

ABBOTSLEIGH PRIORY 1861-2018





Introduction

Welcome to the sixth, and final, volume of *The Abbotskerswell Village History Series*, I hope that when you have read this volume you will agree with me that it is most remarkable of them all.

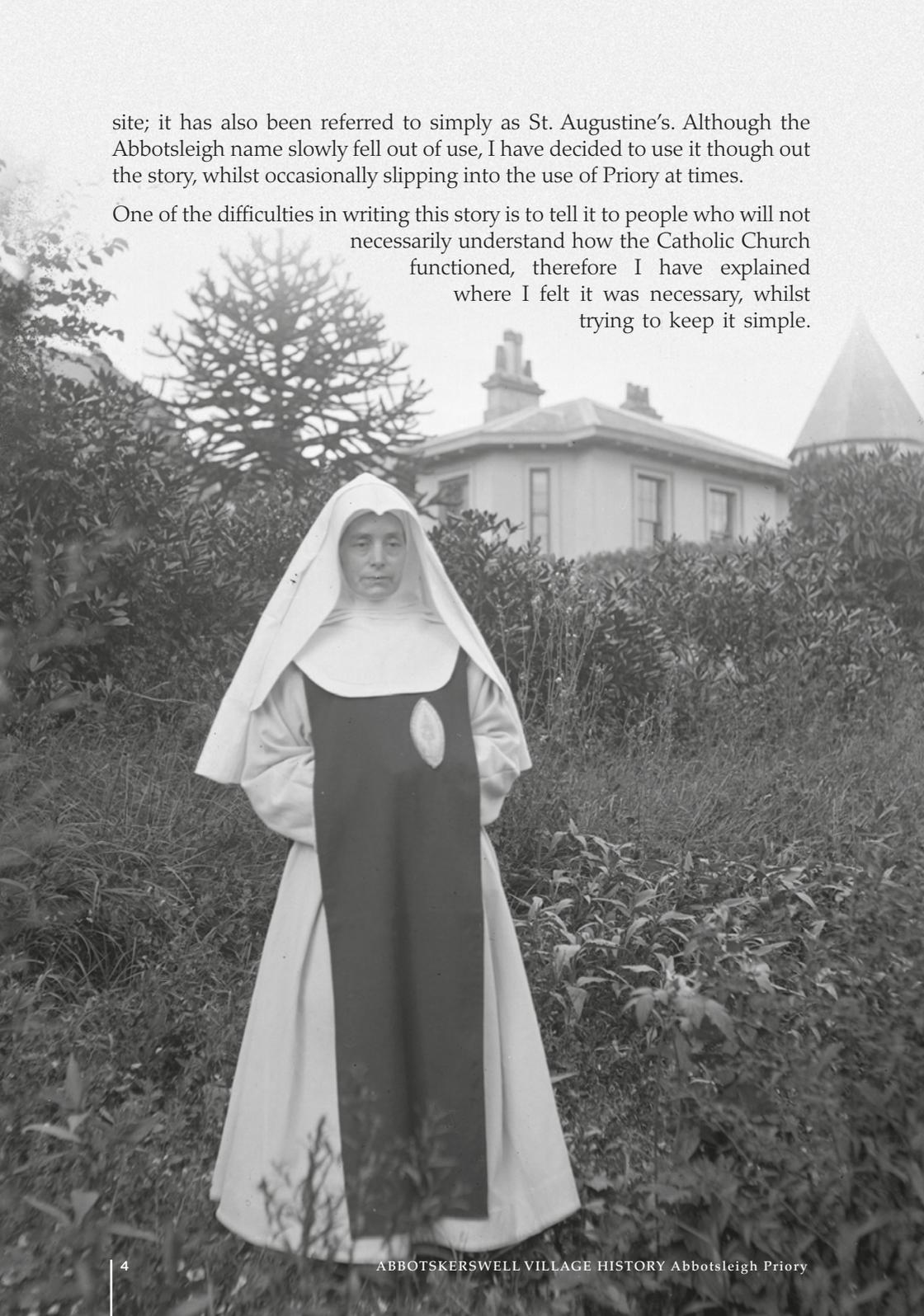
When I wrote the chapter about The Priory in *3. Religion & Education* I had no idea of what a fantastic story actually existed. After Peter Brown wrote his history for the Priory Residents Association, it occurred to me that he, we and Geoffrey Watts before us, all had in reality written a history of the buildings; and interesting as they are, they are only a small part of the story. I do not know why, but I felt that there was a bigger, more worthwhile story to tell about the Order, the Sisters and the buildings, and so it has proved.

Unlike the facts in other publications AbbPast has produced, this story was buried deep in archives; largely ones that had rarely been opened, and as you will see, some were actually sealed for decades at the behest of the Catholic Bishop of Plymouth. The Catholic Diocesan Archive in Exeter and the Priory Archive at Douai Abbey have slowly revealed what may well be a unique story in the history of British convents. I have to thank Sister Benignus at Exeter and Abbot Geoffrey at Douai for their fantastic support in helping me to unravel, and tell this story; I hope they feel I have been faithful in my story telling, I have tried to be.

In Abbotskerswell this institution was always simply known as The Priory, or for some older residents The Nunnery, but it soon became clear that this was probably not accurate. When it was created it was known as Abbotsleigh Priory, a derivation of the name of the original house that stood on the

site; it has also been referred to simply as St. Augustine's. Although the Abbotsleigh name slowly fell out of use, I have decided to use it though out the story, whilst occasionally slipping into the use of Priory at times.

One of the difficulties in writing this story is to tell it to people who will not necessarily understand how the Catholic Church functioned, therefore I have explained where I felt it was necessary, whilst trying to keep it simple.



When referring to the nuns at Abbotsleigh I generally chose to refer to them as Sisters, and used the abbreviation Sr., with the term Mother being used for the senior nuns. I also only use their religious names, for greater detail look in *Appendix 6*.

Great finds in the archives of Newton Abbot Museum and the Plymouth Diocesan Archive were many photographs that have never been made public before. 140 glass negatives, probably taken in the early 20th century by Sister Mary Alphonsus Lambert, were unearthed and they gave an amazing insight into daily life. Thanks to our once again obtaining a Heritage Lottery Grant, these have been cleaned, scanned and saved as digital files and I am certain that they will be well used in the future. I have to thank the two institutions for giving us permission to retrieve, and to have first use of them. Other photograph collections from Exeter and Douai from later in the 20th Century have also given us a genuine feel for life in an enclosed order.



Without giving the story away you will find that the story of Sr. Mary Benedict Keon is vital to Abbotsleigh and for that reason I show the 'Profession' written by her in the 1860s. You will learn why this is so important later, and to a historian it is quite brilliant.

The picture on the back of this volume shows a painting of Sr. Mary Benedict, created by Sr. Agnes Teresa, it is truly remarkable and its story is told later. The front cover features another of Sr. Agnes Teresa's paintings, as well as a painting of Sr. Mary Benedict.

As always, it is vital that I thank everybody who made this volume possible, especially all my colleagues at AbbPast, for their support and help in producing the entire series. Thank you Felicity, Nick and Trish, it was fun. I also need to thank Felicity and Tess at Newton Abbot Museum and Shirley Buckley at The Priory for their help. Also to all the villagers who gave their time willingly to tell me what they remember of their visits to Abbotsleigh, it made the place become real in my mind. This series of publications would not be the same without the brilliant design work of Kim Waldron at Kingfisher Design and Print, and all the team there; I thank you all and will miss dropping in to see you.

Peter Wade

Chapter 1

The Augustinian Rule

The story of Abbotsleigh Priory, or should it simply be 'The Nunnery', as older villagers prefer, begins in the 4th century AD when the work of St. Augustine of Hippo made him one of the earliest, and most influential, Christian theologians and philosophers. During the first millennium his followers created the Augustinian Order, of which there were different forms. They followed the Rule of St. Augustine, written about the year 400, which came to stand for a detachment from the world through chastity, poverty and obedience; this required fraternal charity, prayer in common, fasting and abstinence proportionate to the strength of the individual, care of the sick, silence and reading during meals.



The Canonesses Regular of St Augustine of Lateran

During the 12th century an Augustinian Order known as 'The Canonesses Regular' developed, with a commitment to the religious vows of pastoral care, their primary vocation. This meant observing St Augustine's Rule of not having personal belongings, but not the idea of corporate poverty. It should be noted that they were different to the Order of St Augustine. The Canonesses Regular were called 'canon' because the monks names were kept in a list known as a 'kanon', a Greek word meaning 'rule'. Observance of this Rule was approved for members of the clergy by the Council of Lateran, which was an ecclesiastical council, or synod, of the Catholic Church, held in the Lateran Palace in Rome. In England 54 houses of Canonesses Regular were established during 12th century

Soon groups of women also began to form, wanting to follow the Rule of St Augustine, hence becoming communities of Canonesses Regular, and dedicating themselves to various forms of social service, such as nursing or teaching. A priory was founded at Burnham Abbey for a community of Augustinian Canonesses in 1266, by Richard, Earl of Cornwall, brother of King Henry III.



The Abbey was built around a cloister, with a frater, church, guest house, kitchen and quarters for the nuns on two storeys. There was also an infirmary, which was in a separate building. The picture left shows the ruined abbey in 1819.

The Abbey continued to operate until it was closed, or to use the correct term suppressed, in 1539 during the Dissolution of the Monasteries. This was when Henry VIII took ownership of all Catholic land in Britain and declared himself head of the Church of England. In 1539 there was an Abbess and nine nuns at Burnham, and some of these nuns fled to the continent. By 1548 one of these nuns, Elizabeth Woodford, had entered the Convent of St. Ursula at Louvain in Flanders, where she was soon joined by other English nuns.



Some years later Margaret Clement (shown left), the adopted daughter of the statesman Sir Thomas More, joined the Convent. More was executed in 1535 because he refused to support Henry VIII's break with Rome. In devotion to her Catholic faith and to its followers, she risked her life by helping Carthusian monks, some of whom starved to death in prison for refusing to renounce their faith. In the mid-1500s she was elected Prioress of the Convent, which at that time had nearly 80 members. Twenty

five other English ladies were professed (their public profession, or vow, of obedience) in the years up to 1606; many the daughters and sisters of Catholic martyrs. In 1609 a separate convent to St. Ursula's was founded nearby, to cater for this English community; this was St. Monica's Convent, which added a Ladies School and flourished in the 18th century. Between 1609 and 1794 there were 157 additional professions. The first Prioress was Mother Wiseman; *Appendix 1* shows a full list of the pre-Abbotsleigh Prioresses of the Order.

However, in 1794, during the 'French Revolution', the approach of the Republicans, with their anti-clericalism, made the English nuns flee from Flanders. They decided to take refuge in England, since religious toleration had grown sufficiently for the Order to return home after over two centuries in exile. They left the convent on 28 June and boarded a ship at Rotterdam on the 5 July, reaching Greenwich on the 17 July 1794. A letter from one of the nuns, Sister Stanislaus, to her sister, describes the journey:

Sept 8th 1794

My dearest sister,

We left dear Louvain that lamentable day, ye 28th of June. We were forced to quit our beloved convent, 47 in number; 21 nuns, 4 priests, 12 lay-sisters, 4 pensioners, 3 servants, and a young lady. We had 4 wagons to be crushed into, so you may imagine we were finely crowded..... From thence we went in a barge to Rotterdam. I think our misery in the barge exceeded that of the wagons. At Rotterdam we stayed a week.....thence we took shipping, which was going from one misery to another still greater..... We landed at Gravesend, where we rested ourselves one night, being, as you may imagine, most heartily tired. The day after we set off again by water for Hammersmith, where we arrived all safe, but wearied out of our lives. We are here very different indeed to what we were at Louvain. We are obliged to be three or four in a room, very much pinched for place, and many other inconveniences. However, we must resign ourselves to the will of God; I doubt not but He will support us under the pressure of our afflictions. It is the greatest cross He could have sent us excepting being under the French.¹

The Order's Chronicle tells a similar story of the harrowing journey to Mechlin and onto Lierre "where the good Teresians gave us a most kind reception and took us into their convent"². (This Carmelite Order was also fleeing and eventually found a home in Darlington.) The next day a dusty journey was made to Hoghstorh, where local people put them up in their houses; that night there were four fleeing Orders in the town. Their wagons continued on to Breda where "the inhabitants thereof behaved to us in a manner beyond praise ..."³ Having reached Rotterdam they spent eight days at The Golden Lion waiting for the weather to improve, and then Captain Shepherd took them to England aboard his ship *The Flora*, charging them £100.

They moved on to Hammersmith, being in a "piteous plight"⁴, but they were immediately welcomed by the local Catholic community, with the Right Rev. Dr. Douglas and friends showing them great kindness. Like a good number of Catholic communities in Europe they returned 'home' after 250 years in exile, and a whole new existence awaited them all.

Chapter 2

The English Convents

The nuns returned to England as refugee celebrities, used by the English aristocracy as proof of how vile the French revolutionaries were; in May 1795 they even received a visit from the Prince of Wales. For six months they lived in a convent in Hammersmith, supported by the English Catholic community, but since the chapel was a public one it was impossible for them to function as they wanted to.

They next found a home at Abbey House in Amesbury in Wiltshire, which they leased, and where they established another school for young ladies. They moved to Amesbury on 1 January 1795 and resumed their Singing Office and Midnight Office, as well as all their usual duties. However, Amesbury, though spacious, also had its problems, with the chapel once again being a public one. The local community recited the Divine Office chorally, with an organ accompaniment, which drew crowds to the services. It was whilst at Amesbury that they received a visit from the Prince of Wales (later George IV), with his wife, Catherine of Brunswick, and a large party of friends. However, this apparently aroused the resentment of the neighbouring families who had been ignored. One wonders if the nuns were aware of the Prince's reputation at that time!

Once again the difficulties of living at Amesbury, and their need to increase their income, made them decide to purchase a house. Their choice was Spetisbury House in Spetisbury (sometimes spelt Spettisbury), Dorsetshire, which was bought in the name of a Mrs Tunstall. Mrs Tunstall was the widow of Marmaduke Tunstall of Wycliffe Hall in Yorkshire and after his death in 1790, having no children, she lived in various religious houses; she used her wealth to support these houses.

The house, formerly called the Mansion House in 1800 passed from Francis Fane to Mrs. Tunstall who bought it for £3,150 for the English Augustinian Canonesses, who a few years before had returned from Louvain.¹



At this time there were restrictions on Catholics purchasing property in England, consequently Mrs Tunstall, with the approval of the Bishop, Dr. Gregory Sharrock, Vicar Apostolic of the Western District, bought the house on behalf

of the Augustinian Canonesses: "religious communities not then being sanctioned by Government we could not purchase it in our own names. She (Mrs. Tunstall) signed a declaration of trust acknowledging the property to belong to us".² The Order chose to revive the name of the Louvain Convent, consequently Spetisbury became known as St. Monica's Priory. As well as the name, they also brought with them a fabled relic, the hair shirt of Sir Thomas More which he had worn the day before his execution. Margaret Clement had taken the shirt to Louvain and it would stay with the Order until it closed in 1973. Today it is on show at Buckfast Abbey, as shown above.

In order that there should be no break in the choral life, part of the community, under the sub-prioress Sister Mary Frances Tancred, moved to Spetisbury first. They set about making the house suitable for both the Sisters and the school, whilst the rest remained at Amesbury. By 21 December 1800 the whole community had moved and resumed their conventional life in their new home. Part of the stable block was converted into a boarding school for 'young ladies', again run by the Sisters. In July 1822, at the request of Bishop Dr. Collingridge, they also started a school for poor girls of the village, which began with nine pupils.

When they moved to St Monica's Priory the Prioress of the Canonesses was Mother Mary Benedict Stonor; she had led them from Louvain and was Prioress from 1784 until 1811. At this time Prioresses were elected for life, with Mother Mary Frances Tancred being elected as her successor; the Augustinian Chronicles explain that "her example was above all powerful, very mild, charitable." When she died in 1818 Sister Mary Aloysia Joseph Tuite was elected to succeed her although she resigned owing to ill health in 1828, when Mother Mary Bernard Berington became the Prioress. The Chronicles description of her was that "her government was firm but most gentle, kind and considerate; and she sought to be a mother rather than a superior." She had been with St. Monica's for 42 years, having entered as a

16 year old pupil in 1806. She died suddenly of influenza in 1848, and the sub-prioress, Sister Mary Gabriel Poynter, was elected to replace her. She would later oversee huge changes for the Order.

In the 1830s a great deal of new building took place at St Monica's. A new chapel was built and a new school for the young ladies was built on the site of the old chapel. In 1840, after the deaths of two of the young ladies, they also added an infirmary.



The 1841 Census reveals a thriving community at St Monica's, with 32 Sisters, a schoolmistress, three servants and nine female boarders. The Sisters were aged from 21 to 79 years old, whilst the boarders, who were all female and presumably the young ladies who were being educated, were aged 8 to 17 years old. There were also four males: these were a clerk, a gardener and two priests. The 1851 Census is rather more detailed, and we learn that the 'Superioress' was Elizabeth Poynter, who was 50 years old and from Hadham in Hertfordshire. There were 34 Sisters, whose occupation was given as 'Sisterhood', a governess, and 17 scholars aged from 9 to 17 years old. There were also two priests at the 'Nunnery' (as the census enumerator called it), Edward Kenny and Thomas Lynch, who were both Irish. A schoolmistress, a servant, an annuitant (a retired boarder) and a gardener made up the staff.

During the 1850s the philosophy of St Monica's began to change, with the Sisters increasingly becoming interested in developing a greater devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. In September 1855 the Right Reverend Dr. Vaughan was consecrated as the first Catholic Bishop of Plymouth, and when he made his first visit to Spetisbury he "expressed a very great interest in all that concerned our community and of this he has ever since been pleased to give us the most convincing proofs"³. There can be no doubt that the support and encouragement from Bishop Vaughan would be crucial to the Order in the next 50 years. At the 1855 Feast of the Immaculate Conception the devotion of the Forty Hours was kept with great solemnity, and a large stone statue of 'Our Lady' was set up. It was following this time that the idea for the Sisters to give their lives to the Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament became a major point of discussion.

Sister Mary Benedict Keon

The role of one young Sister, Mary Benedict, is vital to the events that would occur in the next few years, and her story needs to be told. It must also be read with a clear understanding that it occurred in the mid-nineteenth century and not today, and we must avoid making modern judgements on the story that follows. The world of that time was very different, with people having much less understanding of their world, and inevitably that made the people more able to accept what happened. It was also a much more spiritual time, when most people were deeply rooted in the culture of their religion. For most English Christians this meant Anglican, Non-Conformist or Catholic.



Margaret Jane Keon was born 1830 in the family house of New Brook in Leitrim, Ireland; she was the fourth of Ferdinand and Margaret's eight children. The Keons were a wealthy, land owning Catholic family, noted for their probity and virtue. When Margaret was 14 years old she was sent to St Monica's Priory School at Spetisbury until she was 18, she was "remarkable for her sweetness of disposition, simplicity, and unaffected piety ..."⁴

Written on the back of this photograph was: "Last photo of our dear Sister Mary Benedict Keon taken in our infirmary dining room just before she died", therefore it was taken in 1863.

Margaret's health was never good, and at the end of her education she returned home to take the Irish air; but it was clear to her parents that she was strongly attracted to the religious life. Whilst at home a young gentleman of rank sought her hand in marriage, which pleased her family; however, this was not what Margaret wanted, she had set her heart on becoming a spouse of Jesus at St Monica's. Her family allowed her to decide her own future and at the age of 20 she returned to Spetisbury to begin her novitiate as a Choir Sister.

