

FR ABBOT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

This edition of Pluscarden Benedictines should reach you in the run-up to Easter. May that feast be for all of us what it is meant to be and can be!

Our Fr Prior, Dom Giles, who will be keeping the silver jubilee of his profession in August, has been spending 6 weeks at St Mary's monastery, Petersham. I myself was able to visit the brethren there in the second half of January. The resident community numbers 6, and, though small, is sturdy and united and full of promise. Two monks of Pluscarden, Frs Anselm and Bede, are contributing much. Another monk of Pluscarden's contribution – that of Fr Ambrose in Ghana – has proved so vital that he has generously accepted to stay on and help that other young and promising community. So there are now monks of Pluscarden on 3 continents.

Meanwhile at home, we look forward to the jubilee of our own re-foundation in 1948. The first 5 monks arrived on 13 April, and we will mark the day by a private, domestic celebration. The public celebration, as already known, will be on 8 September, Our Lady's birthday, and the 50th anniversary of the monastery's official opening. By a happy coincidence, 1998 is also the centenary of the first Mass celebrated in the Priory since the Reformation. The celebrant was Dom David Oswald Hunter-Blair of Fort Augustus, later Abbot, and his congregation consisted of the Marquess and Marchioness of Bute who had recently acquired the property. Dom Mark Dilworth, who in his turn has been an abbot of Fort Augustus, has kindly agreed to celebrate our

Conventual Mass on the actual centenary day, 5 May.

A new organ is one projected enhancement to our liturgy. Another has been the installation of a – hopefully discreet public address system. The shape and size of our church can make the hearing of both readings and homilies difficult, especially for the hard of hearing. Thanks to the generosity of Mr and Mrs Hugh Bradley of Glasgow, this difficulty is now overcome. A loop has been installed, and microphones are now at the disposal of lectors and homilists. The readings at Vigils, given in the choir, have become audible to those in the side chapels.

Our novitiate is being quietly blessed. Paul Cole from New Zealand was “initiated” as a novice on 7 December, receiving the name of Br Thomas. We have 2 postulants, and others due for a trial around Easter.

Finally, thanks are due to Rev. Kay Gauld and Local Councillor Mrs Jenna Shaw for talks to the community shedding light on two mysterious subjects, the early chapters of Genesis and the workings of local government respectively.

May this Easter and its wonderful 50 days take us deeper into the life and mystery of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Yours in Christ,

+ *Dom Hugh Abbot*

THE EDITOR’S JOTTINGS

In August 1938 I had to light a fire and was given a newspaper – *The Birmingham Mail*, Tuesday, August 2 1938, where I noticed a picture of a ruined church and the heading *Pluscarden Abbey, near Elgin, photo Mrs E M Booty*. I cut it out thinking it would not be difficult to make a drawing of the reconstructed building. I still have it. I had never heard of Pluscarden before and never imagined I would one day be involved in its restoration.

The Marquess of Bute had brought the property in 1897 and on 5 May 1898 arranged for mass to be offered in the little chapel above the Lady Chapel by Fr David Oswald Hunter-Blair of Fort Augustus. The occasion was recorded in a painting which we reproduce here. On 5 May this year Abbot Mark Dilworth of Fort Augustus will sing the Mass here to mark the centenary of this important occasion, which ended the silence of 400 years.

Incidentally, this year is the bicentenary of a similar restoration in Elgin. Around 1798 Fr John Farqueson bought land in Elgin and built a tiny chapel. A hundred years earlier Fr John Paul Jamieson was sent from Strathbogie to open a mission in Elgin but the following year he was captured and imprisoned in Elgin and then in Aberdeen.

It was another 50 years before Lord Bute's son, Lord Colum Crichton-Stuart, was able to find a religious community to take on Pluscarden. And so on 13 April 1948 the five pioneers arrived from Prinknash to take over the ruins. The Wolf of Badenoch is rather unfairly blamed for the destruction of the monastery in 1390. In fact the damage was repaired and monastic life continued until the Reformation Parliament of 1560. It was then that the roofs were stripped and the walls became a quarry. Broken altar sections with their consecration crosses are in an aumbry in the transepts. There was a headless statue of Our Lady on the nave foundations some years ago, now probably on someone's rockery.

