

## ECHOES FROM THE PAST? ST BENET'S HALL

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## St BENET'S HALL

Paper given at the 1980 Symposium  
by Dame Frideswide Sandeman  
Downside, 2 September

**B**UILDINGS OCCASIONALLY FLASH out as scintillating threads in the warp of life. I am not referring to the kind of cause and effect that can be verified by historical research, but to glimpses of the fittingness of things in the overall pattern which can sometimes be picked up by poetic antennae. Let me give you two brief examples. A member of our community owes her specifically Benedictine vocation to the fact that she took the Rule of St Benedict as a set book when reading medieval Latin at Cambridge. Her tutorials were at Jesus College, formerly St Radegund's, a monastery of Benedictine nuns. I myself have never forgotten the contribution made towards the final issue of my own vocation by a casual remark thrown out over tea in an old room at Worcester College, Oxford, once Gloucester Hall, the Benedictine house of studies.

But it is on another Benedictine house of studies that I would like to concentrate: St Benet's Hall, Oxford, formerly an Ursuline convent with a school of which I am an Old Girl.

The land on which St Benet's stands was at one time part of the extensive property of a house dating back in part to 1600 and represented now by 40 St Giles. In 1821 the heir decided to part with some of his property and within the next two decades 38 and 39 St Giles were built. They were duly advertised as "residences for persons of the first distinction."

It was not until 1890 that the Dames de Ste Ursule moved into No 38. Though their immediate provenance was Stowmarket, they were in fact a splinter group from Ursulines in Belgium belonging to a congregation founded by Anne de Xantonge. It seems that it was not secularist legislation which drove them to England but the prevailing anti-French attitude of the government at that time. Perhaps because splinter groups are apt to contain within them germs of further splintering, perhaps because the air was heavy with narrow-minded nationalism, perhaps because the Oxford community were too conscious of having both French and English members to survive for long as a viable unit. Nevertheless there were splendid individuals among them and they did valuable work.

The Oman family lived in No 39 from 1897 till 1908, and Carola Oman describes their house as built in doll's house style, thin but tall. There was a garden wall which looked old but was probably made of fragments from Beaumont Palace. Occasionally she and her sister would gaze fascinated at the sight of school-children processing round the garden singing hymns. When the Omans left, the nuns bought No 39, joined the two houses together and added an attic storey. The chapel was built out into the garden from the rear of No 39. Somewhere at the back, towards or in Wellington Square, (be it confessed with shame) the nuns ran another school for children whose parents were considered not to be quite of the first distinction. The schools had separate entrances and posed not a few problems for children's minds. A front school child might be looked at askance if she walked home

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with a back school child, even if the latter's parents happened to be saintly and influential members of the parish. On the other hand one might make the even more appalling mistake of referring to the "poor" school and thus incurring a horrified reprimand.

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vocations. Apart from vocations to other orders, they could claim to have influenced four members of the EBC and two secular Benedictine oblates.

The first on the list is Father David Ogilvie Forbes who had two spells as a pupil there. After a couple of terms he was sent on to a more manly establishment run by two or three maiden sisters of Sydney Owen of Christ Church. However, at the end of his first term there the Owens' father died and the school was given three months holiday. Poor David had to return to St Ursula's, "furious at being sent back to a girls' school and bolshie." This mood found expression one day when a pioneer aviator flew over, prior to landing on Port Meadow. Despite the rather fierce man in charge, David was determined to get the best possible view and rushed from the room followed by the whole class. One suspects that the reopening of the Owens' school must have caused general relief.

Then there was a largish family whom, to be up to date in terminology, I shall call Sandepersons. The elder boy, known to a number of you later as a distinctly big Fr Michael, was at that time not large or strong enough to go home with the elder members of the family but had to be put on to the horse-drawn vehicle which conveyed passengers to North Oxford. It was known in the family as the "sepulchre", "sep" for short, presumably because it progressed so slowly, or perhaps on account of its appearance. Carola Oman mentions the horse trains which ran up Banbury Road: her father was even rash enough to purchase shares in the Oxford District Tramways. It is pleasing to be able to record here the happy relationship between Fr David and Fr Michael in after life. At one time Fr David was Brother Michael's novice-master; it was impressive, so I was told, to see the ex-RAF novice reach out a long arm, seize the novice-master by the back of his collar, turn him round and then address him with the utmost reverence.

