

## THE LIFE AND WORK OF ABBOT ANSCAR VONIER

Dom Leo Smith

**F**OR MANY YEARS NOW South Devon has become a centre of tourism attracting large numbers of holiday makers from all over the British Isles, from Europe, especially Holland and Germany, and increasingly from the United States and Canada. Buckfast lies on the edge of the Torbay area and is on the fringe of Dartmoor, so that even without the saga of the rebuilding of the abbey at Buckfast, the district would have been an attraction, a sort of gateway to the English Riviera and a pass to the lair of the Hound of the Baskervilles. Every year now Buckfast abbey receives some half a million visitors and this is due to the interest aroused by the reconstruction in modern times of a medieval monastery by the labours of four monks who were the masons. This achievement was the life-work of one man who inspired the work and by the force of his personality saw its achievement in spite of enormous difficulties. He was Abbot Anscar Vonier, the subject of this paper.

In the south aisle of the abbey church there is a memorial plaque to Abbot Anscar, the work of Benno Elkan<sup>1</sup>. There the Abbot, a figure of no small stature, is depicted as offering his life's work to our Lady to whom the abbey is dedicated. There is an epic quality about the story developed in the scroll of the plaque. The young monk saved from a shipwreck in which his abbot perished; his own election as abbot; the decision to rebuild the abbey church; the first load of stone from the quarry delivered in a borrowed horse and cart; the labour of building with no modern equipment, and the final touch, his acclaim of the finished work with the skeleton of death calling him to his reward.

In the centre is the abbot working at his theological writings. This was a stroke of genius on the part of the artist, since it highlights the driving power behind the Abbot's achievements. He regarded himself as one of the great number of Benedictine monks who were the missionaries of the Christian faith to these islands. Abbot Anscar wanted to bring God to the ordinary people, so in spite of opposition he insisted on the church having a high tower with its four pinnacles pointing upwards, drawing people's eyes from the earth upwards to the heavens. Likewise he intended his writings to be the means of bringing theology to the general reader. He regarded preaching as another channel of this missionary endeavour and at a time when a lengthy sermon was a matter of course, he gave regular 'lectures' on Sunday evenings from the pulpit to his monks and the local folk of the parish. His achievements then can be

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<sup>1</sup> Benno Elkan was a German Jew. Because he was a Jew, he was forced by the Nazis to leave his native land and in the mid 1930s he arrived at Buckfast almost literally in the clothes he had on. As he was a sculptor in bronze, Abbot Anscar asked him to make a bronze candlestick for the entrance to the sanctuary. The subject was to be the four Cardinal Virtues. He then produced a companion with the four major Prophets as the theme. He later went to London where he set up a workshop. Among many of his works is the candlestick standing near the tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey.

fully appreciated only against the background of the history of Buckfast Abbey the rebuilding of which he inspired and which served as the rostrum of his teaching and the pulpit of his preaching.

## 2

The early history of Buckfast is shrouded in the mists which creep down on it from the nearby Dartmoor. St. Petroc is mentioned as one who had a cell here. Other Celtic and Saxon missionaries are also shadowy figures in the gloom. The only genuine historical date is however a charter discovered at Exeter in the early 1950's among some documents belonging to the Petre family who had some share of the spoils at the Dissolution. This document gives 1018 as the foundation date when King Canute granted Earl Aylward of the Western counties the right to make a monastic foundation at Buckfast. Between 960 and 993 there was a spate of monastic foundations from Glastonbury, one of which was Tavistock in 981. King Canute realised the cultural and stabilising influence of monasteries, and as he was a friend of the Abbot of Tavistock, it is possible that Tavistock had some influence in the Buckfast foundation. Possibly it supplied some of the monks for the new foundation in addition to those from Winchester where the *Regularis Concordia* had been drawn up in 970 as the rule for all Benedictine houses.

To ensure the survival of the Saxon foundation the founders endowed it with a number of manors in the district. The Domesday Book shows that the actual manor of Buckfast comprised some 300 acres, about the same size as the property today. However it also possessed some 10,000 acres in manors, some to the north on the other side of Dartmoor and others, the more important ones, to the south-west towards Kingsbridge and the coast.

For some fifty years after Domesday Buckfast was apparently in decline. King Stephen however was sympathetic to monasteries and he founded or revitalised a number of houses including Furness and Quarr. In 1136 Buckfast along with these was placed under the jurisdiction of the abbey of Savigny in southern Normandy. However for Buckfast this was but a step towards a much more fundamental change. In 1147 the Savigny houses were taken over by the Cistercians and Buckfast began a new phase of its history which was to last until the Dissolution in the sixteenth century.

We do not know exactly where the Saxon monastery was situated, but the remains of a sort of undercroft dating back to Saxon times indicate that it was more or less on the present site. The Cistercians however were careful planners and their surveyors at once realised the potentiality of the site. The high ground to the north-west would provide for the drainage into the river Dart which flows due north-south through the property. During the latter half of the twelfth century Buckfast was built according to the usual plan -the church on the north side and the conventual buildings coming south to form a quadrangle.

