

Hunston Convent and its reuse as Chichester Free School, 2016

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Document begins

Author's "Read Me"

This is the latest version of a work in progress.

This draft has been peer-reviewed by two senior Carmelite nuns.

Please challenge the document as to fact or opinion.

It's longish: the contents table may save frustration.

The web references are to real-world sources (not wiki's).

All in-text links are copied in ***Internet research leads*** below.

I undertook this project with some CFS encouragement, and am happy to do more work to make it more useful to the CFS, but it is not (yet, anyway) official in any sense

Hunston Convent: Building, community and school

Hunston Convent (or Chichester Carmel), in a nutshell

For over 120 years (1872 until 1994), the building [housed around a dozen](#), and for a period in the mid-1970s a couple of dozen, cloistered nuns. They were living in an unbroken Carmelite tradition whose origins are 800 years old; which follows a Christian monastic tradition which is at least 2000 years old; and whose most famous strand - which Hunston followed - was devised by Teresa of Avila over 500 years ago. By all sorts of twists and turns, the Chichester Carmel at Hunston Convent had a direct, "family" continuity – a monastic lineage - with English Carmelite sisters (nuns) dating back to 1678, via periods of exile in Holland and France, and in Dorset.

Chichester Free School will gain instant élan and identity in taking on this monastic building. The school's being co-educational, secular, modern, busy (and noisy) will all go well alongside its being proud of having rescued something from decay, and learning from all the implied history of a building most of whose fabric is 144 years old and whose ethos is many centuries older than that.

The Hunston Convent: architecture and function

Like a school - or the Palace of Westminster, a factory, hospital, or prison - a monastery like Hunston Convent is a building which is specifically designed to deliver a communal and institutional human function.

Hunston Convent (finished in 1872) is a good – if muted - example of the kind of building which 19th Century – and especially French - architects brought to perfection. It is in their ["Gothic Revival" of a decorated medieval style](#), in distinction to the earlier, rather plainer, Romanesque which religious orders such as the Cistercians had helped make famous throughout Europe from the 12th Century. Indeed, the chapel at Hunston (all but destroyed by fire in 2009) was designed in 1930 by [Sebastian Pugin Powell](#), the grandson of the great A W Pugin, who was from an émigré family and was the world's premier Gothicismist and the paterfamilias to a growing tribe of Arts and Crafts designers.

The Hunston Convent's layout and the Free School

The nuns at Hunston, like nuns and monks all over the world and for centuries, lived intensely solitary lives in a close but isolated community. That's a peculiar idea, but [central to the mission of most enclosed orders](#). That is why [monastic buildings have always taken the form](#) broadly followed at Hunston. Oddly, it is a good parallel for some design features of a school.

On the ground floor, there are a few public rooms where the public (really, anybody, even a priest, not belonging to the house or order, or specially mandated or invited) can be met but kept outside the "enclosure". Then, within the enclosure only the "Religious" of that house (in this sense, mostly professed or probationary members of the enclosed community) can go. In the enclosure, the ground floor has large communal rooms, a church, and a cloister for walking and contemplation. Upstairs, there

are [corridors of mostly small rooms - or "cells" - for sleeping in](#), but including the Mother Superior's suite where she could meet the sisters.

So a monastery like Hunston can be figured as having similarities with a school (actually, also a prison or a hospital) because downstairs there is already a small public area with easy access for everyone with business with the community within. Then, through a single door, there is access to the private world.

Even the mood of the place is right: what used to be a sort of factory for prayer becomes a sort of factory for talent. True, monasteries are usually very quiet places, and schools are sometimes pretty noisy. Still, even a modern school fully understands that quiet has great value.

Outdoors, but within its enclosing walls, Hunston had, like most monasteries, some decorative gardens and a kitchen garden; a graveyard (often, as at Hunston, with simple wooden crosses); and – within its actual buildings - a “garth” or courtyard garden. Often this last is encased in a colonnade, or – as at Hunston – by an enclosed corridor whose many windows look out on to the courtyard. This arrangement comprises the “cloister” and its importance can be gathered from the way the word is often synonymous with the wider monastery. Hunston's inner courtyard lacks the common colonnade, but like any other, it would have served for walking and contemplation, at any season.

Indoors, there are a refectory (for communal meals, in many orders, and at Hunston, taken in silence, with one community member reading devotional works) and a Chapter House (a room for communal discussions and decisions).

Of course there is also a church, and usually (as was true of Hunston's modest but beautiful building) it was open to the public, at least for some services, via a door in the enclosing wall. The enclosed monks and nuns in their choir area had their own entrance connecting the church to the rest of the enclosure. Historically a grille or grate separated the monastic community from the public, but this arrangement was abandoned in response to the Second Vatican Council (“Vatican II”, a radical modernisation in the 1960s). In Hunston's case, the school can only preserve a vestige of this, the engine room of the monastery.

