

THE BRUSSELS NUNS AT WINCHESTER

1794-1857

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THE COMMUNITY OF THE GLORIOUS ASSUMPTION of the Blessed Virgin Mary, exiled from Brussels in 1794 during the French Revolutionary Wars, settled in Winchester in that year and remained there until its transfer to East Bergholt in 1857. Winchester was a city with deep Benedictine roots, a lively urban Catholic community (unusual in the South of England) and an outstanding 'missionary post.'

Medieval Winchester had a strong Benedictine presence. The Cathedral community had been given a 'monastic' character by Swithun (d.862) and a Benedictine one by Ethelwold (c.912-84) which it retained until the Dissolution. The Winchester Cathedral community had a *Scriptorium* and a cultural impact which was made all the more effective by its proximity, over many centuries, to a place of political influence.¹ With sixty monks at its height there were still forty five by 1532-4.² There was no communal continuity at the Dissolution but one monk at least, Dom Thomas Figg was living the religious life as an exile in the Low Countries in the 1580s.³ The present Cathedral, deprived of its conventual buildings, begun by Walkelin, the first Norman bishop, and with later enlargements, remains probably the largest, unruined Benedictine church in the World..

The 'Old Minster', as the Cathedral was called, was joined by the 'New Minster', founded by King Alfred, originally on an adjoining site. It was transferred to Hyde, in the outskirts of the city, in 1110. It was rebuilt by Henry II having been burnt in the civil war of Stephen's reign, it housed forty monks in 1140, twenty nine in 1381 and thirty three in 1509, and twenty one at the surrender in 1539.

The third Benedictine community, the Nunnaminster, for women, founded by Alfred and his Queen Eahlswith at the close of the ninth century and reformed by Ethelwold in 963, was one of medieval England's principal monasteries for women. With a community of up to seventy nuns until financial difficulties and the general malaise of the Fourteenth Century diminished the community it remained as powerful influence in the city until the Dissolution and after. At the Dissolution its foundation included twenty six nuns, thirteen lay sisters, five priests, twenty-nine officials and servants, three corrody-holders and twenty-six children. The last abbess, Elizabeth Shelley, continued to live with several nuns near the dismantled abbey. In 1794 Abbey House, on the site of the Nunnaminster, became the temporary home of the exiled Franciscan nuns (now at Woodchester), where they remained until 1808. The property belonged to Thomas Weld and the sisters conducted a

¹ For Winchester Cathedral and its Cathedral Priory see J. Crook, ed., *Winchester Cathedral Nine Hundred Years 1093-1993*, Chichester, 1993

² Statistical information on Medieval Winchester and the summary history of the Benedictine houses come from D. Knowles and R.N. Hadcock, *Medieval Houses England and Wales*, London, 1971

³ See Greatrex, p. 166, and P. Bogan, 'Dom Thomas Figg and the Foot of St Philip', *Winchester Cathedral Record* 61 (1992), pp 22-26

school.⁴

Winchester played an important role in the revival of the English Benedictine Congregation. It was at Ponsholt, in West Meon, ten or eleven miles South-East of Winchester, that Dom Sigebert Buckley, the last monk of Westminster, died in 1610 having, by tradition, aggregated the new monks to the Old Congregation. In the seventeenth century monks were living at Longwood and Stoke Charity close to Winchester.⁵ In Winchester itself Dom Ambrose Brown, was resident from 1717 to 1741, and Dom Alexius Shepperd, from 1741 to 1745. Their residence was probably Hyde House, ‘an undemolished piece of old monastery where some Roman Catholic gentry are still tolerated with residence, and where, it is said, they have an Oratory, and live according to the Rule of St Benedict.’⁶ A more distant Benedictine connection with the city was the succession of titular Cathedral Priors appointed by the English Benedictines from 1633.

