

The community pay tribute to Albert Baker

FRIENDS and well-wishers filled St John the Baptist Church, Greatham for the funeral of artist Albert Baker on Wednesday last week.

The parish's former vicar the Rev Paul Duffett had returned to conduct the service, and he started by speaking of Mr Baker's "life of indomitable courage" and "gift of skill and generosity to others".

Albert Baker, who was severely disabled and painted by mouth, died at his home in Liss on May 22nd, aged 73.

Mr Duffett described Mr Baker's life as having grown "like a butterfly from something lowly and often ugly into something remarkable, free and colourful."

He described how Mr Baker had suffered abuse from others during the institutionalised early part of his life, how he had eventually gone to live at the Le Court Cheshire home in Greatham where he received help and encouragement from

Eric Stegman of the Mouth and Foot Painters' Association, and of his great love of children.

Tributes from the children of Greatham Nursery School, who had made him an "honorary friend", stood in the church.

Mr Duffett said he felt privileged in being invited back to the church for the occasion and recalled how Albert Baker had found comfort in prayer there and delighted in the carol services. He had also used the church as a model in many of his paintings.

"Albert was physically weak, but a great treasure emerged from the weakness," the Rev Duffett said.

Before the address MP Michael Mates had read from St Paul's Second letter to the Corinthians: "We are persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed."

The congregation sang the hymns "The Lord's my Shepherd", "All things bright and beautiful" and "For the beauty of the earth". The service was followed by a private cremation at Aldershot.



● Albert Baker with Anna Dent (left) and Katie Packett who nominated him for a top award in November.

Brave artist who triumphed over adversity dies at home

THE talented and popular Liss artist Albert Baker has died at the age of 73, after a life of triumph over adversity.

Born in London with deformed feet and without the full use of his arms and legs, Mr Baker was mocked as a child for his appearance and suffered cruelty at the hands of his violent father.

At the age of three a disability assessment at St Thomas' Hospital, London, turned out to be the beginning of an institutionalised life.

Throughout his childhood he endured constant pain and countless operations - one of which left his hands twice as bad as they had been.

Denied education by frequent interruptions for surgery, the one ray of light in his life was painting, which he taught himself to do with a brush in his mouth.

When Mr Baker reached the age of 17, the authorities wanted him to leave hospital. Years in the workhouse and then a home for 'incurables and cripples' run by strict monks followed.

But during this time, Mr

Baker, who had struggled to teach himself to walk, never lost his interest in art and began selling postcards of his paintings for a shilling each.

In 1953 things began to improve when he returned to live with his mother, who looked after him until age made it too difficult for her to manage.

It was then decided that Mr Baker should go to the Le Court Cheshire Home near Liss - which proved to be a haven for him.

The Association of Mouth and Foot Painters tracked him down and helped him get training. He proved himself good enough to become a member - his work having been judged by experts unaware of his handicap.

Mr Baker then flourished as an artist with his paintings becoming some of the most popular ever turned into greetings cards.

At last he achieved what he had long sought - the ability to earn enough money to support himself and he bought his own house at Greatham, later moving to Riverside, Liss.

He became a governor of

Greatham School and bought equipment for its classes and for the Greatham Nursery School.

Last year he was awarded a top national honour in recognition of his work for the nursery after being nominated by two local youngsters.

Greatham Primary head teacher Helen Paterson and Sandra Allen of the nursery have both paid tribute to the generosity of the man who became one of the area's true characters.

Two former pupils, Anna Dent and Katie Packett, nominated him for an award for helping children which he received from the Duchess of Kent.

His close friend Jim Harris, of Hogmoor Road, Bordon, summed up the feeling: "Albert's death is a great loss to us. We are really going to miss him. He was part of our life and will leave a great big whole in it."

Mr Baker died in his own home last Monday. His funeral will take place tomorrow at Greatham Church, to be followed by private cremation.