For our present purposes the story of Buckfast for the period until the Dissolution need not detain us<sup>2</sup>. As far as we can determine it was never a very large community, although its position gave it some importance. Buckfast is exactly halfway between Exeter and Plymouth, 22 miles each way. Exeter was already a cathedral town of some standing and Devonport was growing in importance as a naval base. The guest hall was therefore of considerable value for travellers and a very large building was erected to house the retinue of King Edward I, who stayed at Buckfast from the 8th until the 10th April 1297<sup>3</sup>. Buckfast like most Cistercian monasteries in England was engaged in the wool trade which meant that it had extensive estates and established fairs and markets to encourage local trade<sup>4</sup>.

Mention too must be made of Abbot Kyng, who was abbot for thirty years from 1476. He built a guest hall near the south gate for the increasing number of travellers who called. He also built the Abbot's tower which provided excellent accommodation for the Abbot most important guests. This Abbot's Tower figures in the history of modern Buckfast.

The Dissolution of the monasteries was tied up with the whole religious upheaval under Henry VIII. In 1535 on the death of the last elected abbot of Buckfast, John Rede, Thomas Cromwell appointed a personal friend, Gabriel Donne to the vacant abbacy. It was he who that same year on 25th February signed the document of Dissolution. In addition to Donne's signature there are nine other signatures by monks<sup>5</sup>. Most of the property was bought by the Chief Steward, Sir Thomas Denys, and the manor of Buckfast Abbey remained with his family for the next 250 years. In 1806 the property was purchased by a local mill owner, who levelled to the ground most of the then existing buildings in ruins and with the stones built his neo-Gothic mansion on the spot. He left the ruins of the Abbot's Tower as a sort of memorial to the past.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that the grant of lands to the abbey was confirmed by Henry II and the deed was signed by Thomas Becket, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, murdered in 1187.

<sup>3</sup> The huge guest hall which was built to house the King's retinue collapsed or was pulled down some time after the Dissolution. It became a farm house. We were able to obtain ownership of it only in 1980, and after prolonged discussion with English Heritage and other interested bodies, we ere able to convert the buildings to house the Exhibition and the Bookshop.

<sup>4</sup> In 1461 the Abbot of Buckfast granted the people of Kingsbridge the right to hold a Fayre in the last week of July. It has now become customary for the Abbot of Buckfast to attend the opening ceremony each year and present a copy of the Deed to the Town Mayor who reads it from the Town Hall steps.

<sup>5</sup> The six bells were bought by the people of Buckfastleigh for the parish church of Holy Trinity. Two more bells were later added to make a peal of eight. In 1992 the church was gutted by a deliberately started fire but fortunately the tower with the bells was saved. Almost undamaged they were stored in the abbey church until they could be re-hung. They sounded again at Christmas 1995.

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That summary of the history of the first foundation of Buckfast can set the scene for the second foundation in which Abbot Anscar played the predominant part. We must begin in Central France. A young French priest, Jean-Baptiste Muard, became more and more convinced that the missionary work in the religious desert left by the French Revolution could best be served by a religious community. He was attracted to the Benedictine way of life, and after some preliminary discussions with the Abbot General of the recently reformed Cassinese congregation, he made a formal novitiate at the rigid Trappist monastery at Aiguebelle in the Rhone valley and was professed as a Benedictine monk. This must have been in the days before Canonists! He then had a vision of our Lady, who told him to walk into the forest of Vauban until he came to La Pierre-qui-Vire – ‘Logan Stone’ – and there to found a monastery. Père Muard did as he was told and in 1849 he established La-Pierre-qui-Vire some 70km from Dijon. His intention was to combine into one form of life the traditional Benedictine emphasis on the liturgy; the very rigid Trappist mode of life; and the work of the missionary. If I may say so without meaning to give any offence, only a son of the eldest daughter of the Church could come up with such an extraordinary notion. Be that as it may, a number of young men flocked to this new monastic foundation, so much so that within a few years of the founder’s premature death, a large monastery with an imposing church had replaced the rustic bungalow with which he had started.

Soon however the storm clouds gathered and on 29 March 1880 a law was passed by the French Chamber of Deputies suppressing all religious houses which were not authorised. Six months later the blow fell on La Pierre-qui-Vire and the community was expelled forcibly from its monastery. Some of the monks came to England and were welcomed by the community of Ramsgate. At that time Ramsgate had a property at Leopardstown on the outskirts of Dublin and this was placed at the disposal of the exiles from France. To act as an interpreter, one of the monks of Ramsgate, Father Adam Hamilton, accompanied the French monks to Leopardstown where they arrived on 28th November, 1880, three weeks after leaving France.