Margaret took the religious name of Mary Benedict and during her probation she was remarkable for her fervour, being amiable and having a joyous disposition; she took great delight in prayer and gave herself to God wholeheartedly. It was noted that: "outwardly she was but a simple artless young girl, with much of the vivacity and light heartedness of her country people. But inwardly God was, by secret and special touches of His grace drawing her nearer and nearer to that inner circle, composed of his most dear ones"⁵.

A contemporary of Sr. Mary Benedict, Sr. Mary Placida Souter, wrote an account of Sr. Mary Benedict's life: "She compiled 'The Life of S^r Mary Benedict' under Canon Agar's directions and from S^r M. Benedict's letters and manifestations to him."⁶ Sr. Souter's preface read:

The following sketch of the life of one who may be said to have lived and died a martyr of love for Jesus, her Divine Spouse. The perusal of her virtues, her trials, sufferings, her mortifications and her life of intimate union with Jesus Christ, may enliven the faith of souls consecrated to God and enkindle in them a love for the Blessed Sacrament, and moreover will show to the world, that Jesus is a living God: that he really lives and works in the soul.⁷

On 9 November 1852 Sr. Mary Benedict 'Professed' (Chapter 6 explains this term), although her continuing health problems meant that she could not fast and abstain, according to the Rule, having to spend this period in the Infirmary. She spent much time in the devotion to the Holy Sacrament. She was described as having amazing humility and never complained; she just said "God wills all"⁸. Despite her poor health her spirit of penance was very strong, often living off bread and vegetables, and rarely eating meat. She put stones in her shoes and salt in her tea: "Her love for God and her neighbour were by her intimate union with Jesus".⁹

What Sr. Souter's account revealed, and was hinted at in Sr. Mary Benedict's obituary, as composed by the Prioress, is a remarkable, possibly unique story in England. All that follows was documented by Sr. Mary Benedict and her contemporaries, which included the Chaplain at Abbotsleigh and Bishop Vaughan. In the latter years of the 19th Century Sr. Mary Alphonsus Lambert made a copy of Sr. Souter's biography which contained a prologue by Provost Lapôtre, Chaplain at St Scholasticas in Teignmouth; it is eighteen pages long. He wrote: "This favour God granted to Sister Mary Benedict, that she should taste how good he is, and be inebriated with his delights ... The Lord indeed purified, refined her in the crucible of suffering".¹⁰ We must be in no doubt that the story that follows was totally accepted as true at the time, and it is crucial in the story of Abbotsleigh Priory and how it came to be built.

The accounts of the time focus on the significance of 19 November 1858, noting that Sr. Mary Benedict was in her cell pondering on what she could do to promote the glory of Jesus. It was then that 'Our Blessed Lady', Mary, appeared to her and she was told to love Jesus: "Jesus regards the heart, the loving aspirations which she made in the midst of her occupations, and which drew Jesus close to her".¹¹ It was revealed to her that it was "His will and longing desire to be perpetually adored in His Sacrament of Love".¹² Mary told Sr. Mary Benedict that Jesus desired Perpetual Adoration, but that she should not reveal this to anybody. Her increased devotions to the Blessed Sacrament were soon noticed, and she was quietly given permission to pray secretly for part of the night; soon other Sisters followed this lead. It appears that from this time on it was being whispered that Perpetual Adoration might be the future direction for St Monica's.

In the following days she received visitations from St John the Evangelist, St Augustine, St Gertrude and St Mary. She was told she was to be "His Victim", to stand between him and poor sinners. She was also told that the Evil One would have full power over her, so that Jesus could protect her. On 24 November 1858 Jesus appeared to her after she had failed to attend Holy Communion, saying to her: "... where will you get strength to fight against the malice of the evil one but from the heart? I have chosen you as the Special Spouse of my Sacrament. It is your food, leave it not my child or you depart from me."¹³ It appears that her sufferings were witnessed by the other Sisters who could hear her wailing at night in her cell, and saw her reject food as she battled her demons. For the rest of her life she continued to "endure great interior suffering and temptations as the Victim of Jesus to make reparation for the sins of man".¹⁴ Her continued response was to offer herself to Jesus to be disposed of at his Will.



On another occasion she was shown herself on the Throne when she ascended into heaven, with the Ocean of God's love, where angels and saints looked on and she heard alleluias; Mary and Jesus escorted her to the seat, decorated with white lilies. Mary Benedict recalled: "Her Divine Spouse told her this was the glory He prepared to reward her suffering love, showing her at the same time a mantle of exquisite splendour."¹⁵

This description was included in Sr. Souter's account gathered by Canon Agar, which in turn was used by Charles Wild of Chideock to create a painting entitled: "Sister Mary Benedict Keon's place in heaven as shown to her

by Our Lord". This is shown above, and a watercolour version by Sr. Agnes Teresa Maxwell, is shown on the back cover of this volume.

Between 1856 and 1858 there was a great increase and progression in the Order's devotion; in 1856 Benediction was allowed every day in May, and the Devotion of the Forty Hours before the Feasts of St. Augustine and the Immaculate Conception. They also resumed the Midnight Office and in 1857 on the Feast of the patronage of Our Lady, the singing of Vespers on Sundays and Feasts was resumed. In 1858, the community was granted the privilege of having the devotion of the Forty Hours three times in the year, and in 1859 to have Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament on every First Friday, and on all Feasts of Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin. 1859 was also the 250th anniversary of the Foundation of St. Ursula's, Louvain and celebrations were held on 10 February, again with the Bishop's approval.

Although Mary Benedict had been instructed in the revelations not to tell others of the knowledge she possessed, it is clear that by 1859 the Community were aware of the direction of her intentions. In April 1859 Rev. Mr. Poynter wrote to Bishop Vaughan to tell him that Mr Clarke had spoken to Sr. Mary Benedict:

The Little Sister opened herself freely in the confessional, and I believe he thoroughly examined her, he also had a long conversation with her alone in the Parlour. And saw, and spoke to her at Recreation. What he said to me about her, was most satisfactory and was of the opinion that I was justified in giving her leave to go beyond the rules, as regards prayer, fasting etc.

Once again Sr. Souter's account tells us of another 'revelation' made to Sr. Mary Benedict; on 19 October 1859 Jesus and Mary appeared to her with St Augustine holding a monstrance. Jesus spoke to her, saying:"

... through you I manifest the desire with which my Heart is urged to be perpetually adored in this convent. The victims and adorers of my Sacrament shall be as holocausts before my Father, His glory and the salvation of souls shall be as a consuming fire within them ... Such is the life I ask my Victims to lead. Let the Rule and Spirit of my servant Augustine reign in his daughters.¹⁶

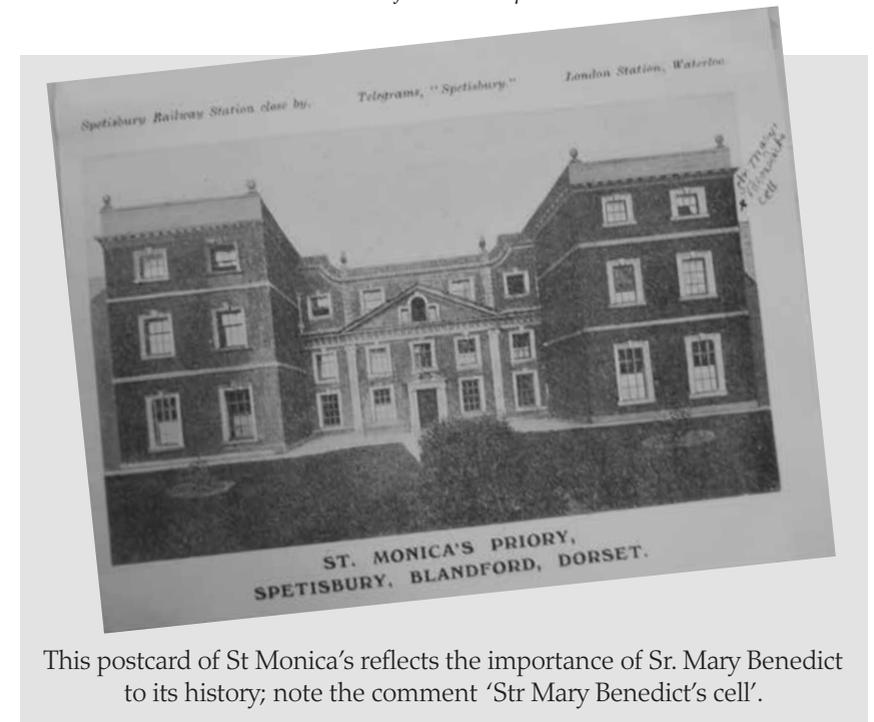
This time Sr. Mary Benedict did reveal her vision, and its impact on the Sisters at Spetisbury must have been quite stunning; it is clear, from everything written at the time, that everybody accepted her accounts completely. Following this confession several 'extraordinary confessors' were sent to test the 'Spirit' of Mary Benedict: "The many enlightened men, who from time to time, examined her, declared it their belief that she was led by the Spirit of God."¹⁷ Eventually it was agreed to ask each Sister in the Community what they wanted, and the majority would decide.

Now with the change of charism, the Order's chosen purpose, from teaching to Perpetual Adoration having widespread acceptance in the Community, the Prioress laid the matter before the Bishop of Plymouth. When Dr. Vaughan conducted his Episcopal Visitation of the Convent in 1859, he was presented with a formal petition to allow the Order the privilege of Perpetual Adoration. There can be no doubt that Bishop Vaughan approved of the idea and the need for it:

When we reflected on the state of religion in this country, and more especially in our own diocese, where Our Divine Lord is not only little known and honoured in the Sacrament of His Love, but outraged and blasphemed by unbelievers; and by many even of the household of the faith treated with coldness and seldom visited by loving and adoring hearts, we were convinced that it would be an act highly pleasing to the Divine Spouse of our souls that there should be at least one altar where His abiding presence should be constantly recognised; where unceasing reparation should be made to His outraged Love.¹⁸

He therefore made application to the Pope, and on March 15 1860 Pope Pius IX approved the object of the petition, by a Papal Rescript. The Sisters were informed on Maundy Thursday, 5 April 1860.

*"To the special lights imparted to her, we owe much of the introduction of the 'Perp. Adoration into our Community. Our Lord called her especially to be the 'Victim of His Love' and to stand between His justice and poor sinners."*¹⁹



In real terms for St Monica's Priory, 'Perpetual Adoration to Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament' meant the closing of their school and the convent becoming an enclosed Order, with visitors discouraged. Their role would be one of prayer to the Host, the bread at the Altar, which in Catholicism involved Transubstantiation; the bread becoming The Body of Christ. It meant that the prayer would be perpetual, in other words 24 hours a day, 365 days a year; meaning that a number of 'Adorers' would always be praying to the Host.

The Feast of Corpus Christi on 7 June 1860 was chosen as the day on which to inaugurate Perpetual Adoration, when the Bishop sang the Mass and

addressed the Sisters. Bishop Vaughan gave them three objectives with the erection of Perpetual Adoration:

- To offer to Our Sweet Lord, perpetual reparation for all outrages and want of love towards Him in the Sacrament of the Altar
- To implore efficacious grace for the conversion of sinners, and for the spread of our holy religion in England, especially in this diocese
- To animate with a more lively charity the members of this community of St. Monica's, and so enable them by assisting each other in prayer and in all gentleness bearing each other's burdens, to attain the perfection to which they are called as the spouses of the Immaculate Lamb of God.

This was followed by the Sisters praying: "In Thy Name, O my Jesus, and confiding in Thy Divine assistance, and in the intercession of Thy Immaculate Mother, and our Holy Father, Saint Augustine, we, from this time forth, devote ourselves to Thy special service in the Perpetual Adoration of the most Holy Sacrament of the Altar. Amen."²⁰

Although this was the final confirmation of the privilege of Perpetual Adoration, it is clear that the planning for the change had already begun. Since it was felt that the Spetisbury Priory was unsuitable for their new status, it was decided to look for new accommodation, and once again Bishop Vaughan would be instrumental in finding this; interestingly they purchased their new property on 13 February 1860, a month before the Papal Rescript. They had also found new tenants for St Monica's, these were an Order of English Bridgettine Sisters, who had been residing in Lisbon. A brief history of the Spetisbury site after 1861 is provided in *Appendix 2*.

The site that had been purchased was near to Abbotskerswell, technically in the Anglican Parish of Wolborough, which contained a house and farm. On 16 April 1860, Rev. Mother Poynter, Sr. Ryan (the Order's Procuratrix, or manager) and Chaplain, Fr. Agar, visited the property to decide what further buildings would be needed. Although they found the property smaller than expected, its site was most suitable in other ways. They travelled in secular clothes, lodged with the Franciscan Sisters at Taunton, and continued to Plymouth to talk things over with Bishop Vaughan. He showed them around the Cathedral and schools and provided lodgings for the night. They returned home, calling in on the Franciscans at Exeter and Taunton, and the Cistercians at Stapehill; preparations had begun in earnest for the move.

Chapter 3

The Creation of Abbotsleigh Priory

The land that the Order had purchased was mainly farm land between Abbotskerswell and Kingskerswell, on a road then known as Langford Bridge Lane. It ran along a ridge above Abbotskerswell with stunning views across the valley in which the village was situated.

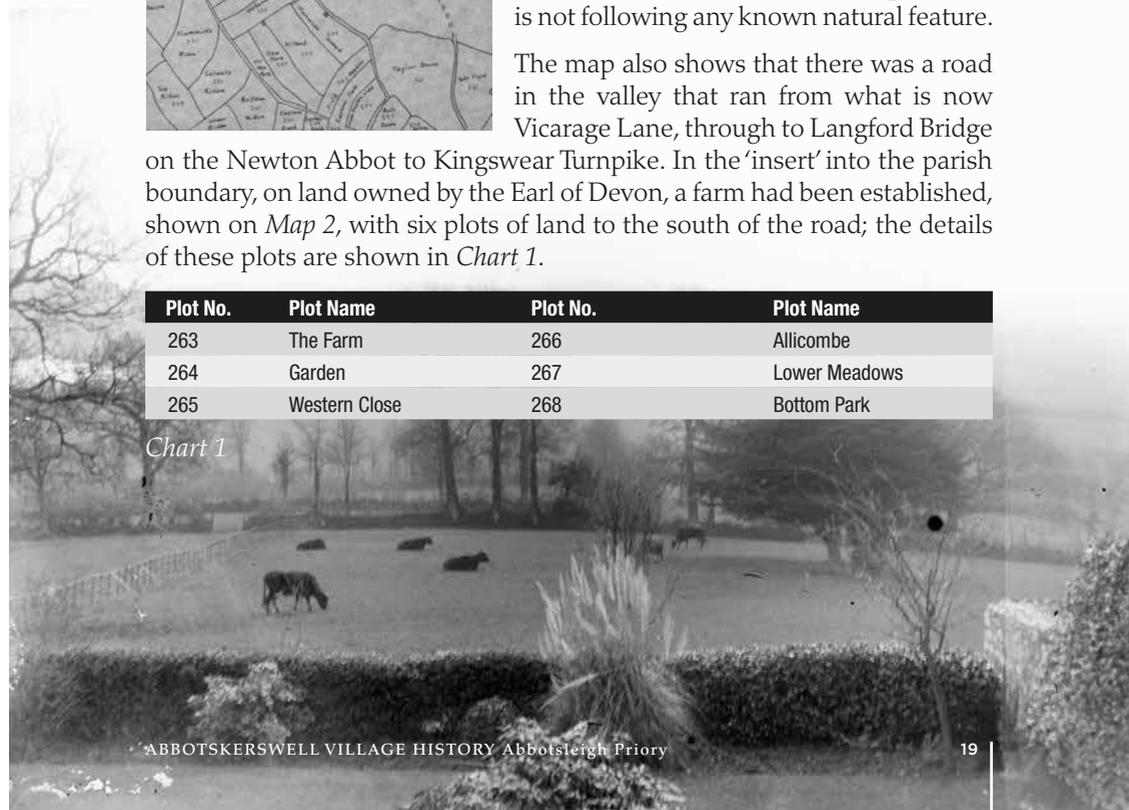


When the Abbotskerswell Tithe Map was drawn in 1839 it showed a rather odd hole in the northern side of the parish, below the higher road to Langford Bridge; this is shown on *Map 1*. Quite why the parish boundary was created like this is unknown, presumably marking a land ownership issue back in the dim and distant past, as it is not following any known natural feature.

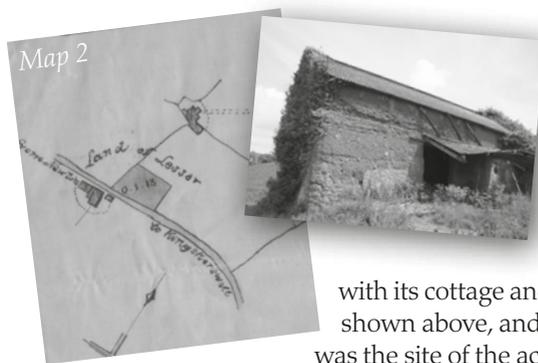
The map also shows that there was a road in the valley that ran from what is now Vicarage Lane, through to Langford Bridge on the Newton Abbot to Kingswear Turnpike. In the 'insert' into the parish boundary, on land owned by the Earl of Devon, a farm had been established, shown on *Map 2*, with six plots of land to the south of the road; the details of these plots are shown in *Chart 1*.

Plot No.	Plot Name	Plot No.	Plot Name
263	The Farm	266	Allicombe
264	Garden	267	Lower Meadows
265	Western Close	268	Bottom Park

Chart 1



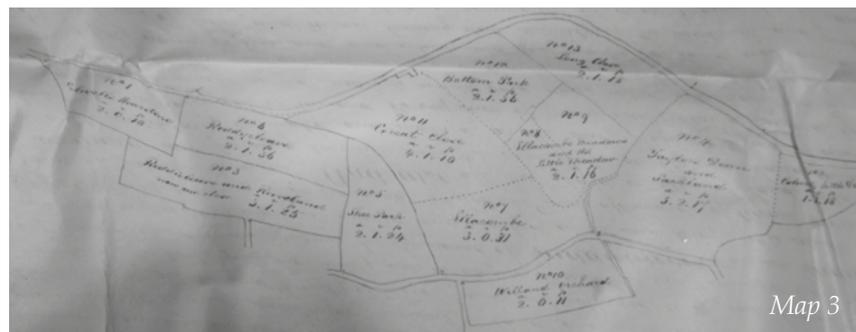
The nature of the farm buildings is not entirely clear, as the Wolborough Tithe Map and the 1841 Census do not show any inhabitants. Local historian Geoffrey Watts believed that they were only barns, as in the 1980s building work revealed two large openings in what became the farm house, suggesting it was a rebuilt barn, and since the windows resembled those in the Priory he felt it was a post 1860 development. On the other hand later research has suggested a farm on the site called Wotton Farm, although there is little evidence for this.



To the east of Langford Bridge Lane was a group of buildings called Hennaborough; these included a cottage in which George, Mary and Sarah Bowden lived in 1841. *Map 2*, drawn in 1873 when *Marystowe* was built, shows Hennaborough with its cottage and barns. The cob barn is still there, shown above, and Geoffrey Watts believed that this was the site of the actual farm, before the construction of the main house on the later Priory site. To the west of the road is the outline of the farm buildings on the site bought by the Order.