Two Cambrai nuns, Dame Elizabeth Frances Sheldon (1720-1808) and Sister Martha Fryer (1761-1825), a laysister, were from Winchester and both were imprisoned at Compiègne during the French Revolution. One of the earliest sisters at the Benedictine monastery at Brussels was Elizabeth Tichborne⁷ of the Hartley family in Hampshire, whose father, Sir Nicholas Tichborne, was the first to be buried at St James Cemetery, the Winchester Catholics burial ground where, from 1794 to 1857 the Benedictine nuns of the former Brussels Community were interred.⁸

The Winchester Catholic community may have been provided with a permanent resident priest in the middle of the seventeenth century by Roger Corham in his new house, Peterhouse, near the centre of the city. Mass was celebrated originally in an upper room and from about 1740 in a garden building no better than a sizeable shed. This chapel, abandoned briefly during the 1745, was extended and embellished later in the century until replaced in 1791 when John Milner, the priest at Winchester built a new free-standing chapel more in keeping with the character of the city and the new status afforded the Catholic community by the Catholic Relief Acts of 1778 and 1791. Refusing to follow ‘the modern style of building churches and chapels which are, in general, square chambers with small sashed windows and fashionable decorations, hardly to be distinguished from common assembly rooms,’ he decided instead, using John Carter of London as his

⁴ RE Scantlebury, ed, *Hampshire Register/The Registers and Records of Winchester*, (Catholic Record Society 42), London, 1948, p.13

⁵ For Hampshire Benedictines (men and women) after the Dissolution see G. Dolan, ‘The English Benedictine Missions, XII, Benedictine Hampshire *Downside Review* 20 (1901) pp 104-118

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 113

⁷ The Necrology Book of the Community of the Glorious Assumption, in MS, from 1611-1901 survive in the Downside Archives where most of the Haslemere (the monastery of the Glorious Assumption’s final resting places) Papers are kept. Its sources are unclear. In this Necrology (p.8) we read ‘In the year of Our Lord 1646 April 6th in our Monastery of the Glorious Assumption...happily deceased our dear Sister in Christ Sister Scholastica Tichborne.’ The summary list of the Winchester dead which appears as an appendix to this paper is drawn from this source.

⁸ See Scantlebury, pp. 145-200

architect, to imitate ‘the models which have been left as by our religious ancestors who applied themselves with such ardour and unrivalled success to the cultivation and perfection of ecclesiastical architecture’.⁹

The building used by the Brussels nuns at Winchester is now known as the Royal Hotel and stands near to the 1791 Chapel. Parts of the building date back to the fourteenth century and the present building was started by the Smith family in the 1690's. James Smith, President of the English College, Douai, and Vicar Apostolic of the North, had been Roger Corham's chief beneficiary and it was his family who developed the property and remained in possession of it until Milner acquired it in 1780. Milner saw its potential as a possible site for an English seminary and, with the dislocation of the French Revolution, a new home for the threatened Douai College. It was this building into which the nuns moved. On their departure it began its life as a hotel.¹⁰

John Milner (1752-1826), a Londoner, was educated at Sedgley Park School in the Midlands and the English College at Douai where he was ordained on 21 December 1776. He received a doctorate from the University of Douai. He came to Winchester in October 1779, after two years in London, and remained there until his appointment as Vicar Apostolic of the Midland District and Titular Bishop of Castabala in 1803.¹¹

Winchester's Catholic community came into public prominence with the arrival in the city of a great number of French clergy, exiles from the Revolution, who were billeted in the decaying remains of Charles II's projected palace, The King's House. At one stage there were over a thousand priests in residence, the largest community of clergy ever gathered in England. The first priests arrived at the King's House in 1792, the last left in 1798, although some isolated priests continued to live in the city.¹² Milner's responsibility for these priests was tenuous although a public Requiem Mass in Milner's chapel for Louis XVI celebrated on 12 April 1793, gave an opportunity for some liturgical ostentation and difficulties surrounding the priests' presence allowed Milner an opportunity to engage in controversy with the Winchester Anglican establishment. Such opportunities were never missed by Milner who was a committed controversialist.

Milner's antiquarian interests, which led to a Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries of London, concentrated on a rediscovery of the Catholic past. His major work, *The History, Civil and Ecclesiastical, and Survey of the Antiquities of Winchester*, published in two volumes in 1798, was as much polemical as Historical. He wished to rehabilitate the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages in order to proclaim its importance in his contemporary England. The coming of an English Benedictine monastery to Winchester could not have found a more appropriate priest to welcome it than the redoubtable Doctor Milner.

