

SAINT BENET'S HALL

1897 - 1997

Fr Anselm Cramer, Ampleforth

THE ACTUAL HISTORY OF ST BENET'S HALL as a going concern is somewhat ferial. There are in the file registers of those who have passed through its two portals (originally two houses, 39 and 38) and a logbook. The latter for the most part is a series of dinner engagements, and the former supply interesting matter to those anxious to assemble statistics about degrees, courses and distribution between the various EBC houses, foreign and lay students.

N U M B E R S

In the first 63 years to 1959 there were 198 matriculated members of the University and 21 non-members, an average of 3.14 yearly. In the next 27 years (1960-86) there were 244 and 70, an average of 9.03: finally in the last ten years these figures have been 78 matriculations (average 7.8) and an ill-defined number of non-members. This makes 611 in all, of which 520 were members of the University, an average of 5.2 matriculations a year. Of these, 115 (or so) were Laurentian monks, out of a possible total of Laurentian stable professions of 198 for the hundred years 1897-1996.

L A Y M E N

The first lay member who was not simply a discontinued monk was a temporary expedient just after the war. A small trickle began about 1959, but were limited to five in number for quite some time, and lived out. But economic pressure, and Fr James Forbes' hospitable nature, filled the rooms left by falling vocations from the middle sixties, until the present balanced membership became the norm in Fr Philip Holdsworth's time.

V O C A T I O N S

In his memoirs, written about 1951, Fr Anselm Parker considered the criticism, made when he first went to 'our Oxford House', that it would ruin vocations:

What of prospective vocations? Many others, who had intended to become monks, gave up as novices, boys who did not go up to the University: about my set, Potter, Daniels, also Yorke (of my class); then Gately, Gosling and two brother Pikes - of five, Byrne, the Oxford man, alone survived. Natural intentions did not mature, either because of sheltered environment or personal lack of vocation. Byrne and Parker came out unscorched from the lion's den... Now in more than half a century there have been four defections of Laurentian monks. It may be observed in this connection that the Ampleforth community consists now of 135 monks, and in fifty years quite that number also have died. In a matter of such grave responsibility about future effect it is necessary to make this sad mention and give statistics. Of these four, two never went to Oxford at all, and of the two who did, their defection took

place years afterwards when one can trace no evil effects of the University, and their friends can relate quite a satisfactory explanation of so unsatisfactory an affair.¹

On the positive side, the community of St Laurence has gained new members through St Benet's, Fr Felix Hardy (clothed 1914) being the first, unless it be the case with Gregory Swann (1911): there is one in the Novitiate now². The school used to be the main source – it was started for this purpose explicitly: the lay students were left at Parbold in 1802 – but the Universities (not just the University) now yield more of this kind of fruit³.

ACADEMIC

Appropriately Fr Justin McCann was the first Ampleforth First, Fr Bede Jarrett OP the first absolutely. There have not been very many more: one can mention Dominic Milroy and Alberic Stacpole, and David Morland so as to be able to include Henry Wansbrough. It is fair to say (at least it was when I was at SBH) that monks' degrees were always one below what they would have got elsewhere, because as monks you can never really be fully committed to any other activity: very proper, but it needs some realism. Most monastic degrees were seconds and thirds (in those days there were fourths: one at least succeeded in achieving that distinction). It is also worth remembering that monks were originally sent to acquire degrees for work in schools: only later did the idea of second degrees, or theology studies, or research come in. The *Diary* records that the first Juniors to reside for theology came in October 1929: Dominic Allen at least took a second in 1931³.

PAST MASTERS

There have been eight⁴. Their lives and influence are reviewed in *The Benedictines in Oxford*, and need not be repeated here.

SPORT

Left to themselves, young men run about a good deal, and some retain the habit for some years. In the very early days real money was spent on the hire (by the term) of a tennis-court⁷, but in the McCann tradition sport was somewhat restrained by the view that study was all. This could cause difficulties. Br Martin Haigh played for the University as full back (1944), so long as the matches were at home, which in the war years they were: and before him Francis Vidal (1942). Basil Hume only played for the Greyhounds (2nd XV) There was

2 MS at Ampleforth v4 p12 (EX33-1)

SBH was more or less the point of contact for: Osmund Jackson 1952, Bernard Green 1975, Laurence McTaggart 1991, Chad Boulton 1992, Columba Todd 1997. Until 1970 the great majority of vocations were from the school at Ampleforth, and the remainder from the Missions. St Benet's also brought Walter Shewring to Ampleforth: he was received by McCann on 19 June 1926. (*Diary*)

³ The others were Chad Bourke, David Ogilvie-Forbes and George Forbes, at Blackfriars

⁴ DD Oswald Hunter-Blair 1898, Anselm Parker 1908, Justin McCann 1920, Gerard Sitwell 1947, James Forbes 1964, Philip Holdsworth 1979, Fabian Cowper 1989, Henry Wansbrough 1990. All except Hunter-Blair (Magdalen) are former members.

a row the next year when the Master applied his own standard rule — no expeditions — to Vidal when he was selected for the match at Cambridge. The local press (not having much else to talk about once the war was over) got quite indignant about it. However when the New Zealand side (then called the *Kiwis*, not the *All Blacks*) arrived for a match, they had no full back or touch judge. So Basil was impressed as touch judge, and Martin played at full back for New Zealand⁵. Felix Stephens played quite a lot of cricket in the sixties, but was tethered in a similar way. Robert Coverdale took quite a different view in the thirties: if you were fit, exercise was unnecessary; if you were not, it was dangerous.

