

THE Poly, Minehead and Freemasonry

Talk by W.Bro. Harold Beck to Exmoor Lodge No. 2390 on 21st September 2006

W.M., Brethren all.

I think the three parts of this title, taken together, cover very well a story which should be told while there are a few of us left with first-hand experience of all three - we who were at The Polytechnic before the war, were evacuated with the School to Minehead and became Freemasons. I regard myself as a spokesman for the few (most of whom are here, some wearing Poly red and green ties). I would welcome from them any corrections or additions to my memories and similarly I would be pleased to receive comments from local residents on any of the points I make about the Minehead and surrounding villages and countryside.

In the beginning The Poly was NOT an educational institution. When the Polytechnic Institution was opened in 1838 at what is now known as 309 Regent Street, the wording at roof level proclaimed it to be a Gallery of Sciences. To Science it was something like what the Tate Modern is to Art. "Poly" meant "many" and "technic" signified "technology". Polytechnic - Many Technologies.

The Polytechnic quickly became a major Victorian place of entertainment coupled to the imparting of knowledge of various applications of science. Prince Albert was an early visitor and its name was changed to The Royal Polytechnic Institution.

After about 40 years the Institution ran into financial difficulties and had to close. The site was acquired by Quintin Hogg, grandfather of the Lord Hailsham who died a few years ago.



Quintin Hogg

Quintin Hogg was a truly remarkable man. He was a successful businessman whose Christian commitment led him to devote all his leisure time and much of his money to helping slum children and youths improve themselves.



When, at the age of 36, he took over 309 Regent Street he retained the title of The Polytechnic - it was very well known and held in high regard. The new Institute provided skills training and general education courses to thousands of young men and women.

In 1891 The Polytechnic Institute became publicly funded, and was named the Regent Street Polytechnic to distinguish it from others in a network of Polytechnics which sprang up across London, in imitation of THE Polytechnic.

By this time Q.H. realised that the classrooms which stood empty during the daytime ought to be put to some use. So he began the Polytechnic Day School, in which he took a close personal interest until his tragic death in 1903 from asphyxiation by a gas fire in his bathroom in the Polytechnic premises.

So far as we know Quintin Hogg was not a Freemason but during his lifetime and no doubt with his approval his protégé and successor, Kynaston Studd, was initiated in Polytechnic Lodge and became a leading member of the Craft.

309 Regent Street

From 1910 to 1912 The Polytechnic was rebuilt, retaining the theatre, which had been added to the side of the Gallery of Sciences, and the swimming pool and gymnasium which had been provided by Quintin Hogg. Another large room, the Fyvie Hall, was paid for by Lord Leith of Fyvie. The Masonic symbols incorporated in the ceiling were to cause much trouble decades later.

This is basically how the Poly looked to the 1939 evacuees to Minehead except that the Theatre had become a Cinema open to the public. In the morning the Cinema was the Assembly Hall of the School. It was probably unique among school halls in having a carpeted floor, plush tip-up seats and a cinema organ (not one which went up and down).



To introduce two key players when the Poly School was evacuated:-

Sir Kynaston Studd



Sir Kynaston Studd was, like Quintin Hogg, a committed Christian. He had a very distinguished career, for example becoming Lord Mayor of London in 1928. By the time of the evacuation he had been President of the Polytechnic for over 35 years. He was also President of the M.C.C., Provincial Grand Master of Cambridgeshire and President of the Masonic Board of Benevolence. Despite his age (81 when the war started) and many other calls on his time he travelled to Minehead by car on School business.

Dr. B.L. Worsnop



In 1939, the School was running smoothly under a physicist, Dr. Bernard Worsnop. He was an pioneer in X-Ray research who had been recruited from King's College London to head the Mathematics and Physics Department of the Polytechnic Institution and had then transferred to become Headmaster of the School. He became a familiar figure in Minehead and indeed in this Masonic Hall.

THE EVACUATION

In August 1939 the boys (we boys) were enjoying our summer holidays. After days of uncertainty the Government decided that evacuation would take place on Friday 1st September.

