

EVENTS LEADING TO THE FOUNDATION OF
ST SCHOLASTICA'S PRIORY
AT FORT AUGUSTUS (KILCUMEIN)
IN INVERNESS-SHIRE, SCOTLAND.

By MOIRA M. BUTLER

ON THE 17 DECEMBER 1891, eight would-be postulants assembled in a rented house in the village of Fort Augustus, Inverness-shire. They had planned to join a community of enclosed Benedictine nuns intending to form a new 'sister monastery' near to St. Benedict's Abbey, at Fort Augustus. Instead, the postulants found themselves the sole nucleus of the new foundation. The next day, Dom Leo Linse, Abbot of St. Benedict's Abbey, celebrated mass in a make-shift chapel in the cellar of the house and appointed one of the postulants namely Edith Weld, as superior. However, the newly formed quasi-religious community, in addition to the sanction of the Holy See, lacked three other conditions necessary for a foundation. Without suitable accommodation, experience in the religious life or visible means of support, they urgently needed a convent, a novice mistress and necessary money. The situation, although not deliberately engineered, was the outcome of a series of major setbacks and one calculated gamble. The first idea of having a foundation in Scotland was Abbot Leo's: that it happened at all, was entirely due to his persistent determination, to succeed at all costs. This paper attempts to cover the events that led to the foundation and to describe how the difficulties were eventually resolved.

Dom Leo Linse, appointed the first Abbot of Fort Augustus in July 1888 by Pope Leo XI11, had been forced to flee the Abbey of Beuron in Germany, when the Congregation came under Bismarck's May laws in 1876. A number of the Beuronese monks, including Dom Leo settled at Erdington near Birmingham, where they built a small priory; a few of the monks remained as willing exiles in these islands long after the dangers in Germany had passed, suggesting the Beuron Congregation sought to establish a footing in Britain. Over the next twelve years Dom Leo became known as 'The Preacher Prior of Erdington'. He was encouraged in the powerful patronage of Archbishop Ullathorne, (to whom he was confessor) who introduced and appointed him as extraordinary confessor to numerous convents in the Birmingham area and others farther afield; at one time well over one hundred nuns were said to be under his spiritual direction. He was also a renowned retreat giver in these and other establishments. It would be true to say that one such retreat changed the history of St. Benedict's Abbey and very nearly altered the location of another.

Despite being highly valued within many convents, Abbot Leo was undoubtedly a controversial figure, eminently worthy of a lengthy paper all to himself. Unfortunately, he was a man who unwittingly (but assuredly) embodied in not a few minds the historic rivalries between England and Germany. He was single minded in pursuit of his 'sister monastery' and as we shall see, refused to be deflected by any obstacle (or community) that might thwart him, that verged on the ruthless; this was thought to be both his strength and weakness. The ability to compromise or to find a middle way, appeared alien to his nature: the resulting gulf between the position taken by his fellow Benedictines (including the British hierarchy) during his present predicament could not have been wider.

These were difficult if not turbulent times in the history of the Benedictine Order in both Scotland and England; 'reform was in the air' and Fort Augustus had suffered its share of upheavals in the name of such reforms. St. Benedict's Abbey had become separated from and independent of the English Benedictine Congregation in 1883 and although now under the direct jurisdiction of the Holy See, followed the constitutions of the Beuron Congregation. Abbot Leo was quite adamant that the new foundation should follow similar constitutions. Back in 1881 the community at East Bergholt had appealed to the German monks at Erdington, for help in an attempt to reform their constitutions and monastic discipline. They were given a ready hand and Dom Leo assisted them in adopting the same as those of Beuron. In 1888 he had sent two postulants to East Bergholt, since 'the realization of a foundation then seemed far distant'. However, from early 1890 onwards hope of securing a foundation in Scotland, emerged from an unexpected source: from then on all likely postulants were recruited for Fort Augustus rather than redirected elsewhere. By the spring of 1891 eight would-be postulants were identified.

