

# PRINCETHORPE PRIORY

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**T**he Benedictine nuns of Princethorpe were the first of the refugees from France to arrive in England and have been in this country for more than one hundred years. They were not originally a community of English nuns living in exile abroad, like the communities of Stanbrook East Bergholt and many others of our Benedictine convents. They came to our shores at the time of the Revolution as exiles suffering for their fidelity to the Faith, and though their intention was not to remain, the kindly welcome they received in England dissuaded them from carrying out their original plan of seeking a home in Belgium.

Their foundress was Mère Marie Granger, a saintly soul who had taken the habit of St. Benedict in the Abbey of Montmartre near Paris. It was quite contrary to her desires and inclinations that she ever came to be the foundress of a Benedictine monastery. It was mainly due to the work and persuasion of her brother that she consented to put her hand to so great a work. He was a canon of Paris, a notable ecclesiastic of the time, and one who saw in his sister's character all the necessary qualities for a work of this kind.

Accordingly, when the Abbey of Notre Dame des Isles in Burgundy was vacant, he tried to obtain it for his sister. The King gave his consent to the proposal. At first she held back and refused to leave Montmartre, but in the end gave her consent and went so far as to make her Profession of Faith before the Archdeacon of Paris. Her courage then failed her, she hesitated and finally refused to accept what she thought would prove too great a burden for her. This refusal was so firm that her brother was compelled to accede to her wishes and let the matter drop.

Her confessor, a Jesuit, died about this time and was succeeded by Père Rabasse, a Franciscan. He soon perceived the depth and richness of her virtue, and was convinced that she was called to do a great work for God and the souls of others. His brethren had just quitted their convent at Montargis, and he thought it would be a good opportunity for her to begin there the foundation of a new Benedictine monastery. Her brother the Canon was consulted and again tried to persuade her to undertake the great work. She was still distrustful of herself; she shrank from the responsibility, and again declared that she wished to live and die a simple nun at Montmartre. It was the cause of much anxiety to her, and not until she felt that God was calling her to the work did she give her final consent.

As soon as this was obtained the Archbishop of Sens was approached, in whose diocese Montargis was situated. He was pleased at the prospect of welcoming a community of reformed Benedictine nuns into his diocese, but would not give his consent for the new foundation until he was assured that the community had the means of support. This was the first difficulty in the way of the new foundation, but it was afterwards removed by the Archbishop withdrawing his condition.

The next difficulty came from the Abbess of Montmartre. She wished the new house to be a dependency of her abbey; the Archbishop strongly objected to this; and as neither party would give way the result was a long delay. The Abbess at length waived her claim and also withdrew the opposition which she had placed in the way of those who wished to follow Mère Marie and join the new community.

The greatest difficulty however was the want of money with which to purchase the property and all things necessary for the furnishing of the monastery. For some time things were at a standstill, and nothing was able to be done until a generous friend and benefactor was found in Madame Charlotte Ascelin, by whose assistance they were able to buy the property, on 17 January 1630.

The way now seemed to be clear and the Abbess of Montmartre appointed Mère Marie Granger the perpetual Prioress of the new community, which consisted of three choir nuns, Sister Barbe Chauvelin, Sister Marie Chauvelin, and Sister Anne Martin with one lay-sister Anne Meaume. They were all young, the Prioress herself being only thirty-two years old. During the time that they continued to remain at Montmartre, a part of the abbey was set aside for their use and they were ruled over by their new Superior. The habit was there given to several postulants and the Prioress, after much persuasion, induced her sister Genéviève, a professed nun of Hautebruyère, to join in the new enterprise.