As the community was living on the charity of Ramsgate, it was essential that some suitable site should soon be found for a more permanent home. Some two years passed and then one September morning Fr. Adam Hamilton noticed in the *Tablet* a letter signed by a Brother Laurence stating that a property known as Buckfast Abbey was on the market and suggested that perhaps one of the many exiled communities from France might purchase it. Fr. Adam at once hastened to the Superior, Fr. Thomas Duperou<sup>6</sup>, and both of them left immediately for Plymouth to consult Bishop William Vaughan, and also to meet Dr. James Gale, who was the owner of the property. He had bought Buckfast Abbey in 1872 but now wished to sell it and was eager to offer it to a religious community. Fr. Thomas and Fr. Adam inspected the site and

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<sup>6</sup> Fr. Thomas Duperou was the first Superior of Buckfast but was later transferred to the foundation made by La Pierre-qui-Vire in the Indian Territory in the United States. He became the first abbot of the Sacred Heart.

were soon satisfied that it would answer the immediate needs of the community. They agreed to rent the property for a period of seven years with the option of a purchase within two years. The first members of the community arrived at Buckfast on 28th October 1882, and the remainder soon followed. Eight months later they were able to purchase the property for £4,700. Fr. Adam organised a committee to help the monks in the planning for restoring the abbey. The Chairman was Lord Clifford of Ugbrooke Park near Chudleigh, who from the first proved to be a most generous friend and benefactor of the community. He and his successors to the title will always be associated with the restoration of Buckfast as the abbey coat of arms is quartered with those of the Cliffords of Chudleigh.

The committee appointed as architect Frederick Walters to supervise the drawing up of the plans for the rebuilding. It was mentioned previously that the remains of the Abbot's Tower dating from the 15th century had been left in the grounds. These remains were at first thought to be the ruins of the medieval church tower. Frederick Walters accordingly drew up his first plans for the rebuilding with the church on the south side and the monastic buildings going north. The usual Cistercian plan was the opposite- the church on the north side and the conventual buildings going south<sup>7</sup>. However one day Br. Paul Lascaraboura, a Basque from southern France, digging to lay out a vegetable garden came across the foundations of what turned out to be those of the medieval church, and it was at once realised that Buckfast had been built according to the normal Cistercian custom. Mr. Walters immediately scrapped his plans and redesigned a monastic complex in its essentials as it is today. The idea of rebuilding was there in theory: to put it into practice served only as a pleasant but baseless dream. Then came a turn in events which appeared at first to make it even more fantastic.

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From the religious point of view conditions in France had gradually been improving and La Pierre-qui-Vire was beginning to flourish again. A number of the community at Buckfast returned to their mother house, and recruitment from England in those days was not a practical proposition. A future for Buckfast looked bleak indeed but Divine Providence was at work.

At the time of the expulsion of the monks from La Pierre-qui-Vire, there were two young Germans in the French community, Dom Wilfrid Schneider and Dom Boniface Natter. They were natives of Swabia, a very Catholic province of the kingdom of Württemberg. It was the custom there for certain families to send their daughters to the Benedictine convent at Oriocourt in Alsace to learn French in the school run by the nuns. Some of these German girls stayed on and joined the community. As Oriocourt is no great distance from La Pierre-qui-Vire, it was customary for monks from there to visit the nuns for retreats and

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One exception to this plan is at Tintern on the Wye. The proximity of the river compelled the builders to situate the church on the south side with the conventual buildings coming north. At first the ruins of the Abbot's tower at Buckfast misled the architect to believe that they were the ruins of the church tower and that Buckfast had been built like Tintern.

spiritual conferences. They made a great impression on the nuns and one of them wrote to her brother, Wilfrid Schneider, suggesting that as he had always wanted to become a monk, La Pierre-qui-Vire would be the place for him. In the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic campaigns, there were no monasteries in Württemberg and would-be monks had to leave their native land. Wilfrid Schneider therefore left home for La Pierre-qui-Vire and was followed shortly after by his cousin, Boniface Natter. These two came to Buckfast in 1882 with the community from Leopardstown.

With the return of the French monks to la Pierre-qui-Vire, the problem of survival of Buckfast was a pressing one. It was decided that the two Germans should return to Suabia and recruit as many as possible from the parishes in the area. In 1884 an aluminate was established at Buckfast, a sort of monastic school where the young boys from Germany who showed signs of a monastic vocation were educated. Hence it was that right up to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 there was a constant stream of those German boys coming to Buckfast. They either joined the community at the proper age or became secular priests or returned to their families. Hence you have this rather curious anomaly of a community in England, belonging to an Italian congregation, a dependent house of a French monastery staffed by Germans! A presage of a United States of Europe?

The life at Buckfast was that of La Pierre-qui-Vire which was basically the rigid Trappist regime learned by Pere Muard at Aiguebelle. It may seem incredible but the young boys of the aluminate had to follow the full horarium of the monks with the exception of the night office, and they even attended that on the major feasts. The result was that only those of robust health joined the community as monks.

In spite of the French appearance of his name, Anscar Vonier was pure German. His family migrated to Germany from the Tirol, at that time part of the Austrian Empire. The future abbot was one of fourteen children. He was born in the small village of Ringschnaitt not far from the ancient town of Biberach, to which the Vonier family moved only a few years after his birth. The actual date of his birth was the 11th November 1875. As that day was the feast of St. Martin, he was given the name Martin. In 1887, when Martin Vonier was thirteen years old, Fr. Boniface Natter did one of his periodic recruitment trips to Swabia. He went to Biberach and as a result of talks with the parish priest and some of the families, Martin Vonier and five other boys expressed their willingness to accompany Fr. Boniface to Buckfast. It was arranged that the boys should first go to the College's at Beauvais, run by the Holy Ghost Fathers, to learn French, which was and remained for a number of years the language of the Buckfast community. It was at Beauvais that Martin Vonier acquired the beginnings of his love for all things French, which lasted until the end of his life.

