the children and put the idea to them that we would sell our home and spend the money on Christ Church. That would mean that when Nancy and I died, we would not have any money to give

On the Sunday morning, a man, a regular member of the church, who was always praying about having faith, challenged me. He asked rather fiercely, "What are all those girders doing stacked outside the church? They look a right mess." I smiled and quietly said, "They are for Christ to our children. With one voice, they all said, "Go ahead; buy Christ Church. We are behind you 100% and will all help you to do it."

They certainly kept their word. I do not want to mention names, for fear of leaving someone out, but everyone I knew and some I didn't, who did not disclose their identity, helped me tremendously.

I have digressed a little, but during my meeting with Cannon Gash, I said to him, "Give me the keys to Christ Church now. I will move in tonight, with a camp bed and German shepherd dog and a Calor gas stove. I will be the resident caretaker of Christ Church under your jurisdiction. You will be my boss and I will put a stop to any further vandalism. Wilfred Gash looked at me and said, "What if it all falls through and you don't get the church?"

I replied, "No one will lose by the church having a resident caretaker, at least they won't set it on fire on bonfire night." I had Widnes church in mind when I said that. Wilfred paused a little while and then said, "Would you mind if I gave you the keys to our bungalow which is next to the church? You could guard that as well, please."

I got the keys, took Guida, a camp bed, stove, kettle and miniature Baby Belling electric knowing that there was one power point that worked. I also took along a cooker a hand lamp, some blankets, a plate and some cups and I moved in to Christ Church. It was about 5 o'clock on Saturday afternoon and Paul helped me in.

Then he went to have a look at the bungalow, since freezing temperatures for the night had been forecast. Paul got a hosepipe and connected it to the lowest point on the central heating boiler. He drained the water system off, to prevent the pipes and radiators freezing up. That night was bitter cold. I slept in a grey woollen track suit and my trainers.

When men came to steal the lead and the slates off the roof, I just turned Guida out and they scarpered, like frightened rabbits!

On the Monday, I went for fish and chips just close by the Church. I asked the proprietor of the chip shop to do me a favour by letting any trouble-makers that came into his shop know that the church had a new caretaker. He certainly did. He told them that an ex-commando tough guy, with a German shepherd guard dog was living permanently in Christ Church. I never had any trouble after that!

Now, the wall was broken down between the church and the church manse-the bungalow. So, I used to sleep in the church one night, then carry my gear in the dark and sleep in the bungalow. Any prospective trouble makers did not really know where I was.

Chapter 10 – Restoring Christ Church

The vision, the discovery and the restoration of Christ Church is unique in many ways. It actually takes some believing, but I take comfort from the fact there are so many witnesses to its authenticity, especially the members of my own family. When I broke the news to the Pastors of the South Manchester district, they looked at me askance and some even told me I was making a big mistake by going to live in a church. They advised me that a pastor should always live a distance from the church members- that that was the only way to get a bit of peace and privacy.

Well, I can tell you at the very beginning of this chapter, that for the past twenty years there has only been a wooden passage door between me and the rest of the assembly and not one person has ever invaded our privacy. Nancy and I are surrounded by the quietest neighbours one could ever live alongside. You see, they are all in graves. One Pentecostal man asked how Nancy and I could sleep surrounded by all the graves and I said, “My good friend, it’s not the dead that cause all the trouble. It’s the living.” At this junction, I think it would be a relief to present a little poem that I wrote called TRANSMISSIONS. It actually took me 50 years to assemble all the material for it

There are many kinds of Christian
Up and down this land, you know
And the Lord, He gives discernment
Even though I older grow
And these old eyes very strangely
See what young eyes fail to see
So the various types of Christian
Will be described by me.

First there’s brother limelight
One in nearly every church
To the platform clings tenaciously
Like a parrot to its perch.
Talk about double natures
Like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde
Just take him off the platform
And into deep depressions he will slide.

Secondly, there’s sister gypsy
Forever flitting around
Pulling down the church she’s just left
And praising the one she’s just found.

Her dear old Pastor, so full of faults,
The new one, such a charmer,
But the old church finds, to their relief,
The atmosphere much calmer.

The fourth pain, Mr Brainwave
Full of plans and schemes and say.
The scourge of the general meeting,
Who turns every Pastor grey
With his grand, impressive manner
And his schemes of good intent
Then quickly from the work scene fades
Leaving others to implement.

Then there's Mrs Pray-them-in
With a system all her own
Using a kind of telepathy
An invisible, spiritual phone.
The one who the unsaved man
Or woman has never seen
A stranger to the harvest field
Simply because she's never been

Then there's Mr Clutch-it-tight.
He's a sorry kind of believer.
Just mention tithe, he begins to quake
And goes down with severe gold fever.
Watch out if this man should ever get
On either council or committee
He'll show the missionaries dear
Not a single ounce of pity.

