

# Hunston Carmel in the Arundel & Brighton Diocesan Archive

By RDN, edited 30/12/22, recounting research 2019-2022

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## Introduction

I have for several years been keen to document the [Carmelite community which for 120 years was at Hunston](#), south of Chichester. In the 2010s I was encouraged to do so by the Hunston Free School, which had recently taken on the purpose-built convent of 1872 and was keen to understand its past.

In 2019 I made three or four visits to the archive of the Roman Catholic Arundel and Brighton Diocese [henceforth "ABD"] in Hove, East Sussex. I have now (January, 2022) revisited my photographs and hurried notes on what I was shown and briefly explored then. What follows is necessarily open to correction.

Below, there are a few fragments of what is a fascinating if small horde of material some of which I cannot so far find replicated elsewhere in the UK, though there is almost certainly invaluable original material in the US (see below).

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## *1 Hunston's home-produced histories*

There are two photocopied typescript pamphlets (both also in RDN's possession).

(1a) *I Carried You...* [ICY], undated, by "SMJ, Chichester Carmel". The author was identified as Sister Mary Joseph by Sr Mary Clare of the Hunston Carmel (the latter at Hunston from 1973 to its closure in 1993, and now of Terre Haute Carmel, Indiana). A retyped hard copy version by an unknown hand is available online at

richarddnorth.com. (Sr Mary Joseph was Hunston's prioress in the early 1970s.)

(1b) *The Story of our Chichester Carmel* [SOOCC], with the subtitle, "From Brabant to Sussex", inscribed as printed at Wells Carmel, priced at 50p (and therefore certainly post-1971). Sr Mary Clare says it was also written by Sister Mary Joseph, and likewise was based on the Annals. ICY's Introduction mentions in passing, "it is not a far cry" from Saint Teresa's cart journeys in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Spain to Hunston's 21<sup>st</sup> Century beehives (though actually Hunston Carmel did not outlive the 20<sup>th</sup> C). It says inner peace can survive the convent's "tapping of typewriters", "the whirring of sewing machines" and the mechanisation of the kitchen and garden implements. Though it briefly mentions the convent's long-desired 1930 chapel, this pamphlet records nothing else after the 1870s. (I intend to put SOOCC online.)

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## *2 Chichester Carmel Annals*

I recall (perhaps faultily) a bundle (perhaps 3-6 inches thick) of poor and not always legible photocopies of (I think) foolscap pages containing mostly daily entries which are all handwritten. I seem to recall seeing a list of or even the full set of volumes and that Volume One covered the community's previous convents first in England and then on the Continent (1678-1870); Volumes Two and thenceforth covered the second period (19<sup>th</sup> Century), first in temporary accommodation and then Hunston, thus: Volume Two 1871-1915, Volume Three 1915-29; and Volume Four 1929-58.

Conventual Annals are community diaries but, speaking of what I saw of the Hunston example, but also from the very little I know of others of the species (see the *Catholic Encyclopedia* online), they do not record the spiritual inner life or personal travails of individuals. These are institutional rather than personal records (much more a ship's log than a memoir or even annual report). My slight delving into the Hunston Annals showed them to note large moments in, say, a Papacy, and these may be of interest to specialists in showing the varieties of (I think pretty conventional) pious devotion the community shared. Of greater obvious interest are the kind of entries of which I copied a very few hurriedly from Volume Four's reporting of visits, say by the local bishop or a well-known architect, or of planned sales of land or building works. Of greatest interest are interactions the nuns have with outsiders with whom they have commercial dealings because the community was, after all, a land- and property- owner with a living to earn and with physical needs to attend to. These are when the sisters most obviously meet with the secular world beyond their enclosure and we see the secular world coming at least to the grille or "grate" (and sometimes inside it).

Here are some extracts quickly selected and hastily noted by RDN with the Annal's actual words transcribed within quotation marks, but with no guarantee of accuracy.

*The Hunston Annals (more properly, The Annals of Chichester Carmel)*

### *Volume 4*

April 1929

The convent had received a gift sufficient to allow them to fulfill a long-cherished project: the building of an appropriate Chapel. They discounted a proposed Protestant architect and opted for the well-connected and well-known Sebastian Pugin-Powell, the grandson of the great Pugin. Besides, his fee was only four percent of the build value, as against the usual 6 percent.