THE WAR

Curiously, we have no record of the First War experience in the Oxford house, but sufficient for the Second. At this time, meals at St Benet's were uninviting and scanty. One of the juniors' duties was to spend an evening a week with 'Herself', the redoubtable Miss O'Halloran. The Chapel was always cold. In 1947 all study was done in the Guestroom (one small gas fire, but not much gas), office was in the Calefactory (one small coal fire, but not much coal⁶ people skated on the canal. D-Day, and the whole sky filled with aircraft flying south; bonfires on the rubber surface of the Cornmarket.

The Master referred to himself as an Edwardian. They took it in turns to take him for walks: he was particularly interested in open drains. He also liked singing, by other people: Br Martin Haigh was usually a success. He was faithful in giving Sunday conferences, but it was not his particular gift. On 10 May 1940 he wrote in the Logbook, 'Germans invade Belgium and Holland. The war seems really to have begun', and quoted Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse*,

I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the seas rise higher.

These events compelled McCann to purchase a new wireless. In August the Juniors had their holiday in St Benet's: three years later General Chapter had theirs, the first in Oxford, McCann noted, since 1319.

ORIGINS

Let us now consider our roots. Let us look to the origin and establishment of SAINT BENET'S HALL, which falls naturally into two parts, the reason it was done, and the manner of its doing — the causes, and the course, of its making. The education at places like Douay was good, and all the Colleges re-established in England had high ideals. It shows in their libraries, and it shows in what we know of their studies, and the principles of their discipline: but let us remember that we are speaking of their aim, not necessarily of their achievement. Things were still so at the end of the century.

Baines is an illustration. He was at school at Lamspringe, and was a prime mover in the rapid rise of Ampleforth before Waterloo (It was called College as early as 1814): he was

⁵ He recalls that it should have been a New Zealander called Scott

⁶ In 1947 the temperature during the distribution of Ashes in the Calefactory was -2°C

in effect headmaster. Being bright, and with a well-hung tongue, he rose, to the mission of Bath, to Coadjutor, to the Western District. And perceiving the need for a seminary and for a College, he set about setting one up. Never mind that the cautious Somerset minds of St Gregory's would not play: the bishop's silver tongue wrapped itself round the pliable hearts of the bright young men in Yorkshire, and suborned many of them to Prior Park. We need not concern ourselves with its particular history, but only take note that this was a good idea spoilt by insufficient attention to time and circumstance, and by the unscrupulous head-hunting methods employed to staff it. It is significant that the idea in some sense came out of Ampleforth: probably the experience so scared the survivors that, as a burnt child fears the fire, they drew back from anything intellectual for a long time. But not entirely; in the forties Anselm Cockshoot sent Shepherd and Bury to Parma, and was a keen supporter (if not initiator) of the Belmont project. And Hedley and Burge grew up in this atmosphere, so that when the time became ripe they could make the critical moves. It is curious, considering how little Ampleforth actually contributed to education for most of the nineteenth century, that Ampleforth bishops should have pushed higher education at both ends of it.

The second phase was something of a reaction: it swung the other way, for in the middle of the century Catholic leaders sensed that Oxford, once the essential seed-bed of Anglican Christianity, in perhaps a sort of enlightened Laudianism, which had given birth to the whole idea of the Oxford movement, which had made and formed the characters of Newman, Pusey, Keble, and a host of others, many of them later Catholics, and indeed including Manning himself, this Oxford had become rather a dried out shell of its former richness, in which the heirs of the enlightenment, the proselytes of scientific enquiry and confidence, the disciples at once of Wilberforce and Darwin, believed that they need not believe, that good could be done, the poor improved, savages enlightened, the sick brought to health and human happiness (and, we might add, wealth), in short, the whole world brought to salvation by British engineers, contractors and administrators, without the need to fall to one's knees or to hear the Word of God: and in any case, who had written that?

There was a reason for what the Bishops thought: we do not know that they may not have been right in their time, that the Catholic plant was yet too delicate to be exposed to these cold northern winds, that irreparable damage might have been done. It was not unlikely that young Catholic men (there was as yet little consideration of women in this matter) were simply not sufficiently educated in the Catholic schools, as yet very few, to be more than fathers of families or good religious. This judgement needs much examination, and qualification: it is possibly unfair to Stonyhurst, perhaps to the successors of the old English College, but certainly at this time the students at Ampleforth were unequal to the University world. Stonyhurst declined in the first part of the century: between Waterloo and Victoria (if we may so put it): its numbers halved, because there were alternatives and because the Jesuits were strict. Yet half a century later, when they had a kind of tertiary education going, Chichester could write in his 1882 account of schools about

.the class of parlour boarders, miscalled Philosophers, allowed to keep horses, to ride about the country, to fish and to shoot, just as if they were Oxford undergraduates, although some of these young men are twenty-two years of age, and many of them are foreigners, who come merely to pick up the language.

Manning and his friends may have been right: but the dangers they feared may have been the wrong ones. At any rate, at their persuasion, a willing and anxious Rome issued a decree in 1867 to forbid Catholics to attend the Universities. This meant the *Universities*: it did not mean London, newly established in 1825, and used as support by Catholic colleges, led by Downside in 1838. They were first, but not the most successful: by 1842, the number included also Ushaw, Stonyhurst, Ware, Prior Park and Oscott.

