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The Benedictines at Heath By Ron Mulroy

We came upon the gravestones on a soft damp morning in early spring. They stood in a somewhat irregular line in a quiet corner of the churchyard at Kirkthorpe and are inscribed only with the initials of the dead and a simple cross. The sole epitaph is 'OSB', powerful in its brief summary of a life lived under the rule of St Benedict. One stone was more explicit, recording 'Emilia Monteiro. Born at Lisbon. Died July 5th 1816. Aged 15'. This then was their final resting place, in a setting of the most gentle tranquillity. But if the end of their journey came in such exquisite peace, its beginning did not, for that beginning was in the bloody turmoil of the French Revolution.

The home of the community was in Montargis, Paris at the centre of the revolutionary maelstrom. By the summer of 1792, it had become obvious that it was impossible for them to stay where they were for already there had been a massacre of priests in the city. The story of their escape to Rouen, then to Brussels and finally to England, is graphically described in the history of the Order. Passports were extremely difficult to obtain and the convent was guarded day and night and was subject to frequent, unannounced searches. The nuns managed, though, to leave in small groups, but could take with them only what they could carry or conceal.

The Mother Prioress, Madame Gabrielle Elizabeth de Levis de Mirepois de St Benoit, was to be the last to leave.

While she was still at the convent, representatives of the Assemblée Nationale came to arrest her, but Nanette, a servant, said her mistress had already left and directed them to the wrong road. The prioress and remaining nuns left the following day. Shortly afterwards, the revolutionary authorities returned, ransacked the house and demolished it, leaving only the Tour building

The community, scattered throughout the journey, eventually, *'after many vicissitudes'*, reached England. They were carried across the Channel in the 'Prince of Wales' under the command of a Captain Burton. The voyage, scheduled to take them to Brighton, was disturbed by a great storm and took 26 hours, rather than the anticipated ten and then landed, not at Brighton, but in nearby Shoreham. After paying their expenses they had four sous left between them.

It was fortunate that several of the nuns were well connected in English Society. In particular Soeur Françoise Dillon was a friend of Mrs FitzHerbert, who had contracted a secret marriage with the Prince of Wales (later to be George IV). She had arranged for the presentation to the prince of the four nuns who had arrived

earlier. She also arranged for a formal reception of the 43 other members of the community when they arrived at Shoreham on the 'Prince of Wales'.

Transported royally (literally) by coach to Brighton they dined well and were given rooms at a hotel - all at the Prince's expense. At a formal reception the next day, the Prince insisted on the community making their home in England, rather than their planned settlement in Flanders.

Again with the aid of Mrs FitzHerbert and the Prince and Catholics in the city, the community was found accommodation in London. There some semblance of monastic life could be resumed, though the resumption of the religious habit caused some local alarm. The stability encouraged the prioress to send for the four nuns separated from the community and living in Brussels. yet the accommodation in London was far from ideal and in 1793, the community received an offer of a house in Bodney.

For some 18 years, the community flourished at Bodney and were joined by other religious refugees and new postulants. They were able to sustain themselves by starting a school for young ladies (as they had in Montargis). During their time in Bodney, 18 nuns died, including the prioress. The new prioress was her sister, Mere Louise Victoire Elizabeth de Levis de Mirepois de Ste Agnes.

The growing community, however, soon outstripped the resources available and they searched for a larger house.

It seems likely that their move to Heath Old Hall was prompted by Mrs Waterton of 'Woodlands' in Sandal, for she advised the community that the then owner (Mrs Smyth, the widow of the Hon. John Smyth) might be willing to rent the property to them. The nuns moved there in 1811 and remained until 1821.

Lady Green describes how the Hall was modified and adapted. The stable block was furnished as a schoolroom and a glass corridor constructed to link it with the main house. There was a subtle irony in the prioress choosing the 'Jezebel' room (State Chamber) as her room. The great carved mantle-piece was not removed, but walled up and the room was further divided to provide accommodation for novices. Mass was said either in the dining room or, more likely, in the drawing room where the bay window was glazed with Flemish glass representing the Via Crucis. From time to time, on special occasions such as Corpus Christi, the seminarians of Ampleforth Abbey joined them to sing Mass.

It is unclear which priest acted as chaplain to the nuns during their stay at Heath. Pere la Fontaine had been attached to the community while they were in France and shared with them the 'vicissitudes' of their escape to England, narrowly avoiding arrest on the way. He left the community to stay at Bodney, became a Jesuit and joined the English Mission in several areas before returning to Paris where he died in

1821. After he left, the Community was served by various émigré priests and occasionally by the Vicar Apostolic, Dr. Milner.