Thursday 11 April, 1929

Pugin-Powell arrives for a visit. He spends the night in Chichester; says he doesn't want lunch because he is going on to visit his sister, a Sacred Heart nun in Brighton. (That convent has since been demolished and is now the site of the Arundel and

Brighton Diocese's Bishop's House.) Hearing that the nuns complained of other architects' allowing high windows to produce draughts above monastic choir stalls, he said he could add little canopies for their stalls. But the nuns thought that would be against their constitution.

"We are very glad that he makes no difficulty about Mother Mary Baptista's [the Hunston Carmel's first Prioress'] grave; it need not be interfered with at all, simply bricked-over and left."

In May, 1929, trees were cut for firewood, using a steam engine. It is not mentioned whether these were the nuns' own trees, nor whether they also provided the wood for the choir stalls or for the Mother Prioress' cell mentioned below.

25 May, 1929

"The boards in the Revd Mother's cell were very badly worm-eaten, Cassidy put others in their place."

3 June, 1929

Myles Cassidy (who seems to have been regular employee of the convent) "had ordered wood for the new choir stalls, and it all arrived in the afternoon. Cassidy, Bachelor and Holder [got it up into the attic by] passing it straight up through the banisters .... Mother Prioress was concerned that it was un-planed and would now need more money spent to make it suitable."

4 June, 1929

In a court case, a local judge, in the face of the views of all "all right-thinking people" gave a tenant of the community, Cunningham, six weeks longer in a cottage they owned than they thought correct.

4 June, 1929

"Cassidy had helped over Cunningham" and the Reverend Mother worried that he "had been the object of much unkindness and ill-will for ourselves. She wrote him a letter and enclosed £10 as a token of our appreciation."

In reply Myles Cassidy writes:

"Old Fishbourne, 4th June 1929,

"I am perfectly satisfied with my weekly wage and feel you are altogether too good to me. It is a privilege and a great pleasure to me to have the confidence of the Nuns, and I hope to continue to deserve it. In fact I am disappointed regarding the trees as I feel they were a very expensive matter to you and the return from the firewood was not as much as I had hoped.... ."

8 June, 1929

The Bishop visited and slept over, presumably in a guest room outside the enclosure,

and said Mass for the community. “We had a wonderful time with him at the Speak House Grate in the course of the morning.”

8 August, 1929

“As we all had colds we did not go to the presentation of Sister Teres[a?] Francis’ bouquet this being her clothing day. Revd Mother and Sister Magdalen[e?]Teresa represented us all.”

10 August, 1929

“A lady aged 36 and very deaf came to interview Revd Mother on the recommendation of Father [Preis?] Smith, SJ. She was anxious to enter here. She is of course quite unsuitable.”

22 August, 1929

“Sr Mary Aloysius came out of Retreat having gone in on the 17th. We notice that there are no wasps this year, Sr Mary Evangelista having killed 70 Queen wasps herself and the other Nuns 30 more.”

2 September, 1929

One of the community’s most important, and perhaps the only permanent employee, was Mr Smith, a handyman, farm and garden worker, and I may recall rightly, their cattle man when they had beasts.

“Mr Smith died. His mind had given way as the result of a stroke and he had been at Grayling Wells Mental Home for several weeks. We had always hoped that he would come into the Church at the end. He was a good man and had led a good life”. [See an RDN online piece on [Graylingwell mental institution](#) or search “Graylingwell mental hospital” online for its fascinating story]

“On the same day a girl from Liverpool called \*\*\*\*\* [name redacted], aged 38, came to see Reverend Mother asking to enter here... She was miraculously cured at Lourdes.... But having [no] dowry, and being 38, it was not possible to grant her request. The heat during the last fortnight has been abnormal.”