If the bishops were anxious, and Rome severe, on the subject of the old Universities, they were keen from time to time to start a Catholic university or College, and this idea persisted in an uneven way until the twenties of this century, when it was overtaken by the rapid growth and expansion of the Catholic schools, and the general exodus of the Catholic body from its fortified keep.

Manning wrote an Easter Pastoral in 1885 on the whole question of Catholics and the Universities". In it he admits that the establishment of a Catholic College at Oxford had already been brought before Wiseman just before he died: he was still asking question about it six months after the Bishops had decided that 'the establishment of such a College could in no way be approved'. What worried Wiseman (and Manning too) were 'the intellectual deviations and contradictions of modern England', which may draw wry smiles among their successors. Rome was worried that people could claim the Catholic Colleges were not good enough: would the Bishops please see that this *obex* was removed. It was next to impossible, said Propaganda, 'to discover circumstances in which Catholics could, without sin, attend non-Catholic universities'. What bothered Manning, however, was the suspicion in Rome that 'the admonitions of the Holy See had not hitherto been sufficiently promulgated'. No one had ventured, Manning said, to assert the necessity of sending youths to Oxford and Cambridge, 'which on the face of it would be untrue': they could simply get their degrees from London. And he had another anxiety, for 'the transfer of Catholic youth to the National Universities.. would dwarf and stunt the growth and rising studies of all our Colleges, and thereby of the Catholic Church itself in England'. The Colleges would cease: 'They would be Colleges no longer, and if called Colleges by courtesy, they would be reduced to the level of public schools such as Harrow and Eton, Winchester and Rugby.'

More significant was Manning's scheme for a College in Kensington, which actually got going in 1873, although the real progenitor may have been Bishop Clifford, who revived Prior Park and attempted to continue in the direction first mapped out by Baines in the previous decade. There were various reasons why Kensington failed: it was not in itself a silly idea, as is shown by the number of Catholic Universities now thriving in France (for example, Angers), Belgium (Louvain) and the United States (Washington, St Louis etc). But the first Rector seems to have enjoyed little grasp of accounts; the seminaries and religious orders felt their own establishments threatened, and there was at this time a growing tension between the regulars and the bishops, in which the bishops eventually won on points with *Romanos Pontifices* of 1880, not to mention competition between colleges for pupils: finally, the lay leaders, that is the aristocracy and the Catholic landed gentry, whom Hedley later estimated to number about 200, had no educational vision except towards the social and career advantages of Oxford and Cambridge.

But there was a Loyal Opposition. It was not simply the landed Catholics who were after the social advantages of Oxford. There was a small but growing body of laymen, many themselves graduates, and for the most part – but not all – converts, who took the view that

the Church was missing something, and by the end of the century the heads of the Catholic Colleges were meeting to tell each other that they agreed. An eager proponent, whose activities we can to some extent follow, was Grissell. Hartwell de la Garde Grissell was a convert graduate, who was born in 1839 and died in 1907. Hunter-Blair was his (literary) executor and retained quite a lot of his letters and papers relating to the affair⁷. They were both involved in the Italian siege of Papal Rome in 1870: Hunter-Blair was a Papal stretcher-bearer: he records that the Papal army had no stretchers. Perhaps this is where their friendship began. Hunter-Blair is listed among the members of the Oxford University Catholic Society in 1883, when the Secretary was Clovis Bevenot, who later taught French at Birmingham University, and was the father of Fr Laurence Bevenot, the liturgical composer. It was Grissell and his friends who set up this group after the failure of the 1871 Catholic Colleges conference with the Bishops to have much effect on the question of access to the University (and to Cambridge: 'Ought we to have a Secretary for Cambridge?'). Curiously, this conference is not mentioned in the detailed history of the matter in Manning's Pastoral. The explanation sent out in 1871 said:

At that Conference, a Sub-Commission was appointed with instructions to obtain information on the actual state of our higher education, its quality, extent and needs; the probable number of those who wish for higher studies; the relation of London University to our Catholic education; whether a wholesome stimulus and a valuable direction to the higher studies in our existing Colleges may not be given by the formation of a body of Examiners and other officers under the united guidance of the Hierarchy, with power to confer degrees; and generally, to frame suggestions as to the course to be pursued.⁸

There is a list of the members, or proposed members, of the Society in the Grissell file: it is quite striking how many seem to have become, or been, priests. For our present purposes much of the information there collected is not *ad rem*, but it is interesting to note in passing that the first signature on the questionnaire that the Sub-Committee sent out (to anyone they thought would give the answers they wanted) was the President of Ratcliffe College (Rosminians, Loughborough), Fr Peter Hutton. He is a link because he was clothed at Ampleforth in 1828, went to Prior Park with Bishop Baines, and when the priests fell out with him, and he brought in Gentili and the early Rosminians, joined them and rose to be President at Ratcliffe.⁹

It was Grissell and his friends who got up the Catholic Society: unfortunately it is not clear from their letters who was a convert graduate supporter, and who was a Catholic who had found one way or another round the Roman (or Manning's) prohibition. It was Grissell who hired an expert to prove that the Roman rule, in asserting that something was white, actually meant that it was black. The document is a long one, and is open to Dr Johnson's *riposte*, that 'That argument is wrong which requires many words to prove it right'. On the

