

# BENET HOUSE, CAMBRIDGE

## DOM PHILIP JEBB

**I**N SPITE OF EMANCIPATION IN 1829 Catholics were prevented from attending the university of Cambridge until 1871 because they were required to take communion in their college chapels, and even after that there was a ban imposed by Cardinal Manning which remained in force until his death in 1892. His successor, Cardinal Vaughan, educated in part at Downside, took a different view of the dangers to young men of Oxford and Cambridge and in 1895 the Holy See issued a decree which allowed attendance at these universities on condition that there were lectures on Catholic theology which they were to attend. It is ironical that the explicitly secular University of London was before this the only opportunity for Catholics in England to gain a degree.

In the last quarter of the 19th century St Gregory's was reestablishing its scholarly tradition under the enthusiastic encouragement of Edmund Bishop and through contact with Armitage Robinson, who was Dean of Christ's College and later to be a close friend of the community while he was Dean of Wells. At this time Dom Aidan Gasquet was pursuing his historical studies with a team of Gregorian monks at Great Ormond Street, close to the British Museum, and when the possibility of a Benedictine presence in Cambridge arose Prior Ford saw it more in terms of learned work than as a means of providing the School with monks armed with a degree to enhance their teaching. He was also interested in the idea of Downside taking over the Cambridge parish. This idea came to nothing because of the rooted objection of the Bishop of Northampton, Arthur Ridell, to the presence of the Benedictines in Cambridge, even though (or perhaps because) he was himself an Old Boy of Downside.

However, others among the English bishops, especially Cuthbert Hedley, a monk of Ampleforth and by then bishop of Newport & Menevia, were strongly in favour and the Oxford and the Cambridge Education Board was set up under his chairmanship in 1895 to consider how best to care for Catholic undergraduates. They established the Catholic Chaplaincy and the lectureships which were the prerequisite of Papal approval of Catholics attending the university. Abbot Ford put forward the name of Dom Cuthbert Butler as well suited to provide the required lectures and the Board unanimously approved his appointment.

Dom Cuthbert was already collaborating with Dean Armitage Robinson in his edition of the Lausiac History of Palladius, which was soon to be published as part of the series of Texts and Studies, and he was therefore an obvious choice, and because of the link with Armitage Robinson at Christ's a house was leased from the College in Hobson Street. Dom Cuthbert took up residence there in October 1896 as Superior, together with Dom Benedict Kuypers and Brother Hugh Connolly. The former was already working on an edition of The Book of Cerne and was accepted as a member of King's College, while the others were admitted to Christ's. Dom Cuthbert and Dom Benedict worked for their BA by way of research as Advanced Students, while Brother Hugh studied for the Theological Tripos, and was to make his name as a patristic and Syriac scholar.

The name Benet House (without the 'St') was the decision of Christ's on the analogy of Peterhouse, and was acceptable to Downside, but the Bishop objected and said that in the Diocese an

Directory the 'St? must be included. In his reply Dom Cuthbert agreed that it should be St Benet House in the Directory, but went on to say: 'elsewhere we must adhere to Benet House, and this not out of any spirit of obstinacy or any desire to question as to whether a bishop may impose names on the houses of Regulars; but because in fact Benet House is the name, given not by me but by the landlords, the Master and Fellows of the College. They chose Benet House, omitting Saint, on the express ground that it was the old Cambridge custom before the Reformation. I welcomed the return to the old Catholic practice. I see that the Jesuit house in Oxford is entered in the Directory as Campion Hall. I wonder if the bishop of Birmingham will insist on it being called 'Blessed Campion Hall?. Our Catholic Society here has been called, and so far without offence, the Fisher Society. Will our dinner in future be called 'The Blessed Fisher Dinner?'

Dom Cuthbert Butler remained superior until July 1904 and was then succeeded by Dom Hugh Connolly who remained there until the house was closed because of the War in 1915. Dom Hugh played a notable part in the academic life of the university: in 1911 he was appointed a lecturer in Syriac, in 1912 an examiner in the Oriental Languages Tripos, and also a member of the Board of Oriental Studies. He was also Editor of the Cambridge Texts & Studies in succession to Dean Armitage Robinson.

At no time before the War were there more than four monks resident including the Superior. It reopened in 1919, but because the house in Hobson Street was considered too small another was acquired at 13 Park Terrace, looking out on Parkers Piece. Dom Bede Camm, who was appointed Superior, had taken his degree at Keble in Oxford, but was affiliated to Christ's. He had gained a considerable reputation as a scholar for his work on the English martyrs. At this reopening under Dom Bede there were three notable undergraduates: Dom Charles Pontifex, later to be Abbot of Ealing, Dom David Knowles, later Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, and Dom Charles' brother, Dom Mark who was later to be Superior of the house and whose writings on philosophy were to earn him standing in that sphere. Dom David and Dom Mark both gained First Class Honours in the Classical Tripos.

Dom Bede remained superior until 1931, but in 1927 there was another move, this time to Brooklands Avenue, somewhat further from the centre of the University and next to the Botanic Gardens. A timetable for the undergraduates survives from this time: Rise: 6.00; Lauds & Prime: 6.30; Mass preceded by Terce & Sext. 7.15; Breakfast: 8.00; None: 1.00; Lunch: 1.10; Vespers & Compline: 7.00; Dinner: 7.30; Matins: 8.15; Curfew: 10.30. They were expected to work 9.00-1.00, 5.00-7.15 and 9.10-10.10, with recreation 1.30-5.00 and 8.00-8.15 - that the great majority took their work seriously, and over the years at least ten gained First Class Honours degrees.