Abbotsley House

In 1839 the six plots of land were sold by the Earl of Devon to James King, who was a wealthy brewer from Pennycross in Plymouth; he was married to Ann Ley from Torquay. The 1839 Conveyance Deeds, which included the detail in *Map 3*, also reveal he bought other land which was purchased from his father-in-law, George Ley, and from the Church; these plots are shown in *Chart 2*.



Plot No.	Plot Name	Plot No.	Plot Name
444*	Beacon	449	Lower Reddeclay
445*	waste ground	450	Sheep Park
446*	Little Burrow	559	Flammicks Orchard
447	Orestone	561	Taylor Down
448	Higher Reddeclay		*Plots bought from Abbotskerswell Church

Chart 2

In the late 1840s James and Ann built a grand Italianate house on plot 265 and it was noted that “Abbots Ley House, built in 1847-48, is the pleasant seat of James King, Esq.”¹. The Kings had six children and presumably wanted a fashionable country estate near to Ann’s roots and it appears to have been named after her family.



The house was variously referred to as Abbotsley or Abbotsleigh, although the latter seems to be the version that was later settled upon. The house was in the fashionable Italianate style with two floors and a tower, known as a Belvedere. This style of tower was made fashionable in the 1840s by Queen Victoria, and her new house on the Isle of Wight; Osborne House, became the model for the style. It was replicated at Abbotsley, and also at Tower House in Courtenay Park, shown above, built in 1854.

On the ground floor at Abbotsley the main feature was an elegant drawing room with bay windows facing south west, which opened onto a veranda which led to the gardens. There was a dining room, library and schoolroom, with store rooms, china closet, waiting room, gentleman’s wash room with a water closet, kitchens, butler’s room, servants’ hall, larder, dairy and cellars. The two staircases led to the upper floor which contained seven bedrooms, three dressing rooms, a housemaid’s closet, nurseries, two WCs, and two servants’ bedrooms.





The tower contained a third floor which had a large room, the Belvedere, with “a beautiful and extensive view of the surrounding country”.² Belvederes were a popular feature of country houses at the time and it is shown here in the painting of the house, with its three windows at the top of the tower. In Italian it means a ‘fair view’

or ‘beautiful sight’, and it was used by the ladies of the house to look out across the valley. It was set in splendid position, (although the railway had been built at the same time) and was described as being “placed on a cheerful healthy eminence, commanding very extensive and highly picturesque scenery”³ and “delightfully situated ... in rich Pleasure Grounds”.⁴ The contemporary painting of Abbotsley House, shown above, shows what an attractive residence it was.

Across Plot 561, Taylor Down, was created a long sweeping drive from Langford Bridge Lane to give an impressive entrance to the house. Sadly the modern view from the drive, shown right, only shows the trees in front of the house on the left side of the drive, with the Priory Church just visible above them. However, the importance of such a drive is clear to see. At the entrance of the drive 12 pine trees were planted that became known as the ‘12 Disciples’.



The Kings did not stay long, as on 12 February 1850 Charles Joseph Braine paid £6300 for Abbotsley House with its land. He did not move in immediately as the 1851 Census records the house was occupied by Charles J Harvey, a 26 year old Cambridge University tutor, who seemed to have been hosting a



Charles Joseph Braine

variety of guests and students involved in his Bachelor of Arts a course. One is described as a ‘landed proprietor’ and another as a ‘fundholder, Bachelor of Arts’; there were three teenage students, as well as a scholar and three servants.

However, by early 1852 the new owner had moved into Abbotsleigh, as it appears to have been re-christened. Charles Joseph Braine, who was 37 years old had been a merchant in India and China. He, and his wife Eudora, would have ten children; their places of birth are shown below, and give a good idea of the family’s travels.

Eudora b.1846 Madras	Julia b.1848 Hong Kong	Helen b.1849 Hong Kong	Charles b.1850 Norton Fitzwarren	Mary b.1852 Abbotskerswell
Lucy b.1853 Abbotskerswell	Arthur b.1854 Abbotskerswell	John & Percy b.1855 Abbotskerswell	Alice b.1857 Abbotskerswell	

The new owner soon set about developing the estate by adding trees and buildings. However, Charles fell out with the village very quickly, which may help to explain why within a few years he was trying to sell the estate. He befriended another new village inhabitant, the vicar, Rev. George Fisher, and he too fell foul of the existing social order: “Mr. Braine and Mr. Fisher were thus allied against the parishioners”.⁵ In 1852 Charles Braine tried to have an old track-way below the house designated a public road so that the parish would have to pay for its upkeep. Rev. Fisher was also trying to assert his authority over his Glebe lands, and this brought them both into conflict with the most important landowner in the village, William Creed. Charles Braine appeared to want Langford Bridge Lane diverted away from his house; it was also suggested that by cutting through William Creed’s land “... he could take Flamank’s (sic) Orchard into his own lawn”.⁶ They lost this battle, but Rev. Fisher moved on to try to force his choice of Church-warden, Charles Braine, on to the villagers. Again this was not popular, at a meeting a voice was heard to say “we won’t have an out-parishioner for Church-warden”.⁷ Once again they lost in their battle against the Creeds, “the ‘kings’ of the parish”⁸; sadly the animosity grew so severe that Rev. Fisher assaulted William Creed, which effectively spelt the end in the village for both the Vicar and Charles Braine. The full story of these events is told in *3 Religion & Education*.

Charles Braine had certainly developed the grounds of the house, as by 1855 there was a 52 foot conservatory, a greenhouse and a well planted walled garden. There were ornamental trees and thriving plantations in undulating



park-like pastures and all enclosed with a ring fence. It appears that he was “an enthusiastic botanist ... who persuaded Kew Gardens to supply the trees and shrubs”⁹, and some can still be seen today. One of these, a monkey tree, is shown incorporated into Abbotsleigh Priory.

The 1857 Billings Directory notes for Abbotsleigh, “Braine Charles J., farmer and merchant, Wolborough.” New farm buildings were also added, and these boasted stables and cow sheds, which were well supplied with spring and rain water, poultry sheds, barns for implements and root crops, a harness room and a liquid manure tank. The workers accommodation was equally impressive with a gardener’s cottage and a coach house with a groom’s room above it. A history of the farm is described in Chapter 8.

In April 1853, Charles brought a court case, Braine v Surveyors of Abbotskerswell, in which he was claiming the non-repair of the disputed highway, it was noted that he “had been backing up the parson, as he thought him generally right”.¹⁰ By 1854 his pursuit of the road issue had reached the Courts, and it had cost the Parish £123 in legal fees; Braine was admonished by the Chairman of the Quarter Session for his actions. Eventually the case was lost and by May 1855 the estate was for sale; whether it was his unpopularity with the Creeds and the villagers, his pact with Rev. Fisher or other reasons we will never know, although the comment on the sale notices that “the owner having determined to leave the county”¹¹, does suggest the dispute was part of the reason. There may also have been a financial reason, as in 1857 Charles Braine took out a mortgage of £5000. Had he overstretched himself in developing his estate?

Abbotsleigh failed to find a buyer at that time, but in August 1858 it was put up for auction, with the comment that, “the reserve price will be reduced below the estimated value that the property may be positively sold.”¹² Once again it failed to sell; however on 7 March 1860 The Exeter Flying Post was the first to carry the news that “Abbotsleigh, an estate in this parish (Newton) has been purchased for £7,000. It is to be converted by the Roman Catholics into a religious house”.



On 15 June 1860 auctioneer’s adverts began to appear in the local press, for the contents of the library, drawing and dining rooms and bedrooms, as the owner was leaving the county. In addition there were three horses, a cow, the conservatory and two cottages in Abbotskerswell for sale. As the sale notice from the Taunton Courier & Western Advertiser of 20 June shows, there were also some exotic items.

It was now clear that the unpopular Charles Braine was leaving, and some very unusual neighbours were coming to Abbotskerswell: “A Roman Catholic nunnery was established last week at Abbotsleigh, Devonshire.”¹³

The Canonesses Regular of St Augustine of the Congregation of Lateran

As described in Chapter 2, Bishop Vaughan had been trying to find suitable premises that would give the Order greater privacy. Prioress Poynter was pleased that the Bishop was looking out for a property for their ‘New Convent’, with a site on Dartmoor being viewed:

Allusion has already been made to the intended removal from Spetisbury. This subject had long been in the minds of Superiors who for several reasons judged it expedient and now especially for motives connected with the Perpetual Adoration, which seemed imperative.¹⁴

The 1860 Priory Chronicle also noted that the Bishop and friends were looking for properties, and when Abbotsleigh House was found it was, “inspected by competent judges, [and] was considered highly desirable”¹⁵; on 13 February 1860 Abbotsleigh was purchased from Charles Braine. The Braine family moved to Harrow in Middlesex, where in 1861 Charles was described as a retired merchant; however by 1862 he had moved to Ceylon as it was recorded that “The Manager of the Ceylon Company, Limited, Mr. C. J. Braine, arrived to commence business.”¹⁶

By the end of June 1860 the Braines had left, and Thomas Flip, who worked at Spetisbury as a gardener, and his wife Catherine, were sent to live in The Lodge to guard the premises and stock the kitchen garden.

Bishop Vaughan continued to take the lead and arranged for Joseph Hansom to be the architect for the new convent. Joseph Aloysius Hansom (1803-82) was one of the most important and innovative architects of nineteenth

century Britain, and it has been said that his ecclesiastical designs defined and distinguished the Catholic revival. He had been responsible for the design of Bishop Vaughan's Plymouth Cathedral, built in 1858. Hansom had a reputation for building cheaply, Plymouth Cathedral only cost £3900: "the remit was 'to build an imposing cathedral economically'."¹⁷ A fellow architect, Augustus Pugin, was so irritated at being undercut by Hansom he called him a "broom-stealer".



The Bishop, shown left, at Abbotsleigh, discussed the requirements with Hansom, and wrote to Mother Poynter regularly; he noted that Hansom thought "the existing buildings work in wonderfully well" and "I have been very hard at work with Mr Hansom on the plans for Abbotsleigh". The costs were estimated at £3220 for alterations to the

house, building the Convent Wing and part of its return wing, and £1200 for the church. Of the design he did feel that "it is more Gothic than what I first had any idea of". By May 1860 the builders, Mr Tozer and Mr Jones, had been employed, and the hope was to complete the Convent Wing, by Autumn 1861. On 19 July 1860 the first Mass was held at Abbotsleigh, using an old door as the altar, with the Very Rev. Canon Woollett, Vicar-General of the Diocese officiating. This marked the beginning of the building programme, with the first stone laid on 10 August.

On 17 July 1861 the Rev. Mother, Sr. Mary Alphonsa and Chaplain Rev. Agar visited the site to witness the rapid progress. By September it was felt that the buildings were sufficiently advanced to make the move from Spetisbury. On 30 September the second priest, Rev. L'Abbe Deireckx, and five Sisters left for Abbotsleigh, these Sisters were; Mary Alphonsa, Mary Benedict, Mary Joseph, Mary Philip and Rose. They left Blandford Railway Station to travel Exeter with their bags. This was an important action as they would take over the Perpetual Adoration at the precise moment that it stopped at Spetisbury to ensure there was no break. The next day, 1 October, the rest of the Priory moved to its new home.

This occasion was captured by many newspapers across the country:

A DEVONSHIRE NUNNERY. – On Wednesday morning last the village of Abbotskerswell, near Newton Abbot, received an addition to its population by the arrival, at about 10 o'clock, of 38 nuns The building was gaily decorated for the occasion with flags, flowers and evergreens, in honour of the nuns' arrival.¹⁸

The Perpetual Adoration at Spetisbury ended on the evening of Tuesday 1 October and St Monica's was handed over to the Bridgettine nuns, who provided a last tea and chatted affectionately: "The elder nuns, with a strange pressure at the heart, as they remembered all that 'St Monica's Spetisbury' had been to them for so many long years. And the younger ones with high and hopeful spirits, about to enter now upon a new life."¹⁹ At 9pm carriages took the Community of 39, which included Rev. Agar, Mrs Trant (a boarder), and the farm servant, Thomas Cox, to Blandford Railway Station three miles away. As they drove away the villagers of Spetisbury lined the road to say goodbye, calling "God bless you ladies". The Sisters travelled in their habits, but covered with a mantle. A special train to Exeter Station had been hired for the move, with 22 carriages and trucks. They took everything with them, including cows and a mule. The train pulled out at 10pm and arrived at Salisbury at 3 30am, where their hired professional packer had arranged refreshments for 40 ladies. There was plenty of food, served by waitresses, but the whole worldly experience meant that they did not really want it.

Mr & Mrs Clarke came to see their daughter Lucy off: "some had never travelled by rail and who apparently had made up their minds to some terrible catastrophe on the way. So that at every extra jog, they presumed we were on the verge of destruction."²⁰ They arrived at Exeter at 7am, where they had to walk to carriages parked outside the station and were exposed to a crowd who had assembled to see these 'strange beings'. However, there was no laughter or rude words, and the three omnibuses and 12-15 carriages took them on to Abbotsleigh. Some of the Lay Sisters had to sit with their heads out of the windows to be sick, but eventually at 11am they arrived at their new home. Bishop Vaughan welcomed them and had decorated The Lodge and the Belvedere with flags. With no furniture and bedding, which did not arrive until 10pm, they slept where they could. The next day a Chapel was created in an upstairs room and Vespers and Midnight Matins said, with Sr. Mary Benedict aptly being the first 'Victim' to take on the sins of the Sisters.

Chapter 4

The Construction of Abbotsleigh Priory

When the Community arrived at Abbotsleigh in September, the building was barely habitable, and builders were still at work. The West, or Convent Wing, was only half finished; it was completed on 20 December 1861. When the Refectory was completed on the ground floor, it became the temporary Chapel.



The **Convent Wing** was attached to the west side of the former Abbotsleigh House and was designed with a cloister running the full length of the ground floor. Off the Cloister were the Kitchen, Refectory, and Music Room; in the Return Wing were the Library and

Community Room. On the first floor were 26 cells and several bathrooms, with a further 20 cells on the second floor. In the centre was a bell tower, capped with a Rhenish spirelet, with a staircase within it; it contained three steel bells, which were cast by Naylor Vickers of Sheffield. Steel bells are unusual, because tonally steel is often not as good as bell metal, an alloy of copper and tin. The delivery charge for the bells, by rail from Sheffield, was 13s.7d.



The building process was not without problems, as was reported in September when William Phillips had a severe accident when he fell from the scaffolding.

However, as the photographs show, "it was an imposing building ... commanding one of the most beautiful views in the neighbourhood."¹ 2 February 1862 was a momentous day for the Sisters, because the first stone of the church was laid by Canon Agar. The church, which



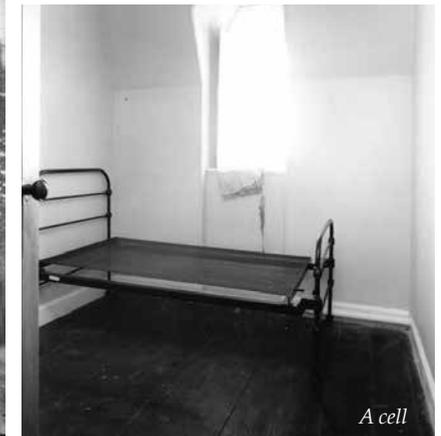
The Cloister



The Refectory



Nuns outside the Community Room



A cell

became the first to be dedicated to the Holy Ghost in England, was to be a Catholic Revival masterpiece by Hansom, aided by Benjamin Bucknall, who was seen as the rising star in Catholic architectural circles, following his design for Our Lady and St Michael in Abergavenny.

The grandness of the building, shown in the many receipts that still exist, came at a cost, with the Priory Chronicle noting that building would have stopped if not for generous donations from their friends. Many local companies were used, examples of Hansom's orders are shown below.

- Browne & Co Bridgwater – 2500 bricks
- Samuel Roach Plymouth – £32.11s. 0d for slates
- Harris & Snell Plymouth - £16.1s. 3d for timber
- The Architectural Pottery Co Poole –£12.13s. 6d for floor tiles
- Plymouth Pottery Plymouth – ridge and top tiles at a cost of £7.12s. 1d
- Randell and Saunders – Bath Stone

The **Church** was completed in September 1863, being another impressive piece of Hansom’s Catholic Gothic Revival architecture: “I think the church is all but perfect for the purpose.”² The west doorway, set inside the old house, led from the Cloister, under the organ gallery, into a large Chancel which had a double row of stalls on each side. The rear stalls were set in alcoves made by four pillars on either side; each pillar was crowned with a carved capital. They show the Guardian Angel of the church and the seven Guardians or Archangels, who ‘stand evermore before the Throne’. Each is shown holding a shield bearing their symbol; these are shown in *Chart 3*. The first four were on the left, or Gospel Side when facing the altar, with the right side called the Epistle Side.

The Angel	Their Role	Symbol on their shield
Guardian Angel	Guardian of the church	A Monstrance
St Jehudiel	The Renumerator	A crown
St Uriel	The Strong Companion	A sword
St Gabriel	Angel of the Incarnation	A lily
St Sealtiel	Angel of Prayer	Hands crossed on his breast
St Barachiel	Chief of the Guardian Angels	A Rose
St Michael	Prince of the Heavenly Host	A cross
St Raphael	The guide of the wandering	A fish

Chart 3

A Chancel Arch, with two central marble pillars and an ornate carved stone altar rail, led to the Sanctuary containing the altar, and two side altars dedicated to St Joseph and St Mary. The Sanctuary is housed in a tower with an Octagonal Dome supported by eight arches underneath; on top of the tower is a metal Monstrance, which was put in place in 1862. The Sanctuary is unusually small, and was “pardonably unsuited for liturgical functions”³; this was because its main function was to house the High Altar that contained the Monstrance, which held the Host. This is explained more fully in Chapter 6.

What makes this chapel in South Devon so great a rarity is the planning of the sanctuary. For this is laid out as an architectural *expositorium* for perpetual adoration, with the monstrance exposed, high above the cramped sanctuary, with its narrow altar in the upper Throne, which dominates the whole ornate composition.⁴

The ornate High Altar was designed by Benjamin Bucknall who often designed interior detail for Hansom. In its design phase Bishop Vaughan wrote to Mr. Poynter to say that “I think the High Altar under the Octagon dome will be very striking”.



On 9 September 1863 the Church of the Holy Spirit was consecrated by Bishop Vaughan in a service to which all the local priests were invited, with Bishop Clifford of Clifton conducting Mass and with Bishop Vaughan delivering the Sermon. The Sisters were not allowed into the church for this service and were forced to huddle in the organ gallery to watch. The following day the Church opened for Divine Worship when Bishop Vaughan arranged for Plymouth Cathedral Choir to attend; the Sisters, it appears, were less than impressed:

To our ears long unaccustomed to such an outburst, caused us not to appreciate as it perhaps deserved. The greater number of us would have preferred the more humble performance of our own choir.⁵

At 4pm the Blessed Sacrament in the Monstrance was carried in procession from the temporary chapel into new Church, and solemnly enthroned. The Bishop also announced that the Holy See in Rome had granted the church at Abbotsleigh the privileges of a Cathedral.