You sometimes get a lazy bones.
Not many, just one or two –
Fixed firmly in the arm chair
As if sat on super glue.
With a skin as thick as rhino hide
And a conscience that won't even quiver
Even when he's blue with cold
He's too lazy to raise a shiver.

But none of these descriptions
Would ever fit you, my friend.
Your attitude and character
Are of a very different blend.

You're not a bit itinerate
Neither brainwaves nor limelight.
You're a pillar in the Church of Christ
I know this to be quite right.

You're a friend I'm always glad to see-
A person I never fear
Transmitting from yourself to me
True warmth and strength and cheer.
You're a person I try to emulate
The young ones should do the same
Filling the hearts of everyone
With joy and never pain.

After Cannon Gash had offered me the church and the land for the nominal figure of £10,000 I set about the restoration of Christ Church, in earnest. First I obtained a bridging loan for £10,000 from the Property Trust. Then I arranged to sell my house to a good friend called Anza Patel, an Indian lady. The house was sold on the understanding that she would allow Nancy and the children to continue to live in it, rent free, until Paul and I built living accommodation in the church for Nancy and Rhoda.

I then got the Assemblies of God's solicitor to draw up a contract between the trustees of the church and Rhoda, Nancy and myself stating that we would live in the flat, rent free, for the rest of our natural lives and that we would be guardians of Christ church. The money from the sale of my dwelling place was to be spent on the restoration of the church either directly or indirectly. Then I assembled the congregation and suggested that each person would use their individual talents and the rest would become their labourers. This is exactly what took place.

The very first thing was to assess the whole building, then decide where to build the flat. Now Mark and I had been instrumental in helping a very beautiful young lady to leave a cult, called The Way and she became a member of our church. Her friend was an architect. When I told him of my plans to build a flat, he suggested we were going to build it at the wrong end of the church. His advice proved to be invaluable and he drew up all the plans at no cost to the church.

Next, we had to rip out the old pipe organ and Paul converted the organ tower into two rooms; a bedroom downstairs and a study upstairs. Then he converted the choir's dressing room into a living room, the Pastor's vestry into a beautiful modern kitchen and we rebuilt a bathroom, complete with toilet.

We finished the flat in the early spring, following which came the hottest summer we had had for years. Paul, Arthur and I were scorched. I was 65 at the time, but after my legs gave way, whilst on the roof one day, Paul grounded me. Instead, I had to do all the preparation of the materials, treating all the wood with creosote. Paul and Arthur did a wonderful job relaying the 90 foot long roof, assisted by the other church members. Every single slate had to be measured, cut and hauled up by hand. The actual estimate for this job was £18,000 and they did it voluntarily.

All the men and women worked tremendously hard for the space of four years. The first bonfire night, I collected twelve spent fireworks and rockets that had been thrown and fired through the open windows. I lined them up on a pew and showed them to the workers the next day.

There is so much to tell, but I can only give snippets. One day, I was bricklaying on the scaffold, just about door height on the minor hall main wall, when we ran short of funds and materials. On the window sill we had a temporary phone. It rang and a voice at the other end of the line asked if we used the bells in the Pentecostal church. I asked who was speaking and learned that it was the vicar of an Anglican church in Accrington who wanted to buy our church bells.

Now all I had done was to coil up each bell rope and secure it from rats or mice, by suspending it in mid air. I explained that I didn't know the value of the bells and the strange voice told me to contact the bell maker in Loughborough. I rang John Tailor's and they told me that the bells were very valuable; a new set could cost £40,000-£50,000. I enquired what the scrap price of the bells would be and he told me £8,000. So, I agreed to sell the bells for the scrap value, wanting to reciprocate to the Anglicans for selling us the church at a very good price.

First I had to get permission from the Charity Commissioners, the local council and the listed buildings department. When I applied to these organisations, it was only the local council who refused us permission, so I pressed them for a meeting. They received me rather coolly and said there was no way that the bells were going out of Pendlebury.

However, as I got to the door, the Lord spoke to me and said, "Tell them about the kestrels." I turned and said, "I'd like to get rid of the bells before the kestrels start to breed." "Come back, Mr Cottam," he said. "I didn't know you had kestrels in the bell tower. Would you mind if we come and take photographs and watch them? You see, I am the secretary of the bird society."

That very week I got a permission form for the disposal of the bells. I rang the vicar at Accrington church to let him know and he told me that they only had £7,750, but they were going to raise the extra money with garden feats. I accepted the £7,750 and that's how the church at Accrington got the bells. We spent the money on bricks, sand and cement.

