

# Bill Sargent



Inspiring the early years  
of



portsmouth housing association



## Foreword

Canon Bill Sargent was a significant influence in the early development of Portsmouth Housing Association. This booklet is produced for those interested in the Association's history and in the particular contribution which Bill made which continued to influence the culture and objectives of the organisation, long after his death in 1989.

Bill is fondly remembered by many people, in Portsmouth and further afield. He was someone who made his mark and left an enduring legacy. One of the many who experienced his influence was Canon Terry Loudon. In 2007, Terry wrote and published a biography of Bill: *'Imperfect Love' - The life and times of Canon Bill Sargent (1926-1989)*. This covered his theology and politics as much as his personal history and his ministry.

In the introduction to the biography, this is how Terry Loudon summed Bill up and explained the importance of reflecting on his life:

*Bill Sargent was ... a man of the left. His Christian faith informed his political activity. He was a Labour party activist, a member of Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, an outspoken opponent of the British National Party, a critic of overseas arms sales and of the Falklands War. But he was always willing to work with others who shared his view of social justice but who did not share his Christian beliefs. He would have been disheartened by the rise of Christian fundamentalism and conservatism, and the inability of radicals and socialists, whether Christian, agnostic, humanist or atheist, to make common cause around shared values. The context in which he served God, Church and society has changed, but a reflection on his life and times may help, in a small way, to revive and reinvigorate that tradition of Christian Socialism which moved and motivated his priestly ministry.*

The current booklet draws on this biography for the essential facts of Bill's life and reproduces, in full, the chapter on his involvement with Portsmouth Housing Association.

Copies of the full biography are available, priced £5 each, from Canon Terry Louden, 01730 823221 or email : [terrylouden@btinternet.com](mailto:terrylouden@btinternet.com)

Bill Sargent's father was an Irishman from Galway, a Protestant in religion, the black sheep of his family. Like his own father, he had a military background, and was commissioned in the field during the First World War. He married a Cockney girl and had two children. The first, Eileen, was Bill's elder sister and was nine years older than Bill. Eileen left home early, lived in Edinburgh, and died at a relatively early age. William Richard Gerald Sargent was born in Battersea, south of the Thames, on 19<sup>th</sup> July 1926.

By the early 1930s, the family had moved out of London to the picturesque village of Long Melford in Suffolk, where Bill's father ran a pub. His mother served at the tables of the gentry, and took home the scraps. They lived in a tiny and inadequate cottage; life was hard and money tight. Bill knew from his early years the effects of low wages and poor housing, and the importance of having a decent place to live.

Bill never looked back on his childhood in the country with any great affection. Although in later years he enjoyed rural holidays, he never liked living in the country. However, music was always an important factor in his life, he fondly remembered his mother's singing and his catholic tastes extended from jazz to Haydn.

Sometime in the late 1930s, Bill's father left the pub he was running, and the family moved twenty miles away, across the county boundary, to Braintree in Essex, where Bill attended the Grammar School. He was bright and did well.

But family tragedy struck whilst he was still a teenager as Bill's mother died when he was sixteen, and his father, serving in the army overseas, died of a heart attack shortly after. This sudden and untimely death of both his parents left Bill with a lasting sense of insecurity.

These deaths also affected his personal circumstances, and he had to go into lodgings. He achieved his School Certificate and was given

a place at London University to read Russian. The choice of subject may have been to do with increasing left-wing sympathies. But somewhere inside him was the need to get away from his upbringing and his unhappy family circumstances.

In 1944, a recruiting officer for the Indian Army visited the school, and Bill, the conscientious objector who once refused to be an Army Cadet (though by this time he had changed his mind and was the senior NCO), joined up, to the fury of the headmaster, who saw his academic potential, and the consequent loss to the school's reputation.

Bill enjoyed army life, and the experience of India, and was promoted captain at the age of nineteen. He hosted a jazz programme on forces' radio. Independence for India and Pakistan in 1947 signalled the end of Bill's army career, and he returned to the UK.

A friend, Gerald Stevenson, who had been demobilised with Bill took him to his home town of Middlesbrough. Over a pint (or two) in a local pub, prompted by a drinking companion, they both decided to join the police force.