Most monasteries have one other feature by which the monks or nuns could connect with the outside world without leaving their enclosure. In the parlour for public use there was usually a grille set in a wall behind which the nuns could sit largely concealed, sometimes showing their faces, to speak with guests. There was usually also, and often in the porch, a hatch, often behind a grille, through which the community could dispense alms or, in some cases, sell produce, or (especially in Italy) even receive the new-born of distressed mothers. Hunston had a quite common arrangement: a “turn”, a sort of “lazy susan”, by which tramps and others could receive alms from their unseen benefactors.

Hunston Convent and other monastery building types

The enclosed, cenobitic monastery building of a Hunston is seen in most purpose-built Benedictine (as at Quarr on the Isle of Wight) or Cistercian sites. But there are other, quite different set ups, in which the anchoritic and cenobitic are variously combined. At Parkminster, in Sussex, there is a Carthusian monastery of much the same period and architectural inspiration as Hunston. But, as a Charterhouse (as the English call a monastery of the order epitomised by its founding house in Chartreuse), this very strict contemplative order has an enclosure which incorporates a series of small two-storey houses, each

having a workshop-cum-chapel, and a bedroom, as well as a small garden. This is to imitate the hermit's cell in a communal enclosure. One order, the Camaldolese, in Italy, have their junior members living in community, whilst senior members graduate to living in a self-contained enclosure nearby where each monk has a cell and garden. (Both orders mirror the patrician "lavra" of the earliest Christian tradition in Egypt and Syria.) By the way, most medieval cenobitic monasteries did not provide individual cells: both choir monks (those who were also priests, with extensive liturgical duties) and lay monks (or lay brothers, with wide-ranging work for the community) lived in (separate) dormitories. In most convents and in all Carmelite houses, each nun (as stipulated by St Teresa of Avila in the case of her reformed order) must have a separate cell. Until Vatican II, Cistercians nuns did have a common dormitory (as did the monks), but they too changed to separate "cells" – or rooms.

Hunston Convent and monastic purposes

The idea of cells brings us to a core dilemma in thinking about monastic life. Some monastic thinking stresses that monks and nuns are trying to enter into the suffering of Christ, and even doing lifelong penance, on behalf of humanity, in a fallen world. But other traditions stress that monks and nuns are striving for a very personal joyous communion with a loving God and His triumphant Son. These ideas are not mutually exclusive, but their influence has waxed and waned over the centuries. Teresa of Avila was typical of other monastic reformers in stressing the loving relationship which monastics could seek with God, and which God himself yearned to have with each of them.

But though a monastery can be full of love and joy, it is necessarily a disciplined place. One might say they are places where it is understood that there is no gain without pain and where one exercises tough love. But there is forgiveness and mercy too.

Christian monastics pray for themselves and for the world. (Teresa said that this was important work for anyone, but that at least some humans should devote their whole lives to it.) To do so, they take vows of chastity, faithfulness, obedience, stability, and poverty. Many have strict rules about diet and silence and maintain religious observances throughout the day and often the night, both in community and alone. In general, one can say that most enclosed monastics maintain a daily rhythm of a daily Mass and a 24-hour timetable which begins at dawn (and in some orders much earlier) and includes periods of solitude, private prayer, private scriptural reading, sometimes study, work for the community, and usually a long night-time silence. [The day will usually be punctuated](#) by an unchanging liturgical routine ("The Hours", or "Office") during which many of the community will chant, in order, all the Psalms (sometimes completing the cycle in a week, sometimes a month) and other songs, and have lessons and readings.

The tradition of enclosed monastic communities includes many different strands. One very common one which is handy for a school stresses that a monastery should cater for the whole range of humanity and the whole of their being. A monastic person should have a daily routine in which physical and mental activity match each other. Alongside spirituality, a healthy body and an exercised – even a learned mind – is often encouraged. There should be leadership, but the leaders should respect the community. One joins a community to advance one's soul, but realises that mutual support gets the job done best.

Hunston Convent: From monastery to school curriculum

Hunston Convent and conservation (built environment)

Converting a part-ruined and much damaged 19th Century monastery into a school is a fabulous opportunity.

From a curricular point of view, the restoration project will help teachers and students clarify several crucial issues. What is the re-builders' obligation to the original plan of the building? What is their obligation to recall or preserve the fabric as it was in its heyday? What is their obligation to recall or preserve the state of dereliction they inherited? What is their obligation to recall or preserve a building's various fortunes? Does the restoration or conservation have to be in situ? Can it best be done, sometimes, by removal to a museum? (Cue: the Elgin Marbles; and the way a statue of the Virgin Mary at Hunston Convent, a key feature of its cloister, was moved to a local Catholic Church.)