We have very good accounts of events before as well as after we arrived in Minehead, written by the boys themselves and published in the School magazine, The Quintinian. The Evacuation number was the first printed by Cox, Sons, Minehead & Williton. All of the wartime issues are on the Internet (<http://www.beck6mw.plus.com/Poly>).

To cut a long story short, the school was put on the wrong train and found itself in 4 small villages in Somerset. The Headmaster went on an intensive search for suitable accommodation, which brought him to Minehead.



Minehead had already received its quota of evacuees on 1st September 1939. The photograph (right) shows them outside the Rex Cinema (a favourite haunt of Poly boys provided they could get a Pass) and the Regal Ballroom (roller skating on slate on Saturday mornings). Clearly there would be great problem in finding billets.



With the help of Mr. Gibbs, the Head of the County School, and Mr. Northover, a member of his staff, together with some of the Poly masters and their wives, billets were found in Minehead and Dunster. About 3 weeks after the official evacuation the Poly School arrived in Minehead.

(I am mentioning names of Minehead people in case they are known to some here present).

THE POLY IN MINEHEAD

I think it can fairly be said that THE Poly School and Minehead took to each other.

In the Evacuation issue of The Quintinian, the Chairman of Minehead Urban District Council, A.E.H. Berry, wrote a warm message of greeting. The Headmaster reported that many of the School's masters were entering in full measure into the activities of the town, for example by giving lectures to the Rotary Club.

Something of the way the Poly boys took to Minehead and Dunster can be seen in their writings in The Quintinian. For example, there was an ode TO NORTH HILL, a poem about A COUNTRY RAMBLE and an article about the delights of DUNSTER. The pleasures of WORTLEBERRY PICKING were described and there was an essay about HUNTING AS SEEN BY AN EVACUEE. The EMMA LOUISE sailing boat fascinated numerous Poly boys to such an extent that 60 years later they were enquiring about its fate.

Billets & Hostels

Billeting had gone well but for various reasons a number of Poly boys had to leave their billets. One, for example got chucked out because he and another boy spent a Sunday afternoon hammering out the opening bars of their Oratorio on a piano in the billet. I never did learn if my schoolfriend got fixed up with a good billet after our labours that afternoon!

In due course hostels were established. One was at The Dene at Alcombe, leased for £120pa, and run by the Headmaster and Mrs. Worsnop. Conditions inside the Dene were crowded but the boys (my brother Alan included) were happy.



Awareness of War



In Minehead there was constant awareness of the war. AA guns sounded from across the water from South Wales, there were the pill boxes, one near the Station disguised as a bookshop, and the sandbags. (The picture on the left shows the measures taken to protect Minehead's hospital). The Poly masters and most of the senior boys were active in the Minehead Home Guard.

Events in which the School teamed up with Minehead organisations were Scrap Metal collections, Warship Week and a Book Drive to provide reading material for the Armed Forces and Libraries. Other activities on a war footing were Scouts (Land, Sea & Air), Cadets, Spotter Clubs and a Savings Campaign.

Soon came a regular flow of obituaries of boys who had been killed on active service. Perhaps the most poignant was in an issue of *The Quintinian* which included a letter from a recent school leaver serving in an Anti-Submarine Patrol, saying he was having a fine time and had been recommended for a Commission. His death was reported in the same issue.

In September 1940, we heard machine gun fire and saw or heard a British fighter chasing a German plane across Minehead. We learned that the Jerry plane had crashed on the beach at Porlock. Many of us cycled to the plane and soon we had collected bits and pieces of it as souvenirs. The next day our trophies had to be returned to the Police - but not all parts were returned, as witness the exhibit at Allerford Museum, donated by one of the boys.



Minehead Residents

Many School activities brought in the Minehead residents. One great favourite for the boys as well as the residents was the Dramatic Society, for it also brought in girls of the County School.

R. Howells *Key*

POLYTECHNIC SCHOOL DRAMATIC SOCIETY
(President - Dr. J. L. Worshop).
Secretary - E. W. Methley

The Society, assisted by two Minehead Ladies
presents
"THE CASE OF THE FRIGHTENED LADY" by EDGAR WALLACE
Characters are in order of appearance in each scene.