In 1948, the murder of three rubber planters prompted the declaration of the Malayan Emergency, a military and political struggle against communist and nationalist insurgents that was to last twelve years. It was Britain's Vietnam. Bill (and Gerald) joined the Colonial Police and went to Malaya to fight the so-called 'CTs' (Communist Terrorists).

In Kuala Lumpur in September 1952, on a blind date, he met Jill Redwood. Jill was a graduate of the London School of Economics, and was undertaking a field study of the *orang asli*, the indigenous, aboriginal people of the Malayan jungle, an impossible task in the middle of a war. Bill and Jill were married on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1953. In time they had three daughters, Jane, Ruth and Kate, born in 1954, 1956 and 1958.

Bill and Jill (and Jane, aged two months) returned to England at Easter 1954, as Lincoln Theological College, was prepared to offer him (and his family) a place there. Bill enjoyed his three years at Lincoln Theological College. He organised, with the Warden's tacit

consent, a day's strike in college, in protest at the Anglo-French invasion of Suez in October 1956, and took the opportunity that day to also join the Labour Party.

Ecumenism was to mean much to Bill and during this time he came to see ecumenism less as a movement towards Christian unity, and more as a universal alliance of people of goodwill

Bill's first position as a priest was in Hull and the parish where Bill was working was a mixed community – with both terraced and Victorian housing providing homes for working class families and for staff and students of the university.

1958, the year in which Bill was ordained priest, was a significant year politically. It was the year of the Notting Hill race riots, fomented by Oswald Mosley's Union Movement, the precursor of the British National Party and the National Front. It was also the year of the first protest March from London to the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston in Berkshire, organised by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. The march started from Trafalgar Square in London on the coldest Good Friday since 1917 and the wettest since 1900. Nevertheless; 9000 people, were there to protest on Easter Monday at Aldermaston. CND was (and still is) a left-wing peace movement, influenced by Christian groups like the Quakers.

In 1960, Bill was appointed as Vicar of the parish of Holy Trinity with St. Philip, in Dalston, East London. During this period the scale of 'casework' ministry became such that Bill believed he could do it more effectively as a local borough Councillor, and he was on the Labour group from 1965-1968.

It was at this time that his interest in housing issues began. With a few friends he formed the Hackney Housing Association, which was soon able to open its first property for rent in Graham Road. He publicly criticised the Church Commissioners for developing expensive penthouse flats in the locality, and was interviewed on the BBC's 'The Money Programme'.

After 10 years in Dalston, Bill Sargent arrived as vicar of St Mark's Portsmouth in the spring of 1970.

## **Portsmouth Housing Association**

In his first years in Portsmouth, Bill Sargent concentrated his attention on his new parish and his pastoral ministry. Nevertheless, wider social and political issues were not ignored.

Food boycotts to exert political pressure began with the boycott of West Indian sugar in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the purpose of which was to advance the cause of anti-slavery legislation. Peter Haynes, priest-in-charge of St. Francis, Hilsea until 1972, remembers similar action over bananas; Bill Sargent led a local campaign not to buy any bananas not sourced from the Caribbean, in an attempt to improve the income of banana growers in the Windward Islands, who were suffering from competition from larger producers in Latin America. Portsmouth was the port through which bananas from the Caribbean reached the UK market. This was an early example of fair trade in practice.

Another local, social issue with which Bill Sargent soon became closely involved was the future of Alpha House, in Stubbington Avenue, just off the North End shopping area. Alpha House had been set up in 1969 as a residential unit for the rehabilitation of people with drug problems. There was immediate and ongoing NIMBY opposition. Bill was an enthusiastic supporter of the project as a way of reintroducing a vulnerable group of people to community life, and spent time and effort reassuring reluctant neighbours of the value of the scheme.

Local voluntary groups were beginning to 'network' under the umbrella of Councils of Community Service, in an attempt to improve co-operation amongst themselves, avoid duplication, address common issues, and improve relationships with the statutory authorities. The Portsmouth Council of Community Service was getting off the ground in the early 1970s, and Bill, with his background of 'social casework' and community involvement in Dalston, was a source of drive and encouragement.

However, an abiding passion, stemming from his childhood and from his experience in Dalston and from his theological convictions about

Christian social responsibility, was the alleviation of homelessness and the provision of good quality social housing for those who could not afford to buy their own home.