## 5

We do not know the exact date of the first foundation at Buckfast, but we do know the date when the second founder of the abbey reached the scene of his future activity.. It was the 22 August 1889. He spent four years in the aluminate and then became a novice and was given the name by which he is so well known, Anscar, the apostle of the Scandinavian countries. A year later on 2 July 1894 he pronounced his perpetual vows<sup>8</sup>. He then followed the usual course of philosophical and theological studies, but his outstanding gifts were already being recognised and while only a junior, he was appointed Assistant to the novice Master. It was the custom then for the novitiate to start the day with a short period of reading from the Scriptures. This provided him with the opportunity of becoming familiar with the Bible and especially the letters of St. Paul. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that he knew St. Paul practically by heart. On the 17 December 1898 he was raised to the priesthood. The Buckfast community was far from wealthy but it found the means to develop Fr. Anscar's already recognised intellectual endowments and sent him to Sant' Anselmo in the autumn of 1900 to read philosophy. The prescriptions for academic degrees were less stringent than they have since become but it was a remarkable achievement that Fr. Anscar was able in one year to obtain a doctorate in philosophy with a thesis on 'The Infinite'. In 1903 the community at Buckfast was sufficiently well established to become an independent house and at the election Fr. Boniface Natter was elected the first abbot of the restored Buckfast. Two years later Abbot Boniface yielded to the persistent requests of the Abbot Primate that Fr. Anscar should go to Rome to teach in the philosophy faculty at Sant' Anselmo. There can be no doubt that his time at Sant' Anselmo was one of the important phases of his life both as a student and as a professor. It must be remembered that he had spent his formative years within the confines of a very rigid interpretation of the Benedictine way of life. One of his contemporaries has left it on record that in his youthful monastic fervour Fr Anscar maintained that if St. Benedict were to return to earth today, he would point to a Trappist house and say: 'That is my monastery'. At Sant' Anselmo he met young monks from all over the world following an interpretation of the Rule quite different from that at Buckfast. He was big enough man to realise that the Buckfast regime, inherited from La Pierre-qui-Vire was but one way of living the Benedictine way of life and not necessarily the best. This understanding of the breadth of monasticism showed itself later when he was Abbot.

In 1906 Abbot Boniface was elected Visitor of the French province of the Subiaco Congregation. The French Province had a number of houses outside Europe, one of which was in the Argentine. Abbot Boniface decided to make the canonical Visitation of this house in the summer of 1906. He had been instrumental in bringing Fr. Anscar to Buckfast and he had always held him in the highest esteem. He felt therefore that Fr. Anscar would be the best man to act as the Assistant Visitor. At the same time the trip would give the professor a welcome

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At that time all vows were taken for life at the first Profession. Only the choir monks: made solemn vows after three years. This was changed by the Canon Law of 1918.

holiday. They met at Barcelona on 3 August 1906 and embarked on the Italian liner the *Sirio*, which was taking some hundreds of emigrants to the Argentine..

The details of the disaster which occurred on the following day, Saturday, 4th August need not detain us except for those which affected Fr. Anscar. On a perfectly calm afternoon and with a calm sea, the *Sirio* at full speed and within sight of the coast struck a submerged reef. The cause of the disaster was undoubtedly an error of judgement on the part of the captain. When the ship struck, Abbot Boniface and Fr. Anscar were talking with two bishops, also passengers for the Argentine. Fr. Anscar was sent up the bows to care for the passengers there while Abbot Boniface remained in the stem. After a short while the stem broke away and sank almost immediately. The bows where Fr. Anscar had gone were wedged firmly on the reef. A number of Spanish fishing vessels had been alerted by the crash and they were able to rescue those in the bows, among them Fr. Anscar. Nearly all those who had been in the stem perished, among them Abbot Boniface. One of the bishops said later that he had seen the Abbot swimming strongly but he never made land or one of the boats picking up survivors. Fr. Anscar went first to Dourness in the south of France, where there is a community of Benedictine monks and also one of nuns. When after a few days it was clear that Abbot Boniface had been drowned, Fr. Anscar returned to Buckfast.

As a sequel to this tragedy two small points had a bearing on Fr. Anscar's future. One was that he always maintained a sort of dread of death. He was never at ease as a priest at a deathbed whether of his monks or friends. The other point is that his short stay at Dourgne saw the beginning of a friendship with the Abbess of Dourgne. He was naturally a reticent man and rarely let his feelings be known, but with the Abbess he found someone with whom he could correspond with complete ease and freedom. It is fortunate that she kept a number of his letters to her as they give us glimpses of his thoughts and feelings during the early years of his abbacy. They are all written in French and demonstrate his complete mastery of a language which perhaps has no equal for expressing delicacy of thought and feeling.