Before leaving Montmartre it was decided that the new monastery should be dedicated to Our Lady of the Angels and that the image of Our Lady should be used on the convent seal. This last design was frustrated in the following way:

Notre Seigneur, par une faveur signalée qui lui estoit assez ordinaire, lui apparut environné d'une splendeur admirable, qui lui présenta une croix avec un coeur dessus percé de 3 cloux et d'une lance, et entouré d'une couronne d'épines; il lui sembloit que de ce coeur sortoit plusieurs gouttes de sang; de cette sorte elle reçut de la main de N. S. la croix pour armoirée, lui faisant comprendre par Lui-même et par le moyen d'un grand serviteur de Dieu, à qui Il fit voir aussi que c'étoit sa sainte volonté qu'elle n'en prit point d'autre.

The departure from Montmartre took place on the 13 May 1630, and Montargis was reached on the 19th<sup>1</sup>. The monastery, which the Franciscans had occupied since the year 1600, was situated in the Faubourg de la Chassée. They were not able to take up their residence there immediately and it was not until 26 May, Trinity Sunday of that year, that they made their solemn entry into their new home. Regular monastic life was begun immediately, and in a short time their spirit of strict observance attracted so much attention that many Benedictine convents desired to place themselves under their direction. Within the first half century of their existence different members of the community went forth to assist in the reform of various other Benedictine convents at Ville Chasson, Caen, Bertancourt, Moret, Gir le Nonains and Malnoue. In 1652, the Sub-prioress received the royal appointment of coadjutrix of the Abbey of Nyoiseau; again, in 1719, Sister Francois de Curton was nominated by the King to the Abbey of Vassin; in 1724, Sister Gabrielle de Curton was made Prioress of St. Colombe de Vienne. Such promotions as these speak for themselves and testify to the fervour and

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<sup>1</sup> *Annals* p.10, MS in Princethorpe archives

regularity of this community, which had become known throughout the length and breadth of France.

The foundress lived only a few years after the completion of her work, dying on 9 March 1636. She was buried in the middle of the Choir in front of the High Altar. Her sister, Mère Genéviève was chosen by the community to succeed her. Under her rule the monastery prospered both spiritually and temporally. The numbers of the community so increased that it became necessary to increase the accommodation, and in 1643 the foundation stone of a new building was laid, bearing the following inscription:

D. O. M.

AUGUSTAE ANGELORUM DOMINAE ILLUSTRISSIMUS ECCLESIAE SENON: ARCHIEPISCOPUS  
D. D. OCTAVIUS DE BELLEGARDE GALLIARUM ET GERMANIAE PRIMAS PROTOGONUM  
LAPIDEM POSUIT MONASTERII NOVI QUOD RELIGIOS: MONIALES S. BENEDICTI C.C.C. 1642

The new house and cloisters were finished in 1649 and were solemnly blessed by M. Jean Granger, canon of Paris, the Prioress' brother. Again in 1655 the foundation stone of another cloister was laid by the Duchess de Bellegarde; and before the close of the century, in 1698 and 1699, they were again compelled to enlarge the monastery. Their great benefactors on this last occasion were the Duc de Beauvilliers and the Marquise de Rochechouart.

The struggle between the king and nobles troubled the whole of France about the middle of the 17th century. In 1652, the civil war was at its height and the country lay at the mercy of rival armies for a period of eight months. The nuns at Montargis did not escape this almost universal disturbance, and for about six weeks they were compelled to leave their monastery and live out of the enclosure in the houses of friends. In the following year they were harassed by a troop of Irish soldiers who forcibly entered the enclosure. The Franciscan fathers rendered them much assistance at this crisis, and the persuasive eloquence of Père Irenée le Piat so prevailed as to make them quite friendly. In fact these soldiers actually placed a guard to defend the nuns from further insults. Before leaving the town, the community allowed them to bury in the church the body of General McGawley – the name is thus spelt in the *Annals*: it is probably meant for McCauley – who had been in command of one of the companies of the Duke of York.

