**Fisher, Baroness Fisher of Lambeth [*née* Forman], Rosamund Chevalier** (1890-1986), wife, mother, devout Christian, Diocesan and Central President of the Mothers’ Union, campaigner for mothers and their families, was born on 11 May 1890 in Repton, Derby, the first child of six and eldest daughter of the Revd. Arthur Francis Emilius Forman (1850-1905), cricketer and Assistant Master of Repton School, and Eleanor Cecila Forman (1858-1932), *née* Pears.

Rosamund was educated at St Mary’s College, Lancaster Gate, Paddington, London, and went on to obtain a National Froebel Union Higher Certificate. (I have no dates or other details for this) Having planned to train as a missionary for the Church of England’s Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), Rosamund’s life changed course when she met the Rt. Rev. Geoffrey Francis Fisher (1887-1972), then Headmaster of her father’s former employer, Repton School. The couple married on 12 April 1917 in Williton, Somerset and their first son Henry was born the following year. Rosamund went on to give birth to five more sons, Francis (1919), Charles (1921), Humphrey (1923), Geoffrey (1926) and Richard (1930). She was a devoted wife and mother and worked hard to provide a happy home for her husband and children. The family lived in Repton until 1932, when Geoffrey stepped down from his position as Headmaster and was subsequently appointed Bishop of Chester, resulting in a move for Rosamund and the children to their new home in the Bishop’s House, Chester.

Lady Fisher purposefully combined her commitment to her family with her strong Christian faith. She did this by way of her enthusiastic and energetic support of her husband’s work throughout their marriage but also, and perhaps most notably, through her leadership of the Church of England’s foremost women’s organisation, the Mothers’ Union. Founded in 1876 the Mothers’ Union set out to unite women of all classes in faith and prayer and to support them in their roles as wives and mothers. By 1930 the Mothers’ Union had over half a million members making it one of the largest women’s societies in twentieth century Britain. It also had a significant overseas membership, representing some 80,000 women outside the UK by the 1940s. As a society for devout Christian women the Mothers’ Union upheld the teaching of the Anglican Church and held conservative views on social issues including divorce, birth control and abortion. Divorced women and unmarried mothers were not permitted to join the Union until the 1970s. Nevertheless the Mothers’ Union was committed to enhancing the lives of mothers and their families and was vocal on a range of key issues throughout the century including health care, housing, social security and education.

While living in Repton, Rosamund served as Diocesan President of the Mothers’ Union in Derby from 1928 to 1932. Following her move to Cheshire she was appointed Mothers’ Union Diocesan President for Chester. In addition to this demanding role she also served as Vice President of the Anglican Girls’ Friendly Society and of the County’s Girl Guides. After seven very successful years in Chester, the family moved to London when Geoffrey was appointed Bishop of London, and took up residence in the historic Bishop’s residence, Fulham Palace. Here the family saw out the Second World War although Rosamund and her youngest children repaired to Minehead in Somerset, where her mother lived, in September 1940 to escape the worst of the London Blitz. However she had returned by the end of the month, keen to support her husband in his wartime work, as well as overseeing repairs to the bomb damaged Fulham Palace. The couple were reported to sleep in different parts of the Palace in case of a direct hit, so that their children would have one surviving parent.

During the war Rosamund kept up her involvement in the Mothers’ Union and in 1944 she was elected Central President, taking on the leadership of what was now a well-known and global organisation for Christian women. Her election came at a difficult time for the Union with membership falling as a result of wartime disruption. She viewed her remit to support the growth of the Mothers’ Union post-war and to promote the evangelical work of the Union, which she viewed as the organisation’s ‘ultimate end’ (cited in C. Moyse, *A History of the Mothers’ Union: Women, Anglicanism and Globalisation*, 2009, 161). Rosamund took on the role of Central President shortly before her husband became the new Archbishop of Canterbury in 1945, necessitating the family’s move from Fulham Palace to their new home in Lambeth Palace, London.

As Central President of the Mothers’ Union (1944-1953) Rosamund maintained the Union’s commitment to its faith-based agenda while at the same time acknowledging that the society in which members lived was changing. A strong supporter of life-long marriage, she objected to calls for liberalisation of divorce legislation but recognised that marriage could be challenging and advocated for reconciliation services to be attached to domestic courts (*Home & Family* Dec-Feb 1986/87). In her evidence to the Royal Commission on Population in October 1944 she explained that the Mothers’ Union accepted that birth control was a private family matter and that the majority of married couples used some form of family limitation.

Supporting the role of women as mothers was of paramount importance to the Mothers’ Union. When the government announced in 1944 that newly introduced family allowances (child benefit) were to be paid to fathers, the Mothers’ Union joined a number of other women’s groups to protest. As Central President Rosamund informed the Royal Commission on Population that ‘we think it ought to be paid to the mother because she is the person really responsible for the child and for the spending of the money’ adding that it was unfair to expect women who earned their own income during the war ‘to relinquish that bit of independence they get from money they earn for themselves’ (cited in C. Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1928-1964*, 2013, 127-8). Revealing something of her own experiences juggling motherhood with her demanding public roles, Rosamund explained to the Commission her views on working mothers. She said that ‘speaking as a feminist I say yes [to mothers working] but speaking as a mother I would say let her have a career provided it does not stand in the way of having babies…but it almost always does (cited in C. Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1928-1964*, 2013, 176).

During her nine years as Central President Rosamund oversaw initiatives to draw younger women in to the organisation, including the establishment of Young Wives’ groups. By 1952 3000 Young Wives’ groups had been set up. Nevertheless membership numbers continued to decline during these years and the Union acquired a reputation for being ‘out of step’ with modern life by maintaining its ban on divorced women and unmarried mothers.

As Mothers’ Union Central President Rosamund travelled widely and spent five weeks on a tour of Canada and the USA as well as a visit in 1950, with her husband, to the Mothers’ Union in Sydney, Australia. She was an active member of the British Council of Churches, formed in 1942, and in particular supported its work for overseas Inter-Church Aid.

In her parallel role as wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rosamund Fisher instigated the first conferences for bishop’s wives (now the Spouses’ Programme) in 1948 to run in conjunction with the Lambeth Conference, the decennial assembly of bishops of the international Anglican community. She acted as hostess and mistress of Lambeth Palace, as well as the Archbishop’s second residency at the Old Palace at Canterbury. In 1961 she was interviewed at Lambeth Palace for a BBC programme and discussed how she had managed the Palace since 1945 and the changes she had made during her time in residence.

Archbishop Fisher was created a life peer, on his retirement in 1961 and Rosamund received the title of Lady. Lord Fisher of Lambeth then became an honorary curate in the village of Trent, West Dorset, and he and Rosamund lived there until his death in 1972. Their son Charles, who emigrated to Australia, predeceased her in 1978. Lady Fisher died on 30 August 1986 at 3 Wendover Drive, New Malden, Surrey, and is buried alongside her husband in Trent, West Dorset. Paying tribute to her and her significant contribution to the Mothers’ Union, the organisation’s magazine, *Home & Family* reflected that ‘Lady Fisher had a lively and critical mind which she brought to bear on all she did in her remarkable life’ (*Home & Family* Dec-Feb 1986/87).

Sources:

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