

BURFORD PRIORY
A BENEDICTINE COMMUNITY
IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH

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WHOEVER FOUNDED the modest little hospital of S John the Evangelist at Burford could hardly have foreseen the many interests that were to become attached to it under the name of Burford Priory. It has experienced profound changes, it has survived at least two periods of long neglect, and now it has become a favourite and familiar example of an English home of especially beauty and charm. Even in the delightful town of Burford, it is pre-eminent¹. Such high praise is essentially that of an architect. Yet the Priory owes much to Walter Godfrey, whose knowledge and expertise concerning the hospitals of medieval Europe is easily discerned in his restoration of this small foundation at Burford in the 1930s. Today when the Priory is neatly catalogued as a 'listed building' in a conservation area much dependent on the tourist trade, his appraisal still remains true.

What he did not foresee however, was that some ten years later, in the autumn of 1949, the Priory would revert to its original purpose of a religious house by becoming the property of a community of Anglican nuns. In spite of misgivings at the beginning concerning the purchase, the transaction was eventually made quite smoothly. The former owner of the house was herself anxious for its original use to be revived and was therefore sympathetic to the community's hope of purchase. A sister in the community, having recently rejected the wealth with which life had richly endowed her, had sold her Park Lane house, thus enabling the community to raise the necessary money. For some it was the finger of God, for others a piece of remarkable good fortune.

The new occupants of the Priory settled in unobtrusively enough. Structural changes were few. The spacious drawing room, with its ornate Tudor ceiling and splendid Lenthall fireplace to distract the wandering eye, became the community chapel. In the novitiate a portrait of Nell Gwyn, whose visit to the Priory in 1676 is said to have caused her son to be given the title 'Earl of Burford', was panelled over and a holy picture, deemed more suitable for the purpose of the room, hung in its place.

The people of Burford meanwhile found the coming of the nuns something of a nine days' wonder, and reactions in so conservative a town were strong. Fellow Anglicans, members of a church where ignorance concerning the religious life was still widespread, regarded them with suspicion. To the small nucleus of Roman Catholics in an ecumenical climate very different from today, they were inauthentic. By the townsfolk themselves, accustomed to having access to the Priory grounds for picnics and similar pleasures, the presence of the nuns and the subsequent enclosure were much resented. It was observed that it would be at least twenty years before the community was fully accepted, a discerning, and as things turned out, an accurate estimate. Only gradually did those early resentments give way to acceptance, and eventually to the real and generous friendship which is now enjoyed, between the community and the people of Burford. Gradual too was that other growth which took place in the community itself, and which concerns us more here. For these were

¹ W.H. Godfrey, in a paper given to the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, September 1939.

essentially formative years, marked first by the community's full and final acceptance of the Benedictine Rule, and then by the working out of its implications for their daily monastic life.

To evaluate these years correctly, one must turn for a moment to that background history in which the community is rooted, no easy task before an audience whose own communities have a long and often unbroken tradition. For in any consideration of religious communities in the Anglican church, one has to face, alas, a lack of historical continuity. Not for us the carefully preserved archives, nor even the hope of finding some hitherto unsuspected 'treasure' on a dusty shelf. For Anglicans there is no such unbroken tradition, and after their destruction in the 16th century, no religious communities existed in the Church of England for three hundred years, although to generations nurtured on the Book of Common Prayer, the Psalter and part at least of the monastic office remained familiar. By the 17th century, moreover, tentative attempts were being made to establish some form of the religious life by devout Anglicans, but only in the privacy of their own homes. Most notable was that of Nicholas Ferrar at Little Gidding, very much a family affair and destined to fall victim to the stresses of the Civil War, but whose spirit remained and was to be evoked some three hundred years later in the poetry of another high-church Anglican:

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment,
Is England and nowhere, never and always...²

It was not however until the first half of the 19th century, after the Catholic revival associated with the Oxford Movement and the Tractarians, that the religious life, as we would understand it, again appeared in the Church of England. Details of the beginnings and growth of these early communities, a phenomenon which has so aptly been called 'the silent rebellion'³ is outside our immediate concern, but in passing, one might pay appropriate tribute here to those women who pioneered those first Anglican communities in early Victorian England. They frequently encountered in their work social conditions for which neither birth nor upbringing had prepared them, and were often alienated from their families and, unkindest of all, mistrusted, suspected, and openly harassed by the church they wished to serve.

Of these first communities one especially concerns us. The Community of S. Mary the Virgin was founded in 1848 at Wantage, and was greatly to enrich the Anglican church by its apostolate of teaching and social work. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to regard this community as totally active, for in its basically Augustinian constitution (1853) ample provision was made for growth in the life of prayer. This largely derived from the influence of the community's founder, William Joseph Butler, a man of God in his generation, whose devotion to S. Francis de Sales and to the ideals of the Visitation Order can be glimpsed behind his foundation.