In 1863 there was no local church for the Catholics of the area, consequently an additional visitors' **ante-chapel** had been added on the north side of the altar. This had a separate entrance and looked along the High Altar meaning that the Sisters could not be seen, but the priest could give communion to those in the ante-chapel. In later years it had five rows of benches and was used by villagers and Catholic children from the Blind School at Court Grange. The picture shows the steps into the chapel as well as the thin tower that contained the **Sanctus Bell** which was rung to call the Sisters to services.

Over the years the opinion of Hansom's architecture has varied: Kelly's Directory of 1883 called it "a magnificent pile of buildings" whilst in 1886, the East & South Devon Advertiser noted that the "beautiful church demands a passing word ... and is a perfect gem in architecture, the High Altar is a masterpiece of art, all the parts got up to a beautiful finish, so chaste in design,

so light, and of such exquisite workmanship, as to excite great admiration." By 1923 Kelly's Directory was even more complementary, stating that the church was an "exquisite structure". However, Nicholas Pevsner's view was less complementary: "The domestic buildings hardly prepare one for the gawky fervour of the church interior ... the nave crowded with oversize angel busts ... Even stranger is the top-lit octagonal sanctuary within the tower ..."



The next phase of construction did not occur until 1876, when the Order's funds allowed for the addition of three more buildings. A **Presbytery**, the Chaplain's House, had always been planned, with its own entrance to the church which kept the priests separate from the Sisters. The Chaplain's 'old quarters' appeared to have been in Abbotsleigh

House, which later became the 'infirmary apartment'. The Presbytery was on three floors and contained sitting rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms and a kitchen. There was also a Guest Room that took up most of the first floor and contained an unusual feature. This was a grille, a wood and mesh room divider so that the Sisters were always kept separate from visitors. The children of Les Martin, the farm manager in 1950s, remember the grille because at Christmas it was their task to entertain the Sisters with songs, poetry and dances; they dreaded this but it was deemed necessary by their parents. The Sisters watched from behind the grille. The Priory Chronicle always recorded this event, as the Sisters really enjoyed it; the Rev. Mother then gave the children presents. The construction of the Presbytery also meant that the Priest had direct entrance into the church, meaning the Sisters lives were kept separate. The Lay Sisters did have access to the Presbytery, as they acted as the servants to the Chaplain and his visitors.

The second new building of 1876 was the **North Wing**, which provided seven separate cells for the Lay Sisters on the second floor, as well as a drying room. On the ground floor were store rooms and cellars, with a laundry and boiler room on the first floor. The nature of the habits that the Sisters wore meant that washing and drying was a major issue that required large rooms. Also on the ground floor was the tradesman's entrance to Abbotsleigh, which consisted of an outer door at the end of a corridor that was opened by the Portress by pulling a string. Just along the corridor was a

grille with another door underneath it where goods could be passed through; the photograph below shows this arrangement from the Portress's side.



Another feature of the North Wing was a tunnel that went eastwards and out into the field through a door in the wall. It has been suggested that this was an 'escape tunnel'. However, the plan of the site, now in The Priory's Octagon, labels this as a 'lead pipe to supply pump from well below' and the Priory Chronicle in 1958 notes that it was an "old waterway, which runs from the fields, under the house, ending outside the boiler house". This led to a spring; the OS maps show a well in the field, which provided the water, not always reliably, for Abbotsleigh. In 1905 the Convent was connected to the mains which were installed along the road. They had always experienced shortages with their existing system, also the nuns were taking more baths! Another aspect of this problem was revealed in 1895 when a new pump house had been built, with a water tank in the Belvedere, replacing a tank under the kitchen floor.



The third construction of this phase, built in 1877, was the **Chapter Room**. This octagonal shaped room had two rows of stalls and was used for formal religious business, such as the meeting of the Priory Council, which was



made up of the Choir Sisters. In 1896 a Chapel dedicated to St Augustine was built onto the north side of the Chapter Room and was paid for by Sr. Mary Anthony Lyons. This was a shell at first and eventually an elaborate reredos was added, the date of which is unknown. Sadly the reredos, shown on page 34 was removed when The Priory was renovated in the 1980s, something that developer Martin Proctor now regrets.

Additions to the site continued over the years; in 1884 the wall around the entire Priory was completed, with land added below the cemetery as additional gardens. In 1885 a new organ was installed which meant that the organ loft had to be extended. In the same year a small chapel was built in the grounds. The '**Chapel of Our Lady of Lourdes**' was built amongst the shrubbery; it was intended to honour Mary and provide a little place of pilgrimage in the grounds. It also became a 'memorial chapel' to Mrs Francis Molloy Sumner who was an important benefactor of Abbotsleigh.

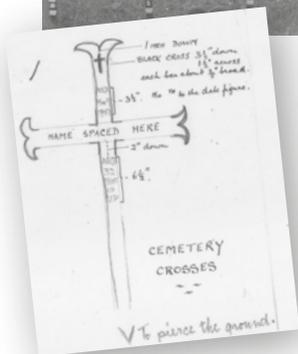


The chapel was blessed by Bishop Vaughan, following a procession to the "statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, which had this day been put up to execute our devotions and Confidence."⁶ In 1894 there was some redevelopment; in the kitchen a steam oven was installed, various cellars were reorganised and heating was put in. This was by hot water pipes which ran through the cells and the Church, although the Sisters complained that the Church was too hot.



A strip of land in the Higher Reddeclay field, on the road side, was allocated as the **Cemetery**. The first burial at Abbotsleigh occurred within a few months of their arrival, on 9 February 1862, when their old boarder, Mrs Mary Trant from Spetisbury, died. Mrs Trant's grave was placed against the end wall, although her burial does not appear in the official record. However, it can be clearly seen in the photograph on page 36 next to the crucifix in the

shelter, which was given by Bishop Vaughan when he consecrated the graveyard. Later in 1862 the first death of a Sister was recorded, Sr. Teresa Bernard Pritchard, a 33 year old Choir Sister; her's is the first cross on the left hand end of the first row, and is clearly marked in the photograph dated c.1906, with Sr. Mary Benedict next. For some reason the first row was left incomplete when the next burial, in 1865, took place, but was filled in 1871 and then in 1881 with Mother Mary Gertrude Poynter, the first Prioress at Abbotsleigh, at the end of the row.



Most rows have five burials, although the rows are interrupted in two places by burials that are not of nuns. A plan of the graves is shown in *Appendix 3*; this shows where the graves are, although not all the grave markers are now in the correct place shown on the plan. The Sister's graves are marked with a particular design of cross made of iron, shown left,

and this design was continued with for most of the Priory's life.

In 1868 the first priest was buried at Abbotsleigh; this was Rev. Emile Fiedel who was an old French Priest who lived at the Priory and who had worked for many years in the Diocese. A further seven priests would be buried in the graveyard; their details are given in *Appendix 4*.

In 1869 Evan Baillie was buried in a plot of ground kept separate for secular burials. He was the 10 year old son of Evan Baillie who lived at Chudleigh; who was one of the benefactors of Abbotsleigh, which explains why he was given permission to create a vault that eventually would hold five members of the family. In 1899 when Evan snr. died it was noted in the Priory Chronicle that there was a door to the vault that gave access and that the Sisters went inside to pray after the funeral.

Perhaps the most significant burials at Abbotsleigh were two Bishops of Plymouth. Bishop Vaughan had lived at the Priory for 11 years and with his health failing had appointed a Coadjutor Bishop, Rev. Graham. When he died in 1902 his request to be buried in Plymouth Cathedral was refused,



consequently he was buried at Abbotsleigh, which is shown left. He was buried on 31 October and a large stone cross marked the grave until 1966 when his body was exhumed and re-buried in Plymouth Cathedral. In 1928 Bishop Keily was also buried at Abbotsleigh; he established 13 convents and 22 missions in the Diocese; he was also reburied in 1966.

When Sr. Mary Cecilia Kirkwood was buried in 1982 she became the last of the 104 Sisters to be interred at Abbotsleigh, together with 11 clergyman and 13 secular burials that included children, gardeners and benefactors. The details of the Sisters' burials can be found in *Appendix 6*.



This photograph shows both Bishops graves at Abbotsleigh. The large cross is Bishop Vaughan and next to it is Bishop Keily's statue of Mary. These now stand in the grounds of Plymouth Cathedral.

Chapter 5

'Roman' Catholicism in the Newton Abbot Area

In AD 597 Augustine led the first successful papal mission to England, and established a direct link with Rome; from then until 1534 Catholicism was the state religion. However, in 1531 Henry VIII made himself The Supreme Head of the Church of England when he broke away from the authority of the Catholic Church, meaning he could divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, and re-marry to gain a male heir. By 1536 Henry had seized the assets of the Catholic Church and declared the Church of England the established church in England. It is still the case today that the monarch holds the post of Supreme Governor.

As a consequence of these events, from 1570 until 1766, successive Popes did not accept the legitimacy of the English monarchy and called for its overthrow. This meant that the powerful European monarchs in France and Spain saw this as an opportunity to undermine or attack England. As a result Catholics were discriminated against in Britain in many ways, and for a while any Priests found celebrating Mass could be hung, drawn and quartered. The Catholic Church (Roman was an addition by the British), along with other non-established churches continued in England, although at times they were subject to various forms of persecution, consequently Catholics practiced their faith in private for practical purposes. Each succeeding monarch tended to have their own view of Catholicism, some more tolerant than others.

The 18th century was difficult for Catholics with anti-Catholic laws and feeling across much of the country. Although worship was not illegal they were excluded from voting, from sitting in Parliament, and from the learned professions, as well as being heavily taxed and having restricted land owning rights. However, a Catholic Relief Act in 1778 allowed Catholics to own property, inherit land and join the army. Following the Act of Union, which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801, the campaign

for Catholic emancipation gathered support. Eventually, in 1829, Parliament passed the Roman Catholic Relief Act which gave Catholics almost equal civil rights, including the right to vote and to hold most public offices.

It was in the post-1829 period that the plans for open Catholic worship in the South Devon area began to evolve. Worshipping Catholics in the Newton Abbot area had to travel to Ugbrooke House or Torre Abbey for Mass, but after the arrival of the Augustinian Sisters at Abbotsleigh they were allowed to use their Chapel. In 1867 Newton Abbot Catholics also used a temporary chapel in a rented house in Higher St. Paul's Road, but in 1868, the Earl of Devon sold a plot of ground to the Catholic Parish, and the building of a town church began. The site was on Queen Street, and in June 1870 St Joseph's Church was opened. It was built in limestone with Bath stone dressings, in the Early English style and cost £360. A Priest's house was also built next to it, with a school for 90 pupils being erected on St Pauls Road.

In 1915 the church was largely rebuilt with the architects being Scoles & Raymond, who built quite a number of Catholic churches in the



area, including those at Dawlish and Exmouth. They continued with the Early English style and used polygonal coursed Devon Limestone rubble with ashlar dressings, and a steeply pitched slate roof. The six-cusped circular window and five lancet windows facing Queen Street give it an impressive look, despite it being right on the roadside.

The school on St Paul's Road continued in use until a new one was constructed on Coombeshead Road in the 1960s. Pupils then transferred to a Catholic Secondary School in Kingsteignton, based in the St Columb Hall, before a new school, St Cuthbert Mayne, was constructed in Torquay in 1962.

Chapter 6

The Sisters of Abbotsleigh

When the Order moved to Abbotsleigh Priory in 1861 they had recently changed from being a teaching community to one devoted to Perpetual Adoration. The nature of this change was a huge one for all those within the Order and to understand the daily life in the convent it is necessary to understand what Perpetual Adoration meant.



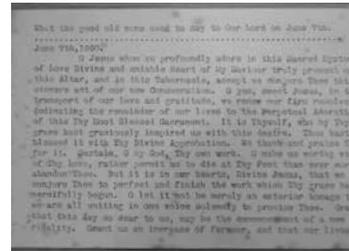
The basic principles of Perpetual Adoration were outlined in Chapter 2, when a number of Adorers prayed to the Host at all times in the day. The Host, a wafer of consecrated bread representing the body of Christ, was often positioned in a monstrance, which was then put on display. The monstrance was an elaborate ornamental, jewelled vessel with a 'sunburst' at its centre that held the Host. At Abbotsleigh this vessel was the Throckmorton Monstrance, shown left, which dates from around 1530. It was given to the Order by the Throckmorton family, who were a notable Catholic family, in 1660. The photograph of the Sanctuary on page 30 shows the monstrance in

place. When the Host was not in the monstrance it was kept in a box on the altar called the tabernacle, which in turn was prayed to by the Adorers.

There were two types of Sisters at Abbotsleigh, the Choir and the Lay Sisters. The Choir Sisters were the Adorers and attended every service, whilst the Lay Sisters only attended a few services and spent most of their day working on the chores that kept the convent running.

Choir Sisters

To become a Choir Sister the lady would need to be educated, from a good Catholic family and have parents willing to pay a dowry to the Order in order to allow her to enter the convent. Some examples of the dowries in the early 20th century were: Sr. Mary Margaret £700, Sr. Mary Aloysius £281, Sr. Mary Veronica £325 and Sr. Mary Agatha £1000.



A Sister applied to the Order to become a nun and often spent some time at the convent to allow her and the Order to decide if it was the correct decision. Eventually the Choir Sisters voted to decide whether to allow the applicant to become a novice Sister; when accepted she entered her novitiate by 'professing'; the Profession vow changed over time, but one used in 1860 is shown above. When professing a Sister took a religious name that she became known by, leaving her worldly name behind; Choir Sisters always included Mary in their name.

The act of Profession took place in an elaborate church service, before the Sisters of the Order, and family and friends.

Miss Sullivan, known in religion as Sister Mary Benedict, entered the church attired as a bride, in rich white dress, with a long flowing veil, and bridal wreath..... After mass the novice received the white veil and religious habit.¹

Frances Sullivan was becoming a bride of Jesus, hence the wedding dress, and she would also wear a wedding ring; she was 23 years old when she professed and was the daughter of James Sullivan who owned a brewery at Kilkenny in Ireland.



The Profession was a major occasion for all concerned: "Their church-which is always beautiful-was on this occasion exceedingly grand, the Sanctuary and High Altar being decked with beautiful flowers."² After the Order's move to Abbotsleigh the first professions were on 25 February 1862, these were two Lay Sisters, Sr. Teresa and Sr. Rose. An early Profession Service at Abbotsleigh was that of Augusta Petre in 1867, when she was escorted by her aunt, Lady Clifford of Ugbrooke House.

The Choir Sisters also made the decisions in the convent, forming the Priory Council; the Prioress was always a Choir Sister. For most of Abbotsleigh's history they also wore a different veil to the Lay Sisters, being black as opposed to the novices and Lay Sister's white veil. The processional photograph clearly shows the differences and shows the Lay Sisters are a group together.

It was without doubt very helpful that many of the families of the Choir Sisters were wealthy, as they contributed much of the money that both built and maintained Abbotsleigh. The Sisters renounced worldly possessions when they joined the Order, but it was not a vow of poverty as was the case in some Orders. Sr. Mary Anthony paid for the alcove that housed the St Augustine Altar in the Chapter Room and other Sisters donated money to the Priory. This was not always without problems as was the case in 1897 when the family of one Sister challenged her will:

“Singular Devonshire Probate Suit” – Southwell v Boursot – will of Louise Marie Henrietta Boursot of Priory. When she entered the Priory she had to dispose of her property and her will did this. “no direct evidence of undue influence” on her in making – jury agreed and will stood.³

Lay Sisters

The Lay Sisters tended to be from working backgrounds and did not pay the dowry. They entered the Order to be able to follow a religious life but spent much of their time completing domestic tasks such as cooking, gardening and looking after the priests. Bishop Vaughan noted that, in the translation from French, they were Sisters who work for love and he defined them as:

The Lay Sister is a Religious as truly as the Choir Nun, but her duties & requirements are different ... the Lay Sisters are received because of the Choir Nuns, and their numbers are regulated by the wants of the Community. In the ordinary sense of the word they are not servants because they do not work for hire. The Lay Sister is consequently the most perfect form of Christian servitude.

Sr. Rose came from a good Irish Family and was well-educated, but her father had lost his money; consequently she became a Lay Sister, having been a cook to Canon Agar’s mother, prior to joining the convent. Sr. Aloisia’s father was a moulder in a pottery, whilst Sr. Teresa’s father was a hewer in a coal mine in East Kirkby, Nottinghamshire. Sr. Imelda’s father was a metal caster, Sr. Colette’s was a waiter in Cork and Sr. Monica’s father was a Bolton cotton spinner. When Lay Sr. Lucy died in 1912, she was the last of the nuns who had come to Abbotsleigh from Spetisbury.

Not all those who entered the convent or began their Novitiate completed their preparations to enter the Order, the main reasons for this were: a lack of vocation, ill health, a parent’s ill health, being voted out by the Priory Council for lacking the special spirit and being sent away for inappropriate behaviour. Also a number were ‘dismissed’ from the Priory over the years, as will be shown later.

The Abbotsleigh Scapular



All of the Sisters at Abbotsleigh wore the distinctive and striking habit that is shown on the cover of this publication. The picture of a Choir Sister shown here shows her wearing the long tunic with a shorter apron over that; this is covered by a Scapular which hung nearly to the ground at the front and back. On the head was a white coif covered by the veil. The wearing of the red scapular is part of the story of Sr. Mary Benedict, as in her ‘conversations’ with Jesus she noted that he decreed the wearing of a Scapular of red cloth with a print of a monstrance and the words “praised adored and glorified be Jesus forever in the adorable Sacrament of the Altar”. This account was accepted, and both of these elements were incorporated into the Abbotsleigh habit; the monstrance element can be seen as an oval design on the scapular. This design can be seen in a number of the photographs that have been used. Interestingly when the badge for the Scapular was completed in 1869 the Choir Sisters had a Latin version, whilst the Lay Sisters’ was in English.

On 28 February 1862 the Scapulars arrived and when Bishop Vaughan gave a Scapular to each Sister he stated that “hence forth was to form part of the Religious Habit, as a special mark of consecration to the Perpetual Adoration”⁴

The Prioresses of Abbotsleigh

When the Order moved to Abbotsleigh in 1861 the Prioress ‘for life’ was Mother Mary Gertrude Poynter. Born at Hadham in Hertfordshire in 1801 she had Professed at the age of 26 at Spetisbury. Her obituary described her as a ‘child of prayer’, born to parents who been married a long time but with no children, but eventually two were born. She had skilfully seen the Order through transition to Perpetual Adoration and the move to Abbotsleigh. However, in 1863 Bishop Vaughan decided to create elected Prioresses, who served for around four years; she was elected for one term before Mother Mary Alipia Winstanley took her place.



Is this a picture of Mother Margaret Mary Beaumont, who was Prioress from 1908, which was around the time that these photographs were taken? Interestingly, her position in the next picture seems to confirm her importance.

The position was not without difficulties as Mother Margaret Mary found when she tried to resign in 1915: "I truly feel I cannot stand the strain of my position any more ... the whole of my Council looking at everything from a totally different point of view, there is a mean and jealous spirit amongst some of them".⁵ She defined her reasons as poor health, the Community were less fervent under her leadership, she looked at things differently to Council and this made her not fit for office. She named Sr. Mary Francis Joseph, a previous Prioress, as the instigator of the trouble. Interestingly when Sr. Mary Francis Joseph wrote to the Bishop she accused the Prioress of not following the correct protocols and ignoring the Council. Bishop Kiely seemed to smooth things over, although Sr. Margaret Mary was not re-elected.

The full list of Prioresses at Abbotsleigh is shown in *Appendix 5*.