⁷ The *Tablet* 16 May 1885 p792-94

⁸ Conference on Studies Nov 1871, for Bishops, Heads of Orders, Presidents of schools and colleges. *Ampleforth JX24-4*

⁹ His fellow novices were George Lowe (who remained, and died as Missioner in Morpeth), Thomas Swale (who wrote the *Diwy*) and Moses Furlong, who was prominent in the setting up of the Rosminians in Ireland. As novitiates go, they were an effective lot, but maybe surpassed by the late Fr Ian Petit: he did a full novitiate twice (1941, 1950), and in each novitiate one of his year became a Bishop.

face of it, neither Grissell's arguments, nor the support of Hedley and Clifford among the bishops, cut any ice with Rome: but deep down the glacier was melting. With Rome, it is better to melt ice than to break it, and so it proved.

The final push was probably Hedley's. He did not favour a simple reversal of policy, and in fact expressed considerable hesitation and caution, for he did not underrate the risks, as risks there were in the early stages of any new infusion of ideas. He viewed the matter as a question of concession rather than encouragement (this view was quite widely held by responsible men, and was in fact the case), and saw clearly the need, and the opportunity, of a Mission: this is the origin of the Oxford and Cambridge chaplaincies, which to this day come under the hierarchy rather than (as in the other universities) the local Bishop.

He saw Catholic young men of about eighteen years of age as falling into three possible groups. First there were those who intended to proceed to the priesthood, or some form of religious life, at that time a high proportion compared to anything we have seen since: for them there were the seminaries, or the Colleges abroad. Then there were those who intended to go into one of the professions or trades: for these, except perhaps for Medicine and Law, the Universities of the time were no special help. And there were the nobility, gentry and the rich or leisured class. He was specific:

I calculate that there would be about two hundred... But they are important because the Catholic status in the nation is dependent on them, and they are the source of our wealth and resources.

An ideal solution would be a Catholic University, but recent experience at Kensington had shown that this idea was unworkable. So the young were left to be like Galahad Threepwood or Sebastian Flyte, for the problem was not an exclusively Catholic one. But, Hedley maintained, warming to his theme, at Oxford and Cambridge are to be found 'the best youth of England'.

Here they meet celebrated scholars, are fired with enthusiasm for culture. Here they meet with one another. Here the whole genius of the place, the professors, the students, the libraries, the examiners, the recreations, unites to give to the English gentleman that tone or character which his class easily recognise. It is easy therefore to understand why many English Catholics consider it almost necessary to send their sons to Oxford or Cambridge. That such institutions are dangerous to Catholic faith or morals cannot be denied. I would prefer, with all my heart, a Catholic university. But I advocate the permission for Catholics to reside there as an alternative that is less dangerous than the allowing of the young men to be idle or to find themselves outside their own class in Society. It is notorious that at this moment young English Catholics of the highest classes are the most ignorant, the most frivolous and the least serious of their class.

Hedley saw further than some of his fellow-bishops: he saw that the situation had changed, and stability had given way to change. As in Newman's time, the real problem was not Anglicanism but lack of any creed:

The peculiar errors of Anglicanism or Protestantism are little heard of in the presence of the battle which is now raging between Christianity and unbelief.

And he added an essential additional proposal, that there must be a strong body of Catholic priests in each of the Universities.

Hedley wrote this in April 1883. In January 1885 Rome turned the idea down. It looked like an end: in fact it was a beginning, for while the idea germinated in the Roman soil, the old man passed on. Manning died in January 1892, and Herbert Vaughan succeeded. Vaughan had originally followed Manning's line, but if it is difficult to divert the old from their cherished views, Vaughan himself did not hold the view so strongly that he could not change it. So the decree from Rome relaxing the ban was issued on 17 April 1895, but with

conditions, of which the chief were that the permission was a concession for exceptional cases, and that there were to be Catholic lecturers to the new undergraduates, and lectures were to be frequent, or sufficient.

There was also a less public reason. The Conference of Catholic Colleges first met on 3 January 1896, under the auspices of Cardinal Vaughan and in his house, with twenty-four clerical Heads and one brave layman, an Inspector of Training Colleges. The problem they faced was a Royal Commission on Secondary Education, and in particular the requirements for the training of teachers: what were Catholic schools to do about it? Fr Purbrick SJ, say the Minutes,

pointed out the advantages of the old Universities.. We should avail ourselves at once of the Universities for the training of our future teachers.. The question we had to face was, which is the prevalent and acknowledged system in the country? Having ascertained that, ought we not to conform ourselves to it?

and they passed unanimously a resolution, which called *inter alia* for the opening at the Universities houses under supervision, to which certain picked students may be sent by different Colleges, where they can take their degree and pass an exam in pedagogy.⁵

Burge was so keen on the Conference that he seconded a resolution to make it at least an annual event, but with subtle cunning also seconded a motion that several others should sit upon the Committee. In the photograph of the second meeting four months later he is sitting next but one to the Cardinal, in the front row. Only Walmsley of Stonyhurst is nearer¹⁰. When he retired (he had a break-down and left Ampleforth for the mission in 1898), Burge was kept on as an honorary member of the Conference for two or three years, and Prior (Abbot) Smith never played so large a part.