In September 1940, four aspirants came to this community, the first of several who, above the average age then considered normal for the religious life, sought not an active apostolate but some form of the contemplative life, as yet dimly perceived. They proved not to be just another development in the life of the Wantage Sisters but the beginning of a new community although this would not evolve finally until 1949. The community 'log-book of these formative years provides interesting and often entertaining reading, with

² T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding'

³ D.M. Allchin, *The Silent Rebellion: Anglican Religious Communities 1845-1900*.

its records of frequent comings and goings and the seemingly hothouse atmosphere of spiritual devotion. Yet one can also discern here factors which could only lead to a form of Benedictine life. For while others came and went, a small nucleus remained to achieve stability long before it was accepted as a vow.

While still under the direction of the Wantage Sisters, it was perhaps inevitable that the inspiration and ethos of the new community would be that of the Visitation Order which was in fact to be the basis of the first rule of the community. If the records reflect an increasing dissatisfaction with this, then it was a dissatisfaction courageously faced. When the community eventually became autonomous, it took the 'Visitation of Our Lady' as its feast of title under the little-used form of the 'Salutation'.

Whatever the difficulties however, the young community was greatly blessed in its diocesan bishop Dr Kenneth Kirk, who was later to become its first Visitor. Here the community was fortunate for Anglican religious communities had not always been assured of tolerance from their bishops, still less of understanding or of any degree of pastoral affection. Rooted in what used to be called 'the high church tradition', Dr Kirk's scholarship was outstanding, even in a diocese whose bishops were supposedly appointed for their learning. His understanding of monasticism and above all his deep personal love of the liturgy, made him the ideal mentor for the community. For it was his desire for a richer and more liturgical way of corporate prayer which lay at the heart of the community's growth towards the Benedictine life. For as the use of the Little Office of Our Lady was abandoned firstly for that of the monastic Diurnal and finally in favour of the Breviary, so also grew an awareness of where the sisters vocation as a community lay. In June 1950, by this time under the direction of the monks of Nashdom Abbey, the nuns asked for and were granted recognition as a Benedictine community. It should be noted that the community considered no other form of the contemplative life. Help towards a Carmelite form could have been obtained from the nuns' near neighbours at Fairacres in Oxford, or towards the Poor Clare tradition from the community at Freeland also quite close. The Burford nuns had shared a home with these latter in 1941, during the days of their mutual beginnings. For the Burford community however, the voice of S Benedict and his emphasis on the liturgy had a strong and insistent attraction and there could be no other way forward.

Meanwhile it had become obvious that the new community must find a permanent home. The nuns lived first under the care of the Wantage sisters and afterwards for three years at the Bishop's Palace at Cuddesdon. Finally the move was made to Burford Priory in 1949, and three years later in June 1952, the first five professions in solemn Benedictine vows were made.

Living now in a Benedictine tradition in such a delectable spot, the nuns not unnaturally began to search for Benedictine antecedents in the history of the Priory. There was some wishful thinking concerning the slight and quite unfounded assumption of a Benedictine origin, and a nostalgic rather than an accurate view of the house's dissolution. Community recreation was enlivened with tales of the ghosts inherited with the house = there were reports of a ghostly bell heard at night and the sound of monastic chanting heard at unaccountable times. In fact, the priory had always been a hospital for the poor and sick, and never a monastic building. Its connections with William, Earl of Gloucester who founded Keynsham Abbey, strongly suggest an Augustinian foundation. Furthermore, it would seem that by the time of its surrender in September 1538, the Priory no longer fulfilled its original function. Much of its property, never very extensive, was already leased to tenants,

and the sole remaining canon and last prior, 'one, Thomas Cade, old and sickly'⁴. In passing, a lover of the Cotswolds can note with satisfaction that although the notorious Dr John London seized the Priory's only two belts, no lead was removed, for the roof of the building, then as now, was a good Cotswold tile.