The unforeseen event, concerned the Benedictine establishment at Atherstone, a daughter house founded in 1859 from Colwich. In 1890, they had 'repeatedly solicited' Abbot Leo's help in reforming their constitutions. He promised a retreat on the Holy Rule, if they obtained consent of the Bishop of Birmingham, under whose jurisdiction they were placed: permission was granted and the retreat given. Arising from this retreat, some of the nuns voiced a desire to change their constitutions to those of Beuron: they signed an unanimous petition asking his Lordship's leave for Abbot Leo to talk over the matter of revision with them, fully intending to draw up new declarations to submit for his approval, but this permission was refused. Later the nuns told the Bishop their real wish was to move their community as near as possible to St. Benedict's Abbey at Fort Augustus. A secret vote was arranged on a fixed day and hour and the Bishop agreed to abide by the outcome. The result was fifteen to seven for moving to Fort Augustus. True to his promise his Lordship immediately authorized the sale of Atherstone's convent and obtained permission from the Bishop of Aberdeen for the Atherstone nuns to be received into his diocese.

In June 1891, Abbot Leo, in order to temporarily house the entire twenty two strong community, (and eight postulants) rented for one year a large fully furnished private

house named Douglas Villa, in Fort Augustus. Mary Murray, one of the intending postulants agreed to live there while awaiting the expected migration from Atherstone. Despite the misgivings of a third of the house, the hope of moving the entire Atherstone community to Fort Augustus was suddenly a distinct possibility. It is wondered if Archbishop Ullathorne, who encouraged the formation of the Atherstone foundation thirty years previously would have entertained or encouraged this sequence of events, but unfortunately he had died in 1889.

Meanwhile, Peter Paul Pugin son of Augustus Welby, was consulted and inspected a number of sites with the intention of building a monastery for the new foundation at Fort Augustus. Abbot Leo expressed the hope of getting a small building ready within a year; this construction, designed to be of sufficient size to house a small community, was to form a wing of the proposed monastery. The money for the undertaking was to come from the sale of Atherstone's convent. However, by September the convent had not been sold and the approach of winter prompted the Bishop to retract his permission for the nuns to move; the sale of the house was withdrawn and the previous arrangement abandoned.

What now seems like a wise decision, was thought by the nuns to be premature: but Abbot Leo was relieved, 'to me it seemed quite providential that the whole community could not come at once, for it seemed a formidable task to reform older nuns and form new postulants together in one house'. He was enthusiastic about another idea, put forward by Mother Prioress 'which is that two of the Sisters should come to help me in the training of the postulants, so that a thoroughly established community would be founded by the time in which the remaining Sisters from Atherstone could join us'. This second plan involved the novice mistress at Atherstone; Sister Bernard MacDonald (sister of Bishop MacDonald of Argyle and the Isles) wished to move to Scotland with a Sister Mechtilde to train the postulants and help establish a community that could eventually be joined by Atherstone. The Bishop agreed to this plan which certainly seemed more feasible than the last: on the strength of this promise Abbot Leo fixed a date for the postulants to arrive at Fort Augustus.

All this uncertainty took its toll and undoubtedly had an unsettling effect on the Atherstone community; one nun observed '...as far as we know German constitutions have been adopted and German rule prevails!' we are not surprised that such a disturbance upsets the minds of many in the community....'. More confusion was to follow in November, when the Bishop suddenly withdrew his promise for the two Sisters to move at all. He maintained that 'as they had no novices for several years, the community could not spare two of their number'. This decision was rightly thought less than reasonable by the Atherstone community since their circumstances had not altered in the intervening months and preparation for their arrival in Scotland was well underway. An instant petition to Rome was made by the community for the transfer of the two Sisters to Fort Augustus. Unfortunately, this plan could not be put into effect (nor German rule prevail) until a clear ruling had been received from the Holy See, not noted

for immediate decisions one way or another.

To say the least, this turn of events placed Abbot Leo in an embarrassing position. The postulants were already on the move, some due to arrive in Fort Augustus within days. We can surmise that if delayed further (some had waited over two years) they were more likely to join another community than to continue in readiness any longer. Abbot Leo had to weigh up the advantage of having eight postulants and chance finding a novice mistress elsewhere or risk losing the postulants. He could not afford to wait (months maybe years) on Rome's decision to agree or maybe disagree, with Atherstone's plan. Throwing caution to the wind, he decided to instruct the remaining postulants to arrive at Fort Augustus by the 17th of December. It was a chancy manoeuvre wholly dependent on either Rome giving a speedy decision, which was unlikely, or totally relying on loaning a novice mistress from another convent. Either way, it was a fairly unconventional way to start a new foundation, but to be fair, he probably thought, knowing so many nuns, that finding a novice mistress would be a simple matter.