The Sisters

Extensive research into the Sisters at Abbotsleigh has found the names of 144 who actually lived at the Priory as fully professed nuns. 39 Sisters came from Spetisbury to establish the new convent and as *Chart 4* shows the numbers peaked in 1911 with 44. Since the figures are taken from various sources, such the Census, Voters Lists and Priory archives we cannot be certain of the exact figures.

1871	42	1911	44	1945	26	1959	21	1975	19
1881	46	1923	42	1948	28	1961	19	1981	8
1891	39	1931	38	1951	26	1968	16	1983	4
1901	42	1938	37	1954	21	1972	12		

Chart 4

It is worth remembering at this point that this was an enclosed order, therefore the numbers would have been reasonably stable, although, as Chapter 7 will show, the mental health of the Sisters was certainly an issue and this impacted

on numbers. *Appendix 6* provides the detail of the 144 Sisters that we are certain lived at Abbotsleigh, and some of their stories will be told in following chapters. The remarkable account of the life of Sr. Mary Benedict will inevitably dominate, but the story of the Priory until it closed in 1983 will also be told.



The Priory Council met regularly to discuss the running of Abbotsleigh and although the Prioress was the decision maker, she would listen to the Council's views. The picture appears to show the most senior of the Choir nuns.

The Priests and Guests

Although Abbotsleigh was a convent, the Sisters could not function without Priests who acted as Chaplains; because in the Catholic Church only Priests can conduct the Mass or Celebration of the Holy Eucharist. However, the Priests had to be kept separate from the Sisters and always had their own quarters, hence the building of the Presbytery.

When the Order moved to Abbotsleigh from Spetisbury Canon William Agar moved with them. He had been born in York in 1815, where his father was a merchant, and he would remain at Abbotsleigh until his death. He found himself in trouble with the law in 1862 when he allowed his bulldog to bite two pigs which had strayed onto Priory land; he was found not guilty of cruelty, but guilty of damage to pigs and was fined 6d, with £1 8s 6d costs, and had to pay £ 1 15s for the damage done to the pigs. His sudden death in 1872 caused much distress, as he was much loved by the Sisters.

He was succeeded by Rev. William Brindle, who, like Canon Agar, was buried at Abbotsleigh when he died in 1891. His successor was Rev. John Joseph Higgins, who remained at the Priory for many years.

In addition to the Chaplains, the Priory became the home for a number of clergymen who had become too ill to act as priests. The most famous was Bishop Vaughan who lived there for nearly ten years after he appointed Rev. Graham as Coadjutor Bishop. He had "expressed the wish that he should die in the care of the Canonesses of St. Augustine's Priory, a wish that he has realised."⁶ The first of these priests appears to have been the old French Priest Rev. Aemilus Fieldell (his grave notes him as Emile Fiedel), who acted as second Chaplain in his old age, and was buried in the cemetery.

The other group of inhabitants of Abbotsleigh were the paid servants who looked after the grounds and farm. Their story is told in Chapter 8.

Chapter 7

The Life of the Abbotsleigh Sisters

Life at Abbotsleigh was obviously centred around the church services; there was a great deal of change in the 122 years that Abbotsleigh existed. For that reason it seems sensible to divide the description into two parts, pre and post World War 2, although this is only for convenience rather than religious reasons.

1861 - 1936

We can see a clear view of the religious life of Abbotsleigh from the 'Horarium & Form of Daily Life' that Bishop Vaughan drew up in 1897. The day began at 3 40 am for the Lay Sisters who were to go to morning prayers and then on to work. When they were called by the Adorers; the rest of the Lay Sisters, those 'whose doors were hung', were called at 4 30. The rest of the day's timings for the Choir Sisters were, as shown below.

6 00	Meditation on a rota, but anyone could attend
6 30	Prime and Mass
7 30	Breakfast and return to cells
8 30	¼ hour spiritual reading
9 00	Mass with Divine Office
10 00	Procession from the Choir, leading to Common Work
11 20	Free time
11 34	Examen in Choir
11 40	Angelus in Choir, if arrival is after the bell they had to 'kiss the ground in Choir'
11 43	Process to Refectory for lunch
12 25	Free time
1 30	Common work
2 30	Free time
3 30	Silent prayer for Choir Sisters

4 00	Vespers for Choir Sisters
4 30	Free time
5 15	Supper, followed by grace in Church
5 45	Free time, when talking was allowed
6 30	Recreation in appointed place
7 15	Compline
8 30	Bedtime for the early risers, no water to be run in bathrooms after 8 30
12 00	Matins for those involved

A group of Adorers had, of course, been in the church all night, with at least four praying at all times, and other Adorers would continue between services. It is also interesting to note that in the Timetable of Bells, a bell was rung 25 times in a day, calling the Sisters to their duties; this was the purpose of the Sanctus Bell.



The Canonesses Regular of St Augustine was not a silent Order, although conversation was only expected at suitable times, for example during free time and common work. The lovely picture shown here, outside the Community Room, shows the Sisters during such moments;

but recreation was organised and compulsory. Each Sister was allocated a particular role in the convent, and after 1897 the Order was able to write its own Directories; but once again it was Bishop Vaughan who structured these roles at Abbotsleigh. He commented that he "...originally intended the Directories to be 1st. a record of the duties of each office and 2nd. suggestions how best to discharge these duties. The main Directories or roles are shown in *Chart 5*.

Prioress, the Rev. Mother	Chantress – led the singing	Choir Postulant – organised the choir	Portress – met visitors at door
Wash Sister – led laundry team	Linen Vestiarian – looked after the vestments and altar linen	Cellaress – managed the food supply	Sacristan – superintended the work of the church
Refectorian – ran the kitchens	Procuratrix – Priory Manager	Infirmary – looked after the sick	

Chart 5

Life in the Priory was very prescribed, to ensure everything was done exactly to order. The later 1917 General Directory had 39 pages that included direction on services, cleaning rooms, recreation, when to kneel, penances, asking forgiveness etc.

As has been mentioned several times, Abbotsleigh was an enclosed Order, meaning visitors were discouraged and until the 1960s the Sisters rarely left the buildings. The high walls were symbolic of this enclosure, but were largely designed to keep outsiders from coming in. The Sisters were allowed visitors, although they were not encouraged; Bishop Vaughan's 1897 rules stated that relatives or good friends could stay in Presbytery, but for no more than 2-3 days – "The shorter the visit the better". Visiting time was a maximum of one hour, at a visitor's request not a nun's, and it was conducted with the Sister behind the grille described in Chapter 4. Villager Angie Vening remembers going to the Guest Room with her mother when she visited her friend Sr. Mary Bernadine; she felt that the nuns always seemed like shadows behind the grille.

The logic for the discouraging of visitors was to ensure that the Sisters were totally focused on their life inside Abbotsleigh and not distracted by outside matters. An example of this was in 1909, when Sr. Mary Gertrude's sister (who had been a nun at Abbotsleigh for a short time,) was banned from visiting her, as she was considered a bad influence on her sister as she was against priests and convent life.

Religious Festivals were an important element of life at the Priory, when the church was decorated and extra services organised. The Profession services were always grand and attended by many guests and clergy; in 1887 at Sister Clare Francis Donnelly's reception those listed as present were Father Bede from London, Father Felix from Bodmin, Bishop Vaughan, Father Downing from Dartmouth, Father Parker from Newton Abbot. The Master of Ceremonies was Father Constantine from Buckfast Abbey, Miss Donnelly's Father and sisters were present, and also Miss Flip, Misses Coz and others from the local area.



In 1909 the Priory celebrated the 300th Anniversary of the Foundation of St Monica's at Louvain by having a big party and making Stonyhurst Tarts (a reference to the school of that name) and a cake that was so big it would not go through the door. In 1913 they celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the consecration

of the church at Abbotsleigh; Bishop Graham led the service, with 15 other clergymen in attendance.



The music was efficiently rendered by the community choir, the rich voice of the celebrant greatly enhancing the beauty of the liturgical function. As the procession left the sacristy, moving up through the nuns' choir, the organ pealed forth the *Ecce Sacerdos Magnus* of Stadler.¹

Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 was celebrated with enthusiasm at Abbotsleigh, when the Sisters united with the nation. The convents of England joined together to make a quantity of clothing for women and children, which they gave as a present to the Queen, who distributed them. Abbotsleigh also sent an illuminated address of devotedness and congratulations. On the day the flag of St George was flown from the Chapter Room roof and the Union Jack above the convent porch. Three of the nuns went up the clock tower and rang a chime on the three bells; the Chronicle noted that "it did not sound badly at all". This was followed by tea in the garden.

Visits of children to Abbotsleigh were always welcomed by the Sisters, as part of their role in encouraging local Catholicism. In 1893 children from Newton Abbot Catholic School spent the day at the Priory, when "an ample supply of tea, cake and bread and butter, was provided by the Nuns who were most anxious that their little guests should thoroughly enjoy themselves."² This was followed by 'musical drill' on the lawn, plus all manner of songs and hymns sung; 'Jesus the only thought of Thee' was requested by the Sisters. The children were then allowed into the Guest Room to talk to the nuns, and after more cake and biscuits the children went home at 8 pm, each with a packet of sweets given to them by the Reverend Mother.

One issue that appears often in the archive papers of Abbotsleigh was the health of the Sisters, both physical and mental. In the early years there was concern over the number of young nuns who died; in 1867 Sr. Mary Philip aged 25, in 1870 Sr. Aloysius Austin died aged 23, in 1872 Sr. Mary Mechtildes was only 24 at her death, and in 1874 Lay Sister Benedict was just 24. The reason appeared to be consumption, now known as tuberculosis, and it was clear that they needed to take greater care with health, and consequently an infirmary was set up.

This was just one of the difficulties that faced the Sisters, those in the Priory and those hoping to Profess. There are frequent references to mental health issues of all kinds, and the lack of understanding of these led to serious differences within the Order. In 1895 the Priory Chronicle describes how Sr. Margaret showed signs of “mental disease”; she had been an inmate in the infirmary since 1875 and was eventually sent to an asylum. Sr. Mary Francis had frequently had mental health problems and in 1889, a Breton ‘Blue Sister’ named Sr. Mary Austin was sent from Clifton Wood Convent in Bristol to nurse her; she was eventually sent to Burgess Hill Asylum, improved and came back several times, until at the age of 80 she left for good. In 1900 Sr. Elizabeth had “mental derangement”, with her sister taking her home for a while; in 1912 her mental health had totally collapsed, and she believed that “she owed Obedience to no one but the Bishop of Diocese”³, consequently she refused to accept orders from the Prioress or other Sisters. She was eventually expelled by the Council for “incurability”, with the Prioress asking the Bishop for a dispensation from her vows. She was placed in the care of the Sisters of Mercy at Bodmin, before going home. One interesting case was Sr. Mary Annunciata whose description noted that she “became quite childish”, but she was 85, and dementia must have been a relatively common explanation for many of the problems.

The Stories of Three Sisters

Of the 144 known Sisters who were resident at Abbotsleigh there are many fascinating stories, but the following three tell of the difficulties faced by young women opting for a religious life at the time.

Sr. Mary Clare Brown was born Margaret Ellen in 1871, the daughter of a Manchester ‘manufacturer’; she Professed in 1895. However, she did not settle well to the life and in 1896 was given a two year dispensation to return home. By 1901 she had returned to Abbotsleigh, despite Sr. Francis Austin, the Procuratrix, writing to the Bishop to try to prevent her return. She was still unsettled and moved to Abbotsleigh’s sister house at Hoddeston (see *Appendix 7*), but by 1904 had returned and it was noted that she “does not obey orders given her, and still gives saucy replies to her Superior”.⁴ In 1905 she was given another two years leave, but since her mother had lost her money she wanted to return. In February 1907, with her return imminent, the Priory Council wrote to the Bishop explaining their concerns, but demanding that if she must return she must be told not to talk about what had happened before she went away. When she returned she immediately teased Sr Mary Anthony and blamed her poor behaviour

on her health, although a doctor found nothing wrong. In 1910 she was back on leave but in 1912 her mother told the Prioress that Sr. Mary Clare was quite her usual self and ready to return, despite a doctor telling her that her daughter was not fit for a religious life. In 1916 the Prioress asked the Bishop to tell Sr. Mary Clare about being a real disturbance to the Community, “...threatening expulsion if she continues her insolence to Superiors”; she also commented that after two leaves of absence, “how stupid it was of us to take her back”.⁵ Her mother tried to persuade her to leave and go to a convent in Shanklin, but despite being warned three times about her behaviour, she refused. In yet another letter to the Bishop, the Prioress suggested he wrote to Sr. Mary Clare to tell “her to leave quietly of her own accord, so that she might avoid the disgrace of expulsion, which her conduct has deserved”.⁶ Eventually Bishop Keily told her “for years you have harassed a community in which you have lived, having brought it nothing but trouble”⁷

Despite all of this Sr. Mary Clare claimed innocence and begged to be allowed to stay, and even had the support of a few Sisters. The Reverend Mother summed up events when she wrote to Mrs Brown telling her: “Everything here seems to irritate Sister Mary Clare, then she forgets herself and speaks out in a most insulting way, to me and to her Sisters”. However, by 1917 she was forced to leave, but from 1919 to 1923 she wrote letters to Rome as petitions seeking support, which failed. In July 1923 she tried one last plea to the Bishop saying she was “broken hearted ... [with] sorrow and distress living out of my vocation”⁸ and had no peace or happiness out of the convent. This seemed to get her the chance to join Hoddeston or Haywards Heath, but they rejected her; but even then she wrote once more to Bishop Keily to claim that no reasons had been given for her ‘dismissal’, and she had not been allowed to put her case to the Bishop, also Rome was prejudiced against her.

Sr. Mary Fidelis was born Marie Elise Melville in Edinburgh in 1870; her father was Sir George Melville whose career was in the Colonial Service, becoming the Governor of St Lucia, and her mother was Lady Marie. Her Novitiate proved troublesome, actually failing in 1903 and 1905. She eventually Professed in October 1908 at Abbotsleigh, but a fall not long afterwards caused a series of health problems that would create major problems for her. She spent some time at home and at Hoddeston Priory, where she seemed to question her vocation, and in 1910 a family friend wrote to Bishop Graham commenting that: “I fear Sr MF’s case will be a sad one. We sent her away twice, thinking she had sufficient vocation”.⁹

On her return to Abbotsleigh she seemed miserable and could not get on with the Prioress. In 1910 Lady Melville visited and her daughter suggested to her that she might leave, as she could not eat or sleep and was anxious, although the doctor could find nothing wrong with her. Lady Melville suggested to the Bishop that he let her go home again, despite the Priory Council being opposed to this; instead he asked Sr. Mary Fidelis to write to him for 'Dispensation'. The confusion for such young women was summed up by Chaplain Rev Higgins: "I greatly fear that there is no hope of her writing to ask for Dispensation. She cannot make up her mind to do it, she fears the consequence so much. She is really ill and wretched from the anxiety and worry".¹⁰ Despite her mother claiming she loved being a nun, her Reverend Mother's view was that she was "like a machine, doing everything without interest or joy ... although she is not naughty or disobedient".¹¹

Eventually in 1911 Sr. Mary Fidelis did leave the Priory, although she failed to follow the Bishop's instructions on how to arrange this, but the story did not end there. Her family were putting pressure on the Prioress to allow her to stay; her brother wrote to say that if he weren't going to Africa with his regiment he would tell the newspapers. However, she was soon begging to return, despite comments such as "she has no vocation" and "her temperament is of profound and unconquerable melancholy" by the Prioress. Once again ill health was blamed by the family and then Sir George demanded justice for his daughter, but he was told: "I will never sanction Miss Melville's return".¹² In 1912 Sr. Mary Fidelis and her brother turned up at Abbotsleigh to try to force her return, but the Prioress refused them entry. Despite petitions to the Holy See in Rome for redress, she was not readmitted, but wrote one last letter to say "I would plead for pity and forgiveness ... I am quite cut off here too, from my church".¹³

These two accounts show the problems that a Prioress faced with young women who believed they wanted a religious life but found the reality very hard. Since most were from good Catholic families, who wanted to support their daughters, it was often a difficult problem to resolve.

The third account returns to the remarkable story of **Sr. Mary Benedict Keon** and the continued impact of her 'visions'. When Mother Mary Gertrude wrote her obituary she commented that: "To the special lights imparted to her, we owe much of the introduction of the Perp. Adoration into our Community. Our Lord called her especially to be the 'Victim of His Love' ..."¹⁴ This was as close as she was prepared to go to comment on the revelations of the 'Little Sister'.

Her death, as with much of her life, was one of suffering. At Christmas 1862 her poor health meant that she had to give up her duties, whilst still going to chapel, unable but to change her position without assistance, eventually being obliged to sit down instead of kneeling. She said she wanted to die before the Blessed Sacrament but sadly as she got weaker she could no longer get to the chapel. She died on 4 March 1863, but had suffered terribly, physically and mentally, as she believed the Devil continued to attack her. At her last Communion she said "Sister tell all my sisters I love them dearly, ask them to forgive me all I have done to displease them and pray for me". She lost her power of speech and writhed in agony, her confessor could not understand her and she died with her sufferings and desolation at 6 15am. She had predicted this saying "I shall have a terrible death". The impact of Sr. Mary Benedict on Abbotsleigh was huge, and her death, probably from tuberculosis, was deeply felt by all there.



There can be no doubt that her 'visions/revelations' had a profound impact on the Order, as the words she wrote down as passed to her by Jesus, were taken into the Order's written material, verbatim. 'The Scapular of the Blessed Sacrament', shown left, was the essence of the Order, describing its history, indulgences and devotions. It contains some telling passages and is at the core of belief and history of Abbotsleigh in many ways. On page 7 it notes that "*Devotion towards the Blessed Sacrament manifested itself for some years in the community, chiefly through one of its members – since departed to her heavenly reward – who was the chosen means to further this work.*" This is followed by "*Our Divine Lord appeared to her on the 19th of October 1859, and revealed more fully the desire of His Heart ... and He also indicated the manner in which His work was to be carried out.*" This is a stunning passage that shows total acceptance of the word of Sr. Mary Benedict, but the Scapular continues on page 8 with this remarkable section: "*One portion of His communication ran as follows: - 'You shall each wear a scapular of red cloth, with a print of a Monstrance and the words ...'*" These are an exact copy of the words written down by Sr. Mary Benedict and quoted in the biography written by Sr. Mary Placida, showing that at the time there was a total acceptance of Sr. Mary Benedict's account of her 'visions'. In her copy of this biography Sr. Lambert included a letter from Bishop Vaughan that contained the detail of a conversation that he had with Bishop Clifford of Clifton. Bishop Clifford related that during Holy Communion at Abbotsleigh he had seen and been told by Sr. Mary Benedict of her entry into Heaven; Bishop Vaughan wrote at the end of this letter:

I have no doubt myself of the present communication being really true. Let it be a means of consolation, and encouragement to assist the holy suffering souls in making known to you dear sisters, His communication. I do strictly enjoin that it not be repeated and written to persons out of the Convent.



In the Priory Archive, now at Douai Abbey, there is an old shoe box which contains artefacts that belonged to Sr. Mary Benedict. These are shown in the two photographs featured here; it seems likely that these were saved for the day that



Sr. Mary Benedict was put forward for beatification. The picture is a hand painted copy of the photograph shown earlier.