I said earlier on that the restoration of Christ church was unique in many ways. You see, I have never made one appeal for money, not even to my own congregation. One Anglican minister gave me £500. Another gave me £1200. A Methodist lady gave me £500. A house group in Swinton gave me £500. Ladies passing the church would give me money and say it was to buy lunch for the workers and so it went on and on.

Well, the time came to sell the old Mount of Olives building, which was situated in a very good position almost in the centre of the town. One day a man called Mr Berry approached me and introduced himself as the secretary of the Care of the Elderly in the town. Their supervisor, a woman named Mrs. Mac (who really had the care of the elderly at heart) was worried that the lease on their building was due to run out.

The only alternative building the council had offered them was right out on the moss, miles away from the centre of Swinton. It would be most unsuitable. Mr Berry explained that they would have the additional cost of running a minibus and even that would depend on them getting a voluntary driver. He wanted to know whether I would sell him the Mount of Olives building, so I called a meeting of the church and we all agreed to sell the old church, for a nominal figure, to the Care of the Elderly. They were delighted. Then I got three offers, one from a joiner, and another from a bookmaker and the third from a garage proprietor. All offered me far more than the figure I had agreed with the Care of the Elderly, but I refused.

One night, a big man called Ken Mac, came into the church. He was a friend of my son Mark. We talked about how the prime site had been sold to the Care of the Elderly and that it was his mother who was the secretary. Ken told me he was a demolition man and pulled down all sorts of buildings. At that time he was starting to pull down a gas show room at Leyland. It had only just been refurbished, yet everything in it had to go. He said he was going to give me a piece of chalk and I was to go to Leyland and put CC (Christ Church) on anything I wanted. I was then to take a wagon and a gang of men and go and take the lot absolutely free.

We went to the show room and got two sets of beautiful stairs, electric fluorescent lighting, radiators, fire doors, tables and wood – in short, everything we needed to restore Christ church. A little later, he rang me and said, "Go to the Catholic school in Middleton. It's only been built ten

years and I've got the job of demolishing it. Do the same as you did at Leyland."

Friends, I did the same as I had done at Cadishead, bricklaying, scaffolding, rigging, lifting up the girders. I lived in the church and worked from morning until night and the Lord blessed the work.

When it was finally finished, the normal routine would have been to engage a well-known speaker, have a special meeting and make a real show of things. Well, Swinton was again unique. I promised Mr Gash, who had been so good to us, that we were not going to beat the drum and say that we were going to succeed, where the Anglicans had failed. In fact we did not have a special opening service. We just moved in where the Anglicans left off.

We promised not to speak one disparaging word against the Anglicans and that we would honour their memories and past endeavours. We would also honour every designated gift, by finding the owner and returning it to that person. This we did. I must mention one man, little Pastor Harding from Oldham who was a wonderful man. He came across every time I had a problem and he helped me out, especially with the foundations and the brick work.

So Christ Church was fully restored, completely free of debt and I give the Lord all the praise and glory. He promised to give it to me and so He did. Nancy and I have now retired and feel that we have put down a good foundation. The leadership of the Church has been taken over initially by Les Bootman and his wife Anne (who I would like to thank for playing such a major part in the production of this autobiography) and of course all the faithful members of Christ Church. I am trusting it will go from strength to strength.

I am a little sad about the lack of young men who come out of the Bible College and don't want to take on the pastorate of a small church. To be a working pastor almost seems to be considered a crime these days, but I must say that many working pastors have put in the foundations of many a thriving church today. Perhaps hard times and a few disasters will revive the church. The main thing of course is to keep cheerful and pressing on to the prize of the high calling of Christ Jesus.

Chapter 11 – Reflections

What I intend to do now is to take a long backward look over the past 63 years, since that wonderful night when I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ hook, line and sinker. I will try to present to you a few very important truths.

What did I learn from the five years working on the farm, both part-time and full-time, from the age of 12-17? I learned patience, especially from ploughing with two shire horses and a single furrow throw-over plough. I also learned the art of transmission. That is, conveying to various animals one's own condition of temperament by contact with hand or voice. This also applies to humans.

What did I learn from my years at sea, especially during storms and the several invasions? I learned to assess people and to keep silent on occasions. I also learned observation, team work, give and take and the value of loyalty and sacrifice.

What have I learned during my service for Jesus? The value of a soul is priceless. The love of Jesus is limitless. To work for Jesus is a privilege. People are unpredictable and of a wide variety.

Three of the very best decisions I have ever made in my life are:-

- First to surrender my life to Jesus Christ and receive Him as my Lord and Saviour.
- Secondly, to take Nancy June Westbrook as my wife.
- Thirdly, after realising my own shortcomings and weaknesses, to determine that He, Jesus, must increase and I must decrease.

Have I any regrets? Yes. By and by, when I look on his face, I'll wish I had given Him more.