Preparations for the inauguration day had started on 12 November when the first three postulants moved into Douglas Villa. Two were choir postulants, Mary McClement a Scot, was later given the name Sister Placid and Novena Seager a Canadian, later called Sister Hildegarde. The third was the first lay postulant called Emma Pike, she was English and had previously been an out-sister at East Bergholt; she was given the name Magdalen. From the start they were given a horarium by Abbot Leo. Rising at six they walked about quarter mile to the abbey for Mass and meditation, returning after breakfast for conventual mass at nine o'clock. Mid morning was spent at the abbey hospice, where at Abbot Leo's dictation (translated from the German) they prepared a written copy of the constitutions from the Benedictine nuns at St. Gabriel's monastery in Prague. They attended vespers at the abbey and said night prayers in common, afterwards silence was observed until mass next morning.

The preparation of Douglas Villa was approached with military like precision, with two hours a day given over to manual labour. A list was made of all the things required for each room including the cells for eight postulants. Abbot Leo personally supervised the work, he also ordered and brought by boat from Inverness, the necessary furniture, sheeting, crockery, wash basins and jugs for each cell and lamps for the chapel. The house was made to look more monastic; white lace curtains were removed from the windows and all 'worldly unnecessary furniture' was taken away by George Douglas (the bemused landlord) to his private store. Each cell was named after a saint and a card placed over the cell door with the name of the postulant. The only room large enough for a chapel had been used as a cellar and though lighted by a large window was quite underground; a fact that led to its being familiarly known as the catacombs. On the 12th December they were joined by Mary Murray who had lived in the house since June in readiness for the Atherstone community: she had been visiting four of her own sisters who were all Benedictine nuns in England (at Fernham Priory, East Bergholt, and Teignmouth). Mary, a native of Belfast, was given the name of Sister Gertrude. The fifth

postulant Mary McDonald was the only local girl from Inverness; little is known about her other than her health was poor and her stay short. Mary Cummings, arrived the following day : she was the second lay-sister later given the name of Sister Walburger, but she only stayed nine months.

The last two choir postulants arrived on 16th December. Emily Wheeble, came from London and was thereafter called Sister Bernard, but she left after eight months. The last, but far from least, was Edith Weld (the youngest postulant) from Dorset: after her appointment as superior she was named Sister Scholastica. The following day the first entry noted by the chronicler read:- ‘Such a day never has dawned, nor is likely to dawn again in Scotland; like this memorable day of the 17th December 1891, the day on which began in a most humble manner a work dear to the heart of God’. Out of the eight postulants, five were to spend the rest of their lives together in the community (totalling between them 215 years in the habit). Brought together by a German Abbot, the four English, one Canadian, one Irish and two Scots, all beginners together, were as yet able to call each other by first names.

Notably, it was the last day on terms of such equality. On the 18th December 1891, the morning of the inauguration day, Abbot Leo asked for six postulants to assemble in the community room to arrange the horarium and assign future offices. The lay-sisters were not invited, this deliberate omission made an immediate and lasting distinction between the postulants. The understood essential function of Emma Pike and Mary Cummings was thereafter to be that of domestic servants. The separation surprised no one, least of all the lay-sisters, who from the start would likely be accepting of their future status in the community. This practice was not the prerogative of the Benedictine Order, but one diligently maintained and widely accepted in a majority of communities at that time. The horarium drawn up by Abbot Leo included three conferences a day with instructions on the Holy Rule, the Divine Office, plain chant and Latin; in addition they had to simultaneously learn and carry out their assigned offices. It was surely a unique situation, few postulants arrive one day and find themselves holding offices the next, about which they previously knew nothing; stranger still that one of their number should unexpectedly find herself named superior and in charge of the rest. Had the Atherstone migration been successful (as Edith Weld herself had expected) she would simply have been a choir postulant along with the others. As it was, she filled only one of four criteria now laid down by canon law (1961) for all superiors ie., that of being of legitimate birth.