When Sr. Mary Alphonsus copied the Souter biography in the late 19th century it appeared to be with the intent of raising awareness of the revelations of Sr. Mary Benedict. There were suggestions that Bishop Vaughan had begun to doubt the accounts of visions, although nothing specific exists. However, Bishop Graham was also having doubts as he told the Prioress to keep documents out of sight. This did not have the impact that he hoped for, as a number of the older Sisters resented this and wrote to him to object; the former Prioress Mother Mary Monica was an advocate of Sr. Mary Benedict and Sr. Mary Magadalen expected that all new nuns should be given a copy of the 'Revelations' to read.

The Prioress was also receiving some objections from young Sisters who wanted the chance to study the 'Revelations' that were alluded to in The Scapular. Whilst in 1910 Rev. Mother Margaret Mary Beaumont understood that the Bishop had banned the reading of Sr. Mary Benedict's work, the previous Prioress disputed this and asked the Bishop to confirm they were 'forbidden' reading. In November 1910 Bishop Graham wrote to Rev. Mother Margaret Mary with the clear instruction that all documents relating to Sr. Mary Benedict were to be "put under lock and key". Consequently all materials were collected and archived, with the Bishop writing to the Priory Council stating that this was his instruction.

If it was hoped that the past would quietly slip away, then it failed, as in 1913 a new version of Red Scapular was due to be printed. The new Bishop, Rev. John Keily, had demanded that the references to revelations, quoted on page 53, be removed from the new edition, which eventually saw 10 000 printed and distributed. It appears that Sr. Mary Alphonsus' request to the Bishop that "I beg of you, my Lord to deal gently with the memory of our Sister, to whom we so owe much", had been ignored. She added that "it is giving us the greatest possible pain that you shut her memory from the Community by making us give up the fragments of beautiful instructions which she has left us Your letter feels her as a visionary and deluded person". However, worse was to follow, although the events of the next few years are not entirely clear, it appears that an in depth study of the whole story was to be conducted. Perhaps another comment in Sr. Mary Alphonsus' letter to the Bishop had given him an idea: "Let a few good Theologians examine the life of our Sister and some conclusions may be arrived at".¹⁵

In 1916 Canon Augustin Morford of Saltash Friary seems to have been charged with the task of transcribing some documents from Abbotsleigh and he wrote to Bishop Keily regarding Sr. Mary Benedict. In his letter he noted that: "If many of the Nuns believe the 'revelations' it is hardly their fault. They were encouraged to do so in many ways, and there has never been any pronouncement against them."¹⁶ This belief is vividly portrayed in another letter to Bishop Keily, this one from Sr Mary Edmund. In it she comments on her excitement that he is to look into the life of Sr. Mary Benedict, and she feels that he will be doing great work for "Our Lord"; she also wrote: "It is not Sr. M.B perhaps who is so much concerned, but the B^d Sacrament, her mission is very far reaching. Many will be drawn to love Our Lord through her."¹⁷

In 1919 Bishop Keily informed the Prioress that he was to ask the Holy See to set up a Local Commission to look into the story, and that "The Commission should decide as things cannot go on indefinitely as they are".¹⁸ He had written to Mgr. Hinsley at the English College in Rome to ask for advice on obtaining the Commission, and in his letter he outlined the story, but concluded that he attached no value to the story of 'revelations'.

He gave seven reasons:

- They have no point
- There is no authentication
- Bishop Graham had sealed up the documents to save disturbance
- Sr. Mary Benedict's documents were unreadable as she was obsessed

- Her death was terrible in its struggle against some invisible or imaginary force
- She could not say if she was deluded or not, visions should be clear beyond doubt
- The two Sisters who knew her seem preoccupied with the preternatural forces around her

It is clear that he had made up his mind on the validity of the story and was asking for guidance on what to do with the records. This interpretation is further reinforced as he wrote this dire warning to the Prioress:

As the documents are unauthentic that is, have no authority behind them, I warn the Council of the grave dangers incurred before God by all who try to impress the minds of others with doubtful revelations. Therefore I have most strictly forbidden, until the Holy See decides, any talk about them in the noviceship. The Faith is adequate and normal groundwork of life.

Once the Commission was agreed, 21 documents were gathered together to present an account of the life of Sr. Mary Benedict; these included the thoughts of various people involved over the previous 50 years. There were letters and documents from Sr. Mary Benedict that described her 'revelations' and her feelings, and also letters from Bishop Vaughan and a number of Prioresses and Sisters that described the unusual behaviour of the Sister and how she punished herself with under eating and over praying. There is little doubt that the collection of documents was chosen to make a point about Sr. Mary Benedict and support Bishop Keily's judgement on her.

Sadly the documents outlining the final judgement do not seem to have survived, but a comment from 1960 by Prioress Mary Dorothy Anderson makes the decision clear. She wrote to ask Bishop Restieaux about "the Sister who appeared to be Our Lord's instrument [but] cannot be mentioned", because even then there were whispers about Sr. Mary Benedict and she did not understand what they meant.

It is clear that the documents were well and truly locked away until AbbPast began its researches and the story could emerge; the final decision obviously concluded that she was a deluded and ill young woman whose total immersion in her religious world meant she had imagined her visitations from Jesus and Mary.

It probably did not help Sr. Mary Benedict that she made no secret of her personal turmoil at the time; Canon Agar wrote to Bishop Vaughan saying

"She has often told me she feared it would cost her her mind, that she feels as if she were going mad" Although Bishop Vaughan in his address to the Sisters when Sr. Mary Benedict died commented: "Could there have been imagination or delusion? Her perfect obedience and her simplicity was proof it was not so".

1937 – 1970

The years that followed were ones of steady development at Abbotsleigh. The finances were on a sound footing, with a steady flow of money from investments, dowries and donations. The Order made investments, buying stocks, shares and bonds, to ensure that there were funds from dividends; in 1936 they bought £1500 worth of shares of British Electric Co Ltd deferred stock, but sold £1200 worth of Quebec Central Railway stock. However, cash flow could be a problem, as shown in 1916, when the Prioress had to ask the Bishop if they could sell an Exchequer Bond worth £100 so they could pay the candle and kitchen bill!



Although Abbotsleigh had limited contact with the local community, the gardener always entered produce in the village Cottage Garden Society in the 1920s and 30s and won many prizes in categories such as best plums, dessert apples, runner beans and onions. A recently discovered photograph even

shows a Sister, the Prioress perhaps, at the prize giving with Rev. and Mrs Dence presenting the trophies.

Local Catholics did continue to attend the services using the ante-chapel but had no contact with the Sisters.

The Prioory Chronicle reveals the issues of each year, noting with some excitement in 1914 that Sr. Mary Teresa became the first Profession for 15 years. Health issues were still prevalent in 1928 when Sr. Theresa was given dispensation to leave cloisters for two years; "she is not fully *sui compos*" and the Community was responsible for her, and the costs of her care, until she was "fully possessed of her wits and she voluntarily leaves the community". The Chronicle also explained that the crosses in the cemetery were twice repainted, between 1924-6 and 1936-7.

At the beginning of this period the Sisters had to deal with the outbreak of war. They used the crypt, really an under croft, which was under the church

Sanctuary and the ante-chapel as their bomb shelter, and over the next six years they had to regularly move down there as the German planes headed for Newton Abbot and Exeter. The description of their first air raid is rather comical:

... a well behaved but somewhat white faced and decidedly odd looking crowd, waiting to be taken down to the crypt. Some were armed with bags, & boxes containing their greatest treasures, tooth brush, towel, linen, shoes etc etc: many had forgotten to put in their false teeth!! So did not look their best.¹⁹

In one German bombing attack they felt the windows and doors rattle and the Chaplain gave the Sisters a General Absolution in case they were hit. The next morning they discovered 14 broken windows in the greenhouse. After a number of scary raids their Chronicle was glad to record the peace in 1945 “and no more ‘bombs’ for us!!! We cannot realize the truth of it all yet!”

During the war it was noted that villager Jimmy Prowse had gone into the Union (workhouse). He had come every day for a meal which Sister Winifred prepared for him. This was one of the social tasks that Abbotsleigh provided; ‘tramps’ and old villagers would knock on the door and be given a bowl of soup with bread, which they would eat sitting on chairs outside. This is one of the things that villagers remember vividly about the ‘nunnery’.



By 1945 the number of Sisters had fallen to its lowest number ever, with 26 living there; this would be one of the ongoing problems for the Priory. Various ideas were tried to increase numbers, including recruiting in Ireland by advertising in the Dublin based “Teen-Age Times” for vocations, and Sisters transferring from other Houses such as from the ‘Bruges Union’. The issue of finance was increasingly becoming a worry and in July 1949 a report looking at the Priory’s finances was commissioned. They had been maintained by income from investments, but their overdraft was causing uneasiness. It was felt that their farm needed to become a long term investment for them to live off as there was little chance of new capital from gifts or legacies. The conclusion was that if the Convent was to survive it would need to make drastic decisions, and one was productive work. The areas to be considered were the making of vestments, binding books and not treating their sick quite so well. The vestment work became quite successful, making a high class set in black for Stoodley Knowle School and a white satin purse for the wedding of Lord Idedesleigh’s daughter; a sample of their work is shown.

The falling numbers and need to earn money meant changes to the day were necessary, to make room for more work. A new Horarium for Choir Sisters was introduced in 1948, which is shown below.

5.20 Rise	12.30 Free time
5.55 Angelus. Meditation. in choir	1.30 to 3.30 Work for earning
6.25 Prime. Terce. Mass. Communion. Thanksgiving	3.45 Vespers followed by silent prayer till 4.30
7.30 Breakfast	4.30 till 5.00 Free time and routine work for the officials of the Community
8.00 Put cell in order	5.15 Supper
9.00 till 11.00 Common work	5.45 Free time and recreation
11.15 Sext and None	6.30 Recreation
11.35 examination of conscience	7.15 Compline and Benediction
11.45 Dinner	8.45 Rest
5.20 Rise	5.55 Angelus. Meditation. in choir

Compared to the 1897 Horarium it is very much more relaxed with more recreation time, when they played croquet and tennis; on a Rev. Mother’s ‘play day’ she organised maypole dancing with ices and games with prizes. By the 1960s their fund raising included making weathervanes from barley,



Three of the Sisters leave the Polling Station, note Sr. Clare, a Lay Sister, wearing a white veil. A taxi was hired to take the Sisters to vote in small groups.

embroidery, lace work, book marks and making boxes and ginger beer. The Sisters sold these goods from a table next to the Presbytery.

The day to day life continued but with more problems occurring as numbers continued to fall and the outside world became harder to avoid. An unusual event took place in February 1950 when all the Nuns went to Newton Abbot to vote in the General Election; the Bishop was keen that the Sisters voted but the Prioress was unhappy with disruption, noting "we wish to avoid this exodus if it can possibly be avoided."²⁰



Any extra expenditure put real pressure on the Order's finances. In 1950 a new central heating boiler had to be installed, costing over £250, which left a £400 overdraft at the bank. This did mean a change from coke to oil, saving the shovelling by the gardener. However, there were new attempts at raising money, with the Catholic Women's League organising fetes in the grounds (the Sisters could not of

course take part) and the Abbotsleigh Association being formed. This was a plan to recruit members to support the Priory by raising funds, and to link with other Orders who might be able to provide Sisters or funds.

The 1950s also saw health problems emerge once again. There were complaints that the Prioress, Mother Mary Veronica, was too dictatorial and Sr, Mary Gerard was admitted to Bodmin Hospital suffering from recurrent melancholia, with schizophrenic features. This meant that she suffered auditory hallucinations and erratic behaviour which created delusions; although the hospital felt her recovery was unlikely, she did eventually return to Abbotsleigh.

On the religious side, the decline in numbers of Sisters by the late 1950s had begun to create problems in being able to provide Adorers at night, and they were forced to have only the bare minimum of three. In 1959 Mary Cecilia was one of the rare Professions, and for the first time since 1921 the Bishop attended. There were also changes occurring in the Catholic Church brought about by what became known as Vatican II, which hoped to bring the Church more in line with the modern world. A consequence of this was that the Priory effectively ceased to be an enclosed order and Sisters began to be able to interact with the outside world. This meant new services at



Abbotsleigh Church, such as a day of services with children which the Bishop and many clergy attended. The picture shows a new service with an altar in the Chancel, another change brought about Vatican II. In 1967 the Pope gave

permission for night adoration to cease, and the grilles in the Guest Room were to be removed.

Sadly the increased contact with the outside world also brought problems. The story of Rev. James Molloy and his theft of thousands of books from the Catholic Church is an unsavoury one, in which he claimed to be gathering books for a great Catholic library, but instead sold 20 000 of them to American universities. In 1964 he wrote to the Bishop of Plymouth to seek permission to visit religious houses in the Diocese to search out old books for his 'library', which he was given. In 1965 he visited Abbotsleigh and was allowed to borrow 12 books. In 1967 Molloy returned hoping to obtain the very rare copy of an 'Abstract of Life of Margaret Clitherow', claiming it to be the only known copy. Fortunately the Prioress was uneasy about the loan as the book was precious to Abbotsleigh and she therefore refused. Molloy tried to enlist the Bishop's help to force the loan, but thankfully Bishop Restieaux was happy to let the Prioress decide. Eventually he did buy some books for £251.

A second unsavoury event occurred in 1966, in what became known as the 'Monstrance Gang'; it must have been a shock for the Rev. Mother to receive a visit from two CID Officers, who came to describe a possible attempt to steal the Throckmorton Monstrance. They had information that a Teignmouth 'muscle gang' were planning to steal the Monstrance to order, being paid to carry out the theft. Apparently they had photographed an access through a Presbytery skylight; the consequence was that the Priory security was improved, with the church being made a secure area. No attempt ever seems to have been made to carry out the theft.

However, the biggest threat to the Priory was its lack of Sisters and a shortage of funds. In 1967 the sale of treasures worth £2500 was authorised by the Bishop; books, paintings and silver were sold, but this was only a short term measure and much more was needed.

Chapter 8

The Priory Gardens and Farm

This section was prepared with the help of Victor, Gerald, Chris and Betty Martin; thank you for your time and your reminiscences.

When the Order bought Abbotsleigh House they also acquired a working farm of over 30 acres. It had a farm house, various barns and a Gardener's House; the Farm and gardens would provide both food and revenue for the Priory.

As described in Chapter 3 there were farm buildings on the site when Joseph Braine bought Abbotsley House and it seems likely that he rebuilt them to create a farm for his estate. In 1851 there was only Abbotsley Cottage on the site, which was occupied by a labourer, Bartholemew Blight, and his family. However, by 1861 there were two cottages, with the Order's gardener in on one and builders using the other; this appears to be the farm cottage that was created by adding to the barns.

The Gardeners at Priory Lodge



The Lodge became the gardener's cottage, and when the Order moved from Spetisbury, their gardener, John Thomas Flip, and his wife Katherine, also moved to Devon to look after the extensive gardens. In 1864 their daughter Mary was baptised at Abbotsleigh but died three weeks later. They remained at

the Priory for the rest of their lives and are buried in the cemetery. When Thomas died in 1892, his son, Joseph, took over as the gardener with his wife Jane. Joseph was known locally for his painted 'Abbotsleigh clogs' produced at John Phillips' art school in Park View Cottage, which were described as "very quaint and decorative".¹ In 1901 it was reported that their four month old son John Joseph had died and was also buried at the Priory. Two of their children, Kitty and Peggy, appear on the school photograph featured on page 61 of 3. *Religion & Education*.

By 1924 they had left Abbotsleigh, with William and Flora Payne replacing them. Later gardeners included Henry and Mary Snell in the 1930s & 40s, John Willoughby, from 1950 and an ex. German prisoner of war, Gerard Radant from 1955 until the 1960s, when Hall and Kathleen Baragwanath took



over. By the 1970s The Priory could no longer afford a full time gardener, therefore the Lodge was rented out.

Most of the land in the walled grounds of Abbotsleigh was devoted to gardens, in which the Lay Sisters worked; there were greenhouses, orchards, and walled vegetable gardens.



The Bailiffs/Managers at Priory Farm



As the plans show there was a long barn alongside Langford Bridge Road (now Priory Road), which appears to have had a farm house added to it at right angles and which also utilised part of that building; this is shown on the centre picture. This appears to be what Geoffrey Watts was referring to with the internal arches of the old barn bricked up, described in Chapter 3. The shippon (cowshed), hay barns, stables and grain stores are shown in the third photograph.

Another person who moved to Abbotsleigh from Spetisbury with the Order was Thomas Cox, who appears to have worked on the farm. In 1871 he



was called a 'groom' but by 1881 he was described as the 'Bailiff' and was living in Priory Cottage with his wife Jessie and their seven children. In his early days there was an outbreak of foot and mouth disease, and it was noted in the press that five cattle were affected. Thomas died in 1881, aged 50, and as a convert he was allowed burial in the cemetery. Fred and May Paddon took over, although Fred was described as a 'general servant'. In 1901 George Crook lived in the Cottage, with his wife and six children; he was called a 'general labourer'. Presumably they were

working on the farm, but different enumerators for the Census tended to use various labels for employment. In 1911 the occupant was called a 'cowman - on farm'; this was Samuel Lane who also lived in Priory Cottage with his family. During the 1920s John and Elizabeth Chudleigh ran the farm; they came from a long line of Abbotskerswell Chudleighs.

It is not clear who the farm's managers were in 1930s and 40s, but in the 1940s the Priory had let the farm to a tenant, Mr Thorning on a five year lease. However, by 1948 he was proving to be an undesirable tenant and the Priory's solicitors tried to have him removed at the end of his term. However, the Law Courts did not agree, but he eventually gave up and left in March 1949. Next the gardener, Henry Snell, took over the running of the farm, earning £5 a week in wages. He was allowed to pay £47 for a strong cart horse, and also bought cows. At the same time the farm buildings were modernised with the intention of the farm earning the Priory valuable revenue. However, Henry Snell was not a young man and was soon forced to retire.

When he left Alfred and Flora Martin became the managers at Priory Farm. Better known as Les and Billy (Flora was a tomboy as a girl and was only allowed to play with the boys if she became one, so her brother named her Billy), they would farm there until 1974, when this usage ceased. It was very much a family affair, with the boys, Victor, Norman, Raymond and Gerald, helping out on both the farm and in the grounds. The girls, Chris and Betty, were only allowed into the Priory buildings at Christmas, when their task was to entertain the Sisters with songs, poetry and dances; they dreaded this, but it was deemed necessary by their parents. The Chronicle always recorded this, as the Sisters really enjoyed the event, and the Rev. Mother then gave the children presents.

Les Martin was an experienced farm manager, having run farms at Stover and Lustleigh, but the first thing he discovered on his arrival at Abbotsleigh was that there was no money in the farm account, and precious little in the way of stock or equipment; just Dorothy the horse. Over the years he and his sons slowly sorted things out, developing the dairy herd, using a crop rotation on the fields that could be ploughed, and 'buying' grass (this really means renting a field on an annual basis) in various places to keep their stock on. There was a herd of South Devon cattle, of which about 18 were being milked at any one time; each day four gallons of milk was taken down to the Priory kitchens.

Old horse drawn equipment was altered to be pulled behind their tractor, with trailers, hay rakes and sweeps modified. The arable fields were used for growing corn, kale, potatoes and mangels: the corn was sent for rolling to make animal feed, the kale and mangels were grown for the same reason. The potatoes were used at the Priory or sold to such places as Court Grange Blind School. When corn was grown the straw was baled by Farmer Mr Rew at Langford Bridge Farm, who charged 4d to 6d a bale. Les's job was to manage the farm so everything belonged to the Priory and the profit he made paid his wages. They also kept pigs at times, collecting waste food from around the area; Chris and Betty boiled this up in a copper boiler to make the swill for the pigs. They both shuddered at the thought of the smell 40 years later!