The monks "day room" – now our refectory – had been fitted up as the village Kirk by Earl of Fife in 1820 but now Lord Bute gave land in the village on which to build the present Kirk. One week after the "centenary mass" the foundation stone of the Kirk was laid on 12 May 1898. Mary Gordon, granddaughter of the Minister records, "Both the Duke of Fife and the Marquess of Bute had shown the greatest courtesy and kindliness." The Kirk was opened for worship on 3 December the same year.

Pluscarden's 768 years of history is put into the shade by that of Minster Abbey which was founded c 670. The nuns would

have known Archbishop Lanfranc who sent the first Benedictine monks to Dunfermline and to Urquhart near Elgin from Canterbury. We welcome the nuns of Minster into our Congregation. Perhaps one day they will come to Moray.

Your Editor

Dom Alfred

NEWS FROM ST MARY'S

Letter from America – by Dom Giles Conacher

This report from St Mary's Monastery comes from a fresh and unbiased pen (all right, computer); perhaps it would also be fair to state that this same observer is also inexperienced, having been on these western shores for less than a week.

The trip from Boston is through wooded country which is not quite rolling, at this season there are few leaves on the trees, and I am told that this is a mild season. We have had a few minor snowfalls, and the temperature falls considerably at nights. The ground is hard and frost-bound, the grass a sere and lifeless brown; there is a small pond in front of the Sisters' house, where there is no sedge to wither, and bird-song is fairly limited. There are tits at work on the interstices of the trees, raucous and brightly coloured blue jays are evident, ducks quack where there is open water, woodpeckers tap reclusively in the upper branches of trees, and the occasional raptor is audible. Quadrupeds are limited to gray squirrels and dogs, so far.

There is plenty of snow about, and on unploughed roads is deep enough to impede progress – I had thought it would become névé with cycles of frost and thaw, and be walkable – or perhaps I am too heavy. The trails through the woods are graced with the name of *roads*, which reflects the fact that at an earlier period, this

was a densely-settled area, which the trees have since reclaimed, leaving networks of stone walls as mute witness of the earlier period. The settlers exhausted the soil and then moved West, to where land was cheap and plentiful, as well as easier to work.

The monks' monastery is a former coach-house, later garage, as is shown by the presence in unexpected places of up-and-over doors, and the process of adaptation has resulted in some unconventionally shaped rooms. It is joined to the Sisters' former bakery, a modern industrial building which houses their Refectory and kitchen plus the joint library, offices and so on. There is plenty of space, but in order to make fruitful use of it, quite a lot of work is required. There is not much grace or favour about the material side of some of their living space.

This is only to be expected in the early years. When there were but five at Pluscarden, as Br Andrew used to say, then life truly deserved the title, *Primitive Observance*. St Mary's is way beyond that stage, and I look forward with pleasure and interest to the next few weeks of my stay with them.

BENEDICTINE SISTERS IN FRANCE

A letter from the Abbot of Fleury

In 1960, our Benedictine Sisters left the centre of Orleans to establish themselves on the outskirts, in an area of Saint-Jeande-Braye which was then countryside. Thirty-seven years later, the city has caught up with them, with its noise and other nuisances.

They are now forced to move anew to find the normal living conditions suitable to a salutary monastic existence. They have found a quality location, in a protected site at the edge of Orlean's national forest, 10 km away from our monastery. By drawing closer to us they are fulfilling an old project which has been considered several times over the last century; locating monastic Benedictines near the relics of our Father Saint Benedict.

The material and spiritual motives behind this transfer are

serious. Our sisters have taken their decision after long and careful thought, and the ground plans of the new monastery, both sober and functional, have been drawn up meticulously.

This being the case, I can only but urge you to provide your financial assistance for this transfer, as the sale of the current buildings and land will only cover one sixth of the cost of the construction work. In their name, allow me to express my heartfelt gratitude.