ACT I
Inspector Tanner's Office at Scotland Yard

| | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|
| Police Messenger | S. Levy |
| Sergeant Ferraby | F. G. Dunford |
| Sergeant Totty | G. K. Matthews |
| Inspector Tanner | E. W. Methley |
| Willnot a Warder | P. J. Fountain |
| Briggs a Convict | R. W. Stanley |
| Lord Lebanon | E. W. S. Smith |
| Gilder a "Footman" | B. S. Stocker |
| Recruits for the C.I.D. | H. Miller |
| | A. Hysouth |
| | B. Catchpole |
| | T. A. Booker |
| | T. Warran |

ACT II - Scene I
Hall at Marks Priory Seat of Lord Lebanon.

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Tanner | Joan Lacott (formerly of Minehead County School). |
| Kelver a butler | G. R. Matthews |
| Totty | |
| Ferraby | |
| Gilder | |
| Brooks a "Footman" | R. W. Stanley |
| Lady Lebanon | Joan Lacott (formerly of Minehead County School). |
| Rowbans a Heraldic expert | S. Levy |
| Lord Lebanon | |
| Aisla Crane | Pat Joyce (of Minehead County School). |

Scene II - The same
Tanner, Lebanon, Totty, Gilder, Brooks, Lady Lebanon, Ferraby.

ACT III - Scene I
A bedroom at Marks Priory.
Aisla, Lady Lebanon, Gilder, Brooks.

Scene II
Hall at Marks Priory
Totty, Tanner, Gilder, Brooks, Ferraby, Lebanon, Lady Lebanon.

P. J. Fountain *officer* *R. Howells*

It was not thought advisable in the present circumstances to expend money or use material for the provision of properties most of which are therefore left to the imagination of the audience as was the case in the earlier days of British Drama.

W. G. Howells

RETURN TO LONDON

After the intense bombing of London in the 1940's there was a lull and many parents preferred to keep their sons in the capital. In late 1943 the Headmaster reported that a London branch had been opened.

Boys in three Forms were asked to give three personal reasons why they would look forward to getting back to London and three more on why they would be sorry to leave Minehead. To summarise the result:-

Most gave as their first reason for returning as: "There is no place like home. I should be with my parents, my brothers, and sisters". The boys said they would regret leaving Minehead because they would miss "the beautiful countryside and the sea, the grand cycle rides" and "the many Minehead people with whom I have made friends".

One boy gave his three reasons for not wishing to return as: (1) Pamela, (2) Audrey, (3) Joan.

In January 1944, the Speech Day of the School was in London. The chair was taken by Sir Kynaston Studd and among the important guests was Mr. Gibbs, Headmaster of the Minehead County School, who spoke of his admiration of Dr. Worsnop and his hope that the contact between the two schools would not end with the end of the war.

It was two weeks after this meeting that Sir Kynaston Studd, carrying out his duties to the last, died peacefully in his sleep. There was a great Memorial Service at St. Paul's Cathedral. It was said of him that "Everything he touched he lifted up".

January 1945 By this time most parents wanted their sons to be taught in London. This presented great problems because most of the rooms the School occupied pre-war in 309 Regent Street were being used by other departments. Temporary accommodation was found in several places in central London.

Some 50 or 60 boys remained in Minehead, together with 5 of the Masters. The senior boys were transferred to the Minehead County School.

When VE Day came in May 1945 very few if any Poly boys would have been around in the Town which had meant so much to them during the war, to witness the VE Day celebrations or, later, the standing down of the Home Guard.



POLYTECHNIC LODGES & CHAPTERS

There are many Lodges and Chapters associated with THE Polytechnic.

| <u>Lodges & Chapters associated with the Polytechnic</u> | | |
|--|------------------------------------|------|
| Polytechnic Lodge | 2847 | 1901 |
| Polytechnic Chapter | 2847 | ? |
| Robert Mitchell Lodge | 2956 | 1903 |
| Quintinian Chapter | 2956 (to 1977) 5416 (from 1977) | 1907 |
| Old Quintinians Lodge | 3307 | 1908 |
| Kynaston Studd Lodge | 5416 | 1933 |
| Kynaston Lodge | 5810 | 1939 |
| Langham Lodge | 6886 | 1949 |
| Kynaston Chapter | 5810 | 1988 |

(It was pointed out to me after the talk that there was also an Old Quintinians Chapter).