The question of securing necessary money was more than likely dealt with in the first weeks, but little is to be found on the subject. The only tangible evidence we have of material support is referred to in a handwritten community book called ‘The Preface to the Chronicles’. It reads:- ‘A large portion of the sum required to effect the foundation was provided by Lady Weld (mother of Sister Scholastica Weld) widow of Sir Frederick Weld, of Chideock, with the object of thus obtaining perpetual prayers for her husband’s soul.’ It is not known what was meant by ‘a large portion’ but this certainly could not have been a substantial amount. Sir Frederick died in 1891 leaving under 5,000. Two

of their thirteen children (the youngest boys) were still at (Fort Augustus) school. Lady Weld who nine years later entered the Priory as an Oblate (and was professed on her death bed) apart from her husband's pension, had no other source of income. On 28 January 1892 Abbot Leo in his letter to Monsignor Perisco, had written 'I may add that the material support of the abbey is quite secured by the keen interest some of our best and noble families in England and Scotland have in this undertaking. Each of the six young ladies brings her £50 pension and at her profession several will have a dowry of more than 1,000.' It is far from clear what was meant by 'support of the abbey' it could mean St. Benedict's Abbey, or the proposed 'new abbey' yet to be built. His example of material support was equally vague: it seemed the only definite amount of money upon which they could immediately rely (apart from Lady Weld's donation) was their pension. We do not know exactly how many postulants had a pension, how long it was to last, nor where it came from. The dowries could not be considered since they were merely held in trust and returnable if and when the owner left the community. Either way it would seem that 'a large portion' of the material support necessary to start the foundation was obtained, but it is not recorded either if, or which 'noble families' made up the rest. Enough to say the community appeared to live most frugally and though not in abject poverty, what would be considered the next best thing. Future attempts to be self supporting were soon to become a dire necessity rather than a mere occupation.

Abbot Leo's attention was next given to the subject of accommodation; this difficulty was surprisingly resolved in a matter of weeks. Given the speed of the outcome, it is thought probable that the solution had occurred to him long before the postulants arrived. Unfortunately, it was carried out in a manner hardly designed to endear him to another community, who were to endure a serious degree of disruption as a consequence. The only building in Fort Augustus able to house a small community with grounds that could be adequately enclosed was already occupied by the Sisters of Mercy, who had little idea their days were numbered. The building, they had renamed St. Columba's Convent, was originally St. Peter's chapel, built in 1842 for the people of Fort Augustus by Lord Lovat. The chapel stood on the summit of a hill about a mile from the abbey and had served the needs of the Catholic population in the surrounding area until the monks took over responsibility for the parish in 1887. The monks however, were unable to continue running the parish school previously held in the priest's house attached to the chapel. In 1888 Abbot Leo asked the Sisters of Mercy, to open a school and offered them St. Peter's chapel to become their convent-school. The building was just as it stood when used as a chapel: part of the agreement was that the Sisters would make the building habitable at their own expense. The alterations were extensive and involved lowering the chapel floor and putting in two upper stories. The cost apart from the refurbishment, was well over 300-00, which was a large sum for any small congregation to find, in addition to a 25-00 yearly rental to the Bishop. It would be fairly safe to presume they planned to stay. In addition to running the school, they took in a few private pupils as boarders and undertook the 'getting-up' of linen for the abbey community. In April 1891 thirteen Sisters of Mercy (the census did not distinguish between choir and lay-sisters) and nine boarders occupied St. Columba's convent school.

It is reasonable to suppose that had circumstances been different and the immediate possibility of building a new monastery less than remote, Abbot Leo would have been quite happy to have left the Mercy Sisters undisturbed. Nevertheless, in mid December he made known his intention to the Mother General of the Mercy nuns: after some deliberation she made a bid to save her convent and refused to consider any proposal that necessitated the Sisters leaving St. Columba's. This stance had no effect whatsoever, the Sisters were instructed that the evacuation of the convent and closure of their school was expected to be completed within the month. The requisition of the convent appears even more high handed when we consider the property was not strictly at Abbot Leo's disposal, since the Sisters were not his tenants. The Bishop of Aberdeen, who owned the property and presumably could have prevented the take-over remained silent on the matter. It would seem that the effect of Episcopal jurisdiction i.e., administration of justice, was a variable entity upon which self effacing nuns in particular could not always rely.

