



Woolwich Garrison Church Newsletter No 17

Autumn/Winter 2025
Message from Chairman

The activities of the Church have been a combination of the new and the old since our last Newsletter.

Among the new has been the initiative started in 2025 to bring young people with additional needs to the Garrison Church on a fortnightly basis throughout the summer months. Our partners on those occasions have been the Brighter Futures Group in Woolwich, the Mencap Rivermead Centre and the Shooters Hill 6th Form College. Those attending are predominantly teenagers and young adults, together with staff. The students and staff come to the Church for up to 3 hours. Some of the students require one on one staff ratios, others are able to enjoy watering the garden with our hose, raking the gravel, or playing Giant Jenga or the other games which we set out on tables in the garden.

We provide refreshments and either we or one of the participating organisations provide music. When the main gates are closed the Church is a safe environment, and all of those attending enjoy being out in the open air, mixing with others, (including trustees and volunteers from the Church), dancing to the music, and carrying out some basic tasks.

We are fortunate to have received generous sponsorship for this initiative from the Bailly Thomas Charitable Fund, and are determined to maintain, and possibly to expand these sessions in 2026.



Among the established events of the summer and autumn I will mention 3, although during the period between April and October we usually have weekly events of one kind or another at the Church.

The first are the commemorative events associated with the death of Lee Rigby in May. On the Sunday closest to the date of his death, Ride for Respect, involving hundreds of motor cyclists, from the largest Chapter in the UK ride past the Church. A splendid variety of bikes and riders take part and some stop to enter the Church, to pay their respects at the Memorial to Lee Rigby (and others) and to lay a large wreath. The Ride for Respect involves the closure for a time of the South Circular (Grand Depot Road).



This year we also organised (through our Trustee David Ball) another event on the actual anniversary of Lee Rigby's death. Those attending included the Mayor and a large number of local Councillors and veterans. The Last Post and Reveille were played and the Kohima Epitaph was delivered. It was a moving event and we hope to increase the number of veterans attending on future occasions. This anniversary event involving Civic Leaders and veterans will become part of our annual calendar

The second event was the Interfaith Event on Sunday 20th July. This was organised by Peter Waller, one of our trustees, and brought together representatives of the many religious faiths represented in our Borough, as well as some of our civic leaders.



Commander Lawry of the Metropolitan Police highlighted the value of faith groups and their leaders in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour. The Mayor of Greenwich, Cllr Linda Bird spoke about celebrating our differences while respecting the views of others. The theme of the event was Wisdom, Worship and Service in Troubling Times.

The speakers were interspersed with musical performances by Cantor David Rome, one of our Trustees.

How the benefits that can accrue from such occasions, and manifest in the community of Greenwich and Woolwich, were summed up by Councillor Shabana Dhedhi from Waltham Forest, who described the Service as combining action with dignity.

The weather had threatened torrential rain throughout the afternoon, but the sun shone for our event. Refreshments were served afterwards with those in attendance enjoying the company of the community and the appearance of the Garden

The third event I wish to mention was our Remembrance Day Service.

This annual Service took place in beautiful autumn weather on Sunday 9th November 2025 at the Garrison Church. We had over 100 in the congregation including a sizeable number from the local Gurkha Community, a large contingent from the Army Cadets, 4 Councillors from RBG and our MP.

The Service followed the time-honoured tradition, including the Reveille and Last Post, the Exhortation and the Kohima Epitaph and hymns such as Abide With Me, O God our Help in Ages Past and Fight the Good Fight. Readings included In Flanders Field by John McRae and passages from Pilgrims Progress.

What distinguishes our Service each year is that we commemorate 2 men, one from the Royal Artillery VC Memorial and one from the Memorial to those killed on active service or in terrorist activity linked with Woolwich. Currently the last name on that Memorial is Fusilier Lee Rigby.

This year we had readings about the life and death of Lt. Tom Tanswell who died in Iraq in 2006 and Ernest Horlock who received his VC for acts of extraordinary valour in Northern France in September 1914. He survived the incident for which he was awarded the VC, but died some years later when the ship entering Alexandria was sunk by enemy fire, as Ernest Horlock was en route to a posting in Egypt.



Our Remembrance Day Service was followed by refreshments in the autumn sunshine. It was a moving and uplifting experience for all who attended.