Hunston Convent makes a good study as it evolved from being a monastery with 30-odd cells for celibate nuns, but then was subdivided in the mid-1990's into 80 rooms to accommodate single but not necessarily celibate agricultural workers of both sexes. What to recall or preserve of the sub-divisions or the communal areas, as they went from monastic tranquillity to workers' hostel sports rooms?

A nice side-bar: a study of how the negotiations went between the school, its architects and the authorities. Those shifts and turns will need to be preserved, and will be a useful case study.

Hunston Convent and the history curriculum

Christian monasticism has a long history which has left a trail of data, narratives, analysis and revisions. It is a field which has facts to be discovered and a matching plethora of hagiography to be unpicked. Actually, monastic history teaches the student the kind of scepticism which is equally necessary when unravelling the swirl of fact and propaganda which constitutes secular history.

Religious history is ordinary human history - of people, movements and ideas - but with the addition of views about spirituality and its practices.

In short, following the Hunston Convent trail backwards and outwards is a matter of both history and historiography.

Hunston Convent and the sociology curriculum

It may seem absurd to take monasticism as a starting point for a secular study such as sociology. How can a mechanistic social science capture the spiritual? Actually, though, even people who lack faith or disdain it can see in monasticism, and indeed all religious life, a human phenomenon which needs to be understood, whether as a danger, a wonder, a model, or a curiosity.

Whatever else they do, enclosed monks and nuns live in a particular small society, and their walled world has a relationship with the world they have left (often they are amongst the most dependent of citizens, living largely on charity as they do).

Monastics live in a very close community - with all the tensions and difficulties of a village, a tower block, a business or a family. Each one really does have to put up with all the others.

Hunston Convent and the politics curriculum

Most monastic traditions began with the ideal of a few men living alone in caves or huts in the mountains or deserts of the Near East. But such men attracted pilgrims and followers, so monasteries became both large and very numerous.

As with wilderness and tourists, visitors threatened the very thing they sought. Some of the most famously austere loners became founders of organisations which had to accommodate followers much less bravely ascetic than the pioneers. Some orders (the Benedictines and the Carmelites amongst them) had hundreds of "houses" scattered throughout Christian Europe and beyond. Some orders became the largest organisations in their countries.

Monastic orders had to get little-p political as they negotiated and promulgated orderly structures; worked out how democratic each of their houses should be, and how autonomous; grew or shrank; were popular with the religious authorities or the state, or loathed by them; got too organised, and often too formulaic in their routines; or too lax to suit some of their members. Often monasteries had to handle reforming or even revolutionary tendencies in their midst. Some reformers went off to found orders more to their taste, others got their changes through.

The story of the Cluniac reforms of the Benedictine community (central to Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*), or the reforms of the Cistercian or Carmelite orders, are all case studies in institutional politics.

The day-to-day management of a monastery is also highly political. Each order has its own constitutional rules (usually a medley of a founder's Rule and later reforms). Debating the modern day interpretation of these rules is sometimes fraught. A subset of these issues is the interpretation of the pretty standard monastic formula of an abbot or prior – or the female equivalent, the Mother Superior or Prioress – who is elected by the community (with varying degrees of sign-off from the local or central authorities of the order).

Hunston Convent and business studies

Monastic orders such as the 12th Century Cistercians were by far the biggest pioneering businesses of their day and with growth rates to match the 19th Century canal and rail networks, or 20th Century Big Oil or Big Pharma or IBM, or 21st Century Google. As they grew, they often faced a dilemma: stay pure to their prayerful mission, or make sure they grew into sustainable organisations? Something similar happens to firms: as they grow they have to decide whether to chase profits through risk-taking, or try to organise themselves so as to provide careers and pensions.

Many monasteries had profitable cottage industries as manuscript copyists, candle-makers and so on: anything which could serve the Church and be done in the enclosure. As landowners and farmers, it was natural that many monks would become brewers, distillers, millers and more. Often, they were highly innovative, and with their ability to combine initiative with expertise and investment over the long-term (like aristocrats), they were proto-capitalists and industrialists.

In the mid 1980s, I found that Parkminster had 180 chickens but some other communities often had much larger agri-business activities: in Santa Domingo de Silos, Spain, the Benedictines had a large-scale

intensive chicken farm and in Scotland, the Cistercians of Nunraw, true to the order's oldest traditions, were farming on a large scale (in this case, cattle).