Research into the post-dissolution history of the Priory indicates a world far removed from the monastic. But the atmosphere of these latter times lived on in stories of some of the eccentricities of the Priory's owners. There was for instance, the figure of the ill-famed Lady Tanfield who was more hated than her unscrupulous husband, the great Sir Lawrence, whose turbulent ghost is still said to ride across the water meadows when the Windrush is in flood. If the nuns found such a lady a somewhat alarming predecessor at the Priory, her daughter Elizabeth, however, made amends. In this lady, they found at last a truly Benedictine link with the past, for it was during her life, in the early 17th century, that the priory had been placed on a wider Benedictine canvas. Moreover it is she who enables us to share at least one small particular of a common ancestry. The life of Elizabeth Cary and those of her children who became Benedictines have a special place in the history of the English Benedictine Congregation. Their connection with the history of Burford Priory is more remote, but one would like to imagine the young Elizabeth here resisting the Calvinist persuasions of her father, and perhaps her exiled daughters, enclosed in their convents, might often remember their Cotswold family home with affection. Perhaps also Dom Cuthbert Fursdon, while fulfilling his role as Lady Elizabeth's chaplain, found the woods and garden conducive to his own studious life and monastic calling. Lady Elizabeth herself would no doubt have been pleased to know that one day her home would shelter a community of Benedictine nuns, despite the prefix 'Anglican'. Certainly this would have pleased her daughter-in-law Lettice, wife of Lucius Cary, second Viscount Falkland, both of whom refused consistently to be dissuaded from their Anglican allegiance. Like many of her contemporaries, Lettice was a woman of firm but gentle piety, and hoped that some form of the religious life might again appear within her church. Thus it seemed to her that Burford Priory was ideally suited to the purpose for the house was still in the possession of the Falklands during the early years of their marriage, '(a place) where learning and religion might flourish more in her own sex than heretofore. (They) having opportunities (here) to serve the Lord without distraction'.

As the community at Burford adapted itself to the Benedictine tradition in the early 1950s, life was by no means 'without distraction': skill had to be acquired in the Latin tongue, grey habits were exchanged for black, and wimples were now cut to a specifically Benedictine pattern. The wimple was the cause of some disturbance. A young Belmont monk who unsuspectingly called at the Priory while cycling through Burford, found himself the somewhat embarrassed mediator between the nuns and the Stanbrook community on this subject. Peter Anson was also apparently consulted, for in a reply to a letter from Mother Prioress concerning his book *The Call of the Cloister*, he remarked divertingly, 'most, if not all Benedictine nuns have plain unstarched wimples and guimpes. They are quite loose and floppy!' (1953). Yet such diversions were surely an indication that the Benedictine life was now being fulfilled at a deeper level. In fact the community now enjoyed what appeared to be a miniature 'golden age', with the struggles of foundation past and the changes and adjustments resulting from the Second Vatican Council still in the future. The daily 'log

⁴R.B. Gretton, *The Burford Records*.

book' of this period reflects qualities of peace and stability and one might add, humour, not evident in the earlier records. This source also reveals how much the community was indebted to its first Mother Prioress, Dame Mary Gabriel. Having nurtured the community through its formative years, she was to continue this work, thus demonstrating how rich was the Benedictine charisma granted her.

Under her guidance, it was decided wisely to follow a well-attested pattern of Benedictine life rather than to take risks by experiment. Thus with the approval of the Bishop, the Ordo of the English Benedictine Congregation was used as a directive for the Conventual Mass and the Divine Office. The community by no means regarded its life as a mere Benedictine imitation, although there were those who did criticise it as such. Rather the community believed its existence was a help towards Christian unity, justified by the nuns deep concern for this end which had been a primary reason for their foundation. Given the strict enclosure which the community kept and the restrictive religious outlook of the day, some degree of isolation was probably inevitable. Nevertheless, close links were maintained with the Abbe Paul Coutourier and through the mediation of Dom Benedict Lay of Nashdom, with the Trappistine Abbey then at Grottaferrata (now at Vitorchiano). Later, when the way was open for closer ecumenical contacts, and for a new and deliberate sharing of monastic experience, the ground at Burford had, metaphorically, been well- prepared. Still, when this time did come, with the 'open windows' and proverbial 'fresh air' of the Second Vatican Council, the Anglican Church also found itself effected, and the community at Burford in like manner. The E.B.C. Ordo was followed regarding the Mass and Office, but experiments in the structure of these met with variable success. Such was doubtless the experience of the English Benedictine Congregation also. These developments had particular problems for Anglican religious; when for instance the monastic Latin was abandoned, some of the community found the English of the Grail psalms a poor substitute for that of the Prayer Book Psalter. Nor did they find the graphic accuracy of the Jerusalem Bible always a happy compensation for losing the poetic qualities of the Authorised Version of King James.

Meanwhile interminable discussions continued and the daily chores of monastic life were sometimes shelved as nuns sought to 'discern their identity' or 'examine their authenticity' or were, even more alarmingly, exhorted to 'openness'. Small wonder that some of their sentiments began to echo those of the poet:

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
 Doctor and saint, and heard great argument
 About it and about, but evermore
 Came out by the same door as in I went⁵.