Fr Etienne Ricaud
Abbot of Fleury

BEE JUBILEE

1 June 1998 is a date which ought not to be passed over in silence, for it marks the 50th Anniversary of the Return of the Bees to Pluscarden. That the pre-Reformation monks kept bees here is certain, because their bee-boles stand intact in our ancient enclosure wall. During the early summer of 1948, our five pioneer monks were in residence, working hard to prepare for the formal restoration of monastic observance on 8 September. On 1 June of that year, as the annals recount, Donald Grant brought a swarm of bees he had taken, and set them up in a straw skep in one of the original boles. Thus were re-established the first monastic bees at Pluscarden since the Reformation. Br Andrew was the monk given the task of looking after them. The annals go on to mark 21 September as another significant date. "Today we ate our own honey for the first time, straight from the comb. The bee-industry is beginning to be developed."

As we know, the monks stayed, and prospered. So did the bees. Donald Grant had his own small apiary at the Lodge, and he continued to donate swarms to the monks. Our bees progressed from straw skeps to more modern wooden hives, though these were still mostly home-made. Jim McBean from Elgin also frequently lent a hand, in those early days, and oversaw the

production of honey for sale in the monastery shop. Abbot (then Prior) Alfred took over responsibility for the bees from Br Andrew in the 1960s. He expanded the apiary by establishing a couple of out-stations, using the excellent Modified Dadant hives which had been sent up from Prinknash.

50 years on, and the Pluscarden monks still keep bees, and still sell their honey in the shop. It is pleasing to think that this, our first monastic “industry” continues, despite all the changes in the community and the environment. Not everything, of course, has changed. Donald Grant’s daughter Helen still lives at the Lodge. Jim McBean’s younger brother Donald, recently retired as President of the Morayshire Beekeepers’ Association, still regularly visits our apiary. The old hives are still perfectly serviceable, and still in use.

Unfortunately, on the horizon is the dreaded Varroa mite, making its way inexorably North. It is likely to be with us within the next year or so. Left to itself, it could wipe out every honey bee in the country. But it can be controlled, to a certain extent. Given sufficient care, there is no reason to despair of the bees’ continued activity for our benefit and pleasure, for another 50 years, and beyond.

DBH

PROGRESS ON THE NEW PIPE ORGAN

Work continues on our pipe organ at the workshop of Kenneth Tickell. The soundboard, swell-shutters, all the wooden pipes, the framework, key-action and pedal-board are all complete; and the rest of the woodwork is prepared. The carver has also begun work on the pipe-shades. Completion is scheduled for the end of July.

Dr John Rowntree, of the Organ Advisory Group of the Society of Saint Gregory, has been an important contributor to the whole project. It was he who made the initial appraisal of our situation and guided us through the different possibilities of design

and choice of builder. The Advisory Group, established in the early 1970s by John East, performs an invaluable function in the Church, giving expert guidance on pipe organs, new and second-hand, as well as restoration work. Unlike many professional Organ Consultancies, they are specifically sensitive to the needs of the Catholic liturgy and are careful to maintain independence from the building trade itself. Details of the service may be found in the current Catholic Directory, or from Dr Rowntree himself at 01635 44630.

We have been greatly encouraged by all the donations to the project so far; and any further donations will be most welcome as work continues over the next six months.

PLUSCARDEN TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA A PILGRIMAGE

Rupert Furze, a friend of the community, is a Chartered Surveyor and worked for twenty five years in private practice as a valuation surveyor. When the firm he worked for was bought out by a national chain of Estate Agents, he decided to take a job with The Church of England Children's Society, where he looks after the property they occupy throughout England and Wales.

Why Santiago?

It is strange how ideas develop. I think that it was the vision of King John (who, you will remember, was not a good king) climbing all those stone steps at Rocamadour on his knees that started it.

It was the last summer holiday on which it was certain that Chloe and I and our three boys would all be together before they began to fly the nest. We had rented a lovely old farmhouse from friends and had spent three glorious weeks in France, in the Lot. From there we not only visited Rocamadour, that picturesque town

built into a cliff which has long been a centre of pilgrimage, but also many other fascinating walled towns in the area dating from the same period.

Why shouldn't I, like King John, do a pilgrimage through France, visiting these lovely places and enjoying the architecture, food, wine and sunshine, I wondered?