Hunston Convent had a cottage industry with some mechanisation as it made communion bread for the wider church.

Hunston Convent and a wider pastoral context

Hunston Convent and feminism

The Carmelites have had at least three very famous pioneering women members who became saints of the Roman Catholic Church. [Teresa of Ávila](#), in Seville, in the 15th Century, was solidly upper class; an ascetic, a successful organiser, a diplomat, a reformer. [Thérèse of Lisieux](#), from Normandy in the 19th Century, was the daughter of successful trades-people; an ascetic, a pioneer for the idea of the spirituality of youth, a rebel. The [Jewish Pole, Edith Stein](#), was brought up by her single-parent mother (a widow left with her husband's troubled lumber business) and became a Carmelite in Holland, but was eventually killed in the Holocaust; she was a martyr, an intellectual and a spiritual writer.

These three women variously epitomise courage, boldness, austerity, wit, cleverness, education, rebelliousness and - of course - spirituality. Even in martyrdom, there is no victimhood here.

Female spirituality has a very powerful tradition a little different from that of men. Partly, that is because the women sometimes figure themselves as the "bride of Christ". Historically, this perhaps had something to do with rectifying the impression that women who entered enclosed orders were abandoning their god-given role as wives and mothers. It has also co-existed with an impression that women made particularly passionate religious figures.

There is a very strong tradition of female religious mysticism in England and the Continent, epitomised by such figures as [Margery Kempe](#) (1373-1438), who was in the mendicant tradition; [Julian of Norwich](#) (1342-c.1416), who was an anchorite, or hermit, living in a way which mirrors the oldest traditions of male (proto-monastic) spirituality; and the 11th Century [Richeldis of Walsingham](#), who was a visionary (in the mystic sense) and monastic founder, though not herself a professed member of any order.

Teresa of Avila, and her reforms, are of historical, spiritual, sociological and political interest. One dimension is very important: Teresa was one of several medieval women who exerted power well beyond the normal clichéd assumption of her time or ours. Some women did so as lovers, spouses and mothers. Several religious women did so as the heads of institutions which they ran in their own right and often in tense relationship with and against the male hierarchies which ruled important aspects of their lives, not least because no woman could perform priestly duties.

Hunston Convent and the mendicant, spiritual tradition

One important strand of religious life – that of the wandering holy man – pre-dates the Christian anchoritic asceticism which gave birth to its apparent opposite, monastic orders which had enclosed (or, to use the technical expression, cenobitic) communities. The older tradition is seen in the prophets of the Old Testament (including the Carmelites' hero, Elijah) and in the religions of Asia, in which holy men

wandered alone or with a few disciples, as mendicants (or beggars, in one flavour of the word) dependent on the “kindness of strangers”. An important element in such thinking is that it is the opposite of the institutional. Instead of building something lasting on earth, one’s life is devoted to getting this world and oneself to look toward heaven, now, whilst there is time. It might be thought of as seeing all human and worldly concerns as being provisional: only spiritual thoughts and life had a chance of permanent value.

Something of the spirit of being “in the world”, but only in a special sense, is epitomised by the medieval hybrid system which combined elements of the communal life with elements of extreme and deliberate poverty, and even of a high regard for the provisional. Franciscan, Dominican and Carmelite friars lived in communities, but usually in towns, and usually with the avowed intention of living in great poverty and austerity and working in the wider world as teachers, healers or in some other form of welfare, especially for the poor.

There is a tension between the anchoritic and the cenobitic traditions in monasticism. The first, the way of the [Fathers of the Desert](#) – the loners – seems the braver, the more purely spiritual, and closer to the ancient prophetic, provisional way. The latter can seem too easy, too accommodating, too prone to become institutionalised and worldly. The Carthusians and Camaldolese combine the two in particular ways. But the emotional and spiritual challenges and opportunities of the communal, cenobitic ways should not be under-rated, and require their own maturity.

Hunston Convent, spirituality, and multiculturalism

(This relates to the previous section...)

An awareness of the ideals of holy men, mendicancy, prophetic mission and especially pilgrimage (not least by ordinary citizens at some point in their lives) are in various ways important to almost all religions, and the traditions of professed orders fostering mendicant holiness but also temporary pilgrim devotion for lay people are found in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The tradition of monastic life of enclosed monks and nuns are only found – besides amongst Christians- only in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Interestingly, though Judaism has no modern tradition of wandering holy men, anchorites or cenobitic communities, the earliest Christian monks, including the Desert Fathers of Egypt, were, and may have known themselves to be, in the [Jewish tradition of the Essenes](#) and other devout communities.

