

# Thomas Burke – artist and prisoner of war



The Stations of the Cross on display during Lent are watercolours painted by Thomas Burke, a Liverpool artist who spent four years in German prisoner of war camps during World War II. From March 1943 he was held in the Milag Nord camp, near Berlin, until the liberation of the camp in late April 1945. He painted these Stations for the camp chapel - see photo below, which however does not show the paintings themselves. He brought them home, along with other work he had done whilst a prisoner of war.

This is only the third time that these vivid and moving watercolour Stations of the Cross have been on public

view since they were in the Milag Nord chapel<sup>1</sup>.

Thomas Burke was born in Liverpool on 5th June 1906. The Burke family were Catholics of Irish descent. Between 1926 and 1934 he studied Art in Liverpool and London. He spent the next few years starting a career as an 'Artist (Portrait and Landscape)' in London, Ireland and Paris. Several of his paintings from this period are now in national collections in Britain and Ireland, including in the National Portrait Gallery in London and the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin.

In 1940, with WWII having started, Burke volunteered to join the Merchant Navy as a Radio Officer and in early 1941 he sailed in a ship carrying munitions to Crete, arriving early in the morning of 14th May 1941. By late afternoon his ship had been hit by German bombs and sunk. He, along with several thousand other Allied troops, was captured by the Germans forces who had swiftly overrun Crete. He then spent the rest of the war in various prisoner of war camps. Throughout this period he never stopped painting and sketching – presumably with materials sent by the Red Cross.

In April 1945 the Milag Nord camp was liberated by British troops and Burke returned to Liverpool. By now he was very ill and, on 15th July 1945, he died – though not as a result of mistreatment during his period of incarceration. These Stations of the Cross and several other paintings, letters, photos etc. passed to his pre-war fiancée Hilda Unsworth, who kept them until her death in 2002. They then passed to Marian McCarthy, a niece of Hilda Unsworth and sister of Stephen McCarthy, a member of this parish.



**Marian McCarthy will be in Luxembourg on**

**March 15 to give an illustrated talk, *An Unfinished Life*, about him. This will take place at 19.00 in the St Alphonse Church (rue des Capucins). To accompany this talk there will be a small exhibition of letters, photographs and other personal memorabilia of Thomas and a few of his original paintings – including the originals of the Stations of the Cross.**

<sup>1</sup> Since the Church of St Alphonse is open to the public all day, we are actually exhibiting (faithful) copies of the original paintings. There will be an opportunity to see the originals at the talk on March 15.