A feeling of inferiority was general. For instance, the *Tablet* of 11 September 1897 lists the seventeen boys from seven Catholic Colleges who obtained Oxford & Cambridge Higher Certificates, and compares these figures with those of the public schools:

Stonyhurst	5	Eton	59
Downside	4	Rugby	55
Old Hall	2	Uppingham	44
Beaumont	2	Harrow	43
Oratory School	2		
Ushaw College	1		
Xaverians, Mayfield	1		

There were also ten in the Jesuit novitiate, but this was considered not to count. Only Stonyhurst entered candidates for the Lower Certificate: one of them, one Richard Manners reached First Class in no less than six subjects¹¹. The *Tablet* says,

It is apparently a favourite examination for the public schools... By the side of these figures our Catholic College results look small indeed, but it must of course be remembered how few the numbers in our schools are. This is the first year in which our own schools have sent up candidates in any number.

The plain fact is, we were waking up, and looking about us. And we were scared by what we saw.

¹⁰ The photograph was included in the first *Report* 'by courtesy of the *Ampleforth Journal*', so we may surmise Burge was active behind the scenes too.

¹¹ I am interested in this man: he was my uncle. His son was to be Headmaster of Wimbledon: one pupil John Patten, later became Secretary of State for Education: such is the wheel of fortune. *Fr Richard Manners SJ, private communication*

It is clear that Burge was not having his ideas in isolation, and when he claimed in his letter to Justin McCann in 1926 that the idea of 'Our Oxford House' had come to him suddenly, and to him alone, he may not have realised the roots of his inspiration in the atmosphere of anxiety among all the Colleges. Where was the improvement in the teaching to come from, and (a second significant point), was not the weakness of Catholic schools in large part due to the wholly inadequate teaching in what passed for preparatory schools? Despite earlier rhetoric, among themselves these Heads seemed very willing to admit the deficiencies of Catholic schools, and very anxious to take steps. It is no accident that during the first years of the century all the Catholic 'independent' schools adopted every sort of practice and custom from the 'public' schools.

OUR OXFORD HOUSE

Writing thirty years later, when he had been many years parish priest at Grassendale (Liverpool), Burge recalled the foundation thus:

I think that I alone was responsible for the move. It was 'borne in upon me' and I held back for some time, as I found no one in my entourage to support me. In fact I think it was a special light form above which made me persevere. I was very ill at the time and very depressed and the opposition was very strong. How I held on to the idea I can never explain. It does not enter into the scope of your article, to deal with the opposition to the enterprise, but the opposition was very widespread, both at home and abroad. One good Missioner at a public dinner prophesied that in 10 years after Oxford the Community at Ampleforth would be a mere handful.¹²

Burge was a man of ability, of energy, and also a musician, being described by a contemporary concert review as 'a great vocaliser', and appearing in programmes as a performer of Mozart piano concertos¹³. He energised the Ampleforth community into building an entirely new monastery, in which they still live: he would have built more if funds had been equal to his plans. He presided over the founding of the *Journal*, and played a considerable part both in the debates then going on (one could reasonably say raging) on the reform and Constitutions of the English Benedictines, and in the more practical problems of the distribution of the numerous Benedictine missions (later to be called parishes) among the then three houses. There is no doubt about his ability, or his energy, or indeed his vision, but there was much opposition to each plan, some of it understandable, and there is some doubt about his capacity to ride storms, for he resigned as Prior only four months after he had set up the Oxford house. He moved to the Mission of St Austin's, Liverpool, and there worked in respected authority until his death in July 1929.

On 22 July 1897 there was a meeting of the monastic Council at Ampleforth: we read in the Minutes, that a House be established at Oxford for Juniors' studies:

Cum Sancta sedes ne Catholici in Universitatibus resederent prohibitionem removeret, statutum est ut domus Oxoniac fundaretur, ad quam mitterentur fratres et postulantes studiorum causa. RD Edmundus Matthews in :

There is unfortunately no record of the debate, and the next reference, equally laconic (but you are laconic when you have to write minutes in Latin) only appears for 12 June 1900, giving permission to enter a five-year lease on the house at 103 Woodstock Road. Six

¹² 9 March 1926 JX23-E. After so long, he may have been simplifying.

¹³ Three weeks before the Oxford house opened (14 September), he was the choirmaster and first cantor at the national celebration of St Augustine's centenary at Ebbsfleet. *Tablet* 18-9-1897 p449

months later (23 Jan 1901) it was agreed that there was no question but that the venture should continue, but that there should be no expansion of the house or its numbers, at that time a Master and three undergraduates. It is evident that there was a question that the Hall should expand, together with a characteristic counter-question, that it should be abandoned. Mission fathers, presumably of the more elderly sort,¹⁴ took the view that sending young men, especially if they had not yet had any monastic training, which was the case with the young Parker and the young Byrne in 1897, would be extremely dangerous to their vocations: one weighty father even went so far as to suggest that if the venture continued for ten years, there would be by then no monks left.

