

Faith

the London Church Cat (2004)

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Faith, the subject of this article, was awarded a silver medal for her courage during the London Blitz in the Second World War, and hers is her interesting story.

This is a true tale from the dark days of the German blitz on the British capital city, London, during World War 2. It concerns Father Henry Ross, rector of St Augustine's and St Faith's Church on Watling Street in the City of London, close to St Paul's Cathedral; his verger Thomas Evans and Thomas' wife Rosalind; some of the church parishioners; and a small tabby cat.

A cat finds a home

In 1936 the cat was a stray, maybe abandoned by a family who couldn't afford to keep her in the lean years following the Depression; we can never know. However, she ended up at St Augustine's, where she crept inside in search of food and warmth; but the verger found her, didn't want a cat in the church, and put her outside again. He did this two or three times; but eventually the cat eluded him, as evening approached, and spent the night curled up inside.



In the morning she appeared upstairs in the rectory attached to the church, where Father Ross was talking to his verger. There was a warm fire, and smells of food. When he noticed the cat, Mr Evans said he would put her out again: but Ross said, 'But she's very thin; don't you like cats? I think we have a little cream we could give her.' Evans protested, 'If you feed her, she won't want to leave. I'm just trying to save trouble; we've never had a cat here. But my wife Rosalind loves them.'

It was decided that Rosalind would find a box for the cat to sleep in, some bowls to feed her, and she would stay in the rectory until someone claimed her. A notice would be put in the church bulletin the following week.

But no one did claim her. Henry Ross decided the cat would stay and become his 'church cat'; and she would be named **Faith**. 'After all,' said Ross to Mr Evans, 'it's part of the church's name; and the cat had the faith to try again after you had thrown her out three times.'

And so Faith settled in, explored the whole building, and caught mice. She grew sleek and plump — and attended all the services in the church that Henry took or at which he preached. She would sit in the pulpit at his feet while he preached and in the front pew on other occasions. The parishioners loved her: she had many admirers, including the altar-guild ladies, Ruth and Clara, who helped to look after her — and so things continued for four years.

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A new arrival

In August 1940 it was noticed that Faith was looking plumper than usual. The reason became clear when one morning, later in the month, she did not jump up on Henry's bed as usual, demanding her breakfast. When he investigated he found her in her basket with a tiny kitten — a tom, white with black ears and tail. A little celebration was held, an announcement was put up in the church, and on the following Sunday the boys of the choir sang *All things bright and beautiful* in honour of the new arrival. As his colouring was similar to that of Chi-Chi, London Zoo's well-known panda at the time, the youngster was named **Panda**.

On 6 September, while Henry was sitting working at his desk, Faith made it clear that she wanted something. She went to the door, and when it was opened went downstairs to the ground floor,

checking that he was following. There was a closed door that led to the basement, and she was obviously asking for it to be opened. When the door was opened, down she went; Ross returned to his work, leaving the door open.

Basement refuge

Later, she was observed to be carrying Panda, rather awkwardly by the scruff of his neck, down to the basement. No one knew why; they thought she would bring him back later. But her basket remained empty. She returned for her evening meal, then disappeared again. Ross decided to find out what was going on. The basement was full of dusty old books, no longer used, and piles of sheet music; it was dark, dirty and cold. He couldn't find the cats at first, but eventually saw Faith in a far corner, in a gap between two stacks of music, curled up with Panda.

Wondering why they were there in this unwelcoming place, he gently picked up the kitten and took him upstairs where it was warm, with Faith following and protesting the whole way. Later in the day Ross had to take a church service, but Faith did not attend. When he returned to the rectory, her basket was empty again. Sure enough, she had returned with Panda to her basement hideout. The previous performance was repeated as Ross again took the kitten upstairs. But in the morning, they were back in the basement.

A third time Henry Ross carried the kitten back to the upstairs basket; by afternoon it was empty once more. He consulted Rosalind and the other ladies, who suggested that Faith must feel Panda to be in some sort of danger, and that the best thing to do would be to respect her wishes, and take her basket down so she would be more comfortable. This was done, and a bigger space cleared between the piles of music; Faith settled happily into it with her kitten.

Air raids

The following night, Saturday 7 September, there was a heavy air raid on the city. Many homes, including some near the church, were destroyed and more than 400 people died. There were not many worshippers at the services the next day. The following Monday Henry had to go on business to Westminster, where he rode on his bicycle. He was returning in the evening when the air-raid sirens started to wail. He went into a shelter, where he spent the night. It had been another very severe raid, and the radio news was reporting a further heavy loss of life and many buildings destroyed, including eight churches.

When he reached Watling Street, his worst fears were realised. The body of the church was a mass of twisted wreckage, with flames rising from the shattered timbers, although the tower was still standing. A fireman told him to get away, as the roof was likely to collapse any time, but Henry clambered over piles of rubble to speak to him, announcing himself as the rector. 'In that case you can help us,' said the fireman. 'Was anyone here last night? We need to look for any victims.'

Henry said, 'Only Faith and Panda. I was away, in Westminster.' Upon learning that Faith and Panda were cats, the fireman said sympathetically, 'I'm afraid nothing could have lived through this. I'm sorry, sir, but I fear you've lost your cats. Now, would you leave us to get on with our work?'

