

Two Hunston sisters on their Hunston years
28 July, 2016

This is a rough transcript of a lively Skype video call with sisters Mary Clare (MC) and Mary Helen (MH), who were members of the Carmelite Convent at Hunston, Chichester for many years until it closed in 1994 and are now in the Carmelite monastery in Terre Haute. The interviewer was RDN in Sussex. RDN has re-ordered and very lightly edited the transcript for flow of subjects, and clarity.

Text begins:

[Question: Was it difficult to start life in Hunston convent in 1960?]

MH: It was like moving into another world, but if you were determined that God was calling you, God gave you strength to hang on. That sounds negative. Actually as time went on I felt that I had sailed into a harbour and this was where God wanted me to be and it brought great peace to me.

[Question: Were your family supportive?]

MH: Definitely. My parents and siblings were very devout Catholics. We were a great family of readers. There wasn't a great deal of chattering going on, we didn't have a TV. Working in silence, as my mother did, at home, there was silence and that was the ethos I was used to.

I left school and was thinking of going to university, I would have done history but I failed my exams. I had a feeling that God was calling me to the religious life. I kind of waited to see what God had in store, I got a very ordinary job in London and I could begin to see my way. I was drawn to the active life for a very short time but then I was drawn to the contemplative life.

I wanted to say the divine office every day, that was one element. Being a hermit was part of the Carmelite spirit and I was very drawn to that. Edith Stein, that was the first book I read, and then I knew it was Carmel which I wanted.

There are other contemplative [orders for women], the Benedictines, the Dominicans, the Passionists.

[Question: when did Mary Clare enter Carmel?]

MC: I entered the Carmel at Waterbeach near Cambridge in 1963.

As an 18 or 19 year old I had my own ideas and my own plans of how I wanted my future to unfold. I had my sights set on Bristol University and I went to Cambridge College of Arts and Technology to get some A levels. Then I walked into the Catholic church in Cambridge, you can't miss it, you can't go to Cambridge without passing it one way or another; you know - the

Church of Our Lady and the English Martyrs. I basically read myself into the Church because at the back they had Catholic Truth Society pamphlets. Being dedicated to the English martyrs they had short biographies of some of the English martyrs and I thought, "Well, if something's worth dying for it must be worth living for." There was another stray book on the shelf. It was the *Story of A Soul... The Autobiography of St Thérèse* [of Lisieux]. And having read that I wondered who is this other Teresa she keeps referring to so I found a copy of *The Way of Perfection* and having found my way into the Church and having read St Teresa, she is such a dynamic writer... [more like a] speaker.. you feel she is talking to you..

MH: ... She is like St Augustine in that...

MC: So I found I had to give up my ideas of what I wanted to do. Because I had wanted to study English and Drama and become a teacher. And I thought: this is such a dramatic turn of events. So I wrote a letter to the Prioress of Waterbeach and said that I thought God wanted me to be a Carmelite. [She laughs...] I wrote, I was told about this afterwards, the mail was taken to the Prioress, and you know what you do, you get a bunch of mail and you look for the most important or interesting, look for the most interesting and you put the bills aside, and there was this letter, with this unrecognizable handwriting ...

MH: ... unreadable!

MC: ... and she says this looks like a possible postulant, but her handwriting looks quite old. But she said of course you can come [on a visit]... and I wrote and said I was 18 and she wrote to say of course you can come. Being a convert, canon law required a two-year lapse between entry into the Church and entry into any religious community... so I was 20 by the time I went in... But I was in constant touch during that time either by visiting or by letter.

[Question: Were your parents supportive?]

MC: Mystified is better. My mother had two very close friends who were Catholics and eventually she came into the church herself. My father was...: "Well she's always done what she wanted, so there's no point..."

[Question: What about abandoning the family, care of the elderly, much harder for non-Catholic, or sceptical background, that remaining load may strike them as unfair]

MC: My parents were young and my brother's younger than myself and that wasn't an issue.