Nearer dangers threatened, for at first the University authorities were unable to see how the new venture could be fitted in to the existing scheme of things: regulations did not provide for such a contingency. A Master of Arts could obtain a licence to open a Private Hall, 'for the reception of students who shall be matriculated and admitted to all the privileges of the University without being required to be a member of any existing College or Hall, or of the Non-Collegiate body', but none of the first monks were MA. Fr Richard Clarke SJ MA, a convert, obtained such a licence, and set up Clarke's Hall in 1896 for the Jesuits (It was later successively Pope's Hall, Plater's Hall, and from 1918 permanently as Campion Hall). It was in fact Fr Clarke who encouraged us to proceed with the venture, and helped us as the experienced pioneer (He had been, among other things, Fellow of St John's and a rowing Blue). All we could do, if the monks were to stay together as a community as monks should, was to rent a house and apply for admission to the Non-Collegiate Body (later St Catherine's Society). Thus Fr Edmund Matthews, Br Elphege Hind, William Byrne and Stanislaus Parker (who were merely postulants, just out of the school) arrived in early October 1897 at 103 Woodstock Road.

This house is still in existence, opposite St Philip and James Church, and is now a guest-house. The landlord of 103 was Alfred Boffin, who sometimes wrote from 5 Winchester Road (1899), and sometimes from Bank Chambers, 3 High Street (1904). 105 was inhabited by Charles Robertson, who was unhelpful in the matter of a noisy drain in 1901. Possibly he was the Mr Robertson who offered an 11-acre site in North Oxford to the Abbey in 1910. The present owner of no. 103 is St John's College. The Woodstock Road house was not the first choice. Fr Aidan Crow (Assistant Procurator) tried first for 4 Park Crescent, Park Town in August 1897, and then switched to Allandale, Woodstock Road, before trying 103.

From the University's point of view, the difficulty was that none of the four men was other than a mere student. It cut no ice in their system that Fr Edmund was an ordained priest and monastic superior: he was not a Master. Moreover, the building was not an approved Lodging-House, and to complicate the issue, the Controller of Lodgings took the view that he could not negotiate directly with a student: it would be Contrary to the Usages. In the following spring the Delegacy wrote to say it could not extend the temporary permission beyond the end of the academic year:

It will therefore be necessary for the authorities of Ampleforth College to make other arrangements for the residence of their students within the University, and I shall be glad to lay before the Delegates any proposal which you may have to make in this direction.

¹⁴ There was a time when these were rather rudely known to the Juniors as 'the heavies': of course, no such custom exists now. *Abbot Patrick Barry, private communication*

Catholics became worried: they thought the bridgehead was about to be overrun. Matthews wrote to Ampleforth:

There is considerable alarm among the leading Catholics at the mere prospect of our departure, and they are determined to do all they can to prevent it.

Shadwell, the precise but not unsympathetic Controller of Lodging Houses, seems to have been first to spot a possible solution, writing in March 1898 to Fr Oswald Swarbreck:

I have no instructions from my Delegates to suggest the course which should now be taken: but I observe that at Cambridge arrangements have been made to open a public hostel connected with the St Edmund's College, Ware: and speaking only for myself I think that a similar proposal, or one on the smaller scale of a Private Hall, such as that of Father Clarke at Oxford, would be the best way of providing for your students. It would be the essential part of any such arrangement that the resident head should be a member of Convocation. In the case of St Edmund's Hostel at Cambridge the Master is to be a Member of the Senate, the corresponding body there.

Where could Ampleforth find a qualifying Master of Arts? Fortunately the community of Fort Augustus Abbey, although not at that time part of the English Benedictine Congregation, but perhaps remembering with gratitude the part played by Laurentian monks in their foundation, found a willing volunteer in Fr Oswald Hunter-Blair, MA of Magdalen. A slight compromise was necessary because previous residence was a requirement, but he was accepted as a fit person to preside over the Lodging-House in the meantime, and was able to set up as Master in October 1899. There was also a question of alterations to the house to bring it into line with the Delegacy's regulations for undergraduate lodgings.

We may thus say that St Benet's was strictly speaking a monastic body before it was a University establishment, and ever since there has remained some duality, for the Master is the monastic superior (he has never had the title of Prior) and subject to the Abbot of Ampleforth, but he is also the Master of a constituent part of the University.¹⁵

Hunter-Blair retired in 1908, by which time Fr Anselm Parker, one of the original four, had become MA and was available to be Master. The Hall became Parker's Hall, but by the time he gave place to Fr Justin McCann in 1920, conditions had changed, and the Hall had by a new development in the University become a Permanent Private Hall, with the official title *Aula Sancti Benedicti*, St Benet's Hall. Under Hunter-Blair, Edmund Matthews (BA from 1901 — he was the first monk to take a degree in the University since the Reformation) had the general management of the Hall, and acted as Tutor, but he was recalled to Ampleforth as Headmaster (the first with that title) in 1903. He was followed by Fr Elphege Hind (to 1907) and Fr Aelred Dawson (to 1908): there seems to have been some discussion of the position at the Visitation Council held in the Abbey by President Gasquet in September 1907. Fr Anselm Parker took on both functions when he became Master, but Fr Cuthbert Almond, historian and first editor of the *Journal*, became monastic superior from 1909 to 1914, when Fr Anselm again took on all the functions. In 1908 he was perhaps considered too junior.

¹⁵ In 1960 a student calculated that the Master was then fulfilling no less than twenty-seven 'College' functions, from Master through Bursar, Chaplain, Sacristan, and Librarian, down to Porter, Head Gardener and Boiler-man. The job was not a sinecure.