At the election held on 14th September the community elected Fr. Anscar as their Abbot. The Blessing took place on the feast of St. Luke, 18th October. Fr. Adam Hamilton, whom we have met before, found a number of reasons for choosing this date, all based on St. Luke's account of the shipwreck with St. Paul. But, as Abbot Anscar pointed out in a letter to the Abbess of Dourgne, 'There is only one detail that does not square with my situation – St. Luke reached the shore with his St. Paul, but I...'; the sentence is left unfinished. The Abbatial Blessing passed with little attention being paid by anyone outside the Community and some close friends. But it may be regarded as the conclusion of the first part of Abbot Anscar's life, a period of preparation for the task God in his providence had destined him to accomplish.

## 6

Within a month of his Blessing the Abbot announced publicly that he intended to start work immediately on rebuilding the abbey church on its original 12th century foundations. In itself this was no surprise for the community, as it had been mooted for some time. Money left by the Dowager Lady Clifford had been used to repair the old foundations and bring them level with the ground. What was startling was the announcement that the monks themselves were to be the builders. There were no funds available to employ a contractor so the task would have to be done on the lines of DIY. Br Peter, who was a master craftsman, having learned his trade in one of our monasteries in France, was put in charge of the operation. Brother Hilarion, Brother Ignatius and Father Richard were appointed to the building work under Br Peter. Every able-bodied member of the community would be called on at times to assist in such tasks as concrete mixing. A young abbot - he was 31 - had the power to inspire a young community and they set to work with a will. On the 5th January 1907 at a brief ceremony after the Community Mass, the first stone was laid above ground. This was a quiet occasion but Abbot Anscar realised the value of attracting public attention to what was going on at Buckfast and made plans for a more festive occasion for the laying of the foundation stone. He chose the 2nd July, the feast of the Visitation of our Lady, for the ceremony to be performed by the Bishop of Plymouth and invited Fr, Bernard Vaughan, a noted Jesuit from Farm Street, to preach the sermon. Some 2,000 people attended. This was a surprising number considering that the motor car was still a novelty, buses were unknown and the only means of access was by the railway from Totnes to Buckfastleigh, a mile and a half away.

The laying of the foundation stone was followed by several years of steady toil during which time the walls took shape. It had been decided to build first the chancel with the ambulatory at the back containing six chapels, and two bays of the nave. The central tower was to be built to a height sufficient to house the peal of fourteen bells donated by Sir Robert Harvey of Dunderidge, near Totnes, in 1910. However world events were soon to cast a shadow on those halcyon early days of the rebuilding of the abbey church.

## 7

On the declaration of war on the Central Powers on 4 August 1914, there were in the Buckfast community three Frenchmen, the Abbot and one other naturalised British subjects, but all the rest were of German nationality. This was a serious situation in itself but matters were made worse by the absence of the Abbot. On medical advice he had gone to Austria in July as his health was not good. On the 4th August he was arrested and taken to Salzburg, where a military court considered his case. He was told that as a British subject he could not leave Austria and would have to remain for the duration of the war in a hotel in Salzburg. He could choose which hotel he wanted. He chose for his 'hotel' the Abbey of St. Peter in Salzburg. He used to say that the affair was conducted with that old-world courtesy which is such a pleasant trait of the

Austrian character. However steps were at once taken to secure his release and with the intervention of the Abbot Primate and the Austrian ambassador to the Vatican, Abbot Anscar was granted a safe conduct through neutral Switzerland. He arrived back at Buckfast on the 18th October.

On his return he had to deal with a danger which did not cease to threaten the community until the end of the war. In October 1914 a demand was made that all those of enemy nationality should be sent to concentration camps. As far as the monks of Buckfast were concerned the execution of the order was entrusted to a Sir Basil Thomson, who had been for some time governor of Dartmoor prison. During his term of office he had come to know the Abbot and some of the monks who had at times supplied for the resident chaplain. On learning of the order of internment, the Abbot went at once to see Sir Basil who promptly saw to it that the monks were not disturbed. However the torpedoing of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 sharpened the anti-German feeling in the country and this was especially true of some members of some of the local district councils. But the community had some influential friends and finally it was enacted that the monks should be interned in the abbey precincts for the duration of the war. This restriction was to last until September 1919. Although the worst that was feared did not happen, the strain on the Abbot can well be imagined. He said in later life that during those war years he dreaded the sound of the front-door bell.

In spite of the shortage of building materials during the five years of war, the work on the church went on steadily. By the time of the Peace Treaty, plans were already in preparation for the official opening of the church for public worship. The date was finally fixed for 2 August 1922. As the months passed it became clear that it was going to be a close thing for all to be ready on time. How close in fact it was may be gauged by the surely apocryphal story that as the Bishop came in one door for the service, one of the builders wheeled a barrow of rubble out of another door!

The Blessing of the new church was followed in the evening by the solemn procession of the statue of our Lady of Buckfast from the temporary church to its permanent place in the Lady Chapel<sup>9</sup>. The first Mass was sung in the new church, the Celebrant being the Bishop of Plymouth and the preacher Cardinal Bourne, on 3 August. The occasion of the opening of the new church was a milestone in Abbot Anscar's life. In spite of all the difficulties he and his community had achieved the impossible, humanly speaking. Moreover, it was an occasion which attracted the attention of the whole country as the media – national as well as local – devoted considerable space in their columns as to what had been happening at Buckfast. It put Buckfast on the map and from that time the annual number of visitors has risen. It was due to their contributions that the next stage of the rebuilding could commence.