The younger Sandeman boy, so much in our minds of late [Fr Barnabas died on 11 August 1980, three weeks before the Symposium], escaped the full educational clutches of the Ursulines for he was sent straight to Miss Owen's, but he was not entirely immune from their influence, as they prepared him for his First Communion. Interestingly enough, those instructions included initiation into the fundamental principle of electricity: evidence that their educational ideas were not too narrow. He also figured in another episode at St Ursula's: I distinctly remember his spilling the incense-boat on the day on which I and another small girl crowned the statue of Our Lady in the sanctuary. At this point let me insert a note to say that Fr Barnabas saw the very first draft of this paper, gave me warm encouragement and provided some of the most graphic details. He remembered the spilt incense too!

In recalling these facts I am far from insinuating that *we* left a spiritual atmosphere about the place, least of all myself. There was my historic sin of calumny: the other little girl didn't really call me a "pig and a beast", she only called me "a beast". There were also the more legendary seven helping of cold ham when I was invited there for breakfast (no doubt there was a nucleus of fact!), and there was certainly my embarrassed refusal to join in the time-honoured game (was it called "flags"?) that took place in the garden during morning break.

However, there *were* saintly people around, and I would like to single out one of them. Sister Josephine was a very humble, very charitable lay-sister who served the community as cook. Her qualities were apparently recognised, for the Jesuit parish priest of St Aloysius asked if he could have her whole time for parochial work, and she was a wonderful success. She was the kind of person who could go anywhere and do whatever was needed: the poor accepted her as truly one of themselves; in the war the wounded Tommies in the Exam Schools, then the Base Hospital, would be cheered by her visits, and children's hearts would be delighted by the surprises which emerged from

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her capacious pockets. Though she shrank

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from entering a drawing-room, she was unselfconscious enough to play aunt Sally along with the portly ex-naval Jesuit, Fr Wolverston, at a party for the mothers of the parish, her invaluable work for St Aloysius was cut short by the break-up of the community in 1922.

In that year a discreet approach was made to the Master of St Benet's Hall, then at 8 and 9 Beaumont Street, asking whether Ampleforth would be interested in purchasing 38 and 39 St Giles. Less discreet was the visit of Fr Bede Turner, the procurator, who alarmed the nuns by going round the house, stamping on the floors to test their stability and make sure that the beams were still resting on the supporting walls. The change-over was rapidly accomplished though it was not until well on in the thirties that the altar in the chapel was rededicated in honour of St Benedict. This involved Fr Justin McCann's chipping out the relics one night, Abbot Matthew's reconsecrating the altar, and two young monks having to fit in between lectures the innumerable psalms prescribed for the rite. Here it should be emphasized that the substitution of St Benedict as patron instead of St Aloysius, or any other Jesuit saint, was no indication of any feeling of rivalry between the sons of St Benedict and those of St Ignatius: on the contrary, it was at the suggestion of the Jesuits that Ampleforth took the initial step of sending three monks to Oxford in 1897, and there had been close collaboration between the two houses in later years, especially in their successful endeavour to be recognised as permanent private halls.

But what of the nuns? The community was disbanded and each member was free to choose what she would do. Two at least joined another congregation in the north of England, and some went to France where they lived as a secular community. In St Aloysius parish it was felt that Sr Josephine should not be allowed to slip away unnoticed after all her years of devoted service, so a little group of parishioners went to the station to see her off. They found her there with luggage consisting of innumerable brown paper parcels. After putting her on to the train and bidding her a grateful and affectionate farewell, they realised with dismay when the train moved off that it was the wrong one! My mother, a woman of action, boarded the next train and pursued her to Didcot. There she found Sr Josephine surrounded by brown paper parcels and sympathetic porters. And there we must leave her.

But a word about Didcot: the name is said to be derived from "Didan's Cot", and Didan was the father of St Frideswide. In 1880 a strange mistake was made when the relics of St Frideswide in the Cathedral at Oxford were secretly investigated under cover of dark. Finding two sets of bones, one large and one small, in a leather bag, they erroneously assumed that one set must be those of Didan. It is surprising that a mere hundred years ago experts could have been so ignorant of the history of the relics at the time of the Reformation, and of how in 1561 St Frideswide's bones were mixed with those of Catherine Martyr.

On the reredos of St Benet's, if it still survives, St Frideswide is depicted together with St Laurence, St Benedict and St Edmund of Abingdon. May she and Sr Josephine intercede for all who study there, while we are left pondering on the message bequeathed to us by St Aloysius on an external piece of altar stone in letters such as QHAA: *Quid haec ad aeternitatem?*

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