

# Shepherds after My Own Heart

Essays in Honour of Dr Robert Oliver

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# The Making of a Shepherd

PAUL OLIVER

## Early Life and Conversion

**O**n the 6th of March 1936, Reuben Oliver, a lorry driver, was making a delivery in the village of Smarden, Kent, when he was intercepted by a cyclist with an urgent message. The cyclist was his younger brother Jim. Like Reuben, Jim worked in the family transport business, based in the neighbouring village of Bethersden. They delivered anything and everything to farms, towns and villages. Jim had come to tell Reuben that his wife Lena had presented him with a son born at ten o'clock that morning. Reuben was working near the farm of Henry and Bessie Jarvis, Lena's uncle and aunt. He immediately called into the Jarvis's farm to tell them the good news and was rewarded with a glass of Auntie Bessie's cowslip wine to mark the arrival of Robert William. Robert was to be the first of seven children born to Reuben and Lena. The family, together with their lodger, the village school infant teacher, Miss Grace Earl, would eventually fill the 200-year-old former post office where they lived. The family house was situated right next to Union Chapel, the Baptist Meeting House, where they all worshipped.

The tensions that were building up in Europe soon exploded into World War 2. As a result, Robert's early years were spent in a county above which the RAF were either battling the Luftwaffe or trying to tip the German Doodlebugs out of the sky onto Kent before they could reach London, their intended target. Mercifully, despite a number of bombs landing in the village (one actually landing in the pond behind their house), no one was killed in Bethersden.

Robert grew up in a home which contained many books, and was taught to read before he went to the village school. His initial experience of school in Miss Earl's class was very happy, but he found it difficult to

adjust to a later teacher and class. He was shy and did not mix well with older boys who loved to play football and other ball games. Soon he had fallen behind in all subjects apart from reading. He became ill and dreaded going to school. The family doctor recommended a few weeks away and he was sent to stay at Sissinghurst near Cranbrook with a family friend. He spent a happy three weeks helping out in the family shopkeeping business and exploring a different part of the county. Wartime conditions meant that cigarettes came to the shopkeeper loose in large cartons and had to be counted into tens and twenties into re-used old packets or tied in bunches with thread. This was a task that Robert enjoyed. However, on returning to Bethersden Robert fell ill again. At this point, there occurred a wonderful turn of providence that was to shape so much of Robert's life. Miss Earl, now a supply teacher, had been sent to High Halden School. She mentioned Robert to the headmistress, Olive Rossiter, who was interested and offered to help. He was sent for a day at High Halden School. As a result, Miss Rossiter, a larger than life character and a brilliant teacher, announced that she could make something of him.<sup>1</sup> Under her care he flourished academically and was able to pass the eleven plus exam. He thereby gained a place at Ashford Grammar School.

It is important also to reflect on the influence of godly parents and life growing up at Union Chapel Bethersden. Robert was taken to the chapel from birth and attended both morning and afternoon services, at first in his parents' arms. When he was four years old he was sent to the morning Sunday School and a few years later, when he was considered old enough, to the afternoon session as well. The main services were one and a half hour's long and the unaccompanied hymns were sung from *Stevens' Selection of Hymns*. These hymns gave him some of his earliest lessons in Christian doctrine as well as stretching his vocabulary from an early age. He has never lost his love of measured unaccompanied singing of classic hymns and the teaching in many of these compositions was lodged in his memory long before he gained an understanding of their significance. Sometimes unexpectedly, words that he hasn't sung for decades have come back to him. The language of the hymns and sermons was often beyond him, but his parents always encouraged him to ask questions at home and to discuss issues that had been raised in the Sunday School. His mother was always ready to resolve issues from the Bible. This was certainly passed on to Robert and over many years of family life and later when I was working alongside him in the church, his response to issues raised has



never been to take the easy option or a pragmatic one, but what does the Bible say?

From an early age he was encouraged to read daily a few verses from the Bible and to pray each day, but Robert dates the time of his conversion to the Spring of 1945 when he was nine years old. He had been reading through Revelation and its scenes of judgment overwhelmed him. He knew he was not ready to meet God as he was a deceitful, selfish, stubborn sinner. He had always been taught that he needed forgiveness from God and began to pray as he had never done before. He remembers cycling along a road between some woods and wondering if he could ever be sure that he was a Christian. Eventually, through looking to Jesus and grasping in a limited way what he had done, Robert was given a sense of the pardon he had so desperately sought. At this point, he was sure of his salvation, but he said nothing to anyone about what had happened. Premature professions of faith were not encouraged in his community. Things had to be tested and it was to be years before he confided in his mother, who had long suspected it. Although he struggled with doubts during his teens, he was growing in his understanding and appreciation of sermons and was also finding great help from Christian books, especially biographies. He was able to defend his convictions about the Bible and his family's way of life at school. Robert was helped by the friendship of another boy at Ashford Grammar School who attended a chapel similar to his own in Tenterden. They travelled to and from school on the same bus and were able to have long conversations on the way.

### **National Service, University and Westminster Chapel**

It was at Ashford Grammar School that Robert developed a love of history, a love which deepened in parallel to his aversion to sports! He passed his O Levels, went into the sixth form and gained A levels in History, Latin and Geography. He wanted to go to university, but the prospect of that frightened his father. Reuben and Lena were not wealthy and were nervous about raising the funds that would be required for a university education, especially as it would also mean that Robert would not be earning until well into his twenties. They were aware that one of Reuben's mother's cousins had had to sell a piano to help finance their son through Cambridge. Reuben, always fearful of getting into debt, was consequently concerned about the sacrifices that might be entailed. However it was agreed with the encouragement of the headmaster at the grammar school