The housing charity Shelter was founded by the Revd. Bruce Kenrick in December 1966, the same month as the BBC showed Ken Loach's 'Cathy Come Home', one of the most influential social documentaries ever screened. Bill was involved with Shelter during his time in Dalston. He joined the Portsmouth Shelter Group, and so came into contact with a number of people, including Godfrey Doyle, Sue Anderson and Peter Ramsay, who were to be co-founders with him of the Portsmouth Housing Association.

National housing policy was about to undergo fundamental change, with the encouragement of local housing associations to supplement the role of local authorities as providers of social housing. The Housing Act of 1974 set up the Housing Corporation to promote this change in direction. Bill and his Portsmouth colleagues had already anticipated the policy change. On Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> March 1973, seven people met at the home of the Catholic Bishop of Portsmouth, and by investing £1 each, became the founder shareholders of the Portsmouth Housing Association. Peter Ramsay, an employee of Portsmouth City Council, itself about to be abolished under local government reorganisation, took a period of sabbatical leave to set up the Association, whose first home was a tiny office in All Saints' Church, Portsea. The founders of PHA came from different backgrounds, some Christian, others not, but it was the objectives of the founders and not their motives which were always paramount. The Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth, under the leadership of Bishop Derek Worlock, provided strong support, and the first chairman of PHA was Doug Hoyle, a Catholic layman.

In 1974 and 1975, with the practical help and goodwill of the local authority Housing Department, two houses in Fratton, 43, Daulston Road and 156, Church Road, were refurbished and let to tenants.

The new Housing Corporation was cautious about supporting new provincial associations, especially when they appeared to lack expertise. There was a proposal that an established housing association from London might take over the infant PHA. Bill and

others resisted this as PHA was set up to be a local community organisation, and the Housing Corporation agreed to PHA proceeding, on condition that it received what was called 'technical assistance' from the Paddington Churches' Housing Association in London, established in 1965, with whose staff Bill was already familiar.

So PHA began to grow, slowly taking on more property to renovate and refurbish. This was at odds with the local authority Housing Department, now part of Hampshire County Council, whose priority in the mid and late 1970s was demolition and slum clearance. A fierce public dispute broke out over the clearance of houses in the Northumberland Street/Canal Walk part of the city, close to the railway line at Fratton. In October 1977, Bill, somewhat reluctantly, became chairman of PHA, and began the long overdue process of reorganising the staff and voluntary management structures of an organisation that was growing rapidly. In March 1979, PHA had 200 housing units: the 500<sup>th</sup> home was opened in June 1982. An increase in staff numbers meant a move to larger premises, first, in 1982, to offices in Hampshire Terrace in Southsea, and then, in January 1987, to the old St. Mary's Institute in Fratton Road, recently vacated by a local radio station, which was to be PHA's home for the next twenty years.

The fall of the Callaghan government and the dawn of the Thatcher era heralded more change in national housing policy. The provision of rented housing was no longer to be the priority. Private ownership was the future vision. Council houses were to be sold. The Housing Corporation was instructed to support equity sharing schemes rather than developments for rent.

This policy change created a huge dilemma for PHA, and prompted agonised debate on the Management Committee about the future direction of the Association. PHA had been set up to provide homes for people in real need; it was now being asked to provide accommodation for those who themselves had some capital to invest. What had started as a charity was asked to become a business. The Management Committee was divided between idealists, who wanted nothing to do with the Thatcherite proposals, and pragmatists, who were content to achieve what was possible under the current regime,

in the hope that this would be a transitional period and would lead to a future when the Association could revert to its first priorities. Bill Sargent sided with the pragmatists. He himself said that he would be prepared to 'sup with the devil' in pursuit of a good solution. Though he was a visionary, he was never a utopian idealist like so many of his predecessors in the Christian Socialist tradition, and remained a realist and a pragmatist, determined to achieve what was possible.

The result of this internal debate was the formation of the Southlands Housing Association, named after a parcel of land in Cosham, a Portsmouth suburb, purchased from the Catholic Diocese, which was then developed to provide houses on an equity-sharing basis. Bill gave up the chairmanship of PHA, and became the first chairman of SHA, overseeing its development through the early 1980s.

