

Benedictines under the terror 1794-95

Dom Denis Agius, Downside

FIVE COMMUNITIES of English Benedictine nuns were forced to leave the continent and settle after much suffering in England during the years 1794 and 1795. These were, in order of antiquity of foundation, Brussels, Cambrai (now Stanbrook), Ghent (now Oulton), Paris (now Colwich), and Dunkirk (now Teignmouth). They totalled 99 nuns¹, 100 if we include Poor Dame Eldridge of Ghent who went mad on the quayside at Antwerp and had to be left behind². They arrived in many different and unusual costumes. When a Catholic gentleman told his coachman to go and meet some nuns at Dover, the poor man, who had never heard of nuns, thought it was a new kind of French potato he had to collect³ - The following is a summary of their difficulties and the means they found to overcome them.

B R U S S E L S

The nuns of Brussels were undisturbed until 1794⁴, when the Governor of the city on the 21st of June told them that the French were advancing and advised them to leave within 24 hours. There were 25 nuns in the community and they at once set about providing themselves with secular costume. This was not easy at such short notice; one nun had to make a shawl out of a tablecloth, while others wore heavy fur-lined cloaks, although it was the middle of summer. Vestments and other valuables were sent to a nearby Dominican convent, and on Sunday morning, June 22nd, a last mass was said in the church where the community had worshipped for over 200 years. They set out in three coaches and a large waggon for Antwerp. The Lady Abbess refused to go and stayed behind with one nun, two maids and a porter.

On reaching Antwerp they found the inn at which they had intended to stay had no room for them. The carriages got separated and it was not until 11 pm that they were all accommodated, mostly with old girls of their school. On Tuesday morning news came that the French were approaching rapidly, and the community found that their hosts were anxious to get rid of them. They managed to hire a canal-barge in which, as the account says, 'there was not any convenience for passengers'. However, they had the boat to themselves; two beds were procured for the old nuns and the rest slept at night on the bare boards. Two French priests begged to be allowed to join them, and were taken on board.

About 3 pm on Tuesday afternoon, the boat set off. The nuns travelled for more than two days and reached Rotterdam at 10pm on Thursday. Here they were told they could not

¹ B. Whelan, *Historic English Convents of Today*, 271 gives dates of leaving continent and numbers.

² *Annals of the English Benedictines of Ghent*, Oulton 1894, 81.

³ *ibid.* 84

⁴ *Chronicle of the first monastery founded at Brussels*, Bergholt 1898, 230 ff.

disembark until the British ambassadors arrived to claim them. They were so ill with fatigue that they were allowed to try and find lodgings for the night.

The inn nearby could provide only 12 beds for the party of 28, as they now had 23 English nuns, 2 French sisters, 2 French priests and a sacristan. But in spite of everything, they managed to live fairly well at the inn which charged them half-a-crown. Dame Ignatia Collins, as Procuratrix, was in charge. The nuns stayed here for almost a week, at the end of which they managed to find a ship named 'The Providence' bound for London, and they set sail at 11 am on July 2nd. Although now so near safety, they nearly met with disaster, as the pilot attempted to steer their ship towards a French vessel, and it was only the 'hard words and threats' of the English captain which saved them. The community arrived in St Catherine's Dock about 9 am on Sunday morning, two weeks after leaving their convent. Bp Douglass, Vicar-Apostolic of the London District, came to visit them and console them. A few days later, on Monday July 14th, they began the journey to Winchester where Dr Milner had found them a home.

CAMBRAI – STANBROOK

The adventures of our second community, that of Cambrai, are better known, since the famous 'Brief Narrative' of Dame Ann Teresa Partington gives us such a clear and moving account of what happened⁵.

It was on Sunday, October 13th 1793, that the nuns, who had retired early in view of the midnight office, were rudely awoken by four men who demanded to see the whole community. The men then proceeded to fix public seals on everything inside and outside the convent, and left the nuns as prisoners under armed guards, taking their chaplain and his assistant with them. Five days later, a body of Horse Guards with a crowd of blackguards at their heels arrived, and the nuns were given 'half a quarter of an hour' to leave their convent. Each sister was only allowed to take one small bundle, but Dame Ann Teresa managed to take with her a framed copy of the Arms of England, which Stanbrook still possesses.

The nuns journeyed in open carts for five days, threatened and jeered at by the crowd. On October 22nd they reached Compiègne where they were lodged in a former Visitation convent with 32 other prisoners. A month later, to their great joy, they were joined by their two chaplains but were forbidden to speak to them.

In early January, a fever attacked the majority of the nuns, 8 or 9 were confined to bed, and others were too ill to help them. In addition, their beloved chaplain, Dom Augustine Walker, died at 2 am on January 14th. He was 73 years old, an Edmundian and President General of the English Benedictine Congregation at the time of his death. By April 3rd, four of the nuns had also died. Their money too was finished, and more prisoners poured in every week.