Hunston Convent and personal spirituality

Spiritual life is not a matter of bubble baths and me-time, or of feel-good introspection. Nor is it a matter just of being peaceful or quiet. Oddly, it is not even a matter of doing good works. Nor is it a matter of escaping the world and its troubles. In fact it is a very tough business. For Christians it is a matter of opening oneself to God without distraction. For a non-religious, according to the Greek classical tradition (which also informs Christianity) it is perhaps more about the "examined life", in which one is ruthlessly honest about one's being and whether one has fulfilled one's fullest human potential.

So spirituality is inward-looking, in one way, and is always at risk of being mere self-obsession. But it is also about getting one's self (or one's weaknesses) out of the way so that one can develop.

It is common for monastics to insist that there was nothing rational in their finding they had a strong spiritual vocation. "I found God called me", is a typical explanation, often said with a shrug and a smile.

Spirituality is, by one definition, necessarily transcendental (that is, supranatural in some way). It can be argued, contrariwise, that it can be the exercise of self-examination and improvement, in line with the desire to live the "examined life".

Hunston Convent and attitudes toward the world

The Hunston nuns left the world behind to become perfect, or - to be more accurate - by God's grace, to be made so. Most monastics would insist that contemplative monks and nuns hand their lives over to God, offering themselves for the Church and the world.

I have known monks (the only religious I have often met) to think the world a bad place, or a place with many bad characteristics and that their own way has something superior about it. They often take the view that the world is rushed, vulgar, and greedy, and their own communities offer a more decent alternative.

It is open to secular minds, especially, to wonder if this is a commanding view: one can both defend and challenge it as being derived from the core Old (and New) Testament view that the world is a fallen place in need of redemption, to be found only by faith and in the hereafter, or at Judgement Day.

There are also elements of it that might be said to derive from Paul rather than from Christ. Indeed, much of the flavour of Christian spirituality derives from the Graeco-Roman philosophy which Paul had imbibed, and perhaps especially Stoicism, which stresses the need for individuals to abandon or regret their appetites, greed, ambition, or their taste for reputation or display. It also stresses the merits of a simple life, in preference to worldly structures of authority, or realpolitik, or commerce.

Historically many monks and other Religious have, rather contradictorily, involved themselves in the world of diplomacy and war: notable cases include the 12th Century monastic founders, the Carthusian St Hugh of Lincoln and the Cistercian St Bernard of Clairvaux.

Less obviously, I have met thoughtful monks who know and appreciate the outside world, including its commercial vigour, not least because "it takes all sorts", and partly because enclosed, contemplative monastic life depends on the generosity of successful outsiders. It is moot whether the generosity of the successful outside world is acceptable only because the charity is a penitential or redemptive act; or whether the monastic world is at its best when it understands that just as it has a rare, and peculiar, role in prayer professionalism, so too it takes its part (though a separated part) in a tapestry of God's work which includes the market, entrepreneurship, just wars, politics, and everything else requiring vigour.

Besides, a monastery no less than a bourse or market is part of the fallen world, and its physical detachment is no guarantee of superiority, but – more likely – a sign of a special luxury afforded some Religious by those who support them.

In short: some monastics sense that – especially because they are free of some travails – they should savour the way the outside world (including the secular and the highly active) is full of "good faith".

Other faiths, including the Abrahamic religions of Judaism and Islam, but also including Hinduism and Buddhism, have rather more variations of flavour than the usual Christian view. Their spiritual thinking about a person's relations with the worlds of money and power can be more worldly. In any case, these themes can be stripped of their religious connotations and be discussed as a matter of what sort of traits can stand being the focus of "the examined life".

Hunston Convent and usefulness

Monks and nuns devote themselves to God in a special, full-time, disciplined way, within the structure of their order.

Different monastic orders have different views about some aspects of working for the world. For instance, Benedictines have always got out their enclosures, often to run schools. Some orders, such as Franciscans, have always been out in the world to a greater extent. There are missionary and nursing orders who do a great deal of practical work.

Male Carmelites have both these strands, but Carmelite nuns are counted amongst the most contemplative and enclosed orders. Such monks and nuns are prayer-professionals. They believe the world needs at least a few people who devote themselves to worship and prayer.

Amongst people of faith, such an idea makes sense to most. To the secular world it can seem absurd. But actually, one could argue that monasticism, like theatre or art or poetry or music, or even sport, exploration or adventure, is a human construct and a thing of some loveliness in and of itself and has value simply as a refined, disciplined expression of the human spirit. In particular, a contemplative, enclosed monk or nun may enter into prayer for the whole world in a way which another devout person might simply be too busy or distracted to do.

