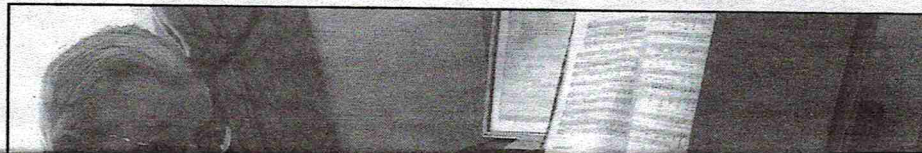


A colourful character in drab world

Foundryman turned musician, he played the organ for Nazi leader Rudolf Hess and is a Templar Knight. **MIKE BUCKINGHAM** spoke to the exuberant Dr William Challenger, aka the Marquis de Challenge



I wasn't terribly difficult to spot Dr William Challenger in the crowd.

For one thing he was the only person in the middle of Pontypool and in the middle of the working day wearing the insignia of a chivalric order.

With the sun glinting on his boyishly cut and still luxuriant hair he beckoned me across the road and within a minute I was sitting in study of the musician and one-time foundryman who lays claim to the aristocratic title Marquis de Chalenge.

A devout Christian who at the age of 80 sees little point in denying himself some of the finer things of life, Dr

Challenger has cigarettes, cigars, pipe and pipe tobacco set out on his coffee table.

He offers me a fill of my pipe but regrettably I've left it in the car.

A lady who sees to some of Dr Challenger's bachelor needs comes in and bustles about a bit before leaving. I'm bursting to ask about the grand French title but skirt around it by asking the basic details of his life.

"I was born on August 13, 1927, in the Tranch about a mile from here as the crow flies. My grandfather said that by the time I was five my fingers were going up and down the window-sill as if playing a piano."

Although Dr Challenger is the sort of person who gets your attention, my eye nev-

ertheless strays to a collection of medallions, certificates, swords and regalia with a vaguely masonic feel to them.

"All to do with the orders of

which I am a member" he says a trifle mysteriously before returning to the potted biography.

"Music was going though my head as I played on the window-sill.

"At 14 I left school and went to the foundry at Pontymoile where my parents had found me a job as an apprentice moulder.

"It was an awful job for a weakling, made worse by the fact that heavy industrial work is not good for a pianist's hands and by this time I was adept at piano, having had private tuition. It was a job for a navvy."

As for so many, war came as something of a release.

"I joined ENSA - Entertainers' National Service Association - after a call for volunteers.

"I accompanied singers of all sorts at performances at Army and RAF bases all over South Wales.

"A car would call for me, which was unusual when there was petrol rationing, and I would be whisked away to venues, some of which were pretty basic."

We laugh over the fact that ENSA, which often had shades of *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* about it, was jocular known as Every Night Something Awful.

"Some of the locations were indeed awful. At one Army barracks someone had to stand over me with umbrella as I played. I can see the funny side now.

"At some point during the war I agreed to play for the Mormons and since I was this time a chorister at St John's Church, Wainfelin got a letter from the then Archbishop of Wales asking for an explanation.

"I told him: 'Your Grace, My music belongs to God.

"He replied: 'I agree with you. Good morning.' And that was that."

Events were to take a yet more colourful turn in Spandau prison, in which Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy was imprisoned.

"I had been accepted by the Army as a civilian musician and organist for the Berlin garrison and part of the job was to play for Hess.