[Question: What about later? And perhaps the problem that monastics "abandon" their family responsibilities?]

MC: Well, my father died of cancer and I must admit I was concerned for my father, but my brother was very close at hand and even after my father died, we said to my mother: "You can look at some kind of retirement home or you can wait till we have to decide for you...". She

went to St Josephs in Bognor Regis and when she could no longer come to see me, I went to see her. That was a freedom brought by Vatican II.

[Question: Vatican II – was that difficult?]

MH: I entered in August 1960, Vatican II came along in '63. I lived through the before and the after and it was rather interesting being in [that situation]. There were some people who were desperately conservative and the thought of change made them afraid. Others took it with commonsense and recognized that life does change. So some communities adopted the changes.

MC: I think it depended on the individual's background. I was reluctant to surrender the Latin. I wouldn't go back to it for anything. It wasn't an aged divide. Possibly the older sisters were more reluctant. We had contact with male Carmelites in Oxford and London and the diocese here in Chichester gave guidance. We kept abreast of the changes going on and we understood why the changes were going ahead. And in some cases we had no alternative.

[Question: What were the Vatican II changes to church layout?]

MC: The chapel was built in 1930 because they [the nuns] didn't have enough money to build what they wanted [before that date], in harmony with the rest of the building. In 1930 [when the convent could afford the development], the architect designed a big gothic arch between the sanctuary [the most holy, eastern, altar part of the church] and the choir [the eastern end of the main east-west axis of the church, where the nuns were placed], but in those days the regulations for the grille very strict. The Prioress wanted the arch bricked in and [to] just have a 12 by 5 foot opening which had the grille and the shutters. The story was that the architect walked away in disgust and was never seen again. Then came the modifications of Vatican II and the requirement that the nuns should be able to see the altar and the celebration of mass. The nuns had enough money stashed away and they renovated the chapel and they were able to chip out all the offending bricks.

MH: ... and it was beautiful.

MC: And [after Vatican II] we could to see the reredos [the painted screen behind the altar] and it was beautiful.

MH: In the old days the grille had a curtain over it and at the time of elevation of Mass the curtain was pulled up so the sisters could see the elevation of the chalice and the Host, otherwise that black, thin curtain was down.

MC: ... So we just saw the figure moving around and just the tips of the candles...

[Question: Pre Vatican II did the degree of sequesteredness seem odd?]

MC: The father general came round and paid us a visit and said what do you miss ... what do you miss most? And I said what I miss is seeing Mass... [laughing]. Obviously, you were present at Mass, it was very prayerful, you went to Holy Communion... It didn't trouble me deeply, but it was peculiar, you know...

MC: It's what you call the peak moment of the Mass and it's the minor elevation, it's the moment when you adore the sacred species of the body and blood of Christ...

[Question: Do you chant or recite all the psalms in a weekly cycle, in the medieval tradition?]

MH: [In the old days] if a sister died in the community every sister would undertake to recite the whole Psalter in a week.

MC: Before Vatican II we recited the whole Psalter in the course of one week, but then it was decided that quality was better than quantity and now it's a four week cycle.... All the Hours begin with a hymn, so it's a hymn, psalms and some readings.

[Question: Are all the meals in common and in silence in the medieval tradition?]

MC: Yes, with sacred readings... with readings from a spiritual book.

[Question: Are you all vegetarian, in the medieval tradition?]

MC: Then [in Hunston] yes. [Now, Terre Haute] we have a lot of Asians - we have three Vietnamese and three Korean and three Chinese, some of whom are over here to improve their English. And the Vietnamese and Koreans are not big agricultural countries because they are so mountainous and they're just not used to dairy products and they are lactose intolerant. We got to the point where we were cooking two [main] meals every day... There's a bit more chicken about now...

MH: I don't know, I have been out of the world so long, [but I wonder if] probably even poorer people eat more meat now, do you think that's true?