The Europe of the early 1790's was not a safe place for religious communities. The

⁹ Quoted from the Westminster Archives by P. Bogan, *Beloved Chapel* (N.D., but c. 1988), p. 4

¹⁰ I am grateful to Peter Bogan, Parish Archivist, St Peter's, Winchester, for showing me his notes on The Royal Hotel and taking me to dine there (7 December 1998). Among the sources for the notes was J.H. King, *The Story of an Hotel*, Winchester, 1930

¹¹ See M.N.L. Couve de Murville, *John Milner*, Birmingham, 1986

¹² See D.A. Bellenger, *The French Exiled Clergy*, Bath, 1986, especially pp. 73-79

English-speaking exiles, in particular, were at risk once the expansionist French Republic and its Napoleonic sequel were at war with Great Britain. Brussels was at the heart of the conflict, as it often is, and the Convent of the Glorious Assumption had its future existence threatened. In 1793 the community Annalist had noted, during the first period of French occupation, ‘the dreadful sacrileges’¹³ committed in the churches of Brussels and in the following year, towards the end of June, the community left its buildings behind and with them its abbess, Ursula Pigott, ill and crazed, and unwilling to move. She died at Brussels in 1796. Travelling via Antwerp and Rotterdam the community took ship on *The Providence* and docked in London on 6 July 1794.¹⁴

The community was proud to be the first English convent or monastic house to arrive in England, a pioneer in the 1790's as it had been two hundred years earlier. The Benedictines of Montargis, the forerunners of the present Fernham, had in fact arrived as early as October 1792, and, being technically a French community (there were strong English connections) did not count. Relations were, however, very good between these two communities: at one stage the Montargis nuns had considered moving from France to join the Brussels nuns. The Montargis nuns had arrived in Brighton to a royal welcome.¹⁵ The Brussels nuns, too, had a soft landing, eased by the house rented by the father of one of the nuns, Ignatia Collins, in Caroline Street, and by the support of the London clergy who rallied to them. Doctor Douglass,¹⁶ the Vicar Apostolic, arranged for the community to transfer to the property in Winchester which was to be their home for more than fifty years.

Doctor Milner had made sure that the building was ready for them and a chapel fitted up. Benefactors from the Catholic gentry came forward and the nuns benefitted, too, from the French Refugee Committee which, because of the King’s House Clergy, was particularly well organised in Winchester.¹⁷ A confessor from among the French clergy was found for them and Milner encouraged them in every way - even allowing them to use a monstrance rather than a ciborium for Benediction.¹⁸

It is impossible to recreate the dislocation and psychological impact of the forced repatriation - the absent abbess is a potent symbol - but as much as possible life went on as before, but there were changes. Hanging in to treasured practices is part of the exiles’ lot, but the Winchester nuns had to make adjustments to a country which, despite its benevolence to the Catholic refugees, remained fundamentally anti-Catholic. The ostentation of baroque Flanders was inappropriate for Georgian Hampshire. When Bishop Douglass came to bless the nuns’ chapel on 25 September 1794 ‘he performed the

¹³ Most of the information on the Winchester Nuns in this paper comes from the Second Volume (1628-1878) of the *Annals of the Community of the Glorious Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, On it is based the less full, *Chronicle of the First Monastery founded at Brussels for English Benedictine Nuns A.D. 1597* which was published at East Bergholt in 1898

¹⁴ *Annals*, pp. 68-73 for the arrival in London

¹⁵ For Montargis in England see Bellenger, pp. 90-93

¹⁶ *Annals*, p. 74

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 76

¹⁸ The Chapel was on the second floor of the building, lit by a cupola (*Annals*, p. 77).

Visitation.’ He saw each nun in turn (14 choir nuns, 5 lay sisters, and 4 novices had arrived in Winchester) and, with Dr Milner present, he assembled the whole community ‘in order to consider what points of the Statutes it would be necessary to alter or modify; the Customs of the Country, especially being now a Protestant Country, required some alterations - changes were therefore made, even on essential points, such as the rules of Inclosure, in regard to admitting Seculars inside the Monastery, in order to do away with the prejudice and ignorance in which the people in England had been brought up to regard Religions and monasteries in general. The Horarium was changed - rising in the night was to be discontinued.’¹⁹