The family were employees of the Priory, and as such Les was always known as Martin when he was spoken to. However, the Sisters were always kind,



especially to the children. Billy did shopping for the Sisters when she went to market, being given a list of things to buy; however, many of the sisters were rather unworldly and would order things that had not been in the shops since before the war. Once a week a fresh loaf of bread, baked by the Sisters, would arrive at their house, with one for the gardener too. The children were always invited to a Christmas party in the Presbytery, with a tea formally laid out; the Sisters, however, were always behind the grill. This house was always much more ornate and warm than the Sister's quarters.

There were certainly some unusual duties for the family to complete. One of these was digging the graves and helping at the funerals, when Les would have to get four men (tradesmen such as local builder Mark Rowe were called in if they were necessary) to carry the unusual coffin stretcher. As it was a long distance from the church to the graveyard it had legs so the bearers could put it down to have a rest. Gerald recalled having to go with his father to collect the body of one Sister who had died in her cell on the top floor. It could only be reached by a circular staircase, so the body was wrapped in a hammock, and with Les at the front they managed to carry it down the stairs. On another occasion the men were called out as a Sister had gone missing: Sr. Christine Acca was a novice from Belgium and had just returned from a visit home. It would appear she was having doubts about professing, and disappeared. The police were called and an unsuccessful search was made. Eventually a week later she was found camped under a big bush in the grounds where she had been living off vegetables taken from the store.

The sons were employed as well, their tasks included gardening and picking fruit. Victor was paid 12s. 6d for looking after the lawns and flower beds at the front of the Priory building. Gerald recalled the occasion in 1958 when his father had cut the hedge in the field in front of the Church, and he was sent to burn the trimmings. He piled them up against the wall and set fire to them, but later on the fire brigade arrived as smoke was pouring out of the kitchen area, but there were no flames. The explanation was that the entrance to the water tunnel was in the wall behind the fire and the smoke was drawn along it and up into the kitchens. Gerald remembers the tunnel door in the wall had a big oak door, and he went down it once and recalled it was lined with slate; he understood that it went to the well in the field.

When the Martins left Priory Farm in 1974, the land was rented to Mr Rew and Mr Buckpitt at Manor Farm, and Misses Mary Lewington and Louisa Dunning became the tenants at the farmhouse; they bred dogs there but also helped with some jobs in the grounds. They remained until Abbotsleigh was sold in 1985.

Chapter 9

The Decline and End of Abbotsleigh Priory

By the end of 1960s there were just 16 Sisters at Abbotsleigh and the finances were rapidly becoming desperate, but there was clearly a strong desire to save the Priory: "St Aug. Priory has been a stronghold of faith and prayer in this missionary part of England for nearly 200 years and there can be no question whatsoever of its being closed."¹ The consequence was a series of plans for the site over the next 20 years.

Life in the Priory

Despite the ominous background events, Abbotsleigh's daily life continued. In 1971 the first ecumenical service between the Community and Abbotskerswell's St Marys Church was held; Fr. Aidan and Rev. Greensides attended.

By 1972 with only twelve mainly elderly Sisters left, came the recognition that they could not maintain "regular observance" without help. As described later, this came with the Windesheim link and six new Sisters arrived; in fact Mother Mary Veronica resigned as Prioress and Windesheim provided a 70 year old Belgian, Mother Mary Bernadette, as her replacement. Interestingly the Abbotsleigh Chronicle stops at this point. However, in 1980 the Windesheim link ceased.

In 1975 an attempt to increase the number of Sisters saw a link made with the Wexford Convent of Perpetual Adoration in Ireland, with six Sisters moving to the Priory. However this proposed 'Fusion' also failed: "after three years of experimental association between the two Communities, it has now proved impossible for the community of Perpetual Adoration of Wexford to achieve the hoped for union with the Canonesses."²

Some of the last known photographs of the functioning Priory, shown on page 68, were taken in 1976 and show cheerful scenes of the Sisters at work.



In 1982 the last burial took place at Abbotsleigh, when Sr. Mary Cecilia died, aged 72, after 26 years as a nun. That left just six Sisters, although three of them were actually in nursing homes.

The Efforts to Save Abbotsleigh

In 1967 a federation of six branches of the Canonesses Regular centred on Windesheim, near Bruges in Belgium was created; this was given Congregation status by Rome in 1970. Abbotsleigh was drawn towards the Federation until the Bishop heard of the idea and stated that the Priory was an "autonomous convent subject only to the Bishop, therefore cannot be part of Windesheim Congregation". The Windesheim link was regarded as being formed on a temporary experimental basis, with six Sisters moving to Abbotsleigh in 1973 as part of the experiment, however, most soon left.

Another idea in 1969 was to turn part of the site into a Conference/Pastoral Centre, with a smaller convent separate to this. Exeter architects Charles E Ware & Sons drew up plans, with the hope that by including youth work they might attract Ministry of Education grants. Mother Mary Veronica rejected this idea and the plan was dropped by the Diocese. Other groups also looked at the buildings. Firstly a small group from the Catenian Order, and then the Catholic Women's League who considered using the building as a home for aged members.

Next was another downsizing plan within the property, turning unused parts of the buildings into flats; interestingly Sr. Mary Bernadette wrote in August 1979 "I still think that the idea of we six staying on here is, humanely speaking, unrealistic and unpractical". In July 1980 one plan did succeed, when a French organisation, 'The Foyer of Charity', took over the Presbytery. They specialised in six day retreats, focusing on fundamental elements of the Gospel. Father John McCabe led these groups. The Martin children from Priory Farm remember seeing these people walking along the driveway and commented that they seemed to be "sad people."

In July 1979 surveyors from Body, Son & Fluery were appointed by the Diocese to look at what options the Town & Country Planning Authorities might consider for the Priory's buildings. These were the conclusions:

- Hotel, offices or re-development – Highways would say no
- An institution, such as nursing or old people's home - a possibility
- Residential apartments - possible
- A School - no real demand
- Land – must stay in agricultural use

The End of Abbotsleigh

With numbers down to eight by 1980 Bishop Restieaux realised that closure was a serious possibility, and he listed seven reasons why this might happen: lack of numbers, lack of postulants (it had been 26 years since the last Profession), the age of the Community, their declining health, there were now no other Canonesses living an enclosed life, their inability to carry on their work and the erosion of capital. Consequently his conclusion was to apply for the 'Canonical closure of St. Augustine's Priory.' On 28 December 1982 the Decree of Suppression from Rome arrived, and 122 years of history came to an end.

During 1982 the arrangements for the closure were well underway, and the three remaining Sisters were found new homes; Sr. Margaret Clitheroe went to the Perpetual Adoration Sisters in Wexford, Sr. Mary Joseph joined Staplehurst Convent and Mother Mary Veronica went to Syon Abbey at South Brent. The biggest issue in the closing months was where the archives and relics should go. Rome's instructions were that archive material should go to the Prioress General of the Canonesses Regular of St Augustine of the Congregation of Windesheim, but "ought to remain in England".

However, it was not to be that simple, as Bishop Budd's definition of 'archive' was paper material; consequently the relics, such as Thomas More's hair shirt and the Monstrance were kept by the Diocese. He had noted that moveable



goods belonged to the nuns and they had handed them to the Diocese, so only the 'archive' would go, eventually to Sayers Common Convent in Sussex, and when that closed on to Douai Abbey. Thomas More's hair shirt went to Syon Abbey and eventually to Buckfast Abbey. The Monstrance and silver pyx (a box containing the host) are on permanent loan to the Victoria & Albert Museum, a Goanese carved ivory crucifix went to Plymouth Cathedral; with three pictures of St Alipius, St Teresa and the Scourging of Christ by unknown artists and the Triptych from Louvain by Gaspar M Crayer being 'loaned' to Stoodley Knowle

Convent. The valuable library material went to the Cathedral. The stunning Derwentwater Vestments and the Plowden Vestments, shown on page 69, are now on show at the Diocesan Archive in Exeter.



The final events in 1983 saw the Department of Environment give the Priory buildings listed status, and on 1 May 1983 the last cleaning of the buildings was done, with the keys then handed to Fluery Manico Estate Agents. The MDA headline read "Last two nuns leave – Priory for sale".³

This charming picture recalled happier times. Taken in 1976 it shows the Reverend Mother Mary Bernadette at the right hand end of the middle row and the former Reverend Mother, Mary Veronica, in the middle of the front row.



Villagers Remember

Like a number of villagers Mrs Vening, who lived in Tamberly on Priory Road, was a Catholic. She was a regular visitor to Abbotsleigh and was friends with Sr. Mary Bernadine, who is shown in the photograph. Her daughter, Angie, vividly remembers her visits to the Priory as a young girl, even being allowed to run along the corridors in the Convent Wing. Mrs Vening helped by buying and selling the products made by the Sisters; these included corn weather cards, elderflower and ginger wines, knitted baby clothes, linen

tray covers, crocheted water jug covers with beads and altar cloths. Angie married locally, to Andrew, Bungy Eyles' son from the Butchers Arms, and their children Emma and Shaun were christened at the Priory; they were the last to be christened there in 1977 and 1980.

Ann Paddon lived at 2 Barnfield during the 1950s and like her mother was brought up in the Catholic faith. Her mother worked as a cleaner at Mote House, the Manor House and Court Grange. At that time the Blind School at Court Grange accommodated a good number of children from Ireland, many of whom were Catholic. Ann well remembers her task each Sunday of escorting the blind children to the Priory and attending the services in the ante-chapel.

In late 1940s John Hannaford began work as a heating engineer and one of his first jobs was at the Priory; living in Torquay he caught the bus to Aller and walked up the lane to get there. He later started his own company and kept on the Priory maintenance. He recollects that when he went there he would ring the bell, and after a minute a flap in the door opened, and when the Portress realised it was him she would pull a cord that opened the outer door, he would then go to the grille door to be let in. He always found the nuns friendly, very kind and happy. When he arrived they would ask if he was staying all day and if he was they would provide him with lunch, which was eaten at the opening to the door. Pudding always involved apples as they had so many; in the cellars were racks of apples.

He could see that it was a hard life; on one occasion he saw a Sister carry a welder's acetylene tank because she did not want the welder to hurt himself. He recalls young novices arriving from Belgium and Ireland, who would stay for six months and then choose whether to stay or not; they never did stay. They did have entertainment and once when he was called at night he saw the Sisters huddled in a room watching a television, it was the only one in the whole building. On another occasion he found them very excited because they had been on an outing to Paignton Zoo in a minibus. He did not visit any of the nun's quarters but did see them in the Presbytery building. The Prioress once told him a Father was visiting, so they had to get the cigarettes and whisky out!

He always found them happy, and they would speak if they needed to, or if he spoke to them, but you could see that they were poor. He was told they had just sold some of the Flemish silver that the Order had brought to England with them. He always dealt with 'Mother Proc' (short for Procuratrix) who was the manager.

The Martin children from the Priory Farm remember the Sisters fondly, recalling that they were friendly and pleased to see you, but were always wanting news from the outside world, because they only heard selected news from the papers that were read to them by the Prioress in the refectory. They recall looking over the farm wall and seeing the younger Sisters playing badminton in their recreation time.

Marina Small's family moved to Priory Lodge in the early 1970s. Her father James rented the Lodge but also did odd jobs, such as cutting the grass. Her mother worked in the Guest House, where the housekeeper was Mrs Smyth. Marina recalls Sr. Cecilia who was lovely, and the Sisters making rosary beads, dolls, and knitted clothes.

Chapter 10

A New Life for The Priory

When Abbotsleigh closed in March 1983, the whole site was placed on the property market by the Diocese of Plymouth. It was probably expected that a school or hotel might buy the buildings, as had often happened with such buildings; however, times were changing and old country houses and convents were no longer fashionable, and dozens of such buildings stood empty and decaying across the country.

Whilst empty, the Devon and Cornwall Police occasionally used the site for police dog training, and a number of photographs were taken showing the buildings still in good condition. This picture shows the church with all the pews still in place.



The first offer for the Priory came in straight away; £80k to use it as a holiday village. By May 1983 there had been eight offers, ranging from £60k to £185k; the uses included a school, museum/retreat, a religious use and residential/nursing homes. None of these came to anything, but by September £253k for a country health farm had been offered, and £410k to make the site a residential language school. Once again, eventually the interest faded, and by December there had been break-ins and vandalism, with lead stripped from the roof. By June 1984 any worthwhile interest had disappeared and things were looking bleak for the future.

However, a saviour was about to emerge in the form of Martin Procter. Martin and his wife Viv owned a building firm called Clennon Developments, and for a number of years had been constructing small housing developments in the Torbay area. In 1981 Martin acquired the old Browns Garage site in Torbay, and this changed his view of building. These buildings had been the stable block of Steerfield House, part of the Singer estate, and by partly using the existing buildings and partly by adding some new, he created retirement apartments when this concept was still quite new. (McCarthy &

Stone's first such development had been in 1977.) The Coach House, as it became known, was a great success, winning Clennon a Civic Trust Award. Martin realised that this could be a niche market, and began looking for another site, and through the architect Keith Proctor, who had helped with the Coach House project, he found the Priory. After a number of visits in 1984, the Procters decided to acquire the site, purchasing it from the selling agents Fluery & Manico for £225 000 on 28 May 1985.



The buildings came with around 30 acres of arable land, which was soon sold to the sitting tenants, farmers Rew and Buckpitt; Martin did insert a covenant to prohibit any building on the land in front of the Priory. When we interviewed Martin, his enthusiasm for the project was still undiminished. He and Keith worked together to create the vision for a different kind of retirement community, not as the wisdom of the time said, in towns, close to shops and transport; but for more wealthy people seeking quality independent living. Martin spent hours walking through the empty buildings to create his vision for the site, planning how to use the buildings and maximise their potential for a new type of community.



Inevitably there were major planning hurdles to overcome; by March 1983 the Priory had been designated a Grade 2* listed building, entry Number 1256845. It appears that the * was added at the behest of English Heritage to protect the reredos in the church. Thankfully both Teignbridge and Devon Council's planning offices were supportive of his idea and worked positively to make the project viable. Martin was very grateful to Peter Beacham, the Devon County Conservation Officer and Steven Anderson at TDC. English Heritage and The Victorian Society were less helpful and at one meeting Martin invited them to buy their own monastery, and then implement the ideas they were expounding! At one time it looked like the planning application might end up in an enquiry, but Martin sought the help of local MP Patrick Nicholls, and this was averted. Abbotskerswell also took to the project, an Open Day in 1986 saw hundreds of villagers visit the site to see what had previously been behind closed doors. In the autumn of 1986 work began, with Martin

having a clear idea that he wanted a launch for the project at Easter 1987. Where possible they gave any church relics to good homes; parts of the organ went to a Gloucestershire monk and the Chapter House altar went to Ingsdon Convent School, (something that Martin regrets now, he feels he should have incorporated it somehow.) After Ingsdon closed it went to the Moorland Hotel at Haytor.

Work was frantic, with Martin often working into the early hours of the morning designing the apartments. On April 16 1987 'The Priory' development was launched, with swimming pool, gardens and several apartments complete so that prospective purchasers could see what their life would be like. Martin persuaded The Daily Telegraph's property writer to visit the site, and his really positive write up did wonders for the project, bringing 300 telephone enquiries within two days. He was certain that the key was 'quality of life': "there seems to be no limit to the price people will pay for something which is big enough and good enough".¹



A three year, £2m, rolling programme had begun, with the sale of the properties of one phase paying for the development of the next. Firstly the north wing, shown left, had the upper two storeys removed "to create a structure more in scale with his concept of "a development with a village church attached"". ² Next all three wings of the main building were totally renovated, making use of the south facing aspect, with 23 apartments created: but "the *pièce de résistance* must surely be Hansom's original church, now renamed the Forum".³ A new glazed entrance was added on the north side and a courtyard and sun lounge on its south side. The Chapter Room was turned into a recreation space, now called The Octagon, and the Priest's Robing Room became the swimming pool. The new



Forum, shown above, has become a stunning multi-use space for dining, concerts, coffees and talks; find a reason to go and see it. Inevitably some features had to go and some new features were added to make it suitable for purpose. The corrugated roofed lean-to walkway along the south side was demolished and balconies added along the first floor, making the building more open and giving more light; these are shown on page 75. Its north side has had a bridge added to give access to the courtyard area.



An important element of the plan was to add extra accommodation on the site, and this was done with the construction of Priory Court, with twelve apartments, and additions to the farm and lodge buildings to create Priory Yard, with its seven cottages. The Court, with its gabled tower, was deliberately designed by Martin to reflect the design of the original Abbotsley House and was completed in 1991. The completion of Priory Yard in 1997 brought to an end the work of Clennon Developments, with Clennon Management taking over the running of the site. It also ended Martin's work as a developer, as he could not summon up interest in any other projects, and today he regards The Priory as his defining work in construction. He was also becoming a well-known artist and it was this which he threw himself into after his involvement with The Priory ended. His work is exhibited in many galleries, including one in California.

In 2011 Clennon Management, then run by Martin and Viv's daughter Karen Pearson, sold The Priory site to Retirement Villages, an Epsom based company who own and run 13 similar properties in ten counties. When Martin planned The Priory he made no secret of the fact that he was catering for the top end of the retirement market, and his vision has been rewarded. In 2018 one bedroom apartments will sell for £175k and the two bedroom apartments and cottages from £290k. Each comes with 300 year lease and a yearly service charge of £6000.

In 1988 Martin said: "A project has got to feel right; you've got to love the building and the project and be able to throw yourself wholeheartedly into every aspect of it"⁴, this he did, and what a great job he made of it. Given a few more years Abbotsleigh Priory would have been derelict and beyond hope, and a major piece of Abbotskerswell's history would have been lost. Not everybody might approve of developments such as The Priory or Court Grange, seeing them as ruining grand buildings, however, the reality is that thanks to Martin Procter and Carl Throgmorton, these two fine village buildings still exist, and that is what counts.



It is hard to know how to sum up this fascinating story of an institution that for a century overlooked the village, but few of those villagers knew anything about it; in reality it did not even become part of the Abbotskerswell Church of England Parish until 1984. It is a many sided story, from farm to country mansion to convent and now a retirement complex, with each being of its time.

In Chapter 2 the reader was urged to look at the story of Sr. Mary Benedict in the context of its time and not to judge it by today's standards. To use Sr. Mary Alphonsus' words to Bishop Keily "I beg of you, my Lord to deal gently with the memory of our Sister". Her story was buried by that Bishop but has at last been found and told, and by doing that, we at AbbPast, can be proud.