THE BUILDINGS

If you visit 103 Woodstock Road, now joined to its neighbour, you will see that by itself it was too small for two senior members and seven undergraduates: and in 1903 Fr Adam Hamilton (Buckfast) stayed there when he was the Catholic Lecturer. A move was made in 1904 to the former Grindle's Hall, also rented from St John's College, and sited at 8-9 Beaumont Street: it was demolished in March 1938 to make way for the Playhouse theatre. Monks do not like to settle in rented property: a monastery should be freehold. With a view to eventually building a Hall, as later the Jesuits and the Dominicans did, the Abbey set about acquiring property in central Oxford. In December 1902 the Abbot, Procurator and one of the Council came to see the problem for themselves, and recommended a short lease of 'Park House', with an option to purchase. In the following March, Council gave permission to buy 'Beech Lawn'²¹ for £2800, but neither proposal seems to have gone far for in June 1903 they were recommending the renting of any other house (presumably the pressure at 103 was becoming intolerable).¹⁶

In November of the same year property in Pembroke Street was bought for £3715, backing on to Beef Lane: it is now wholly absorbed into Pembroke College, but the layout is still visible..¹⁷ Meanwhile, at the same time Council agreed to take the house Grandpont, near Folly Bridge, on the river (literally, for it flows under the house which is a bridge) provided it could be had for no more than £150 a year: since no more is heard of this proposal, we may presume the charge was higher, or perhaps Grindle's in Beaumont Street was simply a more attractive position. Meanwhile, negotiations were needed with Alfred Boffin to cancel the lease of 103 Woodstock Road. In September 1908 two more houses were bought in Beef Lane for £450 (or it was agreed by Council to make an offer for them). In 1910 a Mr Robertson offered a property in north Oxford: he wanted £3000 for 11 acres, but was prepared to make over one third of this sum as an endowment.

In 1911, at the request of Fr Anselm Wilson (later to write Bishop Hedley's life), Council discussed the issue of sending young monks to Oxford: did the Constitutions require Council's consent? Abbot Smith thought that they did not, but was quite prepared to consult Council nonetheless. At the same time Council did not agree to lend Fort Augustus 'one of our graduates to begin their school': it was perhaps in part a matter of commercial competition, for growth of the school had only just begun (this was the year they took up rigger, a concept perhaps picked up at Oxford) and in 1916 a request that Fr Ninian McDonald should teach for a while in the school in order to learn methods was declined, but he was welcome to join 'our Oxford house', at a cost of £100 a year. (He was not the same as Fr Joseph Macdonald, future Archbishop, who was at that time parish priest at the Ampleforth parish of St Anne's, Liverpool.) Yet in 1920 Fr Anselm Parker left St Benet's in order to be Headmaster of the school there. Perhaps more significant is the note in 1913 that Council approved Mr Norman Hardy doing his postulanship after his finals at

¹⁶ *Beech Lawn* is at 4 Park Town, the first house on the left. It is now (1997) used by d'Overbreck's, the coaching institute. *Park House* probably refers to the same property.

¹⁷ This seems to have included nos 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23, all quite small houses, now part of Pembroke College, together with nos 7, 8, 9, and 10 Beef Lane, which back on to them, and to which shortly afterwards were added 5 and 6. There is a detailed plan in the Ampleforth Archives, drawn by Fr Anselm Parker.

Oxford in June: that is to say, the Hall was beginning to attract possible vocations. In July 1914, perhaps innocent of what lay in store, Council agreed not to move from the present house (Beaumont St), and accepted the lawyer Mr Barton's advice to consider building on the Beef Lane property.

The Oxford house continued to exercise the administration. On 3 July 1917, amid the roar of warfare, Council considered more permanent matters:

The Ampleforth Hall at Oxford was discussed. Fr Abbot had applied to the Trustees of the Norfolk property in Holywell for a grant of a building site, but so far without success. Council discussed the advisability of our continuing to reside at 9 Beaumont Street. The suggestion that we should leave Oxford was rejected. The proposal that we might inhabit one of the houses in our Beef Lane property was regarded as impractical. Council concluded that we should go on as at present.

Various memoranda communicated by Fr Anselm Parker were read to the Council, He reported that the University authorities were proposing to give our Hall a much improved status in the University. Council appreciated the importance and advantages of this and commissioned Fr Abbot to accept such proposed status if the conditions were satisfactory and did not call for reference to the Council. At its next meeting, Council spent time discussing the name of the new Hall: the favourites (as usual, neither was the final choice) were *Ampleforth Hall* or *St Lawrence's*. After considerable discussion, two voted for Ampleforth Hall, two for St Lawrence's Hall. It was understood that the members of the Council who were absent favoured the first. It was agreed to postpone the matter for further consideration. It had been suggested that we should adopt the name of 'Ampleforth Hall'. Others favoured a title such as 'St Lawrence's Hall'. Fr Abbot asked the advice of the Council as to the name of our house at Oxford. The most favoured names were 'Ampleforth Hall' and 'St Benedict's Hall'. Council did not agree on the point and it was finally proposed that the name should be either 'Ampleforth Hall' or 'St Benedict's Hall' and that it be left to the Community to decide. This was agreed to.¹⁸

It may be of interest to give the text of the Convocation Decree of 14 May 1918. The governing body was defined as the Abbot and Council of Ampleforth Abbey.

