

# History of the Chichester Carmelite Convent

The Carmel of Chichester was situated in Hunston, a few hundred yards down the Selsey Road, just opposite what became St Joseph's Night Refuge.

It is interesting to note that, had it not been for the various geographical vagaries of other sites, the convent could just as easily have been built elsewhere - West Grinstead or Rustington and if that had been the case, the spiritual life of Chichester would have been the much poorer for it. The Convent building, which was built in 1872, still stands although the Carmelites left in 1994: no less than three hundred and sixteen years since their first recruits came from West Sussex.



Springtime at the convent

## 1678 - Penal Times

The Carmel of Chichester dated back to 1678. In penal times, girls who wished to follow a religious vocation were obliged to leave their native England and live in exile on the Continent. The Duchess of Hoogstraet, Lady Gabriel de la Laing, founded Chichester Carmel originally in Hoogstraet on the Dutch-Flemish border; it was intended specifically for English women. The community lived happily in their monastery at Hoogstraet for over a hundred years, receiving a steady stream of vocations from England; some of the girls who entered were related to the English Martyrs.

However, when French troops overran the Low Countries in 1794, the nuns, together with many other similar communities, were forced to flee and seek refuge in England where, by this time, the Penal Laws were not being so stringently enforced. The nuns were homeless until they were lent a house at Canford in Dorset, where they lived until 1830 when the heir of the donor of the house demanded that it be restored to him. Again the community was homeless and, failing to obtain another house in England, they were obliged to accept the offer of an old convent in Valognes, Normandy, so they returned to the Continent, hoping one day to come back to England again. All these years the community was desperately poor but in 1870 having been left a large legacy they were able to return to England, purchase a plot of land in Chichester and build the Hunston monastery (convent).

## 1870s - Building a New Home in England

On one particular journey to England, in the search for a suitable site, one of the highlights was a visit to the sisters at Darlington, who welcomed the travellers with great joy. The chaplain at Darlington, Fr Brown, took endless pains to help them find a site for their new Convent. They looked at various sites and Fr Brown's first choice of a site at West Grinstead was rejected because the land was poor, and water hard to find. Fr Brown continued his search, and with the approval of Fr Gravey, the Carmelite chaplain at Valognes, actually bought a piece of land at Rustington near Littlehampton. However, this site was rejected as unsuitable, being very near the sea, which was already encroaching at that part of the

coast. So the piece of land was let, and the search continued.

In March 1870, Fr Duke, the Parish Priest of Chichester, wrote to Valognes to say that a piece of land was up for sale in his parish, and he considered it most suitable for a convent. This time the site was found to be ideal and it was therefore purchased for £1,300 from Frederick Padwick and Henry Percival Hart. Charles Buckler, an eminent architect, was appointed and the building contract was signed with Cheesman & Co. on 19th March 1870.



**Sacristy and garden**

Cheesman's also owned brickworks in Bosham situated where Brinkman's offices are located and indeed, many people can remember seeing two run-down kilns at that spot. If you look carefully at the bricks surrounding the convent windows you can see written AC, BOSHAM [Alfred Cheesman].

Construction commenced in August 1870.

## **Travelling to England**

The community intended not to leave Valognes until the Chichester Convent was ready for them, so that they could pass from one convent to the other. But just as the building started, in August, the war between France and Prussia became so alarming that it was judged best to leave for England at once. It was a providential decision, as it proved very necessary that Reverend Mother should be on the spot to mitigate the zeal of the architect.

Mother Mary Baptist and her Nuns left Valognes on 15th September 1870. Their boat put in at Dell Quay, a private port about two miles from Chichester. The boat landed on the 17th after a 5-hour wait for the tide. The captain found it very difficult to get in as no steam vessels had ever landed there, and although they arrived at 10 p.m. they could not land until 3 o'clock the next morning, September 17th. A custom-house officer appeared on the scene, who opposed the landing of the luggage saying he would get into trouble if he allowed it. However, a handsome tip soon put things right and the nuns were allowed to land their goods. There was a small inn there, and the host made the most of the occasion by charging a very high price for a very little refreshment.

Father Duke of Chichester arranged for the whole party to be taken to the Presbytery, the carriage making three journeys for the nuns, afterwards returning for the goods and Charlie, who had been left in charge of them. As it was still school holidays, the luggage was stored in the schoolhouse for the time being.