May 17th was 'one of the most suffering days we ever passed'. At 8 am some 30 ruffians entered the prison and stationed a soldier with a drawn sword in the nuns' room. They were forbidden to leave it or even to open a window. Then the prisoners were taken downstairs for interrogation one at a time, and not one returned. The nuns in fact were

⁵ J. Gillow (ed.), 'Records of the English Benedictine Nuns at Cambrai (now Stanbrook) 1620-1793', *C.R.S.* 13 (1913), 20-38.

eventually spared this ordeal but had to endure a violent harangue from an ex-priest. After this, they and their beds were searched.

Early in June, 16 Carmelite sisters arrived to join the prisoners. After staying six weeks, they were taken to Paris and executed on July 17th, wearing their habits, kneeling and renewing their vows on the scaffold. The English Benedictines expected to meet a similar fate, and indeed they were told to put on the secular clothes which the Carmelites had left behind. When they asked for shoes, the jailer remarked that they would not need them for long. However a fortnight later Robespierre's 'Reign of Terror' ended with his attempted assassination and execution. The nuns of Cambrai were kept in prison until the following April, but the winter was so severe that their survival seemed a miracle. At last, in April 1795, they obtained passports for England. After hearing mass in their prison, the first time for 18 months and 5 days, and after a number of delays, two carts took them to Calais on April 24th 1795. On the way they had to pass their old abbey at Cambrai and were reluctant to look in its direction now that it was converted into a common prison. On May 2nd they landed at Dover and were able to rest for two weeks in a house in London generously lent by the Marchioness of Buckingham. President Cowley, the new English Benedictine President General, then asked them to take over a school at Woolton on the outskirts of Liverpool.

G H E N T – O U L T O N

Our third community is that of Ghent, now at Oulton, Staffs.⁶ Early in 1794 the nuns of this community realised that they would soon have to move to England, and took the precaution of sending across the Channel the tabernacle from their high altar, some church plate, vestments, papers and records, and Dame Eugenia Pulton's great clock. The Belgian children in the school were sent home and only four English girls remained, one of whom was only 14 years old. She afterwards joined the community in England.

Now follows an incident which seems to sum up all the heart-break and sadness of this period, an incident which was kept a strict secret for years afterwards and only mentioned in whispers by the community. If the nuns had to prepare to leave a city which they loved and a convent which they all regarded as their home, there was one precious thing which they felt must be safeguarded from sacrilegious hands. At dead of night a few days before they left, two nuns crept down to the abbey church where they found two workmen with lanterns waiting. The group moved to the tomb of a 'saintly nun', the secret of who it was was never given away, but most probably it was Dame Lucy Knatchbull, their first abbess. The tomb was opened and the coffin carried to a safe hiding place. The nuns inserted a paper whose tomb it was and stating what was being done, and then the coffin was carefully bricked-up so that no sign of new plaster work could be seen from outside. So skilfully indeed was this done that the coffin has never since been found, and the story came to light only many years after the community had settled in England.

The expected attacks by the French armies began early in June, some Austrian troops and a band of English soldiers led by the Duke of York put up a short-lived resistance. During the battle, cannon-balls passed over the convent garden, and the portress, Dame Mary Joseph Molyneux, who was 'hastily crossing the garden', only missed being hit

⁶ *Annals. .of Ghent*, 79 ff.

because her foot caught in the grass, and she fell. At that instant another cannon-ball passed over her head.

Two more misfortunes befell the community before they set out. On June 12th, the prioress, Dame Teresa Hodgson, died. She was only 50 but had been ill for some time. The nuns were also forced to dismantle their new marble high altar in order to save it. The altar was carried back under cover of darkness to the workshop of the man who had built it. By this time however, the nuns had heard that a Mr Dicconson of Wrightington Hall, Lancashire had learnt of their plight and had come from Antwerp to help them. Assistance also came from the Duke of York who in return for having been allowed to place his military stores in their convent, now ordered military waggons to be placed at the nuns disposal and to convey them and their baggage to Antwerp. Wearing secular clothes, they left Ghent for the last time on June 23rd. As they drove out of the town, the French began a heavy bombardment, and the town soon fell.

At Antwerp the party met with more difficulties. The community numbered 22 or 23, and no ship heading for England could be found which might take them all. The abbess and a few nuns offered to stay behind until another ship could be found while Mr Dicconson and the procuratrix led the main party which included four children, on board. At this point, one of the young religious, Dame Mary Sales Eldridge, became hysterical and had to be left behind in a convent at Velsique, which took charge of mental patients. She never recovered sufficiently to make the journey to England, and when the convent at Velsique was dissolved, she lived for the rest of her life with the nun who had looked after her there.

The main party reached London on June 26th and lodged with Mrs Booker, the wife of the Catholic bookseller in Bond St. They eventually moved north to Lancashire. Meanwhile the abbess and her party had sold their old convent in Ghent to a M. Fyson, a manufacturer of white lead, for 1400 louis d'or, of which 200 were to be paid on the spot. It is doubtful whether the nuns ever received a penny of this money. With the help of one of their old pupils, they found a ship bound for Dover and eventually reached England and joined the others in Lancashire. Two or three lay sisters had courageously stayed behind in Ghent while the French captured the city, but they too had to make their escape and joined the rest of the community in England. The community now numbered 12 choir nuns and 9 lay sisters.