An immediate solution had been executed for the postulants (at no fault of their own) but at the expense of another community given short shrift on their account. After the Christmas holidays, the parish school reassembled under a secular teacher (hired by Abbot Leo) in the former school room until arrangements were made for classes to be held in the public hall while the new school was built. If any of the nuns rebelled against the decision it is expectedly not recorded in their own chronicles. Following their departure a brief entry in their log-book reads:- 'In Fort Augustus the Abbot of the Benedictine Abbey there, asked the Sisters to make a foundation in that town. A small boarding school and day school opened. Sisters did laundry and mending for the monks. Later the German Abbot who wanted the Benedictine Sisters instead was responsible for the Sisters leaving.' This gentle understatement was the only record kept by the Mercy Sisters; they left St. Columba's convent and returned to their mother house at Elgin in the early hours of 14th January. Strangely enough, there is no record of any of the postulants meeting the Mercy Sisters, despite living only a mile apart in the same small village for over a month. The incoming Benedictines later paid back the compensation owing to the ousted Sisters: other than that, there was no contact between them. It was an unfortunate incident, but with hindsight it is doubted if any other less disruptive course of action could have been taken (short of dismissing the postulants). In the meantime, St. Columba's convent renamed St. Scholastica's Priory was eventually adapted and plans for a chapel and cloisters (both wooden structures) were added to the existing building as it stood. The work was placed in the hands of an Inverness architect (who proved woefully incompetent) with instructions to have the changes complete if possible by the end of March. It was however far from ideally suited as an enclosed convent and only considered from the outset as a temporary abode until a new abbey could be built:

Meanwhile, Abbot Leo, had been busy trying find a novice mistress which was proving more difficult than expected. He approached a small community of Subiakan nuns who were considering a move from their monastery at Minster in Thanet (they later moved to

Tenby). His offer was declined, 'for reasons thought best at this time'. This rejection received soon after Christmas suggests that Abbot Leo was unwilling to wait on a decision from Rome: but his second move was to try and hasten Atherstone's petition. In support of this he wrote a lengthy letter to a Monsignor Perisco, (the Roman prelate who had conducted the third apostolic delegation to Fort Augustus in 1888 and confirmed Dom Leo's appointment as Abbot) pleading with him to use his influence to hurry along the deliberations going on in Rome. This letter unexpectedly provided us with a detailed explanation of the prevailing problems at Fort Augustus. Two misfortunes occurred in March, regretfully, Sister McDonald left: two days later a letter from Atherstone informed them Sister Bernard was very ill; sadly, she died soon afterwards, which was a great blow. Her death was to prove more fateful to both the Priory's hopes of a more permanent home and Atherstone's migration than first imagined.

When the preparations at the Priory became sufficiently advanced to allow living there, the move commenced on 25th March, which despite the weather, was only four days later than originally planned, but the church was not ready until June. The furniture was taken up the hill to the priory by the lay-brothers in horse and cart and then arranged in the cells by the scholastics. Towards the end of May, a negative reply was received from Monsignor Perisco who, although it was now too late, could not offer any help. Abbot Leo turned again to the Benedictine establishments in England. His first request was made to East Bergholt, where he must surely have thought his credit was good, having previously sent them two postulants and reformed their constitutions. The Abbess replied that she was willing to send two professed nuns to Fort Augustus, where one would act as novice mistress, but surprisingly wished to 'reserve the right to recall them whenever she might think well', but her offer was ruled out of hand as impractical. This was perhaps a missed opportunity worthy of further negotiation; if only because it was the only other convent capable of delivering the type of training Abbot Leo wanted for his postulants.

However, the wording of his request made a favorable reply almost impossible; 'I am ready and happy to accept one Benedictine Sister who is willing to impress under my direction our principles and our discipline upon the minds of our postulants', adding that, 'it is essential that the education of all the postulants should take place here, under my direct control, but if it should prove impossible that constitutions of Beuron are taught and practiced, our postulants themselves would raise objections to this as it is their decided wish to follow the discipline of our Abbey and enjoy its immediate protection and support'. It is thought that any Abbess whose permission he subsequently sought, was understandably reluctant to let two members of the community come under 'the direct control' of a Beuronese Abbot, quite apart from the novice mistress being expected to instruct novices in constitutions other than their own. The Abbess of Stanbrook, Dame Gertrude Dubois, was expectedly unwilling to part with any of her nuns, but ready to receive the Fort Augustus postulants and train them for the foundation in Scotland, but under the constitutions of the E.B.C. This offer was not considered feasible either.