Another initiative of the early 1980s in which Bill was closely involved was PHA's Care and Repair Scheme, which gave practical support to elderly owner-occupiers wanting to remain in their own homes, and provided jobs for the long-term unemployed.

One of the major effects of the new government policy to downgrade the provision of social housing was a rise in homelessness. To avoid people literally sleeping on the streets, local authorities moved families into temporary bed and breakfast accommodation, often overcrowded and lacking basic facilities, with shared toilets and bathrooms, no laundry facilities, and a requirement for families to be out of the property during the day. Bill, Bob Paterson (chief executive of PHA), and Jo Sugrue, a local Councillor and campaigner on housing issues, went to visit a scheme in Brighton, based in a church hall, giving respite care to families living in temporary accommodation. As Bill got off the train in Fratton at the end of the day's journey, he turned to Bob and said: 'We're going to have one of those'.

Funding and premises were needed. Bill went to see Timothy Bavin, Anglican Bishop of Portsmouth. Bishop Bavin had just received a large bequest from the estate of E.C. Roberts, a Portsmouth man who had emigrated to the USA. The terms of the bequest were that it was to be used for the poor people of Portsmouth. Bishop Bavin was minded to give the money to the Children's Society. Bill persuaded

him to channel the funds to the new project. At the same time Bob Paterson invited the Chief Executive of the national Housing Association Charitable Trust to meet Bill in Portsmouth to discuss the scheme. Further financial support was to come from this direction, assisted no doubt by the fact that the Bill and the Chief Executive realised that they had been in the same regiment in India at the end of the Second World War. Premises were a greater problem for what was effectively a day centre for families. What was first known as the Phoenix Centre had temporary homes at St. John's Roman Catholic Cathedral and at St. George's Church in Portsea. Not long before he died, Bill negotiated with the Revd. Michael Brotherton, vicar of St. Mary, Portsea and the Parochial Church Council about the use of a building in Crasswell Street, close to the city centre. The building had once been St. Faith's Mission (a daughter church of St. Mary) and a garment factory; now it was surplus to parish requirements, and was leased to the Portsmouth Housing Trust as the new home of what was to be the Roberts Centre. After extensive alterations to the building, it was formally opened in 1991 by Diana, Princess of Wales. Bill spoke of the Roberts Centre as 'my pride and joy', and he would be delighted to know that the Centre continues to thrive, offering a range of services to those with insecure housing and family difficulties, eighteen years after his death.

In 1985 the Church of England produced the 'Faith in the City' report, an indirect attack on government policy in the inner cities, and the Church's General Synod subsequently established the Church Urban Fund to give financial support to church projects in inner city areas. The Roberts Centre was a typical example of such a project and gained CUF funding for a number of years.

As a housing provider, PHA was not able to set up day care provision like the Roberts Centre. So, as this project was getting off the ground, the Portsmouth Housing Trust was established, with charitable status, a commitment to 'the relief of poverty, sickness and distress', and a brief to provide services for groups and individuals who were not tenants of PHA. Bill gave up being chair of Southlands Housing Association, and became the first chair of PHT. PHA then transferred to PHT all its housing stock which had been built or renovated for use by disadvantaged groups, including people with special needs such as physical disability or mental health problems. PHT's second major

project was the All Saints' Direct Access Hostel for young homeless people, built on the site of the church's vicarage and completed in 1991. PHT has also set up the Portsmouth Foyer, a scheme to provide young people with a base whilst finding work. Had Bill lived, he would no doubt have taken on the chair of the Foyer also. In 1999, PHT became independent of the PHA group and was renamed the Southern Focus Trust, carrying on much the same range of work. Bill was still Chair of both PHT and Care and Repair at the time of his death in 1989, though he had already taken active steps to recruit new committee members whom he believed shared his vision, his Christian perspective, and who would carry on the work.