I will make a few comments on the three oldest Poly Lodges:-

Polytechnic Lodge No. 2847

This was the first of the Lodges associated with the Polytechnic, Consecrated at the Poly in 1901. The idea for its formation came from one Charlie Pratt, an exceptionally well known old Poly boy - he was Secretary of the Harriers, the very successful Athletics Club of the Poly. He was not a Freemason but felt Masonry should be a Polytechnic activity - the impression is given that Freemasonry could be regarded as an extension of the Polytechnic.

Charlie Pratt became the Polytechnic Lodge's first initiate. The second initiate was one Robert Mitchell. I will concentrate on him in my consideration of the other two Lodges because I think it will reveal something of the nature of the early Polytechnic and its relationship to Freemasonry.

Robert Mitchell Lodge 2956

In 1903 the second of the Lodges associated with the Polytechnic was Consecrated. It was called the Robert Mitchell Lodge.

"Who was Robert Mitchell, who had engendered such respect that a Lodge of Freemasons was named after him within 3 years of his initiation?" The question is asked and fully answered in the Centenary History of the Lodge.

Robert Mitchell was born in 1855 and was apprenticed to a metal worker. He attended a bible class run by Quintin Hogg and then went to Q.H.'s Boys' Institute. He became, at the age of 16, Honorary Secretary of the Institute and then paid Secretary of the Youths' Christian Institute.

Robert Mitchell knew first-hand the urgent need for technical and trade education. Q.H. understood the need (without having direct experience) and backed R.M. all the way. R.M. built up a programme of evening trade classes covering 28 different trades. In 1891 he was made Director of Education.

In the report in The Freemason of the Consecration of the Lodge it is stated that "Special allusion was made to Bro. Robert Mitchell's life work and to the appropriate honour which had been conferred on him by those who had worked so long with him".

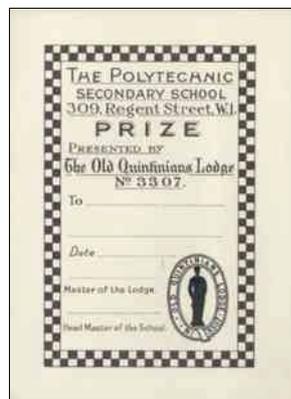
The Christmas Dinner Fund, which enabled tons of food to be distributed by Poly members to thousands of poor families at Christmas, was his initiative. R.M. also worked very hard to start the Polytechnic Holiday Tours, which over half a century later became the Lunn Poly.

Robert Mitchell went into Robert Mitchell Lodge No. 2956 as Senior Deacon and in 1906 he was Worshipful Master. He achieved the rank of A.G.D.C. In 1917 tribute was paid to him in the House of Commons for training men for the Royal Flying Corps - he had been given the Honorary rank of Major (the R.F.C. was then part of the Army) and was awarded a C.B.E.

Old Quintinians Lodge 3307

In October 1908 the Old Quintinians Lodge No. 3307 - a Lodge associated specifically with the Poly School - was Consecrated at the Polytechnic. Robert Mitchell was a Founder.

Another illustration of the close association of the Polytechnic and Freemasonry, with a reference to Polytechnic business in a Masonic meeting, arose at the Installation Meeting of the O.Q. Lodge in 1922 when it was announced that the new W.M. (W.Bro. Worswick) had received a letter from W.Bro. Mitchell. The following extract was recorded in the Lodge history:-



"I should like to take this opportunity of signalling my retirement as Director of the Polytechnic and recognising your appointment as my successor, and also as Worshipful Master of the Old Quintinians Lodge, by asking the Lodge to accept the enclosed bearer bonds, which should produce an income of £6 per annum. I ... suggest that the income be allocated by the Lodge to provide a prize or prizes to help to strengthen the link between the Lodge and the Polytechnic."

I wonder if this was the basis of book prizes with labels (left, reproduced with the permission of the University of Westminster Archive Services) signed by both the W.M. of the Lodge and the Headmaster of the School.