Hunston Convent and well-being

It is often said that monastic life is a retreat from the world, as in an admission of failure, an escape, suitable only for the weak.

Actually, the monastic life takes great reserves of strength, patience, and self-sufficiency. These are not places for moaning ninnies. There is much to endure, and it has to be endured without constant complaint. Of course, some people who thrive alone, but in community, may be pathological in some way. In my experience, they do not seem to be. Indeed, senior monks often told me that the more apparently (and perhaps vaingloriously) devout and ardent a novice was, the less likely the man would become a stable monk.

Many monks and nuns endure considerable periods in which they feel bereft of faith. Many say that surviving such periods strengthened them. Others decide they have lost their faith, or their vocation, and leave.

Early monastics, especially solitaries, sometimes reported experiencing what was called in Latin, *acedia* (or *accidie* in French and English). This was a sort of spiritual malaise, often a sort of crippling inertia, which we might think a form of depression. The problem was matched by others: some ascetics were thought to be unhealthily extreme, and in the case of female religious (notably Margery Kempe) anything of that sort was readily stereotyped as typical of the gender.

Some of the most famous spiritual cenobitic monks have found it very hard to live away from the world, and have been given exceptional permission to travel and speak. [Thomas Merton](#), the famous Cistercian, is a classic and revered case. Others have found it hard to live in community and have been given permission to live as hermits (as was Merton until even that halfway house failed to satisfy).

The point here is that monastic well-being is not a matter of being at peace all the time, or even settled. It is complicated and conflicted, just as well-being in ordinary life is, for ordinary people, of any age.

In a way, the monastic life is very extreme. Like being a painter, a soldier, an entrepreneur, or anything dramatic, or anything useful, it requires great resolve, self-sacrifice and often risk. Indeed, monasticism is sometimes described as a sacrifice or even as a living martyrdom, to mimic Christ's. It is also often described as a matter of exploring "the desert within", an idea which captures the way a monk or nun may go nowhere, and yet have a huge inner journey, and one with great challenges.

It is quite possible that the appeal of a monastic vocation is felt by exactly the sort of person who might become an athlete, soldier, creative or adventurer (or, indeed, a terrorist): it is an all-or-nothing way of life, requiring 100 percent commitment, and involving very high stakes.

There are life-lessons here, not least as teenagers consider the emotional ups and downs of their liminal years.

Hunston Convent and green thinking

Wilderness

The earliest tradition of Christian monasticism, especially when it became a large movement from the 4th Century, was that men, singly or in very small groups would go beyond civilisation to the desert. Here, away from the temptations of the world, they could wrestle with the demons who sought them out, and they could consider God's being. The desert was a bleak background against which they could test their holiness. Often, wild creatures would seek them out and even succour them: this was taken as a sign of a hermit's being in tune with God and His creation.

By the time of the 12th Century, monks - and especially [the Cistercians](#) - were often given large tracts of wild countryside, and they set to farming it on a scale which was revolutionary. For hundreds of years, monks were vigorous farmers, and often converted wilderness to be so.

By the 20th Century monks sought out wilderness with a version of the earliest spirit, but with none of the early dread of the wild. Monks saw the beauty and even luxury of untouched Nature. Several modern monastic foundations in the Western US exemplify this.

Non-religious society has made something of the same pilgrimage about wilderness as have monks. The wild has gone from the fearful to the productive, and on to the sacrosanct.

Gardens

For millennia, gardens and orchards have seemed to people to be places where one could have a glimpse of paradise or heaven. That theme becomes especially rich with the Christian belief in the

expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, and Original Sin. Within their enclosures, monks and nuns – Hunston’s included - often created lovely and productive gardens and orchards, and this practice never much wavered. Growing vegetables and fruit, within the enclosure, gave the community something manual to do which also helped them economically without bringing them into contact with the world outside.

The abandonment of Hunston Convent and its grounds might allow a small in situ study of the succession of species as invasives took over a garden. Recreating any part of its gardens would be a fine testimony to an ancient tradition continued by the Hunston Convent.

Hunston Convent and hospitality

For centuries, the local monastery was often a main source of kindness. Some convents took in unwanted babies as orphans, but also unmarried mothers (a practice which in the 19th and 20th Century sometimes became controversial). Many monasteries provided outdoor relief (a dole of food at their doors, or through “turns”) or took in and cared for the sick and old. Monastic herbalists were highly valued (is in the hero of Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* and Ellis Peter’s Cadfael novels).

Hunston Convent and learning

A monastery is primarily a place of the spirit rather than “merely” the mind. (This is perhaps especially true of the Orthodox, or eastern, Christian tradition.) Indeed, one might argue that the very essence of religion, let alone of monasticism, is irrational. But this is tricky territory in which some of the best minds in history have bent themselves to discussing the competing roles of faith and reason.