Bill Sargent was closely involved in each of PHA's major developments over a period of fifteen years. Today he would be called a 'social entrepreneur', with the vision to grasp the potential of each new project, and the drive and determination to turn new ideas into practical reality. He was at the forefront of each new initiative in the group. Just before his death, he was talking about the setting up of Credit Unions, as the next development in PHA's work. He was an efficient committee chair, though he never suffered fools gladly and sometimes did not give others the time they thought of as their due in putting an argument or making a case. He could not stand the hand-wringing, 'conscience on the sleeve', approach of some of his committee colleagues. He wanted decisions made, usually in the direction he had decided beforehand, and he usually got his way. Sue Anderson, who succeeded Bill as chair of PHA, pictures him *'sitting at the chairman's place in the boardroom, with an ashtray close at hand, listening attentively, whoever the speaker, and always able to extract the point of what was being said, no matter how convoluted the delivery'*.

Bill was a loyal supporter and encourager of staff, especially in the early years of PHA when staff numbers were small. He cared for the staff as if they were his own parishioners, though without any attempt to 'Christianise' the organisation. It was quite enough for him to be working with those with faith or with none at all in pursuit of a common objective. He was a loyal and hands-on chairman, frequently in touch, in person or by 'phone, with all that was going on. He took a very active part in staff appointments, though he used to say that he only expected to get 50% of them right. If he had a fault, it was a

reluctance to dismiss people when that decision needed to be taken. He hosted Saturday morning seminars for staff, which were an informal opportunity to discuss the future strategy of the PHA group and 'to think outside the box'. He much enjoyed socialising with the staff, especially evening jazz cruises on the Solent. He was a great fan of George Melly.

Bill was an obvious Christian presence in the PHA Group, but he was frustrated by the lack of local church support for PHA, at least in the early years. In PHA's annual report for 1977-1978, he wrote this:

*'we have failed to engage their (the churches) attention to the essential work we are doing. I....believe that the work of our Association is a direct expression of Christian social responsibility in the city but....the churches do not see it as such. Perhaps we take it for granted that housing is seen by everyone as an opportunity for love in action, at least by those who profess that love in action is the name of the real human game.'*

This situation began to change in the 1980s when Bill became a human catalyst in a number of housing development projects on existing church land, when churches and churches and halls were adapted for residential use to the benefit of the participating church and association. The rebuilding of the Methodist Wesley Central Hall in Fratton Road is a prime example. Bill would have been gratified to see the completion in 2006 of a housing scheme on St. Mary's Glebe Field in Fratton, providing new accommodation for rent and part-purchase. As a charitable trust, the Roberts Centre also required funding, and Bill used his tenure as Rural Dean of Portsmouth (1984-89) to encourage practical support for the work from church volunteers and church giving. An annual sponsored sleep-out in December in St. Mary's churchyard attracted hundreds of participants, made for good public relations, and produced income.

From opening its first house in 1974, PHA has become a major social landlord in Portsmouth and South-East Hampshire, responsible now for some 5000 properties. These include properties for rent, houses for disadvantaged groups, and shared ownership schemes. Community regeneration has always been a priority of PHA's work. Besides the provision of bricks and mortar, the Group has always

tried to improve neighbourhood facilities and to encourage leadership and action among residents and tenants. The Roberts Centre, Bill's 'pride and joy' now runs a 44 space Ofsted-registered nursery, a Tenancy Support Service to prevent what is called 'the revolving-door syndrome', and a pioneering Contact Centre for separated parents.

All these services are part of Bill Sargent's legacy to Portsmouth. For sixteen years he was the real moral force behind the PHA organisation, the custodian of its values, and the quartermaster of its resources, especially the human resources of staff, committee members, volunteers, residents and tenants. People needed to be housed, not houses built for people. And Bill's contribution would have been far less had he not been prepared to temper his idealism with pragmatic action in order to get the job done.

When Bill died, his family and PHA debated how to mark his contribution to the development of the organisation. Mindful of his dislike of personal memorials, it was decided not to name a housing scheme in his memory, and for many years the only reference to Bill was on a small plaque affixed to a bench just outside the PHA offices in Fratton Road, Portsmouth. In the autumn of 2006, a PHA development on church land, the glebe field previously owned by the parish of St. Mary, Portsea, offering both shared equity and rented accommodation, was named 'Bill Sargent Crescent'. Whether he would have been pleased is another matter! The Bill Sargent Trust, the research arm of the PHA Group, also keeps his name alive. Established after Bill's death, its task is to propose new research-based housing-related projects, and thus serves to continue that work of innovation within the Group which he did so much to foster.



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Front cover shows Bill Sargent Crescent, opened October 2006