In the early days it was seriously questioned whether they should be allowed to use bicycles, and they were not allowed to take part in College or University games, though later this rule was relaxed and several distinguished themselves in this sphere, in particular Dom Denis Agius and Dom Luke Suart both rowed for the Christ's 1st Boat, of which Dom Luke was Captain; Dom Martin Salmon played cricket, hockey and squash for the University, though not gaining a Blue, but elected to the Hawks Club; Dom

Benet Innes played rugby and cricket for Christ's, but was not allowed to box for the University; Dom Ceolfriid O'Hara had a University trial for Association football; Dom Kevin Taggart was captain of Christ's squash and had a University trial for rugby, Dom Gervase Murray-Bligh played rugby for Christ's and had a University trial for the Athletics team in the Quarter Mile and Dom Philip Jebb fenced for the University 2nd team.

The other notable achievement in extra-curricular activities was Dom Raphael Appleby's election to the Committee of the Cambridge Union at the end of his first term, a place he held until he went down. There is little doubt that he could have been President, but he stood down from the election when he realised how important it was for others in their careers to have held this position. He gained very considerable personal influence in the Committee, being already ordained a priest and much older than his colleagues. This had the result that a whole group of young men who later gained prominence in politics were regular visitors to Benet House. These included Leon Brittain, John Selwyn Gummer, Christopher Tugendhat and John Nott, as well as Cohn Renfrew, the future Professor of Archaeology, Master of Jesus and appointed a Life Peer.

Benet House differed in several ways from St Benet's Hall, founded by Ampleforth a year later in Oxford, most significantly because Cambridge never accepted the proposition that the houses of the Religious Orders should have any collegiate status in the university. This meant that those who resided at Benet House had to be members of one of the existing Colleges, and had to gain entry in the ordinary way. Because of the early association and the academic success of so many of the monks, Christ's continued to accept any monks from Downside put forward by the Abbot, and this continued until 1963, when the Fellows became frightened of accusations in the press of special treatment, and insisted upon everyone taking the College entrance exam which was becoming increasingly demanding. Up until then monks from Downside had simply had to achieve matriculation. But in fact this change in the policy of Christ's came at a time when those entering the novitiate were tending to come at a later age and already equipped with a degree, so that an important part of what Benet House had developed into (ie, to provide degrees for future teachers in the School) was much less relevant.

In 1931 Dom Bede Camm was succeeded by Dom Mark Pontifex, but was closed in 1934 until 1938 for lack of suitable candidates. When it was decided to reopen another location was chosen on Mount Pleasant, North of the Cam, next door to St Edmund's House, set up at the same time as Benet House for the secular clergy who were studying for a degree. Dom Mark, with the help of the Catholic Chaplain, Father Alfred Gilbey, was responsible for choosing this final location of Benet House, but in fact the arrangements for setting it up and moving in were given to Dom Wilfrid Passmore, but after only one term he was appointed Superior of Worth Priory, then a dependency of Downside, and Dom Mark returned as Superior until the house was again closed from 1945 until 1950 for the lack of suitable candidates resulting from the lack of novices during the War. He then continued as Superior until 1969 when he was succeeded by Dom Adrian Morey, previously Headmaster of the Oratory School and an historian of note, who had himself been an undergraduate at Benet House in the 1920's, when he had gained a First.

By this time the situation had completely changed, and over the next ten years there were to be only four monks from Downside attending the University under Dom Adrian, and all of them already had degrees and were pursuing higher studies. One of these was Dom Maurus Lunn, who gained his Ph.D. in Monastic History, and was a founder member of the EBC History Commission.

However, it was decided to keep on the house as a 'Downside presence in the University, and to enable Dom Adrian to pursue his historical research which resulted in a Litt.D. From 1959 there had been laymen resident at Benet House, the early ones through the 1960's were nearly all Old Boys of Downside, but with Dom Adrian's wider connexions, especially with the Oratory School, this ceased to be the norm. By the time of the final closure of Benet House there had been about fifty laymen, who thus were almost equal in number to the fifty-odd monks. Also from 1950 onwards there was a trickle of monks from other monasteries taking degrees, four from Belmont, one to be abbot and two to be headmasters, two from Douai, one from Ampleforth, six from the United States and one Augustinian Canon from Malta.

Of the ten Head Masters of Downside during the 20th century only the first two, Dom Leander Ramsay and Dom Sigebert Trafford, and the present Head Master, Dom Antony Sutch, did not have Cambridge degrees, four of which were through Benet House, while Dom Wilfrid Passmore was the only Abbot of Downside with that qualification.

With the death of Dom Adrian in 1989 Dom Nicholas White was put in charge and remained pursuing historical and other studies until 1992 when the lease from St John's College was retained by Downside but the property was sublet to St Edmund's College next door. The name Benet House remains, but it is no longer connected with Downside.

Sources: 'Benet House, Cambridge, Some Early Correspondence, 1895-1900?', by Dom Adrian Morey: Downside Review, Vol 103, July 1985, pp.230-238  
Abbot of Downside's Files on Benet House  
Unpublished Memoirs of Dom Mark Pontifex and Dom Adrian Morey kept in the Downside Archives  
Personal Recollections of Dom Philip Jebb