Welcomes And Farewells

We say farewell to two of our longest standing trustees.

Diana Beattie was the Chairman of Heritage of London Trust Operations which began the work of restoring parts of the Church after acquiring the freehold from the Ministry of Defence, and before a lease was granted by Holtops to the Woolwich Garrison Church Trust. Diana has been indefatigable in her support for the Garrison Church and has family military links with the Gunners which makes the continuing viability of the Church a cause close to her heart. We owe a great debt of gratitude to her for her sterling work over the years in obtaining funding for the restoration of the Church and being the source of valued and valuable advice.



Cyril Young will be known to many. He was a Deputy Lieutenant for many years and Churchwarden of St Luke's Charlton where he became a friend of Shane (Viscount) Gough who, through Cyril's introduction, became a generous and valued Vice Chairman of the Trust, prior to his death in 2024. Cyril has great knowledge of diocesan affairs and church procedures. This was invaluable as the Garrison Church does not fit within the Diocesan framework and Cyril has had to advise on solutions to practical problems.

We will miss both Diana and Cyril, but the combination of advancing years and the distance between where they live (Wiltshire in Diana's case and Northumberland in Cyril's) made it increasingly difficult for them to attend events at the Garrison Church. They will always be welcome at any of our events, and all Trustees join with me in thanking them for all their many years of service.

We are delighted to welcome Lt Col Veronica Sefton as a Trustee. She is the first female Commanding Officer of Woolwich Station, a prestigious Royal Artillery position. She values the links between the Barracks and the Garrison Church and hopes that they will continue.

Veronica has supported the Church since her appointment to Woolwich and read one of the Lessons at the recent Carol Service.



New Administrator

Ruth Dodson resigned from this position at the end of September. I would pay tribute to her commitment to the Garrison Church during her years as Administrator.

We are delighted to have found an excellent replacement in Carmel O'Beirne who will be known to many readers of the Newsletter. Her son, now an enthusiastic Army Cadet and rugby player, was for many years, as a boy, a keen supporter of the Garrison Church, and in particular a guide to the crypt. He read one of the lessons at our recent Remembrance Day Service. Carmel has had experience in events and marketing at Shrewsbury House, lives locally and is committed to the Garrison Church. She has already improved and posted new items on our website, and attended our recent Trustees' meeting. She has given me great assistance in finalising two major grant applications which have recently been submitted. I hope that hers will be a long-term position as our Administrator.

Tim Barnes Chairman WGCT

Commonwealth and Gurkha Garden

We submitted a planning application to RBG in the summer, and had hoped that the detail provided in the application would suffice without our being required to commission various reports. We had had the Council's Tree Officer for a visit before the application was submitted and she had not thought that there would be a problem.



The Council's planners took a different view and asked us to commission reports from both an ecologist and an arboricultural specialist. This was disappointing because the land for the Garden has no particular ecological value, while the Garden itself will create new benefits. Juliet Sargeant's plans also avoid removing trees, though care will be needed around the roots where decking will be laid. We obtained the required reports from Duramen Consulting (arboriculture) and Denis Vickers (ecology). Both are now complete and raise no issues. We hope the Planning Application can now move forward so that final costing can begin. We are already in touch with Stuart Johnson Consulting, whom Juliet has worked with before, and Maylim, led by Thomas O'Mahony. Both have visited the site and expressed strong interest in being part of this unique project.



With support from the Mayor's Charity Donation, we now have around £100,000 for the project. This reflects our own fund-raising efforts and puts us in a strong position as we seek further funding. Our first major application has been to the Green Roots Fund, which offers grants between £10,000 and £500,000 for projects that improve green and blue spaces in London. The Fund supports projects that can run for up to two years. We already meet the 10% matched-funding requirement thanks to the money raised so far. Our application has now been submitted. The Heritage Lottery Fund is another proposed funder with whom we intend to engage.

As many will know the land to be occupied by the Commonwealth and Gurkha Garden is currently being cultivated by a group of Nepali ladies. The Trustees will seek to find them a location close by on which they can continue their efforts.

So although progress is slow the Commonwealth and Gurkha Garden project is going forwards, and we hope to be able to announce further progress in our next Newsletter.