Poly Schoolmasters at Minehead's Masonic Hall

When the Poly School came to Minehead it sought a long-term arrangement to use the Masonic Hall for teaching. The meeting of Exmoor Lodge in November 1939 was a highly significant event for the Poly in Minehead. The Visiting Brethren included 8 of the Poly schoolmasters.

The Lodge confirmed the Agreement for the use of 4 rooms and also agreed (with support from St. Bernard Lodge) that the schoolmasters who were Freemasons should be allowed to become Honorary Members of the Lodge during the period of evacuation.

This Table gives bare information on the Masonic careers of the Schoolmasters and an indication of what we boys called them (though not to their faces).

Regent Street Polytechnic Schoolmasters who were made Honorary Members of Exmoor Lodge No.2390

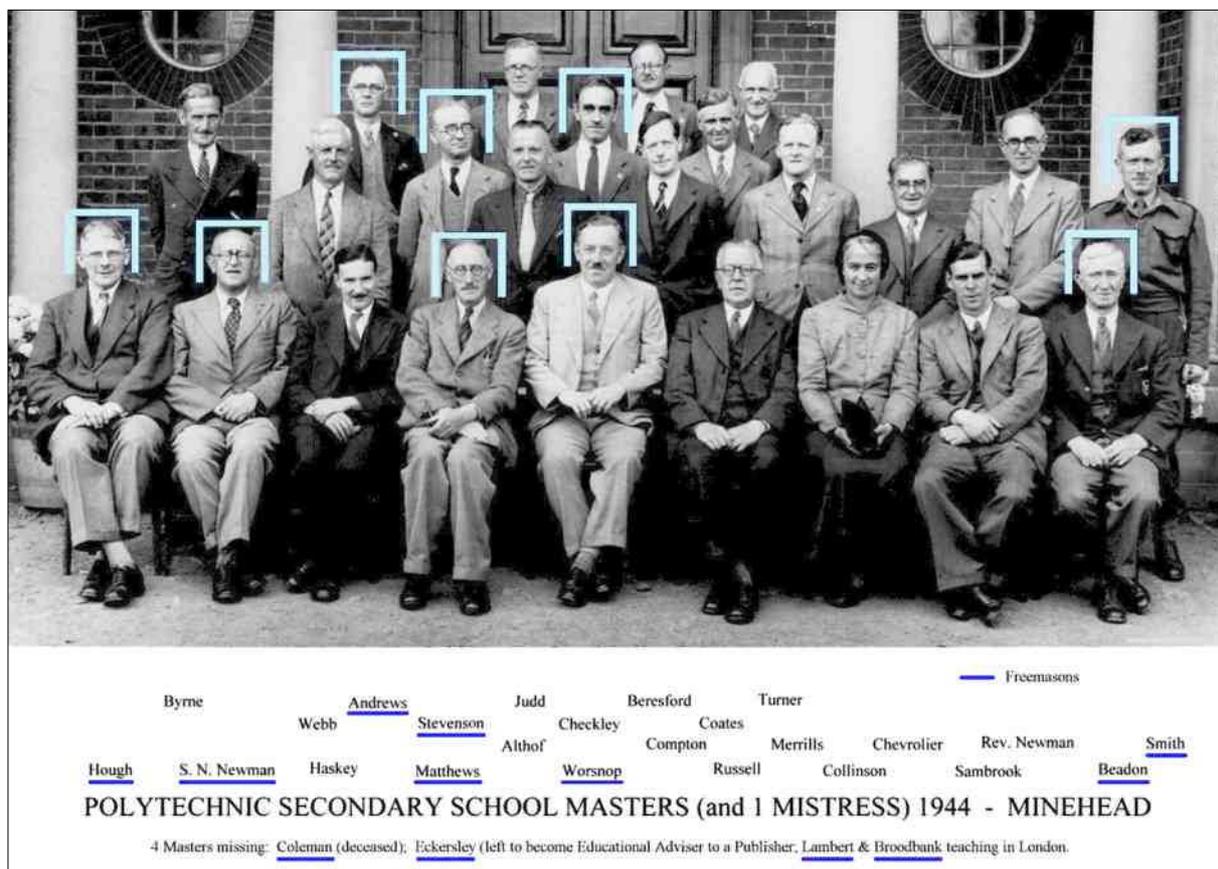
◀ Schoolmasters at the November 1939 meeting of Exmoor Lodge