There is a note in the magazine 'The Field' dated 1864 that '*...the last priest who resided [in the Priest's House] was Father de Sale, a French monk of the Benedictine Order who came over from France with 200 men to escape the terrible evils of war...'* No date is given.

Otherwise the Priest's House was used as a guest house for visitors to the Community. Among the many visitors was the 8th Prince de Condé (Louis-Joseph de Bourbon). His daughter, the Princess de Condé (first cousin of the executed Louis Louis XVI) had been harboured by the community after she, too had fled France. She returned with him to Paris at the Restoration and founded a Convent of Perpetual Adoration.

It is not easy to assess how the people of Wakefield responded to such a formidable Catholic presence in their midst. Lady Green thought '*...the ladies were greatly respected for their good works and benevolence, and succeeded to some extent in influencing the religious faith of those with whom they came in contact...'*

There are several glimpses of their life at Heath, '*... In the evening, the nuns were often entertained by the songs of the boatmen as they plied their way up the river [Calder]...'* Although the nuns employed four carpenters, they had no baker and '*...a large cart full of bread was brought three times a week from Judy Clegg's of Wakefield...'* Henry Clarkson recalls an encounter with the nuns during one of his weekend visits to Heath. They would '*...look with some awe at the nuns' graves...'*

'...One sultry summer afternoon, my cousin Ben and I took a boat from Wakefield down the river... made fast our boat and strolled in the grounds. We had not been long there before we heard footsteps, and concealing ourselves behind a tree, saw a long line of nuns, two and two approaching us, preceded by the Lady Abbess. We were very much struck by the youthful and beautiful appearance of the young ladies and, my cousin unable to repress some slight exclamation, we were at once discovered by the Lady Abbess. At a signal from her, each beautiful face was instantly concealed, by the drawing down of a veil and a retrograde motion immediately commenced by all except the old lady who came forward in great indignation, speaking angrily in French... She then broke out and rated us soundly, in English, in good set terms too, and we retired...'

In the history of the community, a more dramatic story is told. One of the nuns, Mere Basile Gras, was woken one night by a repeated banging at her window. When she opened it, she faintly heard a voice calling '*Oh God save my soul...'* She roused a manservant, William. The cries were coming from the river, where a barge was sinking with a man clinging to the rigging. By roping together some planks, he was able to reach the stricken vessel and effect a rescue. And a subscription from the

people around enabled him to buy another barge. It is noted, unsurprisingly, that '*... he became a good Catholic...*'

Little is known of Emilia Monteiro, whose gravestone is so poignant. She must have been very young indeed when she left Portugal, perhaps to flee the Peninsular war. Speculation has continued about her life and death. William Henry Leatham published a romantic ballad about her in 1843 and the tone of the poem and the attitude of the poet, is reflected in its preface:

'This short and meagre epitaph [on her gravestone] has suggested the following poem wherein I have but recorded the real [sic] history of thousands of young and sensitive creatures who have speedily fallen victims to the restraints and mortifications of a monastic life. This usually occurs when extraordinary misfortunes have driven them to the convent as a refuge, instead of stimulating them to mix in the active duties of everyday life, as the best and most rational means of dispelling an otherwise incurable melancholy...'

Not surprisingly the essence of his speculation is that she died of a heart broken by leaving her true love '*...on Tagus shore...*' and of the guilt instilled by the religious life - '*...[they] told me mine was earthly love and was but sin in me...*'

By 1821, life in the Old Hall was becoming cramped but attempts to buy the property and extend it failed. A suitable house was found at Orrell (1821), but modifications to create a 'real Monastery' were impossible because of the mines that lay beneath. Finally, in about 1835, the Community found a permanent home at Princethorpe in Warwickshire. There they erected what may have been the first religious house to be built in England since the Reformation.

The Old Hall at Heath has long since gone, destroyed by mining subsidence and neglect. Only the impressive gateposts and some remnants of the walls remain. But the nearby water tower evokes the 16th and 17th century heydays of Lady Bolles. And the quiet witness of the gravestones at Kirkthorpe recall those years of peace and harmony which were born of bloody strife.

The main source for this article was a history of the Order written several years ago, and which Ron Mulroy was able to research when he met the surviving head of the Order.