Links with Gurkhas and the Nepali community

We are proud of the increasingly close links between the Garrison Church and the local Gurkha community (the largest in London) . This is reflected in the fact that one of the leaders of their community, Shri Gurung, is also a Trustee of the Church. Shri ran the London Marathon in 2025 to raise funds for the Commonwealth and Gurkha Garden and together with Cllr Jit Ranabhat was instrumental in raising further substantial sums for the Garden during Jit's year in office as Mayor of Greenwich.

We were delighted to host a major Nepali Cultural Day at the Church in the summer which was attended by the new Nepali Ambassador to the UK. The Church was decorated with Nepali banners, and there was a display of Nepali dance and music as well as numerous stalls and food and drink outlets.

This year we showed the documentary of The Gurkhas versus Everest

The evening of Saturday 4th October 2025 was pretty cold and it was pleasing that as many as 45 ventured out to support our annual Film Night, showing films with a military connection.

The documentary film embraced both the 2015 attempt which was aborted when the earthquake in Nepal wiped out Everest Base Camp, and the successful attempt in 2017. On that occasion the oldest man to have climbed Everest was part of the group seeking to reach the summit. He was still fit and alert despite being in his 80s. During the course of the ascent and after a day's climbing he suffered a fatal heart attack. Very sad, of course, but all on the expedition gave him a great send off when the helicopter picked up his body and all agreed that it was a fine way for him to die. 13 of the expedition reached the summit. A second group of 7 were repulsed by deteriorating weather.

It was a fine film in which many of the participants explained what the expedition meant to them both as Gurkhas. and as natives of Nepal.

There was some excellent hot Nepali food before the showing of the film.



We were also very touched to receive a beautiful ceremonial kukri (see photo) from Shri Gurung and his Gurkha friends with a generous citation about the warmth in which they hold the Garrison Church and the Commonwealth and Gurkha Garden. Tim Barnes, Eamonn O'Leary, David Ball and Andrew Blundy were the Trustees present on the occasion and made it clear how much the presentation meant to us.

We have still to decide where to display the Kukri, It may be that when the development of the Crypt is complete we will find a suitable and fitting space for it to be permanently on display.

Our Royal Patron

We are very fortunate to have as our Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Gloucester. He has been interested in and supportive of the Garrison Church for many years, and despite the many claims on his time, attends once a year an event at or in support of the Garrison Church.

This year he visited the University of Greenwich on the morning of July 16th and then came to the Garrison Church in the afternoon. It was a fine summer afternoon and the Church was full with those invited to the event. The afternoon began with a performance by the choir of Sherington Primary School, under Megan Armson. The children were exceptionally well drilled, singing all the songs by heart and looking as if they were thoroughly enjoying the occasion.



They were followed by the Reach Theatre Group from the Tramshed Theatre in Woolwich, a supportive space for teenagers and young adults with additional needs. Under the thoughtful direction of Joe Cocklin, they shared a spirited and enjoyable performance that highlighted their talent and confidence.



After the performance the Duke of Gloucester met with the performers and their Directors, and with an invited group of Veterans. It was a happy occasion and The Duke of Gloucester engaged with all the activities and the participants. His presence gave a lot of pleasure to a lot of people.

Councillor Jit Ranabhat Mayor of Greenwich May 2024-May 2025

The Garrison Church owes a great debt of gratitude to Jit Ranabhat, the first Nepali born Councillor of the Royal Borough to be elected Mayor. Not only did Jit nominate the Commonwealth and Gurkha Garden as one of his 2 Mayoral charities during his year of office but he also supported us with his attendance at numerous events.

Jit worked tirelessly to maximise the financial contribution to the Church, including his support of the Gurkha Procession through London in the New Year which he co-organised with Shri Gurung and resulted in a substantial award as one of the best of the processions which came from all over Greater London. His year of office ended with a Gala Dinner at the Town Hall which involved Nepali food, dance and music, and again raised funds for the Garden. Some of the last contributions secured by Jit are still coming in but at the end of the day we hope to receive a sum in the region of £30,000.

