

## **History of Mount St Bernard Abbey**

*Talk by Fr Terence Wilson*

I wish to talk about the history of the abbey here at Mount St Bernard. The foundation of the abbey was made in 1835. I will try to encapsulate into a brief talk nearly 200 years of history. I can only focus on significant events, dates and people. Really, the history of the abbey is the lives of 170 or so monks who lie in the monastery cemetery and in the lives of the 26 men who make up the present community.

There is a prelude to the founding of the abbey; for in 1794 at Lulworth, Dorset, a monastery of Cistercians was set up. Because of the forces behind the French Revolution all monastic foundations were disbanded and their religious persecuted. Some died, some fled the country. The Lulworth foundation was made by some of those monks who fled. Though it flourished it was short-lived for in 1817 the British Government asked the community to leave the country. With revolutionary rumblings still occurring in France the British Government were concerned that there were a number of French monks in the community. The Battle of Trafalgar had been won by the British against the French and Spanish just 12 years before, in 1805.

The community went back to France to enter the monastery of Melleray near Nantes in Brittany. The Revolution of 1830 dispersed the Melleray community in the following year and caused most of the British monks to be sent to Ireland, where the Irish prior of Melleray had gone to prepare a house of refuge.

The idea of a new foundation in England began to take shape in 1833 when Fr Norbert Woolfrey, one of the British monks in Ireland, was asked to raise funds in England to build the new Irish monastery of Mount Melleray. He met a recent convert to the Catholic Faith, Ambrose March Philipps (later to take the name *de Lisle*) who lived at Grace Dieu in Leicestershire, which is just a few miles away from the Abbey. Ambrose de Lisle was fired with zeal to restore the contemplative monastic life to England and invited Bishop Thomas Walsh, Vicar Apostolate of the Midland District and Father Odilo Woolfrey, the brother of Father Norbert, to come to Grace Dieu to discuss the possibility of establishing a Cistercian monastery nearby. A property of 227 acres of land was acquired, paid for by Ambrose de Lisle; and Bishop Walsh ordered Father Odilo, who was then chaplain to a Cistercian convent of nuns in Dorset, to take charge of the foundation. Father Odilo, as Prior, then chose six of the dispersed community of Melleray then in Ireland to be the founders.

On the land acquired, Br Augustine, an English laybrother, took possession of a four-roomed cottage in one of the meadows, *Tynt Meadow*, on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1835. He lived there for some while a solitary life until he was joined by the small group of co-founders with Fr Odilo Woolfrey as first superior. By 1837 a small monastery building and church designed by the architect William Railton had been built. One of the people Ambrose de Lisle brought to see the new monastery was John, 16<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shrewsbury. He was impressed and offered to finance a permanent monastery to be built on the site of his choice, the site of today's monastery. The famous architect of the Gothic Revival, Augustus Welby Pugin, offered his services free to design it.

In 1844, the new monastery was opened with only the monastic choir side of the church erected and the monks' quarters, as funds didn't stretch to completing the church. The community had grown in numbers to around 30 monks and novices.

In 1848, the monastery was raised to the status of an abbey and the first abbot was elected, Dom Bernard Palmer, an Englishman who had entered the community of Lulworth, Dorset, and gone back to France with the community in 1817. He was abbot for 4 years and died in 1852.

Fr Bernard Burder was appointed superior, then elected abbot in 1853. He was a man of charm and persuasion but not of the character to guide a monastic community. In 1856 he began a Reformatory for wayward boys on the site of the first monastery using the buildings there.

This apostolate was not in line with the Cistercian way of life and the community were uneasy about it. The Reformatory got into debt. In 1858 Abbot Burder resigned and the Reformatory eventually was handed over to the Fathers of Charity, finally to be closed in 1881. Abbot Burder died 22 years after resigning, having acquired a reputation of priestly holiness.

