

## Woodbine Willie

Reverend Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy was born in Leeds in June 1883, the son of a vicar in an impoverished and overcrowded industrial area of the city. He first went to Leeds Grammar School, and then on to Trinity College Dublin. After graduating he began teaching but soon realised that he wanted to follow his father into the clergy. His two curate appointments took him to Leeds and Rugby, which at the time was in the Diocese of Worcester. When the time came to seek his first ministry he had the choice of three parishes. He chose the poorest, St Paul's in Worcester and came to the city in early 1914. The church was situated in the poor area known as Blockhouse Fields, on the south side of City Walls Road. It is still there and very active today. He became known for the fire and passion of his sermons, and was renowned for his passionate approach to Christianity. He felt passionate about helping and supporting those less fortunate than himself and would spend hours listening to those who came to his services. It is said that sometimes he would not return home after the Sunday evening service until after 10.30pm, and only then at the insistence of his wife, who could see he was exhausted.

A few months after the outbreak of the First World War, he became an Army Chaplain, and was drafted to the front to offer comfort and sacrament to the troops suffering in the trenches. During this time he began writing poetry that was as passionate as his sermons. He was highly-regarded by the soldiers and gave comfort to them by offering them cigarettes, and was awarded the Military Cross in 1917 for action under fire. Indeed his nickname of 'Woodbine Willie' comes from one of his poems in the book entitled 'The Unutterable Beauty'.

After the war he did not return to Worcester, but instead chose to join Industrial Christian Fellowship and worked as a chaplain in London. He was so well-known and his following so strong he was appointed in 1920 to the role of Chaplain to King George V. He was immensely popular but at the same time seen by some as very controversial. He tirelessly campaigned on behalf of the poor and neglected and always drew huge audiences. Whilst working for the Industrial Christian Festival in Liverpool, he was taken ill with influenza and at the age of only 46 died in March 1929.

After his death there was a strong view that he should be buried in Westminster Abbey but the Dean refused permission because he saw him as common and uncouth. His wife Emma knew that he had a deep love and debt of gratitude to Worcester because of his early ministry, and he is buried in Worcester's St. John's Cemetery. At his funeral about 2000 people lined the streets, some throwing Woodbines packets onto the passing cortege. His life and work is commemorated with a plaque in Worcester Cathedral, and the Social Services Building in Spring Gardens named 'The Studdert Kennedy Centre' is a living memorial to his love of the city. The anniversary of his death was recently marked with an exhibition in Worcester Cathedral, where he used to preach to congregations of up to 2000 troops from nearby Norton Barracks, many of whom were killed or wounded on the battlefields of France.