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The statue of our Lady in the Lady Chapel has an interesting history. Between ourselves and the woollen mill next door, there is a dividing wall. At the turn of the century repairs were being done on this wall when the workmen came across a large coloured stone. They presumed it belonged to us and brought it in. From the emblems on the robe it turned out to be the bottom half of a statue of our Lady. The top half has never been discovered, but the artist built up on the pedestal the top half modelling it on a statue of our Lady in Oxford.

The inauguration of the church demonstrated too Abbot Anscar's ability to make friends. Although by nature a shy and reserved person, he exuded a charm which made many people he met do anything for him. Although it is invidious to mention individuals in this context, exception must be made in favour of Henry and Josephine Schiller. Members of a German wine producing family they spent their fortune on Buckfast in accordance with a vow Josephine Schiller had made. She suffered from asthma and had made a vow that if she were ever cured, she would spend her money on a shrine. After a visit to the annual pilgrimage at Aachen she did not suffer from asthma again, and while on a holiday in Devon she visited Buckfast and it became the shrine of her vow.

## 8

After the opening of the abbey church it was decided to rebuild the west front and work backwards to join up with the bays of the nave which had been completed. The work began on 2 July 1923. The whole of the west front, the two chapels attached and the gallery were the gift of the Schillers. They later gave the baptismal font, the high altar and many other examples of fine craftsmanship<sup>10</sup>.

On the 18 October 1931 Abbot Anscar completed twenty-five years as abbot. It was an opportunity for many of his friends and admirers to express their admiration for him as a person and for what he had achieved. He regarded these jubilee celebrations as a sort of full dress rehearsal for the consecration of the abbey church. The building had progressed so well that the date of the consecration was fixed, 25 August 1932.

News of the rebuilding had reached Rome and it was with something of a thrill that the community learned in March 1932 that Pope Pius XI had appointed Cardinal Bourne of Westminster as his delegate *a latere* for the occasion. This was a mark of honour for the community; but there was also a personal touch for the abbot. The Pope granted him the personal privilege of the use of the *cappa magna*. The brief of the 8 August mentions the Abbot's building activities and refers too to his writings which promote the Catholic Faith.

The Consecration of the Abbey Church on 25 August attracted the attention of all branches of the media of that time, all of which presented the event in glowing terms of appreciation. For Abbot Anscar it was undoubtedly the greatest day of his life. Perhaps it can be summed up in the words of the Papal Delegate, Cardinal Boume in his sermon preached at the Dedication Mass:

You enter today, my dear Father Abbot, into possession of your church consecrated for ever to the service of him to whom you and your community have dedicated by solemn vow the homage of your

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<sup>10</sup> The high altar reredos is a replica of the famous Golden Altar of Coblenz Cathedral stolen by Napoleon who placed it in the Cluny Museum in Paris. Abbot Anscar was with the Schillers in that museum in 1928 and he made a chance remark that an altar like that would fit in well with the new abbey church at Buckfast. Josephine Schiller at once took the abbot at his word and unbeknown to him commissioned a goldsmith in Aachen to make the altar. It was intended to be in place for the Consecration of the church in 1932 but difficulties with our Customs delayed its arrival by some eighteen months.

whole life A great charge is entrusted to you to make of your Abbey, as the Holy Father reminds you, a home of religion, of piety and of learning, shining forth amidst all the uncertainties and perplexities that affect men minds today, to set up and maintain in our midst a haven of rest, wherein by constant, unceasing prayer and holiness of life the minds and hearts of our fellow countrymen may be drawn to understand better, to examine more closely, to approach without prejudice, to seek in earnest prayer and ultimately by God's grace, to accept and practise that Catholic Faith whence came forth the Buckfast Abbey upon the ruins of which that same Faith, and the courage which that Faith inspires, have built this glorious Abbey of today.

Should the abbey church have been left as it was when consecrated? Some thought so. But the Abbot had a different view. He wanted a massive tower with its four turrets pointing upwards to lift the eyes from earth to heaven. Eighteen months after the Consecration, the work of building the tower began. It was designed on a large scale with sufficient room to house the re-cast 14 bells with the addition of a 7½ ton Bourdon bell. During these years Abbot Anscar's mind was dealing with another problem. He realised that the rebuilding would soon be completed. He had an increasing number of young men from the British Isles for whom some occupation would be needed. His first thoughts were to follow the English Benedictine example and start a school. But he abandoned that idea, yet still maintaining the educational line, he pondered the doing of another Buckfast in the neighbourhood of our older universities of Oxford or Cambridge. He actually made visits to some of the medieval monastic sites to assess the possibility of rebuilding one of them and thus in some way renewing the traditional presence of the monastic orders in the universities.

