



LOVE STORY: Captain Dugald Hancock and his sweetheart Vivien Bell were married in 1921

Bell with a sweet story to tell

In 1921, the bell tower of the parish church of Wheatley is a tiny bell with a love story to tell.

The bell used to hang in the belfry of a church in northern Russia - and it is only thanks to the detective work of Dr Gregory Walker, Head of Collection Development at the Bodleian Library, that we know how the Russian bell, which is only about a foot tall, ended up so far away from home.

Dr Walker, of Wheatley, spent four years researching the mystery.

The tale is the stuff of a romantic novel, set against the backdrop of the Russian Revolution. The hero is Dugald Hancock, a gallant captain who served in northern Russia with The Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment) just a year after the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Dugald, born in 1897, had joined the Army straight from school and served with the Signals Service, first in France, and then with the North Russian Expeditionary Force in 1918. During his time in Russia he was stationed at Troitsa, where the bell tower was used as an observation post.

Dr Walker says: "The bell was small enough for him to pick it up and bring it back to England as a souvenir."

Parish records show he gave it to the Rev Maurice Bell, vicar of the church of St Mary the Virgin, Wheatley, in 1921.

Dr Walker still had to find out what Dugald's Wheatley connection was. He left Corpus Christi College in 1921 and eventually became joint head of a Sussex prep school with Anthony Bell. The two had had a Christian Church Foundation research society. Anthony was the field. Rev Maurice Bell's son.



By Zahra Borno
zborn0@nqo.com

But it was not until Dr Walker managed to track down Dugald's surviving family that the rest of the story unfolded. Dr Walker says: "It turned out that Dugald was more interested in

Anthony's sister Vivien, who turned up to watch the match. They got engaged

about a year after meeting. Dugald was still an undergraduate and the couple married in secret. It wasn't until a year after the wedding that they plucked up the courage to announce their marriage.

"By then Dugald had presented the bell to the church as a gift to his prospective father-in-law." At last the mystery had been solved..