Many of the repatriated religious - including the Winchester Benedictines - looked forward to return to their continental houses. The French Wars had made this impossible; the buildings reduced to rubble, endowments scattered, treasured possessions lost, and, eventually limited compensation (which lasted until 1854) for the dispossessed implying return was unlikely. ‘By the help of friends,’ the Annalist recorded in 1798, ‘we began to repair the house in Winchester by raising the walls and new roofing it, making cells for the Religious and enlarging the Chapel; with an additional Building containing a Wash house, a Refectory for the Religious, a School room and Dormitory for the young ladies all which was finished in the year 1799, at the time our dear Convent was being demolished.’²⁰

A small school, a dame school in more than a usual sense, had been opened on 9 September 1794 with Dame Ignatia Collins as Mistress. It had facilities for boarders and for ‘a poor school.’ It served as a source of income, a possible recruiting ground for the community and a veneer of respectability; a girls school was more socially acceptable than a convent of enclosed nuns. Dame Ignatia was succeeded in 1814 by Dame Agnes Whelan who ‘formed a library of well-chosen books, and introduced into the method of education, a course of solid reading - carefully reading every book herself, whether amusing or otherwise, before putting it into the hands of the children - guarding against the entrance of any thing detrimental to piety or the good taste, to which she studied to form them.’²¹

Life at Winchester appeared calm and routine but occasionally the community’s life was troubled by crisis. There was intermittent anti-Catholicism. 1815 was a critical year. ‘Public opinion was greatly excited through the ill conduct of an unfortunate man who having made Profession among the Trappist-Monks at Ludworth, ran away three different times, and having been each time received back, left a fourth time, and then spread such atrocious calumnies against the Superior and Monks, that the Prior was summoned before the House of Commons. The Prior was declared innocent of the crimes, but recommended to leave

¹⁹ Milner presented a number of books to the community, some of them preserved among the Haslemere books in the Douai Abbey Library. They include *The Works of Teresa of Avila* (B8) given by Milner to Mother Mary Ann in 1803, *Oeuvres Spirituelles* of Fenelon (O4) given by him in 1800, a 1769 edition of Robert Parsons, *A Christian Directory* ‘given by Mr Milner’ and a copy of (Milner’s) *Letters to a Prebendary*, Winchester, 1801 ‘from the author.’ A small portrait of Milner, painted with his Gallican blue episcopal wear, and his pectoral cross, both from the Winchester community via Haslemere are now preserved at Downside

²⁰ *Annals*, p. 89

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 101. ‘The poor school’ chapel sixpence a week for each pupil. The school was given up in 1877 (*Annals*, p. 201)

the Country with his community. Bishop Poynter feared the effect this might bear upon all Religious Communities, and thought to screen the Nuns from observation by requiring them to relinquish their Religious dress - he was just setting out for Rome, and on his departure left an order with his V.G. to that effect. The Nuns complied much to their grief, and on the 1st Sunday of Lent laid aside their Religious dress till the end of June, when the Revd Thomas White brought them the joyful news, that he had obtained permission for them to resume it, for which favour he had not ceased to importune their Ecclesiastical Superiors, and they joyfully put on their Religious Habit again.²²

The community, by the early 1850's had adjusted itself to its English environment and, having regained its confidence as a religious community began to rethink its customs and constitutions. With the hierarchy restored in 1850 a more 'normal' church was emerging. In August 1856 the Annalist recorded the following:- 'The prayers appointed in union with the English Benedictine Congregation were commenced at this time. It was at this epoch also that Dr Grant began to revise the Statutes in accordance with the regulations of the 1st Provincial Synod of Westminster which had enacted that whenever the Constitutions of Religious Houses, could not for any reason, be observed in their primitive strictness, they should be modified or metered to meet the circumstances or needs of the times. The Fasts and Abstinences of the Rule, as regulated by the original Statutes he decided to be beyond the strength of most who entered of late years; the whole were remodelled by Dr Grant's authority, delegated by a Rescript from the Holy See, and re-printed, as they now stand, though not put into force till some time later, on account of the circumstances which followed.'²³

The community's stay at Winchester came to an end in 1857 with the move to Old Hall, East Bergholt, Suffolk which had been purchased in 1856.²⁴ A decision to seek a new home had been reached as early as 1852 and two attempts had been made to purchase a property in the countryside one in Berkshire, another in the Midlands.²⁵ Winchester had become too populous and too distracting. A special train had been hired leaving Winchester at 4 AM. 'The most Blessed Sacrament had been conveyed to St Mary's Abbey by the Rev. Father Allerry, accompanied by three nuns and a lay sister, a few days previously and a large room was fitted up as a Chapel; here the nuns commenced at once saying the Divine Office, having, before starting at Winchester, recited the day Hours, so that the journey caused no interruption to the song of perpetual praise, which had been begun by our first Mothers at Brussels nearly three hundred years ago.'²⁶