The idea began to develop and after a time I expanded my ambitions to take in the route across mountainous northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela, one of the major pilgrim routes of the middle ages. The *Camino* as it is known, starts in the Pyrenees and is fed by four main routes through France, starting at Paris, Vezelay, Le Puy and Arles respectively. Each route provided a focus for the pilgrims of the Middle Ages who joined them from all over Europe, coming together at the Pyrenees to journey on to Santiago. Today many people are following their example and the pilgrimage routes are becoming popular again.

As I would not have time to walk I decided to do the journey by bicycle. A third means of transport is acceptable to the authorities in Santiago and that is the horse! Whichever one chooses, foot, horse or bicycle, vehicular support is not allowed. A pilgrim must be self-sufficient in order to be awarded the *Compostela*.

St James of Santiago is St James the Great of the Gospels, one of the second pair of brothers called by Jesus to be his disciples (the first were Peter and Andrew, followed by James and John). After Pentecost James was supposed to have evangelised Spain and, after his martyrdom in Jerusalem, his remains are said to have been transported back to Spain and buried on the site of the cathedral that is now in the centre of Santiago. Much of the story may be apocryphal but the very veneration of thousands upon thousands of pilgrims over many hundreds of years makes this a truly special and holy place. Santiago, then, was to be my destination on this journey, but where was I to start?

Why Pluscarden?

Having decided that Santiago was the goal of my pilgrimage, I began to plan the transport for me and my bicycle to Le Puy, where I had chosen to start. It then struck me that a true pilgrim must surely set out from his or her own front door and complete the whole journey from there, not fudge the issue by travelling part of the way in comfort and then following the most scenic route.

That decision made, practicalities took over. I had scarcely ridden a cycle for thirty five years. I am not a small man and I would need one strong enough to safely carry me and the necessary kit for the whole journey – including tent, cooking pots and so on. I would need practice and I would need to have a trial run. Then the final decision was made – I would start at our old home in the north of Scotland and use the stage from there to our present home in Northamptonshire as that trial.

Shortly after Chloe and I were first married, we settled in the north of Scotland in Nairnshire, near Inverness, and lived there for thirteen years or so before deciding to move back to the South. Every year we take our holidays in Nairn (except for the very occasional holiday abroad) and I decided that this year I would simply cycle the 500 miles or so home after the holiday to test myself and my equipment and then, next year, complete the journey from here down to the Channel, across to France, and on to Santiago.

Close to our former home in Scotland, in a lovely valley, is a medieval Abbey. Pluscarden was a flourishing monastery in earlier times or at least was until a character called The Wolf of Badenoch set fire to Elgin Cathedral. On his way home he called in and destroyed most of the Abbey at Pluscarden as well. For years it lay mouldering picturesquely until, after the war, the monks of Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire sent up five monks to get the place going again. Their efforts have been wonderfully rewarded and the Abbey now houses a thriving community of white-clad, Benedictine monks.

Pluscarden Abbey is the most northern monastery in

Britain, another good reason for choosing it as the place from which to start the first leg of my pilgrimage. So, on a wet and misty morning at the beginning of August 1996, Fr Giles, the Prior, stamped my pilgrim record (required by the authorities in Santiago) with a wonderful 14th century stamp. He, with Chloe and our youngest son Robert, then saw me off into the rain and the hills of the Spey valley, towards the Grampians and the Lecht, one of the highest road passes in the UK.

I survived, although when I saw the road from Tomintoul, the highest town in Britain, to Cock Bridge I was sorely tempted to give up or find an easier way! It was a fascinating journey, full of incident and despite the bad weather and 500 miles expanding inexplicably to become 661 (from Pluscarden to home), I proved that I could pedal that far, still sleep on the hard ground in my tent and so stand a reasonable chance of getting to Santiago. But why?

Why Pilgrimage?

All the time I was deliberating upon my route, the concept of pilgrimage was growing in my mind. What started out as a bit of a “jolly” began to change. The pilgrimage routes are strung with the most wonderful examples of Romanesque architecture. It is clear from those whom I have met who have made the pilgrimage on foot or by bicycle that whatever one’s initial intentions, the journey becomes more than a mere cultural tour and develops a distinct spiritual character of its own.

What effect was this journey going to have on me and my family? For those effects to be positive I had to take the matter seriously, to decide what a pilgrimage meant to me and what I intended to achieve by it.