RDN: Yes probably, most people eat too much fat and too much sugar.

MC: We do not eat a lot of meat, it's just twice a week.

RDN: Most people now eat meat every day, and many eat it twice a day.

MH: Really....?

[Question: What about practical housekeeping issues and change since the 1960s? The sisters reply that pre Vatican II it was both required, and easier, to maintain a strict enclosure . Things have changed for all sorts of reasons, and not least practicalities.]

MC: Things like shopping. When we entered you either grew it, or made it, or it was delivered or you went without it. Today the only thing which is delivered is the milk and that's only delivered because it goes to the school across the road and they might as well deliver to us as well. [Historically, and in the early days of Hunston] there might be a female servant, greeting visitors and looking after the rooms for visitors outside the enclosure.

MC: At Chichester at one point the nuns employed a full-time gardener. Either you can't get someone to do that sort of work [or can't afford to]. You end up doing it yourself. We had a young man who did some outside work, but the prioress said we can't afford you.

We kept chickens, before we used to keep cows. After the 1987 hurricane we acquired a cat. It adopted us...

Mary Helen:
... we had bees.

MC [on honey for sale?]:
We had it in the front hallway. We gave away more than we sold, to benefactors as a way of showing our gratitude.

[Question: did you give alms?]

MC: [Yes, there'd be a] ring at the front door. Can I have a cup of tea and something to eat, sister?

MH: We had a little hatch in a door in a little court outside the kitchen door, and a sister used to make a pot of tea and give them some jam sandwiches or whatever we had.

MC: First of all you were getting, the tramps were men of the road [an old-fashioned term, almost of nostalgia] ... veterans men who had been demobbed at the end of the [Second World] war, home missing, no family, and they were suffering from what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder; and then [later] there were the younger folks, we would find people who had lost their health, or their job or their wife.

MH: And some just didn't want to settle down.

MC: We had one old gentleman who had been called up when he was about 17 and he was in the North African desert and had lost his teeth, but I never knew anyone who had such an angelic face. He would tell you his story and he'd say, "Can I have a cup of tea and something to eat, but sister would you cut the crusts off... because I have got no teeth?" And we used to

give him whatever we could, macaroni cheese or whatever we had. And he was so sweet, but when a plane came over he threw himself flat on the ground. He couldn't stand it. One day he said, "Sister could I have some soap and the next day we couldn't recognise him. They used to move between Brighton and Portsmouth and we were about halfway.

MH: after the [October 19]'87 storm trees were blown down and we were more visible and we had far more people knocking at the door.

[Question: To what extent was the Church open to the public?]

MH: [Not many came to Mass] we were very isolated, and they had churches in Chichester.

MC: The public chapels was open for mass and if they wanted to come to the Office, they would have to come to the door. That was for security reasons really.

[Question: Tell us about the mid-1970s doubling in size of the Hunston community.]

MC: [I was in the Carmel in Waterbeach, Cambridgeshire.] In the early 70s there were plans for Waterbeach to become a dormitory town for Cambridge and there seemed to be plans for a school right next door to our monastery. And we had a sister in Waterbeach who had a sister in Hunston. And in the course of a few years, we merged with Chichester.

MH: We had the bigger building...

MC: Was it in [19]72, yes... it might have been '73... [when the Waterbeach nuns came from Cambridge to Hunston in West Sussex]

MH: [Hunston built new rooms in one side of its two attics, on the second, floor] ... Yes, that was necessary, on one side [and new brick extensions were built with fire escape staircases] .

[Question: When Mary Helen arrived at Hunston in the 1960s were the 20-odd first floor cells mostly occupied as they had been from the Victorian period?]