| <u>Name</u> | <u>Lodge</u> | <u>I</u> | <u>WM</u> | <u>Notes</u> | <u>Subject</u> | <u>Nickname</u> |
|------------------------|--------------------------|----------|-----------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| W.Bro. J.W. Andrews | Old Quintinians No. 3307 | 1918 | 1929 | | Maths | JACK |
| W.Bro. J.L. Hough ◀ | " | 1921 | 1933 | Treas 1947-58 Org 10 yrs 1925-46 | Music/Divinty | JIMMY |
| W.Bro. J.B. Lambert ◀ | " | 1920 | 1932 | Org 1933-35 | Maths | JOEY |
| Bro. C.E. Eckersley | " | 1925 | | | English | CHARLES |
| Bro. H. Checkley | " | 1934 | | | French | HARRY |
| Bro. H.O. Coleman | " | 1938 | | | German, Phonetics | HORACE |
| Bro. H.B. Smith ◀ | Kynaston Studd No.5416 | | | | History | SMITHY |
| Bro. B.L. Worsnop ◀ | " | | | J OQL 3307 1946; I C.L. Jones 1951 | Headmaster | NOBBY |
| W.Bro. S. Newman ◀ | Barnato No.2265 | | | | Economics,Brit Constn | TINNY |
| W.Bro. H.J.Beadon ◀ | Polytechnic No.2847 | | | | P.T. | HARRY |
| Bro. F. Matthews ◀ | Coronation No.2898 | | | | Chemistry | BUNNY |
| W.Bro. AJP Broodbank ◀ | East Croydon No.4667 | | | | French | ARTHUR |
| Bro. J. Stevenson | Lodge No. ? | | | | French | ? |

It seems that the honorary membership was informal for the names of the schoolmasters are not recorded as Honorary Members in the lodge rolls. In the Centenary History of Exmoor Lodge it is recorded that the schoolmasters appreciated their welcome and took an active part in the Lodge. Bro. Checkley became Organist and at the Golden Jubilee meeting in May 1941, two schoolmasters - W.Bros. Beadon and Lambert - delivered the second part of the second lecture.

In November 1944, W.Bro. Beadon wrote expressing thanks for their reception by the Lodge.

I thought Exmoor Lodge might like a record of what most of their Poly Honorary Members looked like. They are shown with a square form blue halo and their names are underlined in blue. 4 were missing from the photo for reasons given below.



Sitting next but one to the left of the Headmaster, Bro. Worsnop, in the photo (left) of the 6th Form of 1943 is Cliff Jones, who in 1951 was initiated by W.Bro. Worsnop into the Old Quintinians Lodge. It is good that W.Bro. Cliff Jones is to be the Centenary W.M. of O.Q. Lodge No.3307 in October 2008.

Poly Boys at Minehead's Masonic Hall during the War

As for the boys, the 4 rooms were mainly used as classrooms, the largest was for 6th Form teaching and for meetings of the 49 Club. The Temple was, of course, completely out of bounds but the boys had free reign over the rest of the building.

In December 1942 concern was expressed at the condition of the premises and Dr. Worsnop was asked for the immediate repair or replacement of bells, chairs, a hat and coat rack, piano and gas fire. In due course he attended a meeting of standing committee at which he returned Masonic jewels which had been taken from the Lodge rooms. The bill for damage resulting from the school's use was settled in November 1945 at £45.

I have said to the Lodge before and I'll say it again, that it is inconceivable that any of the boys who subsequently became Freemasons would have had anything to do with the damage or the removal of jewels. We who did become Freemasons can only apologise for the lower standard of behaviour of some of our contemporaries!

EVACUEES RETURN TO MINEHEAD

Such is the affection for Minehead and the surrounding villages and countryside generated by our stay here during the war that numerous Old Quintinians have returned here.