My understanding is that pilgrimage involves an element of penance – of paying for one’s inadequacies by a period of hardship. I hoped that the adjustment necessary to cope with the way of life of a pilgrim might help me focus my attention away from everyday pressures and onto more fundamental questions and issues. The space that I hoped to find as a result of this adjustment

would, I was sure, make me more conscious of my spiritual life and thereby strengthen the support that I can give my family, friends and colleagues.

I felt that if my pilgrimage achieved no more than that, it would be well worth the time and effort. The very act of journeying to a chosen goal might help me to determine my own longer term aims and ambitions and achieving one goal might help me, upon my return, to achieve others. Life itself, of course, is just another journey towards an equally certain destination and in the same way that I would discover challenges to overcome in order to reach Santiago, so the journey might help me to see what other challenges are ahead of me and give me the determination to meet them.

It was becoming clear, all this time, that this was too good an opportunity to miss to raise money for the Church of England Children's Society (for whom I work) and also the Catholic Children's Society as well. I have a deep conviction that unless we all, men and women, French and English, Protestant and Catholic, Christian and Muslim, learn how to celebrate our differences whilst accepting at the same time that we are all one in the sight of God and must act accordingly in love towards one another, there is little future for any of us. An appeal on behalf of both Societies is a small gesture in support of ecumenism and of that concept of the need to work together.

It was clear that I would have little to give my sponsors in return for their cash, except the prayers that I would offer for them upon my arrival at Santiago and the assurance that their money will be well spent, in support of children and young people who are truly in need and who do not enjoy the options available to most of us.

Journey's end?

So, with a waterproof tent this time, I set out again in late June 1997, on the second and last leg of the journey. Just up the road from my home is a little village called Thurning with a church

dedicated to St James, so I arranged with the vicar to make a brief stop there in order to start my pilgrimage on the right foot, so to speak.

To my complete surprise an impressive congregation, including school children, turned out at 7.30 in the morning to join in pilgrim prayers and send me on my way – an inspiring and emotional start to my journey. (I am not sure that they were too confident in my ability to get to Santiago, however, as I only just got to Thurning in time, having taken a wrong turning on my way!) From Thurning I went first to St Alban's Abbey and then to Marlow, where I was allowed to inspect the relic which is reputed to be the hand of St James himself and which was venerated at Reading Abbey before it was hidden when the abbey was demolished by Henry VIII. From Reading I travelled south to Portsmouth and took the ferry to Caen. After visiting the two wonderful Romanesque abbeys there, I carried on to Tours, where I joined the historic pilgrimage route which starts in Paris and leads on to Santiago.

The Paris route is little used by modern pilgrims as much of it is now fast, major roads and motorways. However I managed to devise a route which took in many of the medieval pilgrim centres but avoided the heavy traffic. The wonderful churches, particularly that dedicated to St Hilaire in Poitiers, the monastic churches at Melles and the church at Aulnay with its fantastic carvings, make me determined to explore the route again at a later date. At the Pyrenees the Paris route joins those from Vezelay and Le Puy and then, once over the mountains, the fourth, most southern route from Arles also joins what has by then become the *Camino Frances*. This route from France to Santiago crosses an impressive part of Spain, wide, sparsely populated plains and high (5,000 feet) mountain ranges. All along the way are reminders of the history of the pilgrimage, magnificent Romanesque churches, monasteries and medieval bridges.

After cycling 2,165 miles from Pluscarden, Santiago might

have been a disappointment. Early in the season, it was wonderful. Galicia, the region of Spain in which it is situated, is wet – swept with the winds and clouds of the Atlantic to which it is open from the north and west. The climate adds a distinctive character to the magnificent architecture of the old city, cloaking the granite towers of the Cathedral with moss and lichen, softening them and adding subtleties of colour to the texture of the stone. By chance I was lucky to witness the rare sight of the giant censor, the botafumeiro, swung like a flying bonfire across the north and south transepts to the full height of the triforium.

I arrived two days ahead of Chloe and Robert. They had come out to meet me after doing their own mini pilgrimage through Burgos and Leon, experiencing almost as many adventures on their shorter journey as had I on my longer one. It was then, literally and figuratively, that the sun came out and Chloe, Robert and I had a wonderful few days, exploring Santiago, travelling back to Santander in a hired car and taking the ferry home.

