

The War Years: 1939-1945

Just as a pan-European Buddhist Movement was taking shape, hostilities commenced in Europe on 1 September 1938, and Buddhist activities everywhere were consequently disrupted. The 13th and final Annual General Meeting of the British Mahabodhi Society was held on 5 November.

The premises at 41 Gloucester Road were closed and compulsorily purchased by the municipal authority, although weekly meetings continued to be held in rented halls. Severely damaged by bombing in the summer of 1941, the last links with No. 41 were only severed as late as 1965 when Camden Borough Council sold the building back to the Mahabodhi Society of Ceylon. This transaction was made to offset the cost of the new *Vihara* in Chiswick, which had already been acquired the previous year upon the expiration of the lease at 10 Ovington Gardens, Knightsbridge.

The darkness lightened after the war was over in 1945. During the war years, three *Theravada* organizations somehow kept aloft the torch of the original teachings of the Buddha, the most significant being The Buddhist Circle.

The New London Buddhist Vihara:

The First Decade 1954-64

Early in January 1954, vacant possession of the premises of 10 Ovington Gardens, Knightsbridge, was taken and preparations made for the formal opening ceremony to be performed on *Vesakha* Day, 17 May. On 16 April, Ven. Narada (1898-1983) and Ven. Vinita, accompanied by their lay attendant, Chandra Kuruppu, arrived in England. Narada was duly installed as the *Vihara's* first Head. The Buddhist *Vihara* Society turned over to the *Vihara* three marble/alabaster Burmese Buddha images, the relic of the Buddha presented to the Society by Narada on his first visit in 1949, their reference library of some 140 books and a few items of furniture.

On *Vesakha* Day, the new London *Vihara* was formally opened by the then Thai ambassador who unfurled the Buddhist flag. At the public meeting in the evening, the lecture hall was full and after the chanting of *paritta*, Ven. Narada gave an impressive discourse. Other speakers included Sir Claude Corea (the new, albeit non-Buddhist, High Commissioner for Ceylon), Maung Maung Ji, Meddegoda, Lt-Col. Payne, C Humphreys, G Glounsbury and John Garrie (representing the Buddha-*Dhamma* Association, Manchester).

Favourable publicity was given in the national broadsheets. The general feeling of euphoria at this happy event was marred by the tragic loss of one of the main pillars of the English *Theravada* Movement: Francis J. Payne. On 22 May that year, he passed away peacefully at the ripe age of 85 – a life completely devoted to Buddhism since reading the anthology, *Lotus Blossoms*, in 1907 and whose children (son and daughter) were probably the first in Britain to take the Five Precepts, from Ananda Metteyya in 1908.

In the *Vihara* itself, a multitude of activities was arranged: elementary and advanced classes in *Abhidhamma*, elementary *Dhamma*, meditation and *Dhammapada* classes, public lectures given by Ven. Narada, Vinita and at least one during this early period by the well-established scholar, Edward Conze (1904-79). Ven. Pannananda, a *thera* from Thailand, 'unexpectedly arrived here' to stay for some time. A monthly *dana* list was quickly organized, subscribed to by both Sinhalese and English Buddhists. On 15 July W.E. Rajakaruna presented a relic of the Buddha, which had been sent from Ceylon to London by his father.

The first diplomatic function at the *Vihara* occurred when Sir John Kotelawala, Prime Minister of Ceylon, paid a visit. In the course of his address he said: "This *Vihara*... is the symbol of our great desire to make a contribution to the national life of the British people to whom we owe so much for their contributions to us in political, social and economic affairs. What can we give in return? Of gold and silver we have none, but what we have, we will give. We will give things spiritual the ultimate truths – the doctrine of our Master, Lord Buddha".