PARIS – COLWICH

Our fourth community is that of the Benedictines of Paris, now at Colwich, Staffs.⁷ As this community was nearer the centre of the Revolution, these nuns suffered a great deal. Even on the fateful 14th of July 1789, they saw the mob storming past on their way to the Bastille, setting fire to the houses of the rich as they passed by. The prioress, Mother Clare Bond, was ill in the infirmary at this time and kept asking what was the smoke coming through the windows. Next day some of the mob even knocked on the convent door, but they had only come to ask for food, and after being fed in the convent parlour they departed 'very peaceably'.

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St Benedict s Priory, Colwich. Printed from an old MS, n.d., 61 ff.

For a time the community was left in peace. The prioress died on November 22nd 1789 and a new prioress was elected. She was advised to sell most of the church plate, apparently to avoid pillage by the mob. For the next three and a half years life continued with some difficulty because the nuns refused to receive priests appointed by the revolutionaries.

At the beginning of 1793, the nuns began to receive visits from the revolutionaries. The first three passed off peaceably enough but after the fourth visit, on October 3rd, the nuns were told they were to be prisoners in their own convent. In November their chaplain was taken away and from that time onwards, many aristocratic families were brought as prisoners to the convent before they went to the guillotine.

Finally on November 3rd occurred the revolutionaries sixth visit, the horror of which surpassed anything that had gone before. The church was invaded, and figures hideously dressed ran up and down the aisles tearing down curtains, crosses and pictures and kicking them up into the air. At length they piled everything they thought valuable in the sacristy and came a few days later to take everything away. One woman among them even dressed herself up as an abbess with a crozier and entered the chapter room singing, 'Veni, sponsa Christi'. Searches were made of the nuns' cells for the table linen but none was found for the nuns were wearing it as petticoats. On December 29th the nuns were made to take off their habits and put on secular dress.

On July 16th 1794, the community were moved by night to the castle at Vincennes, about nine miles from Paris. Here they were given four empty rooms at the top of a tower, a climb of 150 steps, which had no furniture, and the nuns were subjected to a diet of bread and water. However, the abbess had hidden about her person two pint bottles one of white wine and the other of 'orange-flower brandy' which were mixed with the drinking water. Next day, beds, sheets and blankets arrived, and after that the nuns were fairly well treated, although they continued to have only one meal a day. Since they had their breviaries, they were able to say office. At length news came of the fall of Robespierre which allowed their jailer the freedom to inform them of how narrowly they had escaped death. They were still however kept in prison, and on November 11th they were moved to a convent of Augustinian Canonesses, there to join two other communities and seven Carmelite nuns. In the new year (1795) the nuns were able to hear mass again, and on March 1st, the Benedictines were told they were free. They divided into two parties and set off for Calais on June 19th; on July 7th they reached Dover.

DUNKIRK – TEIGNMOUTH

Our last community is that of the Benedictine nuns of Dunkirk, now at Teignmouth, who endured the same hardships and imprisonment as the others.⁸ On October 13th 1794, their convent was seized and they were taken to the Poor Clare convent in Dunkirk where they were kept for four days. On October 17th, the Benedictines and Poor Clares were put on a ship and were transported to Gravelines which they reached at 8 pm, and where they were taken to another Poor Clare convent. Here the three communities were kept for 18 months. Their food was mostly bread and water and they were forced to burn the furniture on account of the freezing conditions. Nine Poor Clares and two Benedictines died during

⁸ Whelan, op. cit., 178 ff

this captivity. They also learned that their names were on Robespierre's list for the guillotine.

On April 29th 1795 all three communities left Gravelines for Calais. They all wore secular clothes, mostly made from curtains and bed-linen. They reached London on May 3rd: the Benedictines took over a large house in Hammersmith, where they stayed until 1863, in which year they moved to Devon.

Such in brief were the sufferings and adventures of the five Benedictine communities. Sixteen others suffered similar fates, of whom probably the best known are the Carmelites of Lanherne, Darlington and Chichester, the Canonesses at Newton Abbot, Ealing, Bruges and New Hall, and the Poor Clares at Darlington. Many individual deeds of heroism are recorded, the Bruges nuns had to flee on foot, and when they arrived at their inn about 11 pm soaked through with rain and almost dead with fright and fatigue, they found no beds and only six chairs. At break of day 'we began again our dreadful march, ready to drop, all of us'⁹ Unlike other communities, they were able to return to Bruges in 1802 where they were to endure two World wars and remain to this day.

In conclusion, we must be grateful to those brave souls who recorded for us in such detail the histories of those sad events soon after they had themselves experienced them: Dame Ann Teresa Partington of Cambrai, Dame Philippa Eccles of Brussels, and the anonymous chroniclers of Ghent, Paris and Dunkirk.

⁹ Whelan, *ibid.*, 212-3.