MH: Pretty well. Some were used as storerooms. The custom was when you build a Carmelite monastery there should be 21 cells because St Teresa said if you had more than that you need to make a foundation [not just a "house" within a disciplinary chain of command, but a new wing of the Carmelite family, with an assumption of several "houses" under its control]... Teresa of Avila was originally in a Carmel of 186 [nuns] and there wasn't much silence and recollection and there were a lot of hungry nuns because the food wouldn't go round. Yes, more recollection, quieter, and the nuns could live more like hermits...

MC: ... yes, like hermits, but also more like a family.

MH: Mind you if you go and see some of the original Carmels in Spain, they look awfully big, but that may have to do with the climate, big walls to keep cool... but they are nonetheless..

MH: When the Cambridge sisters arrived, the first floor and the attic, they were pretty well occupied.

[Question: How were the cells at the expanded Hunston allocated?]

MC: We mixed people up, we didn't have one community here and the others there...

[Question: Was the convent very cold as had been the long tradition in Carmelite convents?]

MC: It was cold. There was no heating except in one or two common rooms. After 1975(?) the Prioress allowed small electric fires in rooms. Fifty-eight degrees [Fahrenheit] was a good temperature. But nobody had central heating then [in the 1960s]. We had warm woolen worsted habits and warm underclothes.

By that time [of the mid 70s expansion at Hunston] everyone had a little heater and actually upstairs [in the new cells in the attic], because they [the cells] were smaller, they were warmer.

[Question: Before the Cambridge influx, what was the population usually?]

MC: It fluctuated between 12 and 15 in the first years...

[Question: When you arrived, did the life you were living strike you as like the medieval or Teresian traditions, or authentically medieval, or irritating, or whatever...?]

MH: Whatever you expect, Richard, it is always very different from what you expect. I hadn't read anything in detail about medieval nuns so I didn't expect anything in particular. I didn't expect anything particularly modern, the building itself didn't strike me as particularly modern, it seemed quite antique...

[Question: What did you think you were contributing to the order or community?]

MH: In the contemplative life really you are receiving more than giving. You are willing to give whatever is asked of you. But I didn't see myself as contributing anything specific, apart from being there and doing what was required of me. Docility is a necessary requirement. People can't be taught. St Teresa [of Avila] said the people who enter must have commonsense. I didn't feel that it was old-fashioned. Some things seemed odd, I suppose. I mean wandering around with a paraffin lamp. There was a quaintness about it too. But you could see the point of it. The point of it was that there should be simplicity in our lives so that nothing should distract from the one thing necessary, [and] that's it.

MC: [The monastic tradition has always been that] you simplified things around you, either the way you dressed, the architecture; you eliminate as much of the preoccupation with self - what shall we put on, or what shall we have for dinner - well, that is a preoccupation sometimes [laughs] – and you have an uncluttered environment.

[Questioner: I have often heard monastics say, “God called me”. Is that what having a vocation begins with?]

MH: It is a mystery, vocation. It's a case of there are more things in heaven and earth...

MC: It is a mystery. You can't even explain to yourself sometimes.

[Question: How does a community ensure that the entrants are suitable?]

MC: Nowadays even at 20 [a community may wonder if there was sufficient maturity in the postulant, but] we let her come for a visit and sees how it goes.

There's quite a lot of work before they even get a foot in the front door. We have divided the work. The novice mistress only deals with people who have actually entered. Prior to that it's the vocations directress who has to weed them out. And after a first letter there's a phone conversation. If that goes OK then they are invited to fill out what we call a “getting to know you” form to share things about themselves and we look at that, and there are two sisters on the vocation team to evaluate that. If they pass that scrutiny, then they are invited to come for a visit for a weekend, because over here [in the US] coming here [to Terre Haute, Indiana] usually involves flying rather than driving. And if that goes well, and it depends on their age too, and getting to know them better, back and forth. Should they want to progress further they are invited for a live-in for up to three months. If that goes OK and they actually ask to enter, before the candidate is presented to the Chapter for voting, the vocations directress does a lengthy in-depth behaviour assessment and our present vocations directress is very good at her work. If that goes OK we have to have five references from an employer, a religious, a friend...

