

**He died because he remained true to his trust.  
When he might have fled he did not flee.  
He remained because he considered it his duty  
to remain, and because he remained he died.**<sup>1</sup>

## VIVIAN REDLICH (1905 – 1942) OF LITTLE BOWDEN ONE OF THE NEW GUINEA MARTYRS

By Rosalind Willatts

Vivian Redlich was the eldest son of Canon E. Basil Redlich, the Rector of Little Bowden from 1924 - 1955. Vivian's death in Papua (New Guinea), during the horrors of the Japanese invasion of 1942, places him amongst the many Christian martyrs of the 20th Century. His life and death epitomise all that was best in the Christian fervour of service to mankind and God in the earlier 20th Century. For Vivian, Little Bowden was home although he was away for so much of his life.



His father, (Edwin) Basil Redlich, 1878 - 1960, came from Colombo, Ceylon from an old merchant family of mixed Dutch/British blood. A brilliant mathematician, Basil went to Christ's College Cambridge. He then taught mathematics in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. It was there that he married and there that Vivian was born, (Jan 1905). On his return to England Basil was ordained in 1908 at Lincoln, going immediately to Boston as a curate. Subsequently he was at Hampstead, Wakefield, Teigh (Rutland) and then in 1924 he came to Little Bowden where he spent the remaining 30 years of his ministry.

He was very active within the town, one position being the first President of the Market Harborough Archaeological (now) Historical Society. His wife died in 1927 and he remarried in 1931. Tragically in March 1939 his two-year-old son Peter was drowned in the River Jordan at the rear of his Rectory garden in Little Bowden. There is a charming memorial window to the child in the North Chapel of Little Bowden Church<sup>2</sup>, which also houses the memorial to Vivian.

Vivian went to St Johns School, Leatherhead, founded in 1851 for the education of the sons of Anglican clergy. Afterwards he trained for the Priesthood at Chichester, was ordained at Wakefield in 1932 and served his curacy at Dewsbury Moor, a poor mining and textile area in the industrial West Riding of Yorkshire.

What was the young priest like? He was tall, thin, with a long face and large eyeglasses. One of his Rover Scouts at Dewsbury later wrote:

... he was very vital and rather eccentric, dynamic, nervous. . . He was quick in thought and speech, full of quips, limericks and gags that one scarcely thought of him as a Priest. He was however deeply religious. Those who knew him realised that behind this façade was a good brain and an earnest wish to bring all people the comfort of the Spirit of God. . . With young children he could unbend quickly. He could be extremely witty and sophisticated. He was quite unconventional. He would sit on the floor discussing anything rather than use a chair. He had something of an electrical "mind" and knew the railway signalling system completely and often went miles to watch the systems in operation. . . He could plan railway journeys all over the country. He took the Rover Scouts on such expeditions from time to time, always superbly confident, when to us young men . . . the journeys and changes seemed bewildering. . . With the Rover Scouts, he had bizarre ideas – but always ideas. Times were hard at Dewsbury Moor in the 1930's and work was difficult to get and to keep and wages were poor. . . . Vivian was generous – helping many of us with little things, such as the purchases of books, maps and equipment. . . . There was something of the mystic in him.<sup>3</sup>

It was his sincerity and enthusiasm in working for God and in helping people to develop spiritually which impressed. His bishop in Papua, Bishop Phillip Strong described him as:

'that happy, youthful gifted gallant. He loved making things . . . and was wonderfully clever at all kind of things with his hands.'

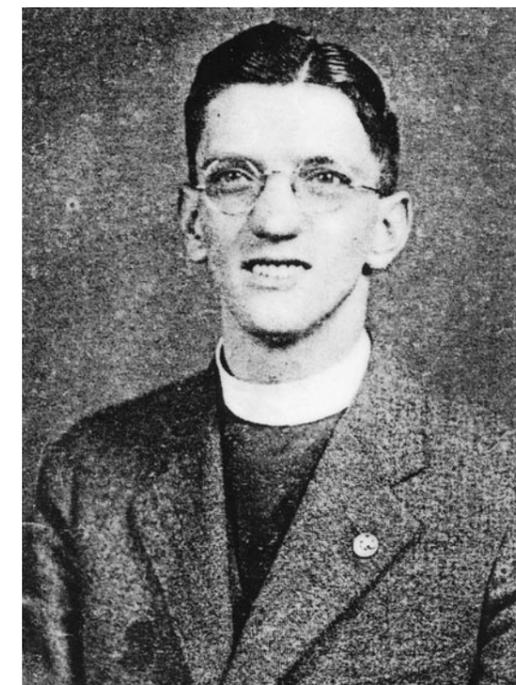
At Dewsbury Moor he threw himself into his work in particular working with youth. He encouraged boys to take part in church services and set up a Missionary group. After three years he decided to join the mission field, but uncertain of where or how, he went to London to enquire at the headquarters of the SPG. Whilst waiting in the SPG offices a representative of the Australian Church came in asking for a priest to join the Bush Brothers in Queensland. The SPG<sup>4</sup> official responded by pointing to Vivian saying:

"Yes, there he sits!"

So Vivian agreed to become a 'Bush Brother' for five years in Queensland and sailed in 1935. A Bush Brother was a priest who in return for keep promised to remain single and be with the Brotherhood for 5 years. His role was to minister to the very scattered and remote sheep stations in the outback. Vivian worked out of Rockhampton, (on the tropic of Capricorn). He had a parish the size of Wales with settlements and farms up to 90 miles apart. He drove between them in his old Ford motorcar through rough terrain. It was said of him that 'what he did not know about the motorcar was not worth knowing; he could make it go over any road or none.'<sup>5</sup> When his five years were completed he forewent the right to return to Little Bowden, choosing to go to Papua instead to work for the Church there.



THE VICARAGE, ST. NICHOLAS CHURCH, LITTLE BOWDEN.



VIVIAN REDLICH



PETER REDLICH

## PAPUA (NEW GUINEA)

New Guinea, the second largest island in the world lies a mere 100 km north of Australia. A range of very high, almost impenetrable mountains extends its length, rising to over 4000m. The vegetation is dense equatorial rain forest. The coastland is largely swamp. In 1940 the east part of the island was administered by Australia, (the west part by the Dutch). Because of the mountainous terrain there are very many different isolated tribes of Melanesian race with hundreds of different languages; the isolation meant that development was retarded with most peoples in the Neolithic stage.

The missionary's life in the early and mid 20th century was very different from today. A missionary was usually single and committed for a very long time; taking six weeks or more travelling to reach his station. He lived an isolated existence far from home. Missionaries organised and led the local churches. They worked from scattered mission stations and had little contact with others. They had to be very practical and self sufficient, and were responsible for whatever medical and education services there were.

The Anglican Church came to the north east coast of Papua in 1891 and landed at Dogura - on a plain which was the fighting ground of local tribes. Here the Papuan people in the 1930s built a large cathedral. Other Anglican mission stations were established along the coast including Gona and Buna, and inland from them Sangara. The Church had its own little ship which regularly plied between the coastal mission stations, visiting about every six weeks, bringing stores, mail and personnel. The mission stations generally consisted of a church, schools and medical posts run by priests and expatriate staff. There were outposts from each. Communications were very poor and mainly by foot on forest and swamp paths; there were some limited vehicular tracks near the coast. Local people lived in houses made of palm leaves erected on stilts; they grew vegetable crops for their own use and some commercial crops such as rubber and coffee.

## VIVIAN'S WORK IN PAPUA

At first Vivian was at Dogura and then at Gona on the coast some 150 miles away. Here the missionary nurse was May Hayman to whom he became engaged. In August 1941 to his delight he was sent to run the Sangara station about 30 miles inland from Gona. Vivian threw himself enthusiastically into his work in Papua. There was much work to do in building up the mission services. Vivian himself made a font from beaten copper for baptisms. His Scouting and practical abilities were most useful. He had a 'swanky hospital' built and several buildings for the schoolmaster and priest, including stores and a workshop. He even concocted an electricity supply for the hospital made from scrap metal and old tin cans. The wiring was fence wire. He planned further outstations and schools.