The last year of Abbot Anscar's life was very full one and a very worrying one. The threat of war hung over everything. Memories of the difficult years of 1914-1918 haunted the Abbot and he breathed a sigh of relief when the Munich agreement put off the evil day. Although there were some indications that his health was beginning to fail, he was able to travel to London for some sittings for his portrait being painted by Simon Elwes. In October he gave an important address to a large gathering of Catholic Evidence Guild speakers. On the feast of Christ the King he accepted the invitation of his friend Archbishop Downey to preach at the annual Liverpool Cathedral Rally. Then he left for Paris to give the retreat to the monks at the rue de la Source. From there he journeyed to Ligugé near Poitiers for the community retreat there. On the 28 November he gave a lecture to a large audience at the Angelicum in Rome on St. Augustine's apostolate to England. That was his last public address. Even for man in good health it was an exhausting programme.

In December he returned to Buckfast. The pointing of the tower had just been completed and all the scaffolding removed so that on entering the main gate he was able to see the dream of his youth come true. It was obvious however that he was exhausted and on medical advice he remained in his rooms leaving them only just before Christmas to receive the solemn profession of one of the juniors. The community missed his presence at the Christmas liturgy, but there seemed to be no cause for alarm about him. The doctor was confident that all that was needed was rest and quiet. It was therefore with deep shock that the community learned that on the feast of St. Stephen, after receiving Holy Communion, he was found dead in his bed by the

Infirmarian about 8 o'clock in the morning. He had kept his 63rd birthday one month previously.

## 9

At the beginning of this paper I referred to Benno Elkan's plaque in the south aisle of the abbey church and to the prominent position given by that artist to Abbot Anscar as a writer. To my mind this brings out clearly the unifying principle in the Abbot's life. As a native of Suabia, which is all but 100% Catholic, he could appreciate the appalling damage done to the Church by the Protestant reformers. He would therefore rebuild a medieval monastery, which although of the twentieth century, could yet mirror that diversity of function so characteristic of pre-Reformation monasticism. Likewise he would bring back to the ordinary people the riches of Christian doctrine which after 1,000 years of Catholicism had once formed the connatural thought pattern of the ordinary person.

It is impossible to assign the Abbot to any particular school of theology. He was not an academic theologian whose work is decorated with all the paraphernalia of footnotes, cross references, bibliography and the like. He wrote for the moment; his works were mainly dictated, taken down in shorthand, typed by a friend and as such sent to the printers. He never revised his work. This perhaps explains in some way the clipped almost disjointed style of his writing. But perhaps too it was the vehicle best suited for his idea of theology. He shot out a succession of ideas but rarely followed them up with deeper discussion.

The two main sources of his theology were the letters of St. Paul and the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. His profound knowledge of St. Paul's theology had its roots in the daily short reading period of his early formation as a novice and a junior. His time at Sant' Anselmo brought him into contact with St. Thomas. He had encountered a kindred spirit. Abbot Anscar's mind was essentially philosophical. He strove for truth by a relentless process of rigid reasoning. And in St. Thomas found the same unwavering pursuit of truth. There was one great difference however. St. Thomas had at his disposal the ideal vehicle to convey that thought, the crisp Latin of the medieval schools. Abbot Anscar was using a language which was not his mother tongue and one which, because it is a living language, does not lend itself easily to convey the unchanging aspects of truth.

His first major work was *The Human Soul*. It was written before and revised immediately after the First World War when people were thinking about the appalling loss of life of those four dreadful years and were concerned with the meaning of an after-life. It is a prime example of the Abbot's early writing. He is giving his reader unadulterated scholasticism, presenting St. Thomas's teaching in at times almost a transliteration of the text. When the reader is confronted with *anima humana est causa formalis corporis non efficiens*, and the author transliterates that into English oblivious that the sentence presupposes a knowledge of the scholastic doctrine of causality, the reader may well be excused if he puts the book aside in despair. This is a pity, for the whole Catholic doctrine of the human soul, the angels and the future life (restated in two smaller later works *The Angels* and *Death and Judgement*) comes out clearly. From what I have said about the Abbot's whole attitude to theology, it will be clear that he was no controversialist. In the early 1920s however he did enter the lists albeit from

the periphery. Some theologians on the Continent had been discussing how the Mass was a sacrifice and began to look in the Mass itself for some sort of natural suffering and mactation of a victim. The debate prompted the Abbot to produce a work which many regard as his most lasting memorial. In *A Key to the Doctrine of the Eucharist*, published in 1925, he brought us back to the pronouncements of the Council of Trent and through those to St. Thomas. These two authorities pointed out that the Mass was a sacrament, and as such a sign. Christ's sacrifice on the Cross was a natural sacrifice, and the Mass is a sacrament-sacrifice. The two are on different planes, though they are connected by parallel vertical lines. A sacrament re-presents what it signifies. If Christ's real death on Calvary was a sacrifice, then so is the Mass. On the Cross Christ shed his blood as a victim. In the Mass we re-present that moment on Good Friday when Christ was dead in the significant rite of the double consecration of the bread and the wine. The Eucharist is concerned primarily with Christ's Body and Blood. It is not a matter of his personality whether before or after the Incarnation. That this was and is the constant teaching of the Catholic Church is obvious, but it needed someone to tell us. At least until recently this work was the text book in French seminaries.