Fr Duke also arranged for them to rent Mundham House for £120 p.a. whilst convent construction work progressed. However, Mundham House would only be free on St. Michael's Day, so an uncomfortable fortnight was spent, Reverend Mother and Sister Mary Teresa sleeping at the Presbytery and the other ten nuns at the schoolhouse.

Mundham House, into which the nuns moved on September 29th, was very comfortable, with a kitchen garden, an orchard and a paddock for a cow. An honest, hardworking gardener, Charles Barnett, was caring for the little property, and Mother Mary Baptist retained him in the service of the community.

## Building works

Mother Mary Baptist made frequent trips to the building site, and in order to give them all pleasure, she would allow one or other of the nuns to accompany her and watch the growth of their future home. She had to be strict with Charles Buckler, insisting on her own wishes being respected, as he had mediaeval ideas about contemplative religious, and grudged the nuns every window he had put in.

Finally the building outran the contract, so that the church could only be added by incurring a debt, which the nuns refused to do and so this was omitted. The preparatory was arranged as a chapel and choir with the grate between. The preparatory is the ante choir, a room where the nuns kneel and pray before it is time for them to process into the choir to say the Divine Office. The grate or grille (the terms are interchangeable) is the iron screen of horizontal and vertical bars, which separates the chapel where the laity heard Mass, from the choir, which is the nuns' part of the church. In pre Vatican II days the rules about the grate were very precise to the extent that you were not meant to be able to get your hand through one of the squares! Vatican II requested the community to change the antique aspects of enclosure and now in most carmels the grille is modified so that it is more decorative and serves as a symbol of the community's enclosure.



## Day-Trippers

The Bishop of Southwark, who at this time was Bishop Danell, expressed a desire that every opportunity should be given to the public to investigate the new convent before it was enclosed. So the foreman was told to give the crowds full liberty. In this way, the Bishop hoped to lessen the Protestant prejudice, which was very strong at that time. Therefore, nearing completion the public was given the opportunity to view the convent. Hundreds of people came to see the convent, extra coaches being run from Brighton on Sundays and holidays. The sightseers were usually curious to see the 'prison cell.' Among them were the daughters of the Bishop of Chichester, who declared that the refectory would make an excellent ballroom. On the other hand, the footwear of the trippers spoiled the floors, to the foreman's disgust, and all those on the ground floor had to be planed again.

## 1872 - Moving In

Father Gravey who had accompanied the nuns from France stocked the gardens with fruit trees (peaches, plums, apples and pears) and vegetable plants all of which were imported from France. The gardener from Mundham House asked to work at the convent and he lived in The Bothy, found in the western section of the perimeter wall. Very soon afterwards he asked to be received into the Church, and after thorough instruction by Canon Walker, he was received in the convent chapel, the nuns assisting behind the grate.

The bell from Valognes, bearing the name of Terese Camille (de Soyecourt) was sent over to Chichester and hung in the new belfry. This was the last item to be transferred, and Beaulieu was sold to the Sisters of Charity.

By April 1872 the convent was finished and considered dry enough. The first member of the community to enter the enclosure was Sister Anne Teresa, one of the two young French sisters. She died suddenly in March at Mundham House and was brought to the convent, the first to be buried in the new cemetery. The local paper had a paragraph on the event.

*'On the afternoon of Wednesday last considerable attention was attracted by the funeral of a nun of the Carmelite Order at the new convent near Chichester. A description of the building appeared in the West Sussex Gazette a few weeks ago. A young French lady, Leah Levionnais about 30 years of age had recently died at the abode of the nuns at North Mundham and it was decided that the place of interment should be within the enclosed ground of the convent, and in that portion of ground to be consecrated as a cemetery, and adjacent to the spot on which the convent chapel will be erected. Mr. Denmark, manager of the convent works was among the mourners.'*



**Cemetery and public chapel**

The nuns took possession of the convent on 28th April 1872 and the first Mass was said on 4th May.

One interesting feature in the entrance hall is the circular turn. The shelves rotate to distribute alms whilst maintaining the enclosed order. Other examples of 'turns' are in the chapel outbuildings where a 'through' drawer can also be seen.

### 1930 – Chapel Added

The building remained unchanged for sixty years until, on the strength of a generous legacy, the beautiful little church was built in 1930, under the direction of the architect, Mr. Sebastian Pugin-Pewell, grandson of the famous Augustus Welby Pugin.

The dates could be seen on the downpipe hoppers from the garden. The next alteration was to add second floor rooms in the early 1970s to provide additional space for visitors. The numbers of the community were increased in 1973 by amalgamation with the Carmelite community of Cambridge, which made a flourishing total of 26.



