

John Stott's earthly resting place

By Chris Wright

The swallows and martins twittered over our heads, the cattle grazed contentedly a few yards away, and the wind whipped in off nearby West Dale Bay, as we gently lowered the casket of John Stott's ashes into a small grave in the corner of the cemetery in Dale.

Dale, so named centuries ago by the Vikings because it sits in a little valley between the ocean to the west and Milford Haven to the east, is the village in Pembrokeshire, on the very tip of south west **Wales**, where John discovered the little farm called **The Hookses** which he purchased in 1954. It was at The Hookses that John wrote almost all of his 51 books over the half century that followed, making himself a much-loved member of the local church and village community in all the weeks he stayed there during those years.

It was John's wish that, after the funeral service at All Souls Church and cremation in London, his ashes should be buried in Dale. And so it was that on **Sunday 4th September** a service of thanksgiving was held in the village church of **St. James the Great**.



It had been a sunny morning, but as is common on this exposed coast, we moved from summer into autumn during lunchtime as steep black clouds raced in from the sea with torrential rain, so people crowded into the little church from 2.15pm onwards shaking out coats and umbrellas. Nothing like the rain, though, to stimulate cheerful British conversation, as the church eventually filled to capacity with about 80 people gathered. Some were members of the congregations from the village churches of Dale, St. Brides and Marloes, with whom John regularly worshipped when staying at The Hookses. Some were pastors from the wider region, members of the informal group of Pembrokeshire Pastors that meets twice a year at the Hookses for a day – started by John Stott and now carried on by myself when I go down there.

But the local community had come too. There was Sharon, the wife of the farmer who owns the land and the sheep surrounding The Hookses. There was Keith, the village plumber who has serviced the boilers at Hookses for years (and still does), who later stood alone with head bowed by the graveside paying his respects. There was Sheila, the lady who comes up once a week to check the place between visitors. There was Mrs Reynolds whose husband did some of the first building work for John in the 1950s. And of course, there was Caroline Bowerman, John's niece, with her daughter Emily, son John and his girlfriend Michelle, for whom this was a final family farewell to their 'Uncle Johnnie', as they knew him. Frances Whitehead, John Stott's secretary for over 50 years, was there too of course, with Matthew Smith, one of that apostolic band of Study Assistants who one after another had formed 'the happy triumvirate' with John and Frances over many years of study and writing at The Hookses. David Gallagher, the architect who designed the wonderful upgrading and extension of the property over the past ten years was there. And still others had come from farther afield, including David and Christina Manohar, from India, Langham Scholars currently living in Cheltenham.

At 3.00pm the service began, led by Rev Bill Lewis, a retired vicar from Milford Haven, one of John's oldest friends in the region. We followed the Anglican order of Evening Prayer of the



Church in Wales, including its beautiful canticles and prayers. We made the church resound with Christ-centred hymns sung to great Welsh melodies: *Jesu, Lover of my soul*; *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds*; and *Oh the deep, deep love of Jesus* - to the tunes Aberystwyth, Lloyd, and Ebenezer. Warm words of thanksgiving were brought, first by Rev Will Strange, Chair of the Evangelical Fellowship of the Church in Wales, which John had been instrumental in founding (at Hookses!) in 1967, and then by Rev Rob James, representing the Evangelical Alliance

of Wales. But then Bill Lewis opened it up for anyone to stand up and speak. Some rich Welsh accents from weathered farming faces spoke warmly of the affection they had for John. Mary, a retired schoolteacher from Milford Haven told how John had allowed her to bring groups of teenage kids to The Hookses regularly for camps, and some of them came to faith in Christ there. Rev Peter Davies, a former vicar of Dale, marvelled that John had thrown himself so fully into supporting the life of the local churches every time he came to Wales. One elderly gentleman delighted to tell us how John always looked at him directly in the eye every time they spoke after church – which must have taken some effort since he is small of stature and John, as we know, was tall and erect.

The prayer time too Bill opened up to all the congregation. and thanksgiving echoed around the pews – for his love for the community, for the books he had written in that very place, for making The Hookses so available to others, for the gospel he preached and lived.

I preached the sermon, as John had requested. I referred (as I did at All Souls) to John's daily prayer to each person of the Holy Trinity, asking, when he addressed the Holy Spirit, that the fruit of the Spirit should be seen in his own life. It is not hard to see how richly God answered John's daily prayer, in a life that was in so many ways simply like Jesus. But, I pointed out, we should not think that it was all the nice things about John that made him 'a true Christian gentleman'. It was the other way about. It was only because he had invited Christ into his life as a boy, and in that way taken the first step in the Christian life, that God had been able to shape his character so fully through the Spirit of Christ within him. I knew John would have wanted the gospel to be preached with the local community so gathered, and so I read a short extract from his book *Why I am a Christian* describing how he accepted Christ as Saviour, to turn his estrangement into reconciliation and his defeat into victory, and concluded by urging all present to follow John in that response to Jesus.

The service over, we opened the church door to the joyful discovery that the rain had blown over, there was still a stiff breeze, but blue skies could be seen moving in from the west. Bill and I led a procession from the church, myself carrying the casket with John's ashes, around the country lane to the little village cemetery. John had selected the spot where he wanted to be buried – close to the far wall that separates the cemetery from the cow-field on the other side, beside the grave of an old friend he knew in the village. When family and friends had gathered closely around in the wet grass, Bill prayed a final prayer of thanksgiving and committal as I lowered the casket into the small grave. Silence reigned for some moments, apart from the



birdsong and the grazing cattle nearby. Then people began to move around, some wept and hugged, or just paid their respects at the tiny grave, and went on chatting until Paul the local grave-digger (a friendly man who told me his own father had died just the previous week so it was an emotional time for him too), asked us if we would care to let him get on with filling it in, since he had another one to attend to later.



John had asked that a gravestone will eventually be placed at the spot, carved out of Welsh slate, with the words:

*Buried here are the ashes of
JOHN R. W. STOTT
1921 – 2011
Rector of All Souls Church,
Langham Place, London 1950-1975
Rector Emeritus 1975-2011
Who resolved
Both as the ground of his salvation
And as the subject of his ministry
To know nothing except
JESUS CHRIST
And him crucified
(1 Corinthians 2:2)*

We returned then, as the sun began to break through the clouds, to the church, where they had tea and biscuits waiting for us, and yet more anecdotes to be shared as we stood around. Tears glistened in the eyes of some of the burly men who told me how proud and pleased they were that John Stott – whose worldwide ministry they had some inkling of – had chosen to honour their village as his final resting place on earth. They seemed to feel that, in coming back to Dale, he had come home. Maybe in some ways he had. At any rate, the place seems utterly fitting for a man who, like Moses, was one of the greatest leaders God has given to his people, and yet one of the humblest men on earth. I can think of no more appropriate place for his earthly memorial than that small corner of a tiny village cemetery in the midst of lush green fields, on the very edge of the land he loved, surrounded by birds and cattle, with ivy, wildflowers and brambles climbing over the ancient red sandstone walls on either side, and the salty wind blowing in off the ocean.



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