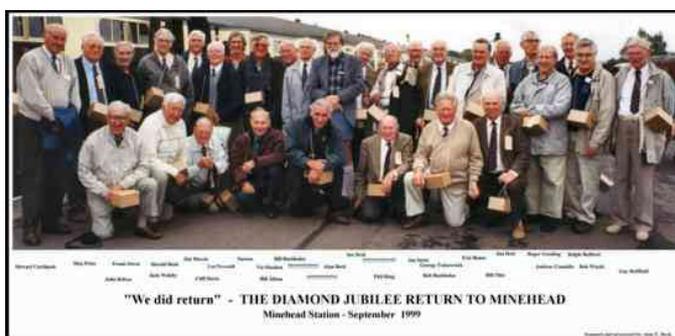
They have come back for holidays, with their wives and children to show where they spent some happy years. Others (myself among them) honeymooned here. At least one opened a guest house. Several bought second homes. One or two retired to Minehead.

Two or three of those who became Freemasons and have homes here joined a Minehead Lodge e.g. Stuart Catchpole and Bert Herbert.

Then there were the Reunions. These started in 1991 and have been held almost every year since then. One was held in Canada where a number of Poly evacuees have ended up.

It was a great occasion when, in September 1999, 60 years after the evacuation, many Poly boys who had become Freemasons witnessed a ceremony in this Temple and then dined, were Toasted and Responded in the very room where we were taught. This is when we presented Charity Bags to Exmoor Lodge to express our appreciation of the welcome it gave our Masters during the war

That same weekend we also presented a cheque to the Local Authority for the provision of a seat on the Quay, with a label on it expressing our appreciation of the reception Minehead had given us. We also re-lived the evacuation by travelling by a steam train into Minehead, complete with gas mask cases!



The following year, the opening year of the new Millennium, we were in more sombre mood at the dedication of a memorial stone we had commissioned. It was dedicated by the Vicar of Minehead, Rev. Geoffrey Wrayford. Names of those who died were read out. The memorial garden is now a place of pilgrimage for many Poly boys.



POST-WAR

The accommodation problem back in London was solved when, in 1957, the School - now part of the State system - moved to purpose-built new premises in St. Johns Wood. The school was renamed The Quintin School and later The Quintin-Kynaston School.

As for the Institute itself, it expanded and in 1970 THE Polytechnic was one of 30 newly created Polytechnics. It was renamed the Polytechnic of Central London.

One terrible development from our point of view was that in 70s and 80's students took exception to all things masonic. They refused to use the Fyvie Hall because it had masonic symbols in its ceiling. I understand Lodge furniture was wrecked so that all the Polytechnic Lodges and Chapters had to move elsewhere.

In 1992 PCL gained University status, and its name was changed to the University of Westminster. Expanding overseas activity has resulted in the University being given the Queen's Award for Enterprise in 2000 and again in 2005.

The entrance hall of 309 Regent Street looks much the same as it did in 1939, except for the security barriers. The swimming pool provided by Quintin Hogg around 1890 has gone but at least the Restaurant which has been provided in its place is called something like The Deep End.



The cinema/assembly hall has been refurbished as a general-purpose Hall. The Compton cinema organ we had heard back in the 30's during our morning assembly had become very dilapidated but was restored through the good offices of the Mayor of Westminster. Five of us attended the University of Westminster 2006 Reception at which the restored organ was demonstrated. Over 66 years after we were evacuated we were back at 309 Regent Street wearing our ties in excellently refurbished Hall.

The five are shown here - from the left, Cliff Davis, Phil Haig, myself, Dick Bawden and Ian Reid. Dick Bawden, whose father went to the Poly School, is the oldest PROM concert season ticket holder. The other four, together with Stuart Catchpole and Bert Herbert and two who alas are no longer with us have organised the reunions. The group was led in a delightfully low-key manner by Phil Haig. His special relationship with Exmoor Lodge - his father was initiated in the Lodge in 1944 - makes this a particularly appropriate occasion to express our thanks to him.



I feel privileged to have been invited to give this talk and would like to express my thanks to the Lodge and especially to W.Bro. John Lendon for his help and interest whenever we old boys come to this hall.

Finally, my warm thanks to W.Bro. Bob Moore for providing the facilities for showing the electronic slides.