**Chapel reredos and altar**



**External chapel**



**Paschal candle & grille**

## Making altar breads

To help become self-sufficient the nuns made altar breads that they sold throughout the country. To move with the times they built an extension to the kitchen wing in 1985 enabling a much larger machine to be used.

The nuns would also sponsor a child for First Holy Communion at the local St Richard's School. The nuns produced all of the First Holy Communion certificates in wonderful copperplate handwriting.



**Sister Mary Joseph**



**Making altar breads**

## 1990s - Planning for the Future

By the early 1990s, because of their diminishing numbers, the nuns found the convent too large for their needs. Also major repairs were needed, therefore Sister Mary Augustine and the nuns knew that some radical decision would have to be made about their future. It was an anxious time, calling for much prayer and openness to God's will, and for many months it seemed impossible to see any way forward. Then at the moment when, humanly speaking, things seemed darkest, Providence intervened, and through the President of the Association of British Carmels, the community was put in contact with an existing one at Sclerder Abbey, near Looe in Cornwall. After many exchange visits it became clear to both communities that they would make a good match, and before long plans were set in motion to adapt the monastery at Sclerder to house the larger combined community: to build an extension to provide the extra monastic cells needed and a new complex to house the automatic altar-bread baking machine from Chichester.



**Sister Mary Augustine  
(later Sister Mary Helen)**

## 1994 - Leaving Chichester

The year 1994 was a very busy one for both Sclerder and Chichester carmels. Sclerder had the upheaval and disruption of builders and carpenters who extended the refectory and adapted the choir, putting in extra choir stalls from Chichester. Chichester faced the mammoth task of disposing of the contents of their huge convent, some of which had to be packed and transported to Sclerder, the remainder auctioned or given away. Then there was the hazardous business of putting the property on the market.

The beautiful silver and ebony tabernacle from the foundation went to Rome and is now in the chapel of the Teresianum, the international house of Carmelite studies connected with the Generalate of the Discalced Carmelites.

The sale of the house had a very difficult passage, fraught with many complications and setbacks, but it was finally successfully completed on the 10th December. The purchase price was a mere snip at £650,000. The prioress Sister Mary Augustine said the decision to sell 'was a very hard one to make'. She went on to say, 'We've been bowled over by the publicity, it certainly wasn't solicited'.



**Bishop Fox saying a last Mass**

## Mass of Thanksgiving

A Mass of Thanksgiving for the life of prayer and witness of the convent was said at St Richard's Church, Chichester on the 4th May 1994 by the Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, Cormac Murphy O'Connor. This was the anniversary of the first Mass said at the convent, one hundred and twenty years previously.

The Bishop gave permission for the community to leave the convent for the short journey to St Richard's Church to join him, dozens of priests from the diocese and hundreds of friends and parishioners, for the Mass. Although they had prayed constantly for the parish, heard all the news and seen many pictures, this was the first time they had seen their parish church, built in 1958. The prioress, Mother Mary Augustine explained,

'We are a closed order because we have chosen to place a little distance between ourselves and the world.'

During the Mass the Bishop expressed his sorrow that the sisters needed to move to other convents, but stressed that this was also a time of thanksgiving for the tremendous witness that they had faithfully given over the years. After the Mass, everyone gathered in the nearby school hall for tea and the chance to have a chat with the sisters.



St Richard's School, before Farewell Mass



Arriving at St Richard's for the first time



Farewell Mass at St Richard's



With Bishop Cormac Murphy O'Connor

## Moving to Schlerder, and beyond

On the 8th September, Our Lady's birthday, six sisters travelled from Sussex to their new home at Schlerder, Cornwall. Three others, Sr Mary Augustine, Sr Mary Clare and Sr Teresa Francis, were obliged to remain until the sale of the house was completed. Canon Giffin from the Witterings parish came every day to say Mass for the three of them. Just before Christmas they were able to join their sisters at Schlerder, since when they rapidly became one united community.

After two years at Schlerder, two of the community, Sister Mary Augustine, the former prioress, then known as Sister Mary Helen, and Sister Teresa Francis transferred to the Carmelite Monastery in Terre Haute U.S.A. Sister Mary Clare went straight to Terre Haute at the closure of the Chichester Carmel. Three other sisters transferred to different carmels in the British Isles: Sr Catherine to York Carmel. Sr Mary Elizabeth transferred to the Dumbarton Carmel in Scotland. However, because she had suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for a

number of years, she had unfortunately become handicapped and moved into a convent nursing home nearby. Sr Mary Teresa went to Falkirk Carmel, Scotland. Those who transferred to Schlerder were:

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



Conclusion of the sale



Sister Mary John



Sister Mary Carmel



Leaving the convent, September 1994



Although Carmelite life is the same everywhere, in that it is a life of continual prayer and total dedication to God, yet each carmel has its own tradition. Sclerder now has a remarkable blending of two very rich traditions. Sclerder Carmel itself was founded comparatively recently from the well-known Carmel of Quidenham in Norfolk, in 1981.