10 September, 1929

A man called Strange owns a field next to the nuns’ Berrymeads Field, across the road to the east of the convent [partly since gifted by the nuns to Stonepillow, a charity for Chichester’s homeless] “and there was talk of his selling the land to a builder to develop workmen’s cottages ... in which case we should have been overlooked on the whole East side of the house”. Strange calls at the convent and the Reverend Mother and her deputy meet him at the Grate. She says, ““You have come to speak about the field?’ ‘No, I have come to speak about your digne’” [which may be an old-fashioned word for dignity]. He goes on to mention a man called Joe as ““a special enemy’” [of the convent?], who has ““already killed more than one hen’” [of the nuns’?] and ““now there is a covey of young partridges’” [which Joe may attack or already has?]. “Revd Mother apologises [for this misunderstanding one guesses], “and

they move on to discuss the field. Strange offers five acres for £1200.” The nuns “offer an Infallible Novena, followed immediately by a Novena to St Joseph ... A land survey valued the field at £500 and [says it covered?] measured four acres in all. Reverend Mother wrote this to Strange but he neither wrote nor called.”

11 September, 1929

“Cassidy and a man finished the recreation room.”

30 September, 1929

[See entry for 10/9/29] Strange accepts £500 down and £500, “after Christmas. The price is rather more than the land is worth; but our Inclosure is worth more to us, and we believe that in time he could easily sell it and our chance once gone would never return. We have our Bishop’s full approval for the transaction. We had the £1000 in hand saved on last year’s income so Our Lord had provided for the need.”

### *3 Architect's drawing for Hunston chapel*

A plan (either an original or print) of the 1930 Pugin-Powell chapel (referred to briefly in the Annals, see below). I have posted the image, as I snapped it in Hove in 2019. See the main ["home" page for my Hunston convent work](#).

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### *4 Diocesan census returns for Hunston 1872-1993*

As I understand it, secular authorities require(d) diocesan authorities to produce a census of the religious communities in their bailiwick.

Most material here is culled from the Annual General Statistical Questionnaire of the Secretariat of State series [henceforth: “AGSQ”], held at the ABD archive and photographed there by RDN on 11 October, 2019. I snapped each return of the entire AGSQ, and have written a file of data derived from them. I would like to publish both the photos and the data in full but for the time being I am being guided by the request made by ABD (October, 2019) that neither the community’s nuns’ secular names nor even their religious names be published. Thus what follows are anonymised summaries of the material in the archive.

In 2022, Chichester’s secular cemetery authority shared with me their burial records for 37 Hunston nuns buried in Hunston convent’s graveyard between 1872 and 1994 and reinterred in the City’s Portfield cemetery when the Hunston convent closed. I intend posting those details soon (written Christmas, 2022).

#### *AGSQ Census notes*

The dates given below are for the completed year each questionnaire covers: the questionnaires were actually filled-in and dated very early in each following year.

The Prioresses had to tick a box recording whether they were under “Papal” or “Diocesan” “right”. They always ticked “Papal”. (RDN supposes that this may reflect the Hunston community's sense that their authenticity derived through some sort of Carmelite chain of command through their order to the Papacy, rather than via diocesan lines of authority.)

### *The community numbers, year by year*

Note: over the years covered a succession of four Reverend Mothers/Prioresses listed the “full members” of the community (my words) variously as (their words) “Professed Women Religious (Sisters)”; “Discalced Carmelites”; “Sisters Solemnly professed”. Novices, Postulants, or “nuns in simple vows” or “simple vows” were (sometimes confusingly) listed separately and RDN tracks them in brackets.

The activity of the community was listed as “altar bread making” or “contemplative life”, or both.

In 1973 the Hunston community accommodated new members from the Waterbeach Carmel in Cambridgeshire which was being disbanded. This was the period when the Hunston convent building was altered to provide more cells and a fire escape.