Certainly, throughout history, and for varied reasons, including career expediency, religious bodies have attracted intellectuals.

Throughout their history, monasteries produced many learned people. For centuries, they transmitted the Christian doctrine through the medium of handwritten - actually, hand-copied - illustrated Bibles and other texts. Some orders allowed or encouraged their members to go forth and learn and teach in universities, or advise rulers.

In the British Isles, in the Dark Ages, the scriptoriums (writing rooms) and libraries of the monasteries of the islands of Western Ireland were the main repository of Christian faith, from which it emerged in safer times.

Hunston Convent and monastic suppression

It is useful to think of monastic orders as scattered families, or as plants which can seed anywhere suitable. If one territory became inimical, they took ship abroad, just as seeds might be cast on the wind.

Hunston was part of the complicated 19th Century story of revival and reversal of monastic and clerical (priestly) fortunes in different parts of the Europe of the period. The English Reformation had seen the dissolution of a vast number of monasteries and the need thereafter for putative monks and nuns to find berths on the Continent; the late 18th Century French revolution was followed by something similar if more sporadic; similar dissolutions followed anti-clericalism in the 19th Century all over the Continent. In short, the 19th Century saw French and other Continental orders seek survival by forming offshoots in Britain just as British orders had historically sought continuance on the Continent. The Hunston

Carmelites were a long-exiled English community escaping punitive anti-religious rules in their Netherlands home, and who were in effect restoring a Roman Catholic monastic tradition which had been quashed here 400 years earlier. As such, they were part of an extraordinary religious revival in the midst of Britain's Industrial Revolution.

Hunston Convent and aesthetics

Hunston Convent takes its place in a compelling modern narrative of destruction and change. Since the 18th and 19th Century Picturesque and Sublime movements, and especially in Britain, dereliction has been a [powerful aesthetic trope](#). Ruined castles and abbeys, after years of being regarded with indifference or dread, became intriguing or luminous tokens of man's hubris, and - as ivy and scrub reclaimed them - a [sign of wild nature's glorious potency](#).

In the 19th Century, something similar took place, but with a special emphasis - not coincidentally alongside a Gothic Revival - on the dark side of human nature. Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley wrote shockers and maybe schlockers in which the Gothic dark side of Medievalism, figured as being alive and well in Transylvania (and later, Hollywood and Pinewood), was married with modern scientific techniques and emerging psychological insights to thrill and challenge readers and cinema audiences.

In our time, WW2 bombsites, the [abandoned nuclear city of Pripjat near Chernobyl](#), and the abandoned [St Peter's Roman Catholic](#) seminary at Cardross in Scotland have all acquired a sort of reverse glamour. Photographers, painters, thriller-writers and poets have eulogised or exploited such images, sometimes in a mode of threnody, regret and warning; sometimes as what Matt Damon has described as our "paranoia aesthetic".

Hunston Convent fits these tropes in several ways. A monastic building on this scale and from the outside has about it the penitential and the massive: it is a little forbidding and might as well be called Brutalist. As the school took over its ownership the old place suddenly and briefly became available for spooky and moody exploration. One could see its monastic structure and a few signs of the nuns themselves. Elderflower was busy reclaiming the wrecked church for nature. And there were the remnants of the convent's temporary reuse as a hostel for 80-some migrant workers in the Manhood peninsula's salad industry. There were TV's and larky laminated injunctions against smoking, in Spanish and Polish, and announcements of fines for any men found in the women's area. Nothing the school was likely to bring to the monastery would match what had already happened to it.

Decline and regret are not the richest or only messages from abandonment. One might as well stress creative destruction. The reuse of buildings - their repurposing - is lovely and constructive.

Internet research leads

Richard D North

RDN's *Fools for God*, Collins, 1987, on Amazon:

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Richard-D.-North/e/B005MRQ776/ref=ntt_dp_epwbk_0

Free download of *F4G*, above, an account of Christian male cenobitic monasticism.