In June 1942, being ill, he was sent back to Dogura where he only partially recovered before insisting that he return to Sangara. He left Dogura on Monday 20th July in the mission ship carrying many supplies for Gona, Buna and Sangara. The next day, Tuesday 21st, when Vivian arrived off Buna, he discovered that the Japanese had started their invasion landings just there. So he sailed some way down the bay and at night organised the unloading of 15 tons of supplies and their subsequent secretion. As he worked on the beach he had a tremendous struggle with himself: to return to the safety of Dogura or to stay with his people and help them. He decided to stay and with a sinking heart watched the ship sail away. He then made his way back to Sangara by footpaths - thus avoiding the invading Japanese. He reached Sangara four days later to discover many Japanese in the area. A party of Japanese soldiers had entered the village that afternoon telling the few people left that they would return the next day to "smash up the village". Vivian therefore went into the bush, some 30 minutes walk away, where the locals built him a lean-to shelter and posted watchers along the track from the mission station to alert him to danger.

## War in the Pacific: The New Guinea Campaign

*In 1941 the mainly European war was distant from the Pacific. But on 7th December 1941 the Japanese destroyed the USA fleet at Pearl Harbour bringing both the USA and Japan into the war and making the Pacific Ocean with its fringing lands part of the conflict area. The Japanese moved quickly. In January they occupied the island of New Britain; from there they harassed the Papuan coast. In March at Buna the mission ship was at anchor when it was strafed by a Japanese float plane. Papua lay between the Japanese and Australia. Port Moresby on the south coast was in a strategic location, which the Japanese coveted, commanding the Torres straits and the access to eastern Australia from the USA supply lines. The Japanese, were thwarted by the Australian Navy from gaining control of Port Moresby by sea, (the Battle of the Coral Sea, May 1942), then subjected to major naval and air losses at the battle of Midway (June 1942). So they looked to a land invasion to capture Port Moresby. Thus it was that the Japanese invaded close to the mission station of Gona just as Vivian returned to the area, his station at Sangara being on the route from the coast at Gona to the airstrip at Kokoda and from thence across the almost impassable range of mountains to Port Moresby. The campaign, known as the Kokoda Track was bloody and very tough. The Australian army so fiercely resisted the Japanese thrust over the mountains that the Japanese for the first time were forced to retreat. But by then Vivian and his missionary companions were dead.*

## THE LAST DAYS OF VIVIAN

Vivian's last days were recorded by a government medical assistant, Harry Bitmead, a Roman Catholic. He knew all the missionaries and had discussed with them separately why they had chosen to remain, rather than evacuate earlier in the hostilities. For all of them the reasons were the same: "our duty is clear, we must remain; our place is with our people; it is God's work." Having been captured by the Japanese, Bitmead had managed to escape and arrived in the Sangara area on Saturday 25th July where he learned that Vivian was nearby. Guided by local people, Bitmead set out to visit Vivian in his hideout. He later wrote a long and moving account of the last known days of Vivian:

'When I arrived at the shelter there was quite a crowd of natives round about. Father Vivian spoke to them thus:

"I am your missionary. I have come back to you because I knew you would need your father. I am not going to run away from you, I am going to remain to help you as long as you will let me. Tomorrow is Sunday. I shall say Mass, and any of you who wish may communicate."

Shortly after dark he returned to the Mission house to collect some church equipment (chalices and altar goods). He returned about midnight. He told me that as yet nothing had been touched in the Mission. Shortly after dawn (on Sunday 26th July) he woke me up saying

"There is a big number of people here. I am going to say Mass."

He began to vest when a native boy rushed to us saying;

"Father, Doctor, go - do not wait! During the night Embogi came and had a look at where you are, and has just gone to tell the Japs, because he wants them to kill you."

There was a dead silence. I looked at Fr. Vivian. He bowed his head in prayer for a few moments, and then he said to the people:

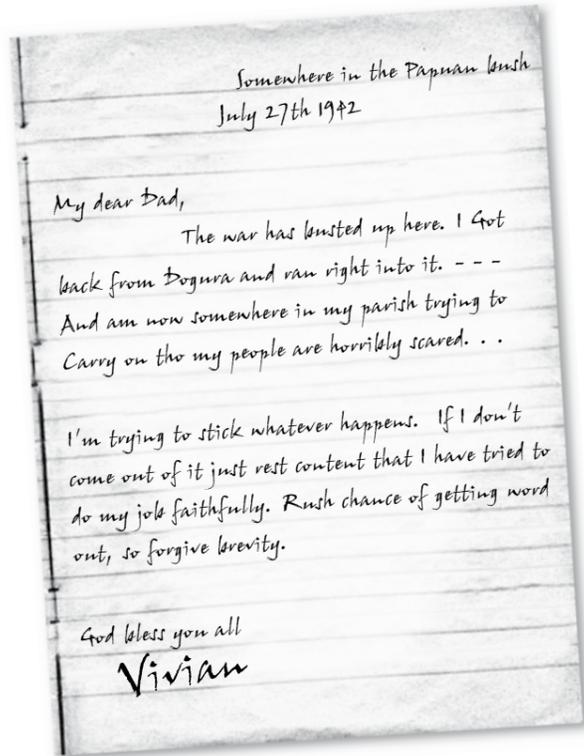
"Today is Sunday. It is God's day. I shall say Mass. We shall worship God." Turning to me Fr Vivian said, "will you remain for the mass?" "Yes," I replied and remained.

I do not think that I ever witnessed a more devout congregation . . . these New Guinea Christians were assisting at mass at the risk of their lives. . .

After the Mass the people quietly dispersed. The following day, Monday 27th, it became necessary for us to part. With sorrow, not unmixed with a feeling of deep admiration for his courage, I bade him "farewell and good luck!" He was going to remain with his people, moving amongst them. My own duty bade me escape.

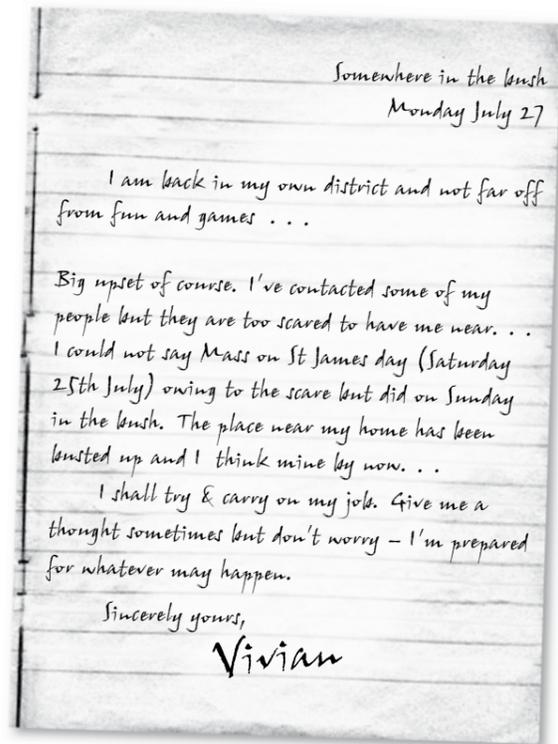
Bitmead look with him two letters Vivian had written that day, (in pencil on lined sheets torn from an exercise book) to his Bishop and to his father. The letters eventually arrived at their destinations.

The letter to Canon Basil Redlich at Little Bowden reads:



These simple calm heroic words reverberated around the Anglican Church and gave substance to the plight of the dozen New Guinea missionary martyrs who were killed at the time of the Japanese invasion. The letter is now in the library of St Paul's Cathedral. When it arrived at Little Bowden is not recorded.

To his Bishop he wrote:

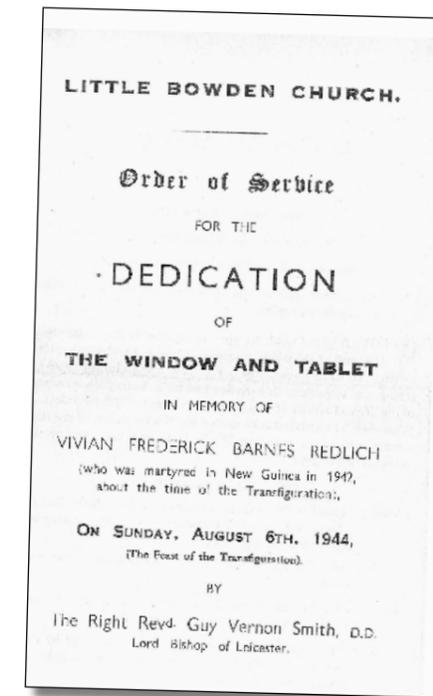
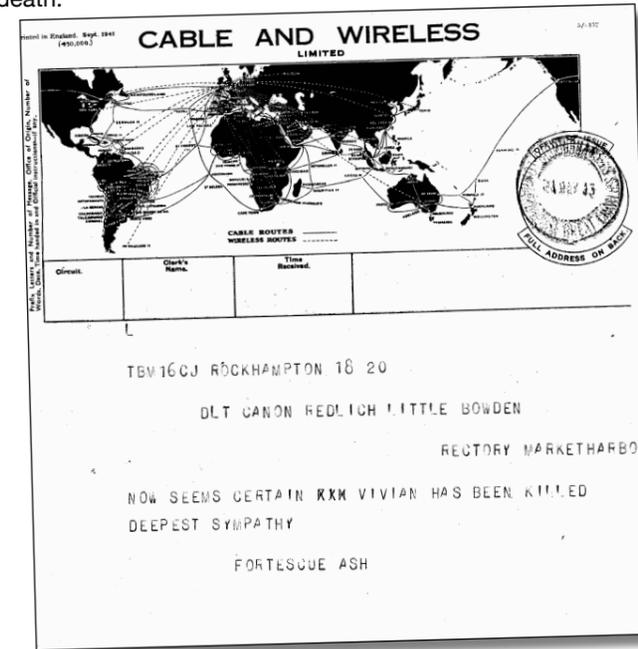


**THE LAST DAYS OF VIVIAN: WHAT REALLY HAPPENED**

What happened next has taken sixty years fully to unravel.<sup>6</sup> For many years it was assumed that Vivian was betrayed to the Japanese who brutally murdered him and the other missionaries by beheading on the beach at Buna and throwing the bodies into the sea. However in 2003, over sixty years after his death, it emerged that Vivian had been speared to death by a group of non-Christian local tribesmen, only one of whom was still living. He seems to have had some "conversional experience" which resulted in him coming clean. The site of the spearing to death was kept secret by local people, but was disclosed to a Father Samson, an elderly Papuan priest, in May 2005. It was between the site of Vivian's last celebration of Mass on 26th July and his station at Sangara. Although a forensic study of the grave with its human remains and DNA identification have yet to be made it seems most likely that the grave DID contain the remains of Vivian. The stature of the person there buried was about 6 foot, far taller than any Japanese or Papuan. Vivian was 6'2"

Four of the local tribes, in remorse for what they had done, are now asking for reconciliation with his half brother Patrick, the families of other victims, and the local church. It seems that local tribes for long had been embarrassed by what had been done to the missionaries, but were afraid to speak.

It was on 18th May 1943 that The Times published an account of the New Guinea murders. Six days later, on 24th May 1943, Canon Basil Redlich at Little Bowden received a telegram from the Bishop of Rockhampton, Queensland confirming the death.



Several memorial windows in Australia and England<sup>7</sup> were subsequently made in commemoration. Following the 21st Century revelations as to Vivian's fate the stone inscription under his memorial window in Little Bowden church is being altered to remove any reference to the Japanese, though the Japanese accept that they created the conditions in which he was murdered.

Vivian Redlich by his short life and his horrific death because he insisted on staying at his post helping his people, is a Martyr from Market Harborough whom the town should know, respect and emulate in his sense of duty.



THE WINDOW TO VIVIAN REDLICH AT HANWORTH CHURCH

Written testimony of H.F.Bitmead, the last person known to have seen Vivian Redlich alive.

<sup>1</sup> Canon Basil Redlich's ashes were interred beneath this window in 1960.  
<sup>2</sup> Letter 4.8.1962 from Lesley Hartley a Rover Scout at Dewsbury Moor with Vivian. He later became a District.  
<sup>3</sup> Commissioner for the Boy Scouts and worked for charitable organisations.  
<sup>4</sup> The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts founded in 1701 with the object of sending priests and teachers to convert, improve and civilize peoples overseas.  
<sup>5</sup> C.S Richardson, Vivian's vicar at Dewsbury, Vivian Redlich: An Appreciation, Dewsbury Parish Magazine, undated.  
<sup>6</sup> Church Times, 13th October 2006. p8  
<sup>7</sup> At Little Bowden, Kingswood Surrey, Hanworth Middlesex, and St Peters Eastern Hill Melbourne. The RAF in the 1940s dedicated a church to him on its base at Iwakuni near Hiroshima, but there is now no knowledge of it there.