1972: 13 (RDN note: Before the influx from Waterbeach, Cambridge)  
1973: 26 (RDN note: After the influx from Waterbeach, Cambridge)  
1974: 26  
1975: 25  
1976: 24  
1977: 24  
1978: 24  
1979: 21 (including one in a nursing home)  
1980: 20  
1981: 19 (plus 2 novices)  
1982: 20  
1983: 18 “Professed” plus one “Simple, 3 Years”.  
1984: 19 One nun is listed at the end of professed sisters, without explanation  
1985: 19 (plus 1 postulant)  
1986: 18 (plus 1 novice)  
1987: 17 (plus 1 novice) (RDN has an uncertain note that one nun has gone)  
1988: 17 (There is a hand-written note that one nun left, 15/01/89)  
1989: 15  
1990: 15 (plus one, a novice, and one a postulant)  
1991: 16 (This number includes one nun whose status RDN is not clear about)  
1992: 15 (plus 1 novice - RDN thinks un-named)  
1993: 15 (still including 1 novice)

Age range of the community: four snapshots

1988

45-50 = 3  
50-55 = 2  
[55-70]  
70+ = 11  
Total: 16

RDN note: 1988 was a year with no young entrants. My note-taking may be at fault, or one nun who left is not counted in the age-tally, presumably made in early 1989.

1990

20+ = 2 (Postulant and Novice)  
40+ = 2  
50+ = 3  
[60+]  
70+ = 4  
80+ = 6  
Total: 17

RDN note: I don't altogether follow the above but there is a note which says the data includes a novice and postulant who are over 20 (we have their names), but that there is also a "postulant over 30" making "18 all told".

1991

20-25 = 1  
40-50 = 2  
50-55 = 3  
70+ = 10  
Total = 16

RDN note: One postulant or novice nun born 1967 may have progressed in this period

1992

40-60 = 3  
70-80 = 3  
80-90 = 5  
90+ = 1  
Total: 13

RDN note: This was the community which prepared to leave Hunston in 1993/4. Sr Mary Clare wrote to me in March 2022 saying that Sr Mary Assumpta [who was in her

mid-90s], "died before we left Chichester and was the first to be buried in the plot we bought in the Chichester cemetery."

RDN overall note: These snapshots imply that there was a stable preponderance of middle aged or elderly sisters and a small irregular recruitment and poor retention of the youngsters who would have been required to ensure longevity for the community. This is a commonplace of 20th and 21st monasticism in the West except where there is recruitment from the "Third World".

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### ***Appendix: The nuns after Hunston***

(Data culled from Breeze's online "History of the Chichester Carmelite Convent")

8 September 1994, six sisters travelled from Sussex to their new home at Sclerder Carmel, Looe, Cornwall, and stayed there until their deaths.

Name	Date of Birth	Date of Profession	Date of Death
Sr Mary Joseph	6 May 1906	10 May 1928	1st August 2003
Sr Mary Carmel	21 November 1905	28 January 1932	R.I.P.
Sr Anne Teresa	30 December 1913	22 July 1936	R.I.P.
Sr Mary John	29 February 1912	14 August 1933	11 July 2003
Sr Teresa Joseph	23 February 1916	8 May 1939	R.I.P.
Sr Mary Bernadette	25 March 1916	5 November 1939	1999

The six *Hunston sisters who went to Sclerder*:

Three Hunston sisters, Sr Mary Augustine, Sr Mary Clare and Sr Teresa Francis, were obliged to remain until the sale of the house was completed. Sister Mary Clare went direct to Terre Haute Carmel, Indiana, USA at the closure of the Chichester Carmel. Two others, Sister Mary Augustine, the last prioress at Hunston, now known as Sister Mary Helen, and Sister Teresa Francis joined their sisters at Sclerder just before Christmas 1994.

After two years at Sclerder [1996?], two of the ex-Hunston community in Sclerder (including Sr Mary Augustine/Mary Helen) transferred to the Carmelite Monastery in Terre Haute (joining Sr Mary Clare).

On Hunston's closure three other sisters transferred to different Carmels in the British Isles: Sr Catherine to York Carmel; Sr Mary Elizabeth to the Dumbarton Carmel in Scotland (but moved into a convent nursing home nearby); Sr Mary Teresa went to Falkirk Carmel, Scotland.

RDN note: The above information produces 12 professed sisters who transferred out of the Hunston community to others on its closure, its population of professed nuns then being 13. Sr Mary Assumpta (see just above) died just before the move and was buried in Chichester, so all 13 professed sisters are accounted for. It may be that the non-professed did not transfer to other Carmels so much as drifted away.

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