7 — That the Vice-Chancellor having granted under the provisions of *Statt.Tit. III Sect. v(8)* to the Right Rev. Joseph Oswald Smith, Abbot of Ampleforth Abbey of the English Congregation of the Order of St Benedict, a licence for the establishment in the University of a Permanent Private Hall situate at Nos 8 & 9 Beaumont Street, Oxford, the consent of Convocation is given thereunto.

8 — That the consent of Convocation be given to the proposal that the above-mentioned Permanent Private Hall be known as St Benet's Hall.

The present buildings in St Giles was built on the site of some stables by one Samuel Collingwood about 1838, so they are just describable as Victorian, and in the plural, for they are a pair. They were separately owned until Ampleforth acquired them. Collingwood lived in the southern one (then 39) and leased the other (then 38) to Dr Bliss, a lawyer. (The number for the whole was officially changed to 38 in 1953). On the death of Bliss, 38 was bought by Rev Richard Michell (for £1870): in September 1890 his widow leased the property for seven years to Marguerite de Leobardy and four others, of St Ursula's Convent in Stowmarket. Two of them had English names, three French: like the five monks who bought the houses in 1922, they probably used only their secular names, though 'Marie Pie Bowyer' sounds unconvincing. By September 1897 (by which time 103 up the road was

¹⁸ Council Book, 16 January 1918: Fr Abbot, Abbot Cummins, Frs Prior, Austin, Edmund, Bede, Basil, Paul.

becoming a monastic *studium*), Michell's son, a Shropshire vicar, sold the house to the nuns for £3500. They financed this by mortgages from Charles Eyston and later from a French lady Alix Liebert, from Nitray in France, who came to live in the convent, but by 1920 she was living in Paris (31 rue de Tournon, VII). In 1909 she bought 39, that is the house on the south side, for the nuns, which had just been vacated by Professor Charles Oman, of New College (1860-1946): perhaps the *Art of War in the Middle Ages* and the *Peninsular War* were written in the house. His daughter Carola remembered her childhood there. The house remained hers, though part of the convent, until she sold it to the same five named monks in September 1922. They paid £6200 for no.38, and £6700 for no.39, but the issue is confused by the number of mortgages in which the nuns and Mine Leobardy engaged themselves. It would be a reasonable inference that the combined building of two still separate houses was too small to run a successful girls school,¹⁹ and did not generate enough income to survive the capital debt. The nuns left in 1922 & returned to France.

The nuns built the top floor mansard in two stages, because they put one on 38 before they possessed 39, and they built the chapel in 1911 (the architect was a priest, Canon Scholes 1844-1920, himself a product of Prior Park, and designer of many churches and convents), to replace the iron shed which they used at first, which stood at the back of the garden of 38, to which led the covered walkway which still exists. It is of some interest that the alterations made by the nuns, and their buyer's survey, were signed by George Keogh, who was the architect who was at school with Prior Burge and advised him on planning the rebuilding of the monastery at Ampleforth.

During the twenties McCann renewed the boiler plant (so did Fr James Forbes in the sixties), and made the wide opening in the ground floor which makes possible the present refectory, extending from one front door to the other, and makes possible the present capacity of the Hall: forty can dine at once. Fr Forbes also had rooms and bathrooms rearranged so as to encourage the conference trade, which is a great financial help. otherwise the building retains its early Victorian character, and Keogh's mansard looks as though it had been put on by Collingwood seventy years before.

In 1926 McCann tried to buy one of the next door houses, but £7000 was considered too much for No.40, and the Council declined even to consider No.39A, yet six months later the University paid £17,000 for 40 and 41, and £2000 for 39A. He was not perhaps of a trading family for nothing: on the other hand Bede Turner's financially miraculous building programme was at that time in full swing, and cash will have been short. When there were few monks, as in the forties and in the seventies, more space might have been an embarrassment — or an advantage: rooms in no.38 were let after the war for a while to Trinity College.

¹⁹ Not necessarily girls: a man who was at school there in 1914 (and still lived round the corner) joined the parish bicentenary party in St Benet's garden in 1993. And one of the difficulties pointed out at the Conference of Catholic Colleges in 1897 was that too many boys were at school in convents, where the nuns were not equal to the needs of boys of 11 or 12. *Report*, 1897, p17: Fr Wilfrid New OSB on Preparatory Schools.

CONCLUSION

One is drawn in two ways: relative to their resources, the Catholic 'colleges' were not the intellectual desert that people have sometimes supposed. Ampleforth was behind the field: they were limited in resources; they did not believe in display; they had a deep commitment to the ordinary working classes, many of whom exiles from Ireland, in some cases nearly destitute, particularly in Merthyr Tydfil and Liverpool. And there was a strong sense of family life about the school, which was only about eighty strong. The monks of Ampleforth, under Prior Burge and influenced strongly by Bishop Hedley, produced at this time with apparent suddenness two strongly characterised institutions which are still thriving in essentially the same character now a century later, namely *St Benet's Hall* and the *Ampleforth Journal*.²⁰ The point of the background is that it was not so sudden, nor on reflection so surprising, and the very strength and consistent character of the baby indicates the length of the gestation. Indeed, one wonders how soon the Hall would have been begun if the Roman prohibition not been in place: would Shepherd and Bury have gone up to Oriel? It would have been the year after Newman's reception: might he have been their tutor? How delightful to the historian is the word *If*, but how forbidden a fruit!

²⁰ And at the same time built the 'New Monastery', with stone and brick taken from sites only half a mile distant, what is still our most solid building.