The Winchester Nuns were an important example of the revival of Catholicism in England in the wake of the French Revolution. They were an urban community in the centre of a well-developed congregation. They were the first enclosed community of religious

²² *ibid.*, p. 105. For the background to the Trappist case see Bellenger, pp. 83-90

²³ *Annals*, p. 141

²⁴ [Printed] *Chronicle*, p. 254

²⁵ *Annals*, p. 130

²⁶ The Annals preserve an account from *The Hampshire Chronicle* (20 June 1857) in the form of a cutting which describes the 'Removal of the Conventual Establishment.'

since the Reformation to have been established and the first to have an abbess blessed.²⁷ Like all closed communities, especially those no longer existing (the last nun of the community of the Assumption died in the 1990's), the inner life of prayer and observance which is at the heart of the monastic life is difficult to recapture.²⁸ The *Annals* suggest an austere life with several early deaths and supernatural happenings.²⁹ The Winchester nuns require more attention and it is hoped that more material, especially from Winchester itself, will come to light. Much of what we know comes from the remaining archives of the community.³⁰ It would be good if we could see how the people of Winchester at the time viewed these sisters in their midst.

²⁷ Dame Austin Tancred in June 1796. The Abbatial pastoral staff of Brussels is preserved in the Sacristy at Downside. It is illustrated in the *Chronicle* opposite p. 167 where it is described as being of seventeenth century Flemish work

²⁸ Some of the house customs are mentioned in the *Annals*. The 'Hail Mary' was said whenever the clock struck (*Annals*, p. 112)

²⁹ See, for example, the apparition of Dame Mary Joseph Collins (*Annals*, p. 118)

³⁰ Preserved at Downside Abbey (see Note 13)

WINCHESTER NECROLOGY

Date		Age	Profession
14 Jan 1797	Christina Stapleton	84	61
31 Mar 1797	Abbess Austin Tancred	64	43
16 Jan 1801	Ursula Scoles	44	19
26 Aug 1802	Teresa Collins	80	60
17 Mar 1803	Scholastica Midi, Lay Sister	64	24
3 Apr 1803	Catherine Eccles	76	55
17 Jul 1804	Frances Damian	–	51
7 Feb 1806	Mary Joseph Collins	50	25
29 Mar 1806	Teresa Rayment, Choir Novice	–	–
6 Mar 1811	Anne Benedict Ascough, Lay Sister	86	62
10 Aug 1811	Abbess Philipa Eccles	78	59
6 Oct 1813	Mechtild Debord	80	61
7 Jun 1814	Bernard Tancred	80	60
26 Jul 1814	Ignatia Collins	62	35
12 Feb 1818	Aloysius Witham	70	44
24 Jul 1820	Winifred Hutchison	32	12
14 Nov 1824	Magdalen King, Lay Sister	76	41
1 Jul 1826	Benedict Siddons	33	12
26 Oct 1827	Barbara Eaton, Lay Sister	–	19
21 May 1829	Agnes Whelan	49	20

19 Sep 1832	Joseph Hutchison	45	26
8 Mar 1834	Margaret Buckley, Lay Sister	28	6
21 Nov 1835	Elizabeth Draycot	34	6
23 Feb 1839	Catherine Molteno	37	16
12 May 1839	Mary Philipa Mitan	56	29
19 Jul 1839	Anselm Edburgh Collins	78	43
14 Nov 1839	Mary Anne Rayment	86	66
17 Feb 1841	Mary Francis Gabrielli	67	39
23 Feb 1843	Sophia Le Bon	86	60
27 Feb 1843	Gertrude Veydt	73	42
18 Oct 1844	Maura Harper Powell	77	52
12 Jan 1845	Elizabeth Collingridge	78	58
15 Feb 1845	Martha Tielmans	83	51
22 May 1850	Anne Fogarty, Lay Sister	47	18
17 May 1854	Abbess Benedict Macdonald	82	58
12 May 1856	Benedict Saynor	75	52