Thus it was only later that it was possible to assess the really significant changes and to discern an important difference in the community's fundamental outlook, springing from a deeper understanding of the place of the enclosed life within the Church and of the relationship between the contemplative life and the apostolate. Changes in the structure of the life at Burford soon followed, particularly in the nature of the enclosure. If it might be doubted that all such changes were totally beneficial, they did make possible what might be called a three-dimensional growth in the community's subsequent life.

The people of Burford were the first to be involved in this new approach. With the proviso of 'hastening slowly', parts of the enclosure covering the grounds and later the

Priory itself were lifted and these parts made available to the public. This gesture was later admittedly to become partly a matter of 'Hobson's Choice', since it was a condition of the grant given by the government to help towards the building's restoration. However it meant that the last remnants of exclusiveness on the one hand and of distrust on the other, disappeared. Possibly the Priory is nearer now than it has ever been to what was the object of the original building on the site, a small, caring Christian community serving its immediate neighbourhood.

Growth of another kind was seen in the development of a more flexible and satisfactory relationship with other non-Anglican religious communities. This was encouraged by the abandoning of old attitudes within the churches generally which in the past had all too easily encouraged communities to regard themselves as separate enterprises for God and, alas, as rival ones sometimes. Within the community itself there was an increasing desire to share monastic ideals and experience, especially with similar Benedictine communities, and at the same time to assure St. Benedict a rightful place within the Anglican Church.

Since Burford was a comparatively latecomer to the small group of Anglican religious communities, it might be helpful here to list those other Anglican communities of nuns who also aspired to lead the Benedictine life, each of these early foundations would now regard itself as fully Benedictine: St Mary's Abbey, West Malling, and the communities of St Mary, Edgware and of the Holy Cross, now at Rempstone. These also began as active communities but in each case, the impetus towards a Benedictine contemplative life came from within themselves. Edgware and Rempstone remain closest to the Burford community in spirit, and both of these have much affinity with the spirit of the English Benedictine Congregation. From the earliest period of their foundation, the nuns at Edgware have cared for the severely handicapped, a work of dedication and compassion which is accomplished within the enclosure with no apparent diminution of their monastic calling. The community of the Holy Cross was formerly at Haywards Heath in Sussex. Here, with easy access from London and the continent, the community became an ecumenical focal point. However the large conventual church and extensive buildings latterly became increasingly burdensome, and the move to Rempstone was a wise and rewarding one. This community combines a fully Benedictine life with pastoral work done within the enclosure = it fulfils what can only be defined as 'the apostolate of just being there', in a part of the Midlands where Anglican religious communities are scarce.

There are also a few Anglican communities whose members, while they would not regard themselves as fully Benedictine, would nevertheless recognise the Benedictine influence in their lives and rule. Of these, the Community of the Holy Paraclete has always been concerned with the traditional Benedictine work of education, and the community still flourishes at Whitby, close to the spot where St Hilda skilfully ruled her double monastery.

To return to Burford itself, by way of conclusion. The third area of new growth since the Vatican Council is perhaps the most significant and happiest of all. In recent times, the ecumenical concern which we have seen to have been rooted in the life of the community since its inception, has suddenly blossomed and led to contacts and friendships which previously would have been seen as impossible. Whilst this was partly due to a basic change in approach which all felt, one must also acknowledge the generous initiatives first taken by Roman Catholic communities; ours has been the easier task of responding to the friendship offered us, not only in this country but from Benedictine and Cistercian houses in France and Belgium also. The first contacts were by way of informal invitations; later

there was participation in specific gatherings such as the 1980 Celebrations in honour of St Benedict. As disciples of St Benedict, we already enjoy a bond which predates the divisions in the Church. It is this achievement which I would like to emphasise at the end of this paper, rather than the various problems which beset us: reduced numbers, an elderly community, and a property which despite its architectural interest, lays heavy burdens on its owners. Still, the prevailing atmosphere is certainly not one of prevailing gloom. One is buoyed up through recalling the recent Benedictine celebrations, not the splendid climax at Westminster, but the earlier gathering during Easter Week at Winchester. To share in the Paschal Vesper chant on that spring afternoon, in a Cathedral which has retained and cherished so much of its monastic heritage, was to be aware of the Benedictine life as it had been at its best when however briefly, the vision and reality were matched. For forty years the community at Burford has tried to restore some small measure of these to a Church which has lost so much either through the deliberate destruction of misguided men in the 16th century or because of the ignorance and carelessness of its members since. We may rejoice in this, and in a translation so long familiar to its people, allow the psalmist to have the last word: *This is the Lord's doing: it is marvellous in our eyes.*

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