The visitor to Princethorpe will see, occupying the place of honour in the nuns' s Choir, a statue of Our Blessed Lady. She is there presiding over the community as their Abbess, and it was on 12 February 1663 that the Prioress and community begged of her to accept this dignity. The beautiful prayer of supplication used on this occasion is still preserved in the *Annals* :

Très pure et immaculée Vierge Mère du Dieu vivant, prosternées en toute humilité à vos pieds nous vous prions que comme vous avez agréé que nous vous ayons choisie et élue pour notre Abbess et première Superieure (moi miserable pécheresse n'étant ici que pour recevoir vos ordres et être votre agente extérieure pour les faire suivre) il vous plaise me départir de l'esprit de votre Divin Fils et de votre conduite maternelle, pour le faire comme Lui-même et comme nous le désirons; et d'agréer l'humble supplication que nous vous faisons de prendre non seulement la qualité d'Abbess mais aussi de première Dépositaire de nos biens temporels et comme telle de pourvoir cette pauvre petite

Communauté du nécessaire duquel nous manquons, nous espérons cela de votre bonté, et nous nous jetons dans votre sein maternel comme des enfants nécessiteux, par un parfait abandon; donnez nous donc notre pain et notre nourriture spirituelle et la temporelle selon notre besoin et bénissez ce que nous allons faire en ce Chapitre au nom de votre Fils et du votre<sup>2</sup>.

Thus did they choose Our Blessed Lady for their abbess, and, in spite of efforts to impose upon them an abbess *in commendam*, they have always been able to resist them. Indeed in 1674 a very strong effort of this kind was made. A certain M. l'abbé Dabcourt obtained a brief from the king for the erection of the priory into an abbey. His object in obtaining this was to bring about the appointment of his sister as abbess. The Prioress and community took a very firm stand against him and were resolved not to lose their right of election. Sister Catharine Morelle was immediately sent to Paris to seek help and advice in order to avert what was looked upon as a great calamity. M. l'abbé Dabcourt actually went so far as to bring his sister to the monastery in September, but she was refused admission into the enclosure. After about a month's delay, the Prioress herself went to Paris and there sought the help of all her influential friends. She received but little encouragement from them and found it impossible for some time to obtain a hearing. Eventually she gained the ear of M. de Colbert, the renowned Minister of State. He took up the question of appeal with great earnestness, and so eloquent was his pleading that he was able to win the victory for them. After the conclusion of the Council at which the matter was settled, the Councillors of State confessed that they had never before heard M. de Colbert plead with such eloquence, and that they had never seen the king so interested and attentive. One can easily imagine the joy of those at Montargis on hearing the glad tidings of victory, for they had undoubtedly escaped a great evil and one that might have brought about the ruin of their monastery.

This struggle for their rights and freedom occupied many months, months of anxiety and worry for all concerned. Like their many other trials they bore this one with patience, having a great confidence in God and Our Blessed Lady, to whom alone they ascribed the almost unlooked for success of their contest. After this trouble had passed away, it was succeeded by a quiet and uneventful period during which the *Annals* are chiefly concerned with announcements of Professions and accounts of the visits of celebrated personages. The King and Queen Mother once honoured them with a visit, the renowned Fénelon was there in 1692, and the Queen of England in 1701.

The Prioress Mère Genéviève Granger died in 1673. Her loss was keenly felt for hers had been the master mind and guiding hand of the monastery during its period of greatest development. Her niece Mère Genéviève Marie Nau succeeded her until, in 1707, she was compelled to resign through old age and infirmity, and Mère Marie Antoinette de Beauvilliers was chosen to succeed her. The noble family to which she belonged was for many years intimately connected with this community. Francis, seventh Count de St Aignan, was made a peer by Louis XIV in 1663; his eldest son Paul, Duke de Beauvilliers, a most generous friend and benefactor of the nuns, died

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<sup>2</sup> *Annals*, p. 109

on 31 August 1714, and his body was buried in the convent church. He bequeathed to them 40,000 livres to be used for the building of the church.