Sclerder Carmel began a new phase of its history, old and new members being bonded as one family. There was no question of the 'old wine' being better than the new, or vice versa; everything was shared: the past, present and the future, which is always in God's hands. They were united in their desire to be one with the local Catholic community in its mission to bear witness to Christ, by a life of prayer and dedication.

As for the Hunston convent, this was initially converted into two bedded and four bedded accommodation used for housing farm workers who earn their living by picking lettuce and other produce from the local farms for sale in the city and county supermarkets.

### Statue returns to Sussex

Canon Peter Giffin, parish priest in the Witterings, often used to visit the convent to say Mass and to give talks. When the Carmelites transferred to Cornwall, Canon Giffin maintained his contact with them. Every year in September, he would take a break from his duties in the Wittering and holiday in Cornwall where he would have a happy time renewing his acquaintance with the nuns. Again he would say Mass for them and give talks. The happy arrangement also allowed the nuns to catch up on all the gossip from Chichester.

When the nuns left Chichester, they took with them a wonderful statue of St Thérèse of Lisieux. As they reduced in number by the ravages of aging, because Canon Giffin spent so many happy holidays at Sclerder, following his death the Carmelites eventually decided that it was fitting for the statue to return to Sussex to be housed in Canon Giffin's favourite church and home in the Witterings. The statue of St Thérèse of Lisieux is now situated in the rear corner of St Peter's Church.



**Statue of St Thérèse of Lisieux, now in St Peter's**

### 2009 - Arson Attack



**Fire in the chapel**

A sad new episode in the Convent's history occurred with the destruction of the Chapel by fire on Sunday 28 June 2009. The Fire Service was quickly on the scene, in force.

It is believed that serial arsonists may have been responsible. Photos and [video](#) were taken by the West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service.

Geoffrey Breeze elicited further details as follows:

Almost one hundred fire-fighters from West Sussex and Hampshire tackled the blaze.

West Sussex Fire & Rescue Service was called to the site at 8:10pm when fire was spotted coming from the roof of the chapel. A fire crew from Chichester had just been dealing with another incident nearby and so arrived on scene in just two minutes. They found a rapidly developing fire in the Chapel and quickly arranged for the number of fire engines attending to be increased to ten, plus an Aerial Ladder Platform (ALP) for tackling the blaze from above using a water monitor. The number was increased to fifteen a short time later and a second ALP.

Debris was falling from the roof of the Chapel and firefighting had to be carried out from the safety of doorway as efforts were concentrated on trying to stop the fire spreading into the main part of the building. A Water Carrier was used to provide water for firefighting, and water was also pumped from the nearby lakes.

A total of 44 fire-fighters wore breathing apparatus to tackle the fire from inside and create a firebreak, stopping it spreading to the main accommodation block by using 6 jets and monitors.

The premises were not derelict, but had not been occupied for about one year. There were no reports of any injuries to members of the public, although one firefighter was treated for heat exhaustion. During the incident, the main road outside the convent was closed between the A27 Whyke roundabout and Hunston, with diversions being set up by police.

The cause of the fire was thought to be arson. A number of deliberate fires had been started in the Chichester area over the previous few weeks, in bins, skips, empty buildings and vehicles. The reason that the Fire Service arrived so quickly, within two minutes, is that they had been dealing with a car which had been deliberately set on fire just to the south of the convent, half an hour before.

The police requested information from members of the public and a £500 reward was offered to anyone who could provide information leading to an arrest and conviction in connection with the fires.

*The information in this article has been obtained from the various Carmelite archives held at Sclerder Abbey and the Terre Haute Convent in the USA. The author gratefully acknowledges the help of the Carmelite communities at both of these establishments.*

*Geoff Breeze, April 2004 and Summer 2009*

## **2015-2017 - Chichester Free School**

By 2015, the Convent was derelict but [Chichester Free School](#) acquired the Convent and its grounds and rebuilt it as a permanent site for the school. Details in the [Chichester Observer](#).