"Each of us was escorted



MUSIC: Dr Challenger played for Hess PD_9674



COLLECTION: Dr Challenger's Knights Templars' regalia PD_9674

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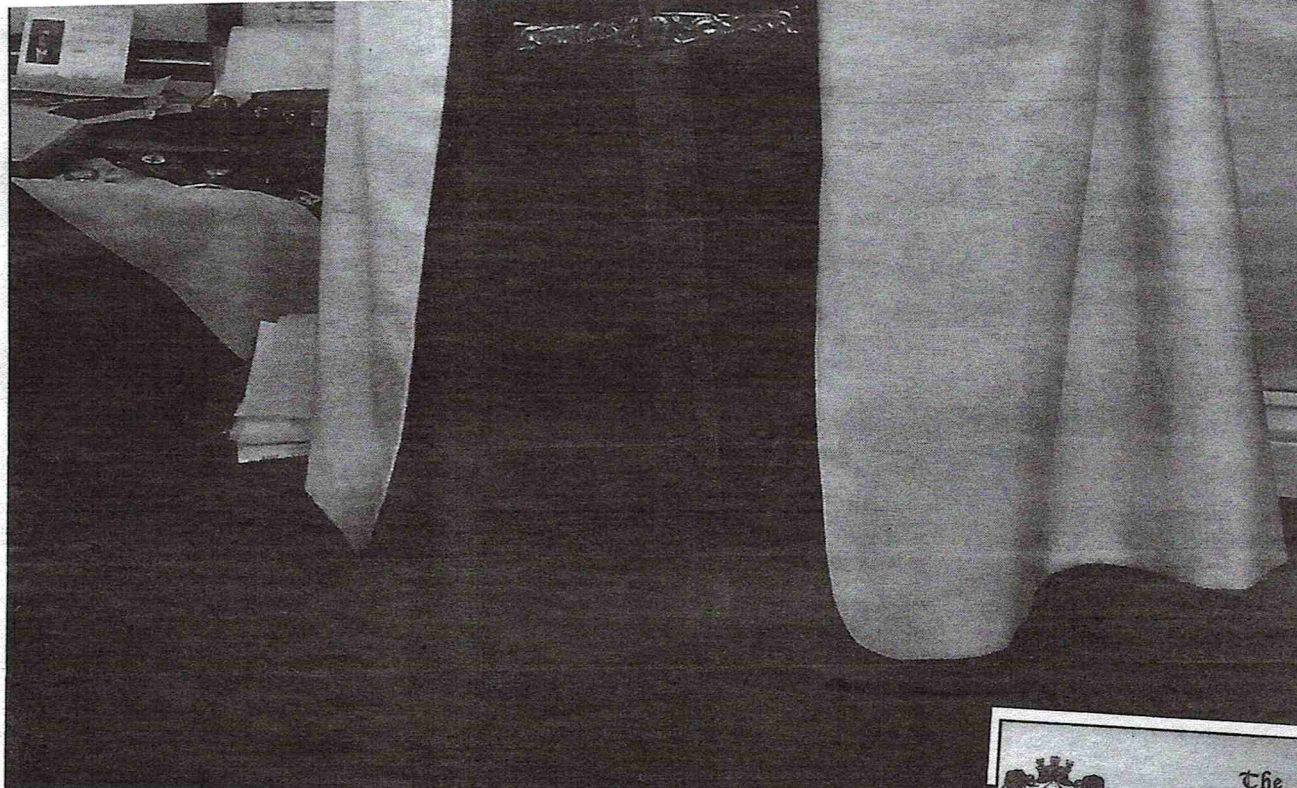
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NOBLE
Dr William Williams
Chancellor
leader of
Wales'



into the prison chapel. I played Wagner and Strauss. There was a mirror in front of me and as I played I could see his body language change. I felt rather sorry for him.

"When I had finished he would acknowledge me with a sort of sad smile although we never spoke."

Hess had been interred at Maindiff Court, near Abergavenny, after his 1941 flight from Germany to try to broker a peace deal with Britain ended in failure.

Last of the leading Nazis, Hess died at his own hand in his Spandau cell in 1987.

If feels as though the chill of that sinister place has entered the Pontypool flat. Time to talk of the Marquis de Challenge, who, it seems, was one Louis Guillaume, a French onion-seller who had been hired as a handyman on William's grandfather's farm and fell in love and married William's mother.

Verification of the title has led William Challenger into some fascinating byways through the Knights Companion of the Holy Sepulchre to the Knights Templar.

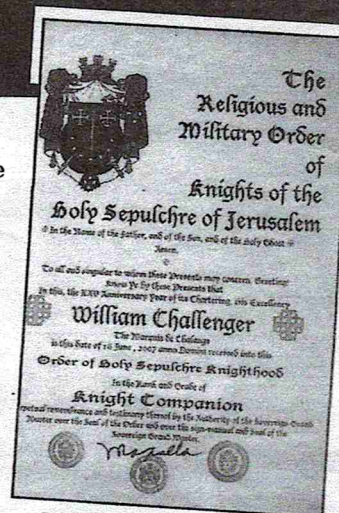
Although scattered by the papcy, the knights are

thought to have lingered on in some form to this day.

For Dr Challenger, the issue is beyond doubt. In fact he has been the order's Grand Prior for Wales.

Should anyone think this fanciful, a sweep of his arm indicates the medallions, regalia, a sword and ornate certificates which argue the presence of *something*.

Of one thing there can be no doubt. In an increasingly drab world, Dr William Challenger is a welcome flamboyance, a quixotic jousting of windmills, colourful enough to brighten any day.



ORDERS: Dr Challenger's certificate

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