Mention has already been made of the Abbot's extraordinary familiarity with the writings of St. Paul. It was to be expected then that his theology should be essentially Christological. In fulfilment of a vow he had made that he would write a book about our Lady, if her community at Buckfast came safely through the First World War, he produced *The Divine Motherhood*. Mary's Assumption and Coronation show clearly that in God's eternal plan she is truly the *porta caeli*, the gate of heaven to all God's Chosen People.

That Mary was in truth the Mother of God is the source of his meditation on Christ, her Son. In *The Personality of Christ* he emphasised that Jesus is truly God, and the book is a metaphysical investigation as to what that really means. It is an early work and at the time it was written a number of studies on the life of Christ were in circulation giving the impression that the humanity of Christ was the all-important thing, that he was one of us. The Abbot took another view: it was the fact that Christ was God that gave the meaning to his whole person and career as man. This had led to his being accused of a kind of Nestorianism, but a careful reading of his book shows that to be unfounded.

A series of lectures he gave to the community was printed in two works, *The Victory of Christ* and *Christ the King of Glory*. They were a commentary on the Third Part of St. Thomas's *Summa*, a sort of synthesis of the full significance of Easter. Frequent quotations from the original Latin, sometimes left without translation, presuppose background which is not common today.

The insistence of St. Paul that the theology of Christ was no mere academic exercise but the motive power for a genuine Christian life found echo in the Abbot's later works. He gave a retreat at the Cenacle where his talks were taken down by one of the retreatants and later published under the title *The Art of Christ*. As with most retreat conferences they are very much of the moment but they contain some telling remarks about the practicality of a genuine Christian life. Of more enduring value are the series he wrote for the *Buckfast Abbey Chronicle*, which were later published as *Christianus*. That Christ is the model of our

Christian life is a truism, but here in these chapters the Abbot deals with what this really means in the daily life of the true follower of Christ. They show too how the Abbot's thought was moving away from echoing St. Paul and St. Thomas and giving us his own mature thought on the doctrine of what he always referred to as 'our Masters'.

This maturity of thought comes out very clearly in the last books he wrote in the 1930s. The extent of the appalling persecution of the Church in the Soviet Union and Mexico was gradually becoming known to Western Europe. This was followed by the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi movement in Germany with its pagan philosophy and hatred of all things Christian. A number of theologians at this time, looking back to Old Testament times were suggesting that all this was due to the sinfulness of Christians and went so far as to talk about the sinfulness of the Church. Abbot Anscar with all his usual robust optimism and relying upon his grasp of St. Paul's theology of the Church, opposed this rather pessimistic view. He set out his ideas in the last three books he wrote. The general theme of these is that since the Church is the Bride of Christ, her sanctity shares in the infinite holiness of her Lord. All the sins of the Christian people simply pale into insignificance in face of this infinite sanctity. The People of God could have different ideas about politics and all human affairs provided that always they were pursuing their goal – the spread of Christ's redemptive message. His promise remained that he would be with them until the end of the world in spite of all their failures. These ideas were sketched out in his book *The New and Eternal Covenant*, and deepened in *The Spirit and the Bride*, and his last work *The People of God*.

Thus prophet-like he was warning Catholics that they should not be won over by the false promises of dictators of whatever kind whose only aim was to produce an earthly paradise in which the individual's only goal was an empire of power and wealth. It is interesting to note that many of the ideas put forward in these books were taken over by the documents of Vatican II the Church (in which one of the chapters is headed 'The People of God') and on the Church in the Modern World. No mention however is made of the Abbot in these documents.

For a paper of this kind this summary of Abbot Anscar's theological writings is bound to be cursory and thereby inadequate. His writings do not make easy reading, as I have indicated. Ideas are literally shot out, incompletely developed, and then another idea follows. Perhaps he is a good source for *lectio divina*, that unhurried meditative reading, whose aim is not to finish a book but to lead the spirit upwards in contemplation. Abbot Anscar was first and foremost a son of St. Benedict. It is perhaps not without significance that his last major work was the lecture he gave in Rome at the Angelicum at the invitation of Mgr. Constantini, the then Secretary of Propaganda, who had arranged a Missionary Conference in Rome. The Abbot took as his subject St. Augustine of Canterbury as the type of a Benedictine missionary. The lecture was delivered on 28th November 1938. He died a month later on 26th December. The force and apostolic appeal was outstanding and no more fitting close to his public work outside his monastery could be imagined. As I pointed out at the beginning Abbot Anscar always regarded himself as a *pontifex*, a bridge builder between the pre-Reformation past, where the monasteries were the centres of Christian civilisation, culture and learning, and the present day. He was therefore one who spread the gospel of Christ by restoring a medieval abbey, by

preaching and by bringing back people to the glorious noontide of Catholic theology. Perhaps I may conclude with a quotation from the *Tablet*, of 31 December, 1938, a few days after he died:

Abbot Vonier was a man of the most commanding presence, a man of abounding energy and high spirits. At the time of his death he was planning to found a Priory from Buckfast and was looking for some old house, preferably one that had been a religious house, so that the story of Buckfast might be repeated in some other county. This eager hope exemplified very well that dominant characteristic of spiritual vitality grounded in a deep historical sense which marked all that he did and wrote.