When people ask what effect the journey has had on me I find it very difficult to answer and it will perhaps be some time before I know. I certainly found the space for myself that I wanted but four weeks on my own, camping or using hostels was very lonely and with the loneliness came unexpected swings of mood. There were times when things weren't going well and I became quite depressed and other times, when the sun shone (sadly not very often) and the countryside was particularly attractive, when I felt truly exhilarated and felt a real joy in the wonder of creation around me and gratitude for my part in it. I don't mind whether St James' bones are there in Santiago or not, I would give a lot to be back in front of that simple silver casket, in the very early morning when no-one else is about, experiencing again the very special relationship that I felt that I had established with him during the ups and downs of my pilgrimage.

My appeal on behalf of the two children's societies was made basically to my family, friends, colleagues and neighbours.

With a job to do and a trip to plan and organise, I had no time to approach companies or other corporate sources of sponsorship. The total appeal presently stands at over £11,000 – every penny of which will go to the two societies as I have, with some kind help, met my expenses from my own resources. I am staggered and humbled by people's generosity and would like to say "thank you" again to all those who have supported me.

MONASTERIES OF THE SUBIACO CONGREGATION NO 72
The English Province No 13
St Mildred's Priory, Minster Abbey, Kent

The first monastery at Minster-in-Thanel, Kent, was founded in 670AD, a few miles from the place where St Augustine first landed. The founding abbess, St Domneva, was a princess of the royal house of Kent and great grand-daughter of King Ethelbert. Domneva's daughter Mildred, entered the monastery and, together with 70 others, was consecrated by St Theodore of Canterbury around the year 685. Venerated during her lifetime, she became one of the best-loved Anglo-Saxon saints and is the Patron Saint of the Isle of Thanet. Mildred was succeeded by St Edburga, a friend of St Boniface; she supported him in his missionary work by sending vestments and copies of the scriptures (cf *Bonifatii Epistulae* esp No 10, 30 & 35).

The following centuries saw several invasions by the Vikings and Minster was raided and rebuilt repeatedly until it was finally destroyed in the late 10th century. In 1027 the land was granted to the Abbey of St Augustine's in Canterbury and the monks re-established a small monastery at Minster as a dependent house. The present buildings date from that period.

After the Reformation the house became a private dwelling for 400 years until it was bought by the Benedictine Abbey of St Walburga, in Eichstatt, Bavaria. This contact was initiated by Dom Bede Winslow OSB, a monk of St Augustine's Abbey, Ramsgate,

(Thanet).

The motherhouse, founded in 1035 over the shrine of St Walburga (another Anglo-Saxon saint who had followed St Boniface into the German missions) was under threat from the Nazi regime – after an unbroken monastic tradition of 900 years. Minister was purchased on 25 March 1937 as a possible place of refuge.

Today Benedictine life at St Mildred's Priory is marked by simplicity, prayer and hospitality. The essence of our life is the silent outreach through prayer, praise and conversion.

Our life is lived in harmony with all of God's creation. Work in the gardens, the kitchens and the farm express respect and responsibility for the earth entrusted to our care. Our guesthouse provides space for individual retreatants and numerous groups to discover the presence of God in their lives. Guests from all denominations join us for the celebration of the Prayer of the Church. In our praying together and listening to the Word of God we find a unity which goes beyond the divisions between our Churches. We try to be open to those who come to us for help, guidance and friendship. All these contacts enrich our lives.

The community is conscious of a great debt of gratitude to the motherhouse, to the commitment of the pioneering sisters of this foundation and the support of the Benedictine community of St Augustine's Abbey.

On 1 November 1996 St Mildred's Priory was granted Independence by the abbess of St Walburga, Lady Abbess Franziska Kloos OSB. The Abbey of St Walburga and the Priory of St Mildred wish to ensure the continued link with the spirit of St Walburga and St Mildred. We have been encouraged to promote the rich monastic tradition we have inherited.

On 6 December 1997 the Priory of St Mildred was aggregated to the Subiaco Congregation of the Order of St Benedict.