Perhaps more devastating by far was the news on 23 May 1892 that none of the English Bishops was willing to allow any of the nuns placed under their jurisdiction to come to Fort Augustus. As a direct result of this decisive (yet unexplained) final rebuff, the beleaguered Abbot Leo, was thus compelled to turn to the Congregation of Beuron for help. He immediately contacted the Abbess of St. Gabriel's Abbey in Prague; a reply was received offering to send a nun to act as novice mistress. Although this appeared an ideal solution, after some correspondence on the matter the offer was withdrawn: intriguingly no reason was given in the chronicles for this refusal.

Abbot Leo responded by flatly refusing to accept the decision of the Prague abbess. Recognizing this was probably his last chance, he made immediate plans to visit Beuron, intending to enlist the sympathies of the Archabbot who was the ecclesiastical superior of the Prague nuns. Accompanied by Father Michael Barrett, Abbot Leo arrived in Beuron on 20 July, where he received a definitive answer from Prague, positively declining any help. The abbess had clearly refused to be intimidated and had persuaded the Archabbot of the rightness of her decision (for whatever reason). Fortunately, on the diplomatic advice from the Archabbot, Abbot Leo was persuaded to make application to the Prioress of Chiemsee in Bavaria, whose large community was said to be more in sympathy with Beuron. Opposition was feared from the Archbishop of Munich who was reported to be averse to too much Beuronese influence in any community under his jurisdiction. However, Abbot Leo to his great relief found the Archbishop not only willing but anxious to help, even suggesting which nun should be sent! deeming it a gain for the Chiemsee community. On arrival at Chiemsee he found the Prioress entirely in favour of the proposal, but instead of following the Archbishop's advice chose a Frau Anselma Glaw, as more suitable for the task of novice mistress. The next morning the three started back together, arriving at Fort Augustus on 6 August. Abbot Leo had every reason to be elated having finally and successfully not only secured the loan of a novice mistress, but one of the Beuron Congregation, in the face of a certain (if understandable) inflexibility from the Benedictine establishments in Britain and total rejection from their Lordships.

On 11 August 1892 the eight postulants and Dame Anselma Glaw, bade farewell to St. Benedict's Abbey and after vespers and benediction, walked up the hill together and entered the priory. The enclosure began that day; the first novitiate started on the 8 September 1892 when five of the choir postulants were clothed. On 6 February 1893 the priory was canonically erected under the jurisdiction of the Abbot of Fort Augustus. Later that year on 8 September, four remaining novices, Sisters' Scholastica, Placid, Gertrude and Hildegarde, pronounced the final vows that made them permanent members of the community, promising obedience, conversion of manners and stability in this place called St. Scholastica's Priory, before God and in the presence of His saints whose relics are here present....'. Sister Magdalen took her simple vows the following year. Before returning to her Abbey at Chiemsee on 7 May 1894 Dame Anselma Glaw, was able to witness the final profession of another choir-novice, Sister Agnes von Dieckhoff. The day after her departure Abbot Leo appointed Sister Scholastica Weld, as the Mother

Prioress of St. Scholastica's Priory (for life) The 'sister monastery' was now well established, German constitutions were adopted and -- for the present -- German rule prevailed. Abbot Leo's high risk gamble had finally paid off.

SOURCES

Chiefly: St. Scholastica's community chronicles (1891-1894), housed in Downside Abbey Archives.

Other sources:

Fort Augustus Abbey Archives, Manuscript History (R.R. Dom Leo Linse, Obituary 1910).

Manuscript History, from Archives belonging to St. Benedict's Priory, now St. Mary's Abbey, Colwich. Extracts dealing with Atherstone and Fort Augustus in the year 1891.

Columba House Archives, Edinburgh. Manuscript History; including some correspondence between Abbot Linse and the Bishop of Aberdeen.

Information on the Weld family, mainly from archives belonging to Squire de Lisle, Quenby Hall, Hungarton. Leics.

Information taken from archives dated (1872 onwards at Fort Augustus) in possession of the Convent of Mercy, Elgin, Moray.

Highland Council Archivist, Inverness. Valuation Rolls, (1891-1892) and Census of Fort Augustus Abbey, in the Parish of Boleskine and Abertarff. April 1891.