Father Bartholomew Anderson, the former prior under the first abbot, Dom Bernard Palmer, was appointed superior; then, in 1862, abbot. His abbacy proved to be a fruitful time. The community grew to 70 monks and acquired an atmosphere of a peaceful family. A number of additions were made to the monastery buildings: the clock tower, the octagonal chapter house and the guesthouse; all designed by Edward, Augustus Welby Pugin's son. Abbot Bartholomew became involved in the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity, which was forward-looking for those times. He was abbot for 28 years and died in 1890.

The next abbot was Dom Wilfrid Hipwood, who was abbot for 20 years. The Cistercian life, the abbey and monastic buildings were established by then, but the number of community members had dwindled. In 1910 Father Louis Carew was appointed superior and led the community till 1927, until Dom Celsus O'Connell was appointed superior. In 1929 he was elected abbot. After only four years as abbot he was appointed to Mount Melleray, Ireland. In his six years as superior, the number of community members began to flourish again.

In 1933 Dom Malachy Brasil, a monk of Roscrea, Ireland, was chosen as abbot by the Mount St Bernard community. It proved to be a good choice. The abbey continued to flourish under his guidance, spiritually and materially. One of his priorities two years after his election was to complete the building of the abbey church. Albert Herbert was commissioned as architect. He changed Pugin's original design of a steeple-tower to the present day tower. In 1935 work commenced on adding the sanctuary, the transepts, the tower and the nave.

The church was completed in 1938, just before World War II. The war years prevented the completed church from being consecrated, a lengthy ceremony of blessing and anointing of the altar and walls by the bishop. But when hostilities ended in 1945 the consecration ceremony took place, on 20<sup>th</sup> August, 1945.

For a week following the ceremony people were allowed in procession through the church and inside the enclosure, around the cloisters. Thousands of people came each day. A

photograph from the tower taken on one of the days shows an orderly queue coiled around the car park area waiting to enter.

The end of the war also saw an intake of ex-servicemen of the three services: army, navy and air force; coming to join the community as monks. The community numbers continued to grow. After 25 years as abbot, Dom Malachy resigned, in 1959. A member of the community was elected as abbot, Dom Ambrose Southey. The community continued to flourish, climbing to over 70 monks. And in 1963 a foundation was begun in the West Cameroons. 6 monks from Mount St Bernard went out to build and establish the monastery. It is now an independent abbey.

Dom Ambrose led the community through the early years following the Second Vatican Council which took place 1962-1965. The Council invited religious to return to their sources; ours being the foundation of the Cistercian Order in 1098 at Cîteaux, France. The Council also invited religious to update their observances.

A major change in the life of Cistercian monks worldwide was the changing of the monastic chant at the Divine Office in choir through the day, from Latin to the vernacular language. It brought the benefit of making the chant easy to understand because it was in one's own language, so that we could praise and sing with mind and heart in harmony, as St Benedict exhorted us.

In 1974 Dom Ambrose was elected Abbot General, the head of the Cistercian Order. It was a big honour for the abbey, but a big loss to the community of a much loved abbot. He had been abbot for 15 years.

One of the changes in the legislation of the Order at this time was that each community had the option before the election of an abbot to decide his term of office. It could be either a fixed term of 6 years or, as was in place till then, an indefinite term, perhaps till the person was 75. The community decided the next abbot would be elected for a fixed term of 6 years, with the possibility of re-election for another 6 years.

And so the next abbot, Dom Cyril Bunce, was elected for a 6 year term. But at the next election the community decided for an indefinite term. John Moakler was elected and was abbot for over 20 years till he reached 75, in 2001. At the following election, however, the community again decided on a fixed term of 6 years as it thought 20 years a long time for a man to carry the responsibility of being abbot.

So, Fr Joseph Delargy was elected abbot in 2001 for 6 years, and was re-elected for another 6 years after this. In 2013 Fr Erik Varden was appointed superior for 2 years, then elected abbot in 2015 for a 6 year term, with the possibility of re-election.

A major development since then has been the changing of the main industry of the abbey from a dairy farm to a beef stock farm, and then to the new brewery which opened on 9<sup>th</sup> July this year (2018). The name of the Cistercian Trappist beer being *Tynt Meadow* which takes us back to where we started.