Before treating of the sufferings of the community at the time of the Revolution, we must refer to the taxation of the religious communities by Louis XIV. After eight years of war, in 1698, France was exhausted by maintaining year after year four armies at least in the field. The burden had become almost unbearable. One author writing of this time says,

The coinage was debased, the taille had been doubled, offices were openly sold, and indeed created in order to be sold, one tenth of the population was without means of subsistence.

The leaders of the State were inferior men, and under their bad management the prosperity of the country, due to the work of M. de Colbert and others, had passed away. To help to remedy such a state of affairs as this, the king began to tax the monasteries. The Archbishop of Sens, knowing the poverty of most of the houses in his diocese, ordered them to sell the church plate to meet the demands that were made of them. At Montargis the Archbishop's orders were obeyed, and their plate was taken to Paris by M. de Chantoiseau in the month of September.

We must now pass on to the story of their sufferings and flight on the outbreak of the Revolution. By the Providence of God the community were blessed in having a great, brave and noble soul to lead and guide them in a time of great peril. Mère Gabrielle de Levis Mirepoix was elected Prioress in 1784, about five years before the great upheaval came: she lived just long enough to shield her children from the storm, dying in 1806 when all were happily settled in England – a land of exile, it is true, but nevertheless a country that welcomed them and gave them a home when their own country cast them forth.

The National Assembly had decreed (2 November 1789) that all church property should be at the disposal of the Nation. In the month of December an official of the town of Montargis demanded a complete list of the movable and immovable property of the monastery. After an interval of about four months the Prioress was ordered to hold herself in readiness to receive other government officials whenever they should present themselves. They came, nine in number, on 30 May, and themselves made a list of the goods of the monastery. Then, in the presence of all the community, they read the decrees which announced the confiscation of monastic property, and declared the freedom of all who had bound themselves by religious vows. Each of the community was in turn interrogated by these officials, but all without exception declared that they were determined to live and die in the faithful observance of the vows they had made to God. At the close of the interview the Prioress firmly refused to sign the deed of surrender.

The Prioress, during the early part of the next year (1791), was constantly visited by officials demanding the surrender of the property; but she stood firm in her refusal. Accordingly in February the monastery was surrounded by a battalion of the National Guard, accompanied by the rabble of the town, who gathered in the church during the time of the Conventual Mass. The leaders entered the house and once more demanded the title deeds of the property. Seeing that further resistance would only

provoke violence, and acting upon the advice of the Archbishop, the Superior promised to make the surrender. Having got possession of the deeds they called the community together and again read to them the decree freeing them from the bond of their vows. They reviled the Prioress, accusing her of unlawful tyranny and of keeping her subjects in ignorance of the freedom which the law had given them. This abuse availed nothing, for all again declared their determination to be faithful to their vows, and their absolute respect for and confidence in their Superior.

Fourteen days later, the mayor came to hold the election of a new Superior, according to the new law which decreed that, if religious communities still wished to live a common life, they could do so on condition they adopted a new mode of life and placed themselves under the authority of the municipality. The Prioress bravely protested against these proceedings and refused to acknowledge the right of the mayor to make use of powers that belonged to the Church alone. The election however was proceeded with, and the Prioress was unanimously re-elected; to the confusion of the mayor who addressed her in the most insulting terms. He then demanded the Register of the Acts of Chapter to insert the Act of this pretended election. According to the law it had to be signed by the newly elected superior, but she firmly refused to do so, and continued to refuse until threatened with violence; she then signed it under protest.

The nuns were now left in peace for a short time, the persecution passing from them to their faithful chaplain M. Fontaine. He had to take refuge in flight, but returned again and again to his charge, until finally he was compelled to leave the country. After his departure the community suffered much from the want of a confessor and, what was much worse, from the appointments of priests to such a position who were the tools of the government; the Archbishop of their diocese too was one of the four bishops who proved faithless to their trust<sup>3</sup>.

