



Anderson, R. (2016) 'The visitation records of the English Benedictine Monastery of the Glorious Assumption of Our Blessed Lady.' *Gender, Power and Materiality in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*. University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK. 7-9 April 2016.

Unpublished conference notes.

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The Visitation Records of the English Benedictine Monastery of the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady.

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This paper is part of a large work in progress based on previously unseen