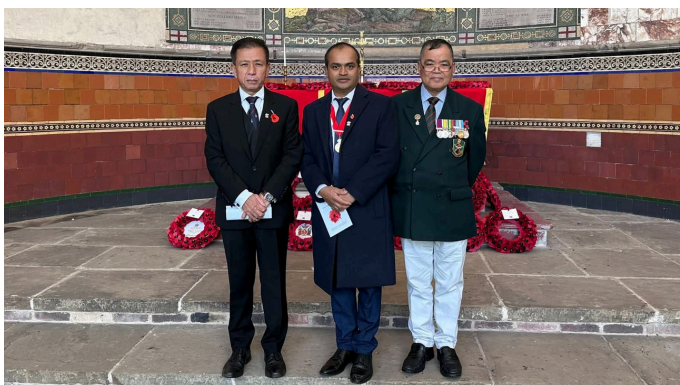
This is an absolutely marvellous return for all Jit's efforts.



For many of us his enthusiastic support of the Garrison Church was as valuable as the financial contribution to the Commonwealth and Gurkha Garden. Jit was a frequent attender at most of our events, both those involving religious Services where he read the Lesson but also at the Nepali and Gurkha celebrations. He has also been a stalwart supporter of Armed Forces Day which during his Mayoralty came back to its traditional base at Barrack Field and was a great success.

We are delighted that Jit continues with his support of the Garrison Church and the Commonwealth and Gurkha Garden now that his Mayoral year of office is over.

Thanks very much Jit.



Resume of other events in 2025

In January and July we welcomed the young officers group from the Royal Artillery based at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain. They nominate 2 of their number to speak for a few minutes about some aspects of the history of the Gunners and their association with the Garrison Church. One of the trustees gives them a short history of the Garrison Church and then they wander around and look for themselves, particularly at the VC memorial for members of the Royal Artillery.



On 5th February the Loudspeaker Orchestra from Greenwich University put on a performance of images and music. The images were created by Simon Withers and his team including some of his ethereal and skeletal images of the Garrison Church.

These were projected onto the underside of the tensile roof over the chancel and were accompanied by 4 different strands of music from separate sound systems. A very cold but unforgettable experience.



Our St Georges Day Service was held on a lovely Spring afternoon, (Sunday 27th April) in the presence of the New Zealand Military Attache (Wing Commander Peart) and her 2 children, the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Greenwich and the Bishop of Woolwich.

Banners were presented by various cadets and youth groups, and the RAF Cadets Band gave another immaculate performance.

The Bishop's talk centred on the life of Martin Luther King, whose life and courage we decided to put at the centre of the Service. There was a congregation of over 100, and the Service was followed by refreshments in the sunshine.

Our summer concert was given by the Blackheath Concert Halls Orchestra. There was a good audience, a fine summer evening, and a large orchestra. The programme was geared towards the music of Aaron Copeland which might not have been everyone's choice, and it had to contend with a noisy Gurkha Party on the cricket pitch on Barrack Field (until they agreed to moderate their sound).

June 28th was Armed Forces Day. The main events were held on Barrack Field and more than 13,000 people attended. The Garrison Church was used as a Veterans Base and was much enjoyed with music and refreshments provided without charge.

October was the month of a splendid wedding. A marquee was erected in the garden with flowers lining the path down from the west end of the Church to the entrance to the Marquee. Flood lighting was installed which made the Church look particularly beautiful as the dusk deepened. The couple concerned had taken great pains over the event which had been planned over many weeks. They were very happy with the result.

18th November was the day on which a beautifully uniformed quartet from the Duchess of Edinburgh String Orchestra performed at the Church. The performance was videoed, and was to be used by the Orchestra as a means of sending Seasonal Greetings to its supporters.

Finally, there was our Carol Service on December 14th. Cantor David Rome performed 'I'm dreaming of a White Christmas', The Belles sang a selection of carols and Christmas songs,. The RAF Cadets Band performed beautifully, including a rendition of 'Jingle Bells'. And we had the traditional lessons and carols for all to enjoy. Afterwards, there was some much needed mince pies and mulled wine.



We look forward to 2026 as another year filled with interesting and exciting events, and look forward to welcoming everyone to the Church in the coming months. Hopefully, we will be successful in our current bids for the various projects we are hoping to move forward with, including the development of the Crypt and Chancel, the Commonwealth and Gurkha Garden, and a new community festival we are hoping to host in the summer.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all our supporters. Without their support, the Church could not continue to grow and reach so many in the community.