[Question: that sounds daunting...]

MC: What we do, to help someone [provide a reference]... People used to come back and say, well what do you want to know? So now we send a questionnaire: How have you observed this person interact with people older than herself; or younger than herself; in a work environment; and how did she handle confrontation? And even so, having done all that they can come in, and perhaps... [even after the vetting].. well, go down like a slow puncture. So now we have one professed novice and she's been consistently good and she's really putting down roots. And we have a postulant who is going to take the habit next week and join the novitiate and she's very good.

[How did the community adapt to the Vatican II reforms, or changes?]

MH: One of the things which came out was the importance of real relationships: “No man is an island”. Was that Thomas Merton; no, John Donne. A real part of our sanctification comes from our living in community, and our relationships with one another, and being an authentic person.

MC [St Teresa of Avila] would have loved it.

MH Many of her ideas have come out in Vatican II, [especially] with a sense of community.

[Question: Is spirituality synonymous with transcendence in the sense of there being a God?]

MC: You do hear people say I am not religious but I am spiritual.

MH: We understand that there are people of really genuine goodwill who feel that is the direction in which they are called, that's how they follow their conscience, in the sense that that's the light's that's before them. [Pope] Francis or [Pope] Benedict said that the difference is that the person of Christ is the centre, it's a personal God.

MC [Spirituality] is relationship. You can't have relationship with an idea.

[Question: Were the monasteries you entered sombre compared with what came afterwards?]

MH: Oh there was laughter...

MC: St Francis de Sales said, “God preserve us from sour-faced nuns” and Teresa [of Avila] said “A sad nun is a bad nun”.

[The conversation turned to the garden wildlife of Sussex, compared with Indiana...]

MC: We miss the [English] hedgehog. What we do have is foxes, a family of three. They have fed on the rabbits, which we are very grateful for. We don't feed them. We did have an old fox and we fed him dog biscuits.

[The discussion turned to the way they might co-operate with the “Hunston Convent and Chichester Free School” project...]

MH: When we were at Chichester we never got tired of going over the story of our community. It's a bit like the Israelites. It's their stories which kept them going.

[On the two printed document about the “English Carmel” in Holland, France, Dorset and Hunston, from the 17th Century to the 19th Century.]

MH: Both were put together by Sister Mary Joseph and she had the archive [now in Baltimore Carmel] and a very good memory. Did you know that an 18th century house in Dorset was their home for a while? [It was] Canford House [and] became a public school for boys. It had been a private house. They [the nuns] were turfed out of there and had to go to Normandy and were given an abandoned or rundown Benedictine house in Normandy. In France they got a very handsome bequest [which allowed the building of Hunston Convent].

[Question: Were the nuns often poor?]

MC [Well, for instance] we sold the Waterbeach property and most of that went on the work on the upper floor (at Hunston). [Back then, there were no pensions without contributions, though in the 70s the rules were changed for nuns who could put up a lump sum.]

MH: There are some communities who are well known with many benefactors. We were [isolated in countryside outside] a very Anglican, small cathedral city. We just let out a farmer was allowed to use our fields for a nominal sum.

MC: It was [a question of] making the best use of what we had.

MH: St Teresa [of Avila] said we need to do some work in order to fulfill the gospel mandate and keep ourselves busy but we were not to worry about money because God would inspire people to help us.

MC: Even a few days ago, there was a gentleman - he has a stall near the hospital - and a sister approached him to buy grain and he said, "Well could you use the surplus veg and fruit I can't sell?", and now every day he comes with that.

MH: And we go down to Catholic charities from time to time, And every now and again we do get a nice cheque in the mail. And every now and again you have a supporter who isn't much in one's mind maybe, and they die and maybe leave a handsome sum.

MC: We have more contacts now through the website.

Text ends