The first three months of 1792 were quiet and uneventful. The house was again inspected and further lists of property were made out by the officials. When September came, they were informed of the new law which commanded all religious to leave their monasteries and that they themselves would only be allowed to remain until the 15th of the month. Preparations for departure were immediately begun, and Lady Jerminham, a sister of one of the nuns, arranged with the English nuns at Brussels (also Benedictine) for a temporary shelter for the community. It was decided that some should go to Brussels and others to the Abbey of Florest. It was then necessary to procure carriages for the journey and passports through several different countries. Everything seemed to go wrong: carriages could not be obtained and so short was the notice of departure which they had received, that it was impossible to get some of the passports in time. On account of this last difficulty the plans were changed, and the Prioress determined to go first to Rouen, then cross the Channel from Dieppe to England, and from there sail again to Belgium. Seventeen of the nuns started for Rouen and got safely to their destination; eighteen of them started on 15 September, leaving four at Montargis to take care of what little property was still left

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<sup>3</sup> This was Loménie de Brienne; of the one hundred and thirty six bishops of France he with three others were the only ones to take the oath to the Civil Constitution.

to them. Eventually they all assembled at Rouen where they were kindly received by the Poor Clares and the nuns of the Congregation des Soeurs d'Ornement.

Further delay was then occasioned in trying to obtain passports for England. The Superior spent day after day in unsuccessful attempts to get permission to leave the country. She had to make journeys to Paris and to interview official after official. Bustled from one bureau to another, she almost gave up all hope of accomplishing her task. She at length succeeded in getting as far as Dieppe where there was another delay until 16 October; then they were all able to embark on the ship named the *Prince of Wales*. The sea passage instead of taking about ten hours lasted for twenty-six. The storm prevented the captain from putting in at Brighton and he was compelled to land his passengers in the bay of Shoreham. The exiles proceeded from there to Brighton, where they were most kindly received by Mrs Fitzherbert, the wife of the Prince of Wales. Everyone without exception was most kind to them. The *Annals* tell us that one and all seemed to say 'Venez venez oublier parmi nous tout ce que les mechans vous ont fait souffrir; nous voulons effacer jusqu'à la moindre trace de vos malheurs.' The Prince of Wales interested himself on their behalf, sending his own doctor to look after the sick. He afterwards visited them in person and persuaded them to give up the idea of leaving England for Belgium.

Restez en Angleterre: vous y trouverez un grand nombre de vos compatriotes, et les Anglais se feront un devoir de vous y rendre heureuses; au moindre allez passer quelqu'un temps à Londres, vous y verrez la tournure que prendront les affaires, et alors vous partirez pour Bruxelles si vous le pensez sans crainte, mai croiyez-moi un voyage précipité pourrait vous jeter dans un grand embarras.

Their friends at Brighton paid all the expenses of their stay there and arranged the journey to London which took place on 19 October. Mr Talbot received them on their arrival, having previously rented a house for them. Another house near at hand was also taken and this was used as an infirmary for the sick and aged, while in the other regular life and discipline was begun almost immediately; the wearing of the habit was resumed on 28 October.

A permanent settlement in London was never contemplated. As soon as they made up their minds to remain in England they began to look round for a suitable house in the country. Lord Onslow, a Protestant, express much sympathy for them and was determined to offer them his own residence situated some few miles from London. When his intention became known his neighbours raised such strong objections that he was forced to abandon his scheme. Fortunately, a little later, they were able to acquire Bodney Hall in Norfolk, and though the inhabitants of the neighbouring town of Thetford appealed to the Government against the settlement of the nuns there, asserting that it was contrary to the laws of the land to allow them to reside in England, the appeal was unsuccessful, and the Prioress with three nuns entered into Bodney Hall on 28 December. By 28 February the whole community was in residence there, where they remained until their removal to Heath Hall near Wakefield in 1811. Ten years later they migrated to Orrell Mount near Wigan, and finally brought their wanderings to an end by settling at Princethorpe in 1855. *End*