The rescue

But Henry wasn't going to give up so easily; he believed Faith and Panda were still down there. When the firemen turned their backs, Henry began to clamber over the debris towards the place where he thought they would be. He started to call Faith, as loudly as he could. From under a pile of still-smoking timbers, he thought he heard a faint answering 'Meow'. He began to move timbers and rubble, while glancing warily from time to time at the dangerously sagging roof. Throwing bundles of singed music sheets to one side he found her in a corner, surrounded by smouldering rubble, serenely nursing her kitten Panda and 'singing,' said the rector, 'such a song of praise and thanksgiving as I had never heard...'. They appeared dirty but unharmed.

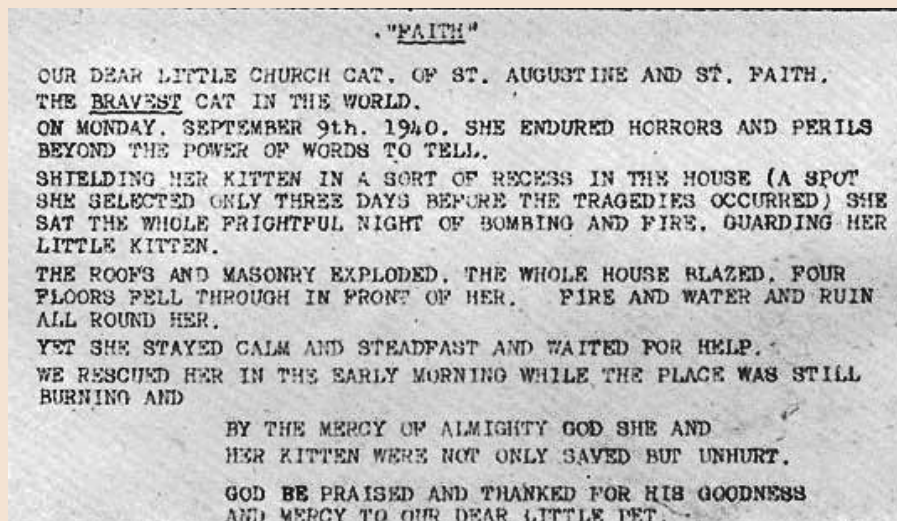
With tears of relief, Henry picked up the two frightened cats and took them to a safer area. It was not long after that the badly damaged roof collapsed in a shower of sparks, burying under a mass of debris the corner where the cats had been. Ross took them to the vestry in the tower, where he shut them in for safety. When Thomas, the vergier, and Rosalind arrived on the scene, they invited him and the cat to stay with them in their house for the time being. Father Ross accepted gratefully;

he took the two animals with him to the church each day while he worked to make the tower inhabitable again.

There were more nights of bombing, but no further tragedies befell the little group of cats and people from St Augustine's; and gradually the frequency of the air raids decreased, until they stopped altogether. With the help of the parishioners in cleaning and clearing up, limited church services could be resumed in the tower by 1 November. In due course, when he had grown up, Panda became the handsome and much loved pet at a residential nursing establishment in Herne Hill, a district of south-east London. Faith resumed her church attendance and lay at Henry's feet when he preached.

Tribute

Ross had Faith's photograph taken, framed and hung on the chapel wall. He put underneath it this text:



"Faith"

Our dear little church cat of St. Augustine and St. Faith.

The bravest cat in the world.

**On Monday, September 9th, 1940, she endured horrors and perils
beyond the power of words to tell.**

**Shielding her kitten in a sort of recess in the house (a spot
she selected three days before the tragedy occurred), she
sat the whole frightful night of bombing and fire, guarding her
little kitten.**

**The roofs and masonry exploded. The whole house blazed. Four
floors fell through in front of her. Fire and water and ruin
all round her.**

Yet she stayed calm and steadfast and waited for help.

**We rescued her in the early morning while the place was still
burning, and**

**By the mercy of Almighty God, she and
her kitten were not only saved, but unhurt.**

**God be praised and thanked for His goodness
and mercy to our dear little pet.**

As people saw the tribute and told their friends, the result was that Faith's story spread. But it was five years before it came to the attention of Maria Dickin, founder of the PDSA and instigator of the Dickin Medal.

An award for bravery

During 1945 Rosalind Evans saw in the newspaper a story about Beauty, a dog that, with her handler, had been responsible for finding and saving more than 60 pets that would otherwise have died in bombed buildings. Beauty had been awarded the PDSA's Dickin Medal for bravery. Rosalind thought that Faith's actions deserved a medal too; and so after consulting Ruth she wrote to the PDSA telling Faith's story. She didn't tell Henry Ross.

The answer came back that she could not be given a Dickin Medal, because she was a 'civilian' cat and not with the armed forces or civil defence. But Mrs Dickin had been so impressed with Faith's bravery that she said she was going to have a special silver medal made, and she would come to present it herself. At this point Rosalind felt she must share the good news with Father Ross — who was really thrilled.

Then Rosalind said to Ruth, 'I've had another idea. What do you think about asking the Archbishop to come when the medal is presented?'