Appendices

Appendix 1 The Early Prioresses of the Canonesses

No.	Dates	Name	Convent Site
1	1609 - 1632	Mother Wiseman	Louvain
2	1633 - 1668	Mother Throgmorton	Louvain
3	1668 - 1690	Mother Winifred Thimelby	Louvain
4	1690 - 1715	Mother Plowder	Louvain
5	1715 - 1727	Mother Sheldon	Louvain
6	1727 - 1733	Mother Worthington	Louvain
7	1734 - 1754	Mother Cecily More	Louvain
8	1754 - 1763		Louvain
9	1763 - 1785	Mother Marina Smith	Louvain
10	1785 - 1811	Mother Stonor	Supervised flight from Louvain. Then at Hammersmith, Amesbury and Spetisbury
11	1812 - 1818	Mother Tancred	Spetisbury
12	1818 - 1828	Mother Tuite	Spetisbury
13	1828 - 1848	Mother Mary Bernard Berrington	Spetisbury

Appendix 2 St Monica's Priory

When the Augustinian Order left Spetisbury in 1861 the Priory was leased to the **Bridgettine Order** until 1887. They were an Order founded in 1346 by St. Bridget of Sweden. In 1415 an English community was founded but in 1539 their house, Syon Abbey, was closed by Henry VIII and like the Augustinians they fled abroad; by 1594 they were in Lisbon, Portugal. However, in 1861 political instability there meant they returned to England and the Prioress at St. Monica's offered them the buildings that they were leaving. Abbess Mary Joseph Carter arrived with eight Choir Sisters, two Choir Novices and two Lay Sisters. For a short while both Orders were at Spetisbury, but when the Augustinians left in October the Bridgettines took over the site, renaming it Syon House.

By 1881 there were 15 nuns and a Chaplain, who was also Spetisbury's Parish priest. Although theirs was a secluded life, it seems that they also ran a school for village children. In 1887 Mr. Evan Baillie of Filleigh in North Devon, gave the order a three acre site near Chudleigh where they built a new Abbey. In 1925 they moved to Marley House at South Brent, which became known as Syon Abbey.



The next occupants were the **Canons Regular of the Lateran** whose existence mirrored those of the nuns. They returned to England in 1881 and Bishop Vaughan offered them some dilapidated buildings in Bodmin. In 1881 Spetisbury was given to this order, no doubt at the behest of the Bishop, and reverted to the St. Monica's Priory name. Eventually Spetisbury was sold to a community of Ursuline nuns in 1907.

The **Ursuline Order** was founded in Italy in 1535 in honour of St Ursula. They also had houses in Germany and France, but changing laws forbidding religious orders from teaching drove them to England in 1906, and to Spetisbury in 1907. During their time at Spetisbury the sisters ran a boarding and day school known as the Ursuline High School, though for its pupils it was generally simply known as St. Monica's.

The school closed in 1926 when the Ursuline Sisters returned to France. The buildings were put on the market although the burial ground was excluded. The Priory was bought by Walter Rigler for £2000; he was a prosperous coal, corn, forage and seed merchant from Boscombe.

However, in 1927 the Spetisbury Priory was sold at auction to Thomas Oakley from Luton whose main business was as a demolition contractor. He immediately set about demolishing the main house, and by the time the demolition contractors had finished their work all that remained was the Chapel, the Priest's House (now the Village Hall), the School House and the Kitchens. Today these buildings are **private houses** with other new houses built on the site. The burial ground was totally neglected and forgotten but in 1977 it was rescued by the village and turned into a Village Garden.

Appendix 3 The Grave Plan

Hedge																
Grave Row	P	O	N	M	L	K	J	I	H	G	F	E	D	C	B	A
Official Grave Row				XI	X	IX	VIII	VII	VI	V	IV	III	I	II	I	
Grave 1	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†		†	†	
Grave 2	†		†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	
Grave 3	†		†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	
Grave 4	†			†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†		†	†	†
Grave 5			†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†		
Path																

Hedge															
Grave Row	EE	DD	CC	BB	AA	Z	Y	X	W	V	U	T	S	R	Q
Official Grave Row	XXIII	XXII	XXI	XX	XIX	XVIII	XVII	XVI	XV	XIV	XIII	XII			
Grave 1	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†		†	†
Grave 2	†			†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†		
Grave 3			†	†	†	†	†	†	†			†	†		†
Grave 4					†	†	†	†	†	†	†				†
Grave 5		†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	†			†		†
Path															

Appendix 4 Burials of Priests and Secular Graves

Grave Plot	Surname	Forename	Title	Role	Died	Age
A4	Trant	Mary Augusta		Boarder	1862	83
D2	Fiedel	Emile	Priest	Retired	1868	76
D3	English		Priest			
D5	Agar	William	Canon	Chaplain	1872	56
N1	Flip	John Joseph		JTF's grandson	1902	4 Months
N2	Agar	Elizabeth	Mrs		1868	78
N3	Bunn	Joseph	Priest		1878	53
N5	Brindle	William	Priest	Chaplain	1891	73
O1	Baillie	Evan Hamilton		Evan's son	1869	14
O1	Bicknell	Louisa			1884	80
O1	Baillie	Evan			1899	82
O1	Baillie	Amy Gertrude		Evan's daughter	1921	69
O1	Baillie	Louisa Mary		Evan's wife	1922	91
P1	Cox	Thomas Joseph		Farmer	1888	50
P2	Flip	John Thomas		Gardener	1892	60
P3	Flip	Catherine		JT's wife	1914	86
P4	Flip	Mary Augusta		JT's daughter	1917	52
Q1	Smyth	John	Priest		1951	43
Q3	Keily	John	Bishop	Bishop	1928	74
Q5	Sullivan	Kathleen			1916	38
R2	Vaughan	William	Bishop	Bishop	1902	88
S2	Moyes	James	Canon	Retired	1927	74
S3	Brown	Francis Charles	Priest	Retired	1944	81
S5	Barratt	Patrick	Canon	Chaplain	1923	44

Appendix 5 The Prioresses of Abbotsleigh

No.	Dates	Name
14	Feb.1848 – Nov.1867	Mary Gertrude Poynter
15	Nov.1867 – June 1875	Mary Alipia Winstanley
16	June1875 – Nov.1883	Mary Scholastica Southwell
17	Nov. 1883 – Dec.1884	Mary Clare Magdalen Vaughan* ¹
18	Jan.1885 – Aug.1896	Mary Monica Simes
19	Aug.1896 – Sept.1905 Sept.1905 – Oct.1908	Mary Francis Joseph Harris Mary Monica Simes* ²
20	Oct.1908 – Nov.1917	Margaret Mary Beaumont
21	Nov.1917 – Oct.1926 Oct.1926 – July 1936 July 1936 – July 1942	Mary Berington Margaret Mary Beaumont Mary Berington
22	July 1942 – July 1948	Mary Margaret Sibeth
23	July 1948 – July 1951 July 1951 – Jan.1957	Mary Veronica Scully Mary Margaret Sibeth
24	Jan.1957 - 1967 1967 – 1973	Mary Dorothy Anderson Mary Veronica Scully
25	1973 - 1976	Mary Bernadette de Radigues* ³

*¹Bishop Vaughan's niece *²First to return to office *³Seconded from Bruges

Appendix 6 The Sisters of Abbotsleigh

Total	Grave Plot	Grave Plot	Surname	Forename	Name in Religion	Status	Died	Age	Years Prof.
1	XXIII.1	DD1	Anderson	Dorothy Mary	Mary Dorothy	Choir	1972	78	50
2	III.1	E1	Anslow	Elizabeth	Winifred	Lay	1866	76	45
3	IX.5	K5	Baker	Julianna	Mary Teresa	Choir	1907	83	48
4	VIII.3	J3	Batchelor	Mary Martha	Mary Joseph	Choir	1888	61	34
5	IX.1	K1	Batchelor	Mary Elizabeth	Mary Magdalen	Choir	1894	70	42
6	XIX.2	AA2	Beaumont	Lilian	Margaret Mary	Choir	1958	94	63
7	XV.5	W5	Berg	Ada Ellen	Mary Francis	Choir	1939	50	23
8	XVIII.1	Z1	Berington	Mary	Joseph Magdalen	Choir	1951	76	53
9	IX.3	K3	Billington	Sarah	Agatha	Lay	1905	85	61
10	XVII.5	Y5	Boursot	Marie Louise Blanche	Mary Gertrude	Choir	1951	80	58

11			Boursot	Louisa Marie	Mary Ignatius	Choir			
12			Bowring	Elizabeth	Mary Barbara	Choir			
13	XII.2	T2	Box	Francis	Teresa	Lay	1928	88	60
14			Boxall	Mary	Mary Austin	Choir			
15	X.5	L5	Bradbury	Susan	Philomena	Lay	1921	78	50
16	XVI.2	X2	Breeze	Annie	Mary Perpetua	Choir	1941	84	55
17			Brown	Margaret	Mary Clare	Choir			
18	XVI.1	X1	Calonnec	Gabrielle	Mary Austin	Choir	1940	92	48
19			Carroll	Elizabeth	Mary Elizabeth	Lay			
20	XIV.1	V1	Carter	Helen	Aloysia	Lay	1933	68	42
21	XIII.3	U4	Cathcart	Elizabeth	Mary Baptist	Choir	1931	47	2
22	X.2	L2	Clarke	Martha	Lucy	Lay	1912	82	59
23	XVII.2	Y2	Cooper	Mary Rose	Mary Aloysius	Choir	1949	65	44
24	XXIV.1	EE1	Copplestone	Dorothy Emma	Mary Gabriel	Choir	1975	80	23
25	VII.5	I5	Crook	Mary	Magdalene	Lay	1885	81	51
26	X.4	L4	Cuninghame	Elizabeth	Mary Veronica	Choir	1915	78	38
27	IV.4	F4	Davies	Margaret	Ellen	Lay	1871	63	3
28	XIII.1	U1	Dawson	Helen Dora	Mary Stanislaus	Choir	1930	76	51
29	II.1	C1	Day	Susan	Anne Austin	Choir	1865	69	46
30	II.2	C2	Day	Martha	Mary Ignatia	Choir	1865	78	47
31			de Radigues		Mary Bernadette	Choir			
32	XX.3	BB5	Densham	Gladys May	Teresa	Lay	1962	61	29
33	XV.4	W4	Domican	Ellen	Catherine	Lay	1938	87	57
34	XVII.1	Y1	Donnelly	Teresa	Clare Francis	Choir	1947	84	59
35			Doran	Mary Anne	Elizabeth	Lay			
36	XVII.3	Y3	Downen	Mary	Winefrid	Lay	1951	86	66
37			Dunton	Pamela	Margaret Clitheroe	Choir			
38	XXII.1	DD5	Edwards	Miriam	Mary Bernardine	Choir	1969	74	35
39			Edwards	Lucy Anne	Ann	Lay			
40			Edwards	Mary Anne	Ann	Lay			
41	XVI.4	X4	Evans	Lucy Ann	Imelda	Lay	1944	75	37
42	XI.5	M5	Fitzgerald	Mary Julia Rose	Mary Angela	Choir	1928	66	40
43	XXI.3	CC5	Flavin	Mary Kathleen Mabel	Mary Teresa	Choir	1969	77	56
44			Forbes		Mary Dristan	Choir			

45			Fryer	Florence	Mary Carmel	Choir	1983	83	
46	XVIII.2	Z2	Gauthier	Nelly Marie	Mary Edmund	Choir	1954	83	59
47	IX.4	K4	Gilson	Matilda	Bernard	Choir	1905	65	37
48			Grealy	Hannah Margaret	Mary Magdalen	Choir	1914		
49	III.4	E4	Hall	Mary	Mary Monica	Choir	1867	73	54
50	VI.2	H2	Hardman	Elizabeth	Aloysia Joseph		1876	69	45
51			Harov		Mary Clare				
52	XV.2	W2	Harris	Mary Anne	Francis Joseph	Choir	1937	83	55
53	V.2	G2	Hay	Honorine	Mary Mechtildes	Choir	1872	24	3 months
54	XIX.3	AA3	Hayden	Alice	Ignatius	Lay	1961	78	55
55			Heath	Ivy Dorothy	Mary Joseph	Lay			
56	XVII.4	Y4	Hickson	Margaret	Monica	Lay	1954	75	37
57			Hodgson		Margaret Clement				
58	XI.2	M2	Hughes	Mary Anne	Josephine	Lay	1924	72	32
59	VI.5	H5	James	Elizabeth	Francis	Lay	1878	75	55
60			Johnson	Ivy Allen	Peter	Lay			
61			Johnson	Myrtle	Mary Paul	Lay			
62	VI.1	H1	Kane	Lucy	Margaret Mary	Choir	1876	32	3
63	VII.2	I2	Kelly	Louisa	Mary Evangelista	Choir	1882	60	30
64			Kelly	Catherine	Anne	Lay			
65	XX.2	BB2	Kendal	Agatha Mary	Mary Agatha	Choir	1962	80	29
66	XII.3	T3	Kendal	Mary Anne	Teresa Joseph	Choir	1929	45	24
67	I.2	B2	Keon	Margaret	Mary Benedict	Choir	1863	33	10
68	XXIV.2	EE2	Kirkwood	Marie Gertrude	Mary Cecilia	Choir	1982	72	26
69	XX.1	BB1	Knapman	Catherine Mary	Clare	Lay	1960	86	65
70	XIV.4	V4	Lambert	Mary Louise	Mary Alphonsus	Choir	1934	75	54
71	VI.4	H4	Lamperd	Mary	Clare	Lay	1877	53	26
72	V.1	G1	Langford	Harriet	Mary	Lay	1872	81	57
73			Lardner	Mary	Mary Mechtilde	Choir			
74	XXI.2	CC3	Le Grelle	Marita	Mary Lucy		1971	89	67
75	III.2	E2	Leonards	Clara	Mary Philip	Choir	1867	25	4
76	XVI.5	X5	Lord	Beatrice Annie	Mary Emmanuel	Choir	1946	69	43

77	XIX.1	AA1	Lyons	Gertrude Mary	ex.Mary Anthony	Choir	1956	85	(1912 - 17)
78	IX.2	K2	Malone	Elizabeth	Mary Agnes	Choir	1904	75	45
79	XI.3	M3	Maxwell	Emily	Agnes Clare	Choir	1925	82	57
80			Maxwell	Mary	Agnes Teresa	Choir			
81	IV.3	F3	McDonnell	Elizabeth	Mary Francis	Choir	1871	81	57
82	XIX.5	AA5	McEwen	Lilian Veronica	Mary Michael	Choir	1962	80	30
83	III.5	E5	McKay	Mary	Anne Joseph		1860	50	21
84			McKay	Ellen	Margaret	Lay			
85	II.4	C4	McKenna	Frances	Mary of the Cross	Choir	1866	30	On death-bed
86	XVIII.3	Z3	Megarry	Winifred Mary	Mary Scholastica	Choir	1955	72	48
87			Melville	Marie Elise	Mary Fidelis	Choir	1949		
88	XV.1	W1	Morgan	Mary Francis	Mary Gabriel	Choir	1934	92	68
89	VIII.2	J2	Morris	Ann	Mary Augustine	Choir	1888	82	32
90		R1	Moynihan	Honorah	ex.Alexis	Lay	1935	51	(1912 - 15)
91			Mulligan	Anne	Agnes	Lay			
92	IV.5	F5	Murray	Ellen	Rose	Lay	1871	46	9
93			O'Gorman	Mary	Mary Colette	Choir			
94	XIV.2	V2	O'Sullivan	Celia Mary	Mary Joseph	Choir	1933	76	39
95			Parsons	Helen	Christine	Lay			
96			Pemberton	Alice	Joseph	Lay			
97	IV.2	F2	Petre	Augusta	Aloysius Austin	Choir	1870	23	2
98	XII.4	T4	Phillips	Emily Ann	Francis Austin	Choir	1930	78	50
99	XII.1	T1	Plowden	Eleonor	Mary Joseph	Choir	1922	84	51
100	I.4	B4	Poynter	Elizabeth	Mary Gertude	Choir	1881	80	54
101	I.1	B1	Pritchard	Catherine	Teresa Bernard	Choir	1862	33	10
102	XV.3	W3	Prost	Mary Teresa	Mary Agnes	Choir	1937	76	44
103	V.4	G4	Quirk	Bridget	Benedict	Lay	1874	24	4
104	XVI.3	X3	Rea (Ray)	Catherine Agnes	Colette	Lay	1941	55	11
105			Reid	Matilda	Mary Francis	Choir			
106	X.3	L3	Reid	Jane	Mary Annunciata	Choir	1912	85	36
107	X.1	L1	Rickaby	Mary Ann	Mary Salome	Choir	1909	58	3
108			Rideout		Monica Regis				
109			Roe	Anastasia	Mary Bernadette	Choir	1982	81	
110	I.3	B3	Ryan	Catherine	Mary Alphonsa	Choir	1871	65	26
111			Ryelandt		Mary Raphael				
112			Scully	Eileen Patricia	Mary Veronica	Choir	1984	77	

113	VIII.1	J1	Shanly	Anne	Mary Catherine	Choir	1888	42	21
114	XI.4	M4	Shanly	Mary	Teresa Austin	Choir	1926	83	58
115	XVIII.4	Z4	Sibeth	Margaret	Mary Margaret	Choir	1957	74	52
116	III.3	E3	Sidgreaves		Mary Emmanuel	Choir	1867	24	2
117			Simes	Louisa Mary	Mary Monica	Choir	1929		
118	V.3	G3	Slade	Mary	Anne	Lay	1872	79	58
119	IV.1	F1	Smith	Mary	Mary Paul		1869	75	35
120	VII.1	I1	Smith	Amy Harriet	Mary Angela	Choir	1879	30	7
121	XI.1	M1	Smith	Amy	Monica	Lay	1924	78	48
122	XIII.4	U5	Smith	Susanna	Winefride	Lay	1933	83	57
123			Smith	Ellen Domican	Catherine	Lay	1938		
124	VIII.4	J4	Souter	Susanah	Mary Placida	Choir	1893	71	43
125			Southwell	Teresa	Mary Scholastica	Choir	1904	74	
126	XIX.4	AA4	Stericker	Beatrice Wreghit	Mary Bernard	Choir	1959	82	50
127	XIV.3	V3	Stevens	Jane May	Mary	Lay	1933	82	60
128	XIV.5	V5	Stewart	Elinor	Agnes	Lay	1938	72	48
129	XVIII.5	Z5	Sullivan	Francis	Mary Benedict	Choir	1956	84	60
130	II.3	C3	Sumner	Bridget	Mary Clare	Choir	1865	59	23
131	VII.4	I4	Sumner	Elizabeth	Mary Aloysia	Choir	1885	76	56
132	V.5	G5	Talbot	Ellen	Mary Bridget	Choir	1875	33	2
133	XXI.1	CC1	Thistle	Evelyn Amy	Mary Gerard	Choir	1968	70	47
134	XX.4	BB3	Thornton	Katherine	Mary Lucy	Lay	1965	65	
135			van Caille		Gertrude Magdalene				
136	VII.3	I3	Vaughan	Mary	Clare Magdalen	Choir	1884	40	17
137	XIII.2	U2	Weeks	Mary Anne	Mary Juliana	Choir	1930	88	68
138			Weld	Filemena	Mary Gertrude	Choir			
139			White		Mary Benedict	Choir			
140			Wilder	Emily	Clare Austin	Choir			
141	II.5	C5	Williams	Catherine	Mary Mechtildes	Choir	1866	44	2
142	VIII.5	J5	Williams	Henrietta	Mary Margaret	Choir	1893	65	34
143	VI.3	H3	Winstanley	Elizabeth	Alipia	Choir	1876	69	44
144			Wylie		Mary Salome	Choir			

Appendix 7 Hoddeston Priory

In 1886 The Canonesses bought the Clare Hall Estate at South Mimms where they created another convent called St Monica's. Eight Choir and three Lay Sisters, led by Sr. Mary Scholastica Southwell, transferred there from Abbotsleigh. The site proved unsuitable, and in 1898 they moved to Hoddeston in Hertfordshire where they remained until closure in 1969.

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