<http://richarddnorth.com/archive/books/downloads/fools4god.htm>

Hunston in particular

Excellent local history account of the Hunston Carmelite convent (2009)

<http://strichardschichester.co.uk/strichards/history/carmelites.shtml>

Good account of the dereliction aesthetic, including Hunston Convent

<http://derelictmisc.org.uk/carmel.html>

Monastic history and spirituality

The different "orders" of "Religious"

http://www.religious-vocation.com/differences_religious_orders.html#.V1-q6DVv96I

The Carmelite Order, mostly

The official website of the Order of Carmelites (O.Carm, or the original, not the discalced reform)

<http://ocarm.org/en/contact>

Serious Carmelite history by Joachim Smet, O.Carm

<http://www.carmelites.net/author/jsmet/>

Official site of the Order of Discalced Carmelites (OCD/ODC): in-depth history, spirituality, etc

http://www.o.cd.pcn.net/histo_1.htm

Official site of the Order of Discalced Carmelites (OCD/ODC): good, brief history

This site shows the distinction between male friars (out in the world) and female nuns (enclosed in monasteries)

<http://www.carmelitaniscalzi.com/quienes-somos/monjas>

The Carmelites in the UK (decent history; bookshop etc)

<http://www.carmelite.org.uk/mteditorial.html>

Famous UK convent of (Teresian or Discalced, OCD/ODC) Carmelites

<http://quidenhamcarmel.org.uk/about-us/>

Various Irish priests discuss different aspect of Carmelite spirituality

<http://www.carmelites.ie/spirituality.html>

Good very brief account of Carmelite history and spirituality

<http://www.dominicanajournal.org/carmelite-spirituality-a-vocation-to-love/>

The different forms of Carmelite male (friars) service and spirituality (official website of Carmelite order)

<http://carmelite.org/index.php?nuc=all&id=370>

US Carmelite official site (I think of the O.Carm, non-discalced, etc)

Rather good brief account of history and spirituality

<http://www.carmelites.net>

Website of an interesting US enclosed male monastery of enclosed Carmelites (probably discalced, OCD/ODC)

<http://www.carmelitemonks.org/index.php>

Three Carmelite saints:

Edith Stein

http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_19981011_edith_stein_en.html

Thérèse of Lisieux

http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_19101997_stherese_en.html

Saint Teresa of Ávila

<http://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Teresa-of-Avila>

Three medieval spiritual Englishwomen:

Richeldis of Walsingham, 11th Century female monastic founder

http://www.walsinghamanglican.org.uk/the_shrine/the_story_so_far.htm

Margery Kempe, 14th and 15th Century King's Lynn mystic and pilgrim

<http://carmelite.org/documents/Heritage/yoshikawamargerykempe.pdf>

<http://courses.wcupa.edu/jones/his101/web/27kempe.htm>

Julian of Norwich, 14th and 15th Century mystic anchorite or hermit

https://www.orderofjulian.org/About_Julian

Resources on wider monastic and related Religious Orders

Thomas Merton, famous restless Cistercian

<http://www.merton.org/>

The Cistercians, in the UK and world

<http://cistercians.shef.ac.uk/>

The Egyptian Desert fathers

<http://desert-fathers.com/>

Enc. Brit. entry on Essenes

<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Essene>

A modern Benedictine monastery following traditional routines

<https://christdesert.org/about/the-monastic-day/>

Resources on monastic building, old and new

Good source on Pugin and his Birmingham work

<http://www.stchadscathedral.org.uk/pugin/>

Good beginning source for the architect of Hunston Covent's church, Sebastian Pugin Powell

http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=202938

The Cistercians who use Pugin's Abbey, explain it

<http://www.mountsaintbernard.org/index.html>

Decent account of Pugin's Victorian aesthetics

<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/pugin/27.html>

Historic England's account of English 19th and 20th Century monastic building

<https://www.historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/iha-19-20-century-convents-monasteries/>

Women and monasticism: bibliography

<https://historyofwomenreligious.org/women-religious-bibliography/modern-2/>

The story of UK convent building in recent history

<https://www.historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/womens-history/nuns-and-convent-building/>

Benedictine monastery of Quarr Abbey, IoW: a purpose-built 19th C building

<http://www.quarrabbey.org/site.php>

Useful architecture site: Gothic vs Romanesque defined

<http://www.buildinghistory.org/style/gothic.shtml>

Standard medieval monastery

<http://www.timeref.com/life/abbey5.htm>

Good plan and glossary of standard medieval monastery

<http://cistercians.shef.ac.uk/fountains/buildings/dormitory>

Parkminster, Sussex: a UK Carthusian monastery (or Charterhouse)

<http://www.parkminster.org.uk/site.php?use=default>

The Carthusian order of Chartreuse (and the Charterhouse, in the UK)

<http://www.chartreux.org/en/>

Wider aesthetics of the Sublime, dereliction & Brutalism

The Sublime and Picturesque aesthetic of wildness

<http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/engl203/overviews/sublime.htm>

Good dereliction and Brutalism site, including the abandoned St Peter's seminary

<http://www.urbanghostsmedia.com/>

Photographs of the abandoned nuclear city of Pripyat, Chernobyl

<http://www.quintinlake.com>

ends