Ruth stared. 'You mean the Archbishop of Canterbury?'

'Of course,' replied Rosalind. 'Why not? Faith is a church cat, the church is in a parish of his, and he's often in the papers for visiting this or that church. No harm in inviting him, anyway.'

So Rosalind wrote another letter, to Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher at Lambeth Palace. Again the ladies didn't tell Henry — although they had to ask him how to correctly address the letter.

A few days later, the phone rang and Mrs Evans was asked for. 'The Archbishop is coming to the ceremony,' announced Rosalind to the astonished rector. 'I must phone the press.'

The presentation

Thus it was that on a sunny 12 October 1945, two black limousines drew up at St Augustine's just before 11 a.m., to the pealing of the church bells. Out of one car stepped the Archbishop of Canterbury, his vestments neatly folded on the back seat; from the other Maria Dickin alighted, smartly dressed and erect at 75 years old. Introductions were made all round and Faith was greeted by the two distinguished guests. A short service was held in the chapel in front of an eager congregation; as usual, Faith sat at Henry Ross's feet. Then while the Archbishop held the cat, Mrs Dickin read the citation from a parchment scroll, and presented the medal, hanging it around Faith's neck. The Archbishop gave a brief address, and then everyone retired to the adjoining hall for a buffet lunch. The parishioners had saved their rations and all contributed to a splendid spread. Faith had a special plate of fish.

Her citation read:

**From the P.D.S.A. to Faith of St. Augustine's, Watling Street, E.C.
For steadfast courage in the Battle of London, September 9th, 1940.**

With photos in the papers next day and on the following Sunday, Faith's renown spread; and when a visiting American saw the inscription in the church and heard the story, he told his local humane society back home. As a result, Faith received a second silver medal, from the Greenwich Village Humane League of New York, and had her story printed in the New York papers. She had her portrait painted, and her story was included in a book of animal heroes (*They Also Serve*). She was the first cat to receive a medal for courage, several years before [Simon of HMS Amethyst](#).

A peaceful end

It was almost three years after her medal presentation, on 28 September 1948, that Faith got up as usual with Henry, had a good breakfast, and then stretched out on the little Persian rug before the fire while Henry worked at his desk. After an hour or so, he got up and found that she hadn't moved at all. There was no welcoming chirrup when he touched her. Lying in front of the fire on her favourite rug, near her beloved owner, her life had quietly slipped away. Henry was devastated, as were the guild ladies when he told them. The little cat was about 14 years old, which at that time was a good age for a cat.

A suitable wooden box was found and lined with the rug, Faith's body was laid gently inside and the box closed. Henry decided she would be buried near the churchyard gate on the following day. He

put a notice on the church door announcing a service at 10.30 a.m., and the ladies started to phone to let people know.

By 10.15 next morning the church was full. After a short but moving service — including organist and choirboys — it was the boys who led the procession into the churchyard, followed by Thomas Evans the vergier with the box holding Faith's body, Henry Ross, and then the parishioners. Henry read a blessing as the box was placed in the little grave, and then a prayer of committal as Thomas shovelled earth onto it. Then he turned and walked slowly and sadly back into the church, as the congregation began to disperse.

There followed accounts in newspapers on four continents — Britain, the USA ([Time magazine obituary](#) – *archived copy, but need to subscribe to read in full*), South Africa and Australia — reporting the event and recounting the little cat's story. Henry Ross was offered another cat by parishioners, but he declined. Instead, he often took his book to sit by the grave on a sunny afternoon.

The end of the story

A little over a year later, it was Father Henry Ross who led the burial ceremony in Ilford for [Simon, the Amethyst cat](#). Not so long after that he retired, and when he left for the last time he took Faith's medals with him. St Augustine's was closed, and the tower, now disused, forms part of St Paul's Cathedral Choir School. I'm sure Henry would have approved of choirboys playing and enjoying themselves above the spot where his dear little cat lies buried.



Note: In spite of extensive research in the national newspaper archive, looking at national, London and church publications, it hasn't been possible to find any reference to the ceremony at which Faith was presented with her medal. This is puzzling, especially as the *Sunday Dispatch* was mentioned specifically; no mention was found in that paper in the few days following the ceremony. However, the dates of the bombing of the church, and of Faith's death, are correct and were reported in *The Times*. What ultimately became of Faith's medal and citation is also unknown.

Resources and acknowledgements

Two Perfectly Marvellous Cats, Rosamond M. Young, 1993 (J N Townsend Publishing, Exeter, NH)
They Also Serve, Dorothea St Hill Bourne, 1947 (Winchester Publications Ltd, London)

I have been able to find only one photograph of Faith; no others seem to exist. The photo of St Augustine's tower was from the now defunct [City of London Churches](#) site (*not archived*). Artist Frances Broomfield created a painting of Faith and her kitten against a background of St Paul's Cathedral, and kindly gave permission for it to be used at Purr 'n' Fur (*below*). It may NOT be copied without her permission.

Faith's story is told in a nice little audio book from St Paul's, aimed I should think at older children: <https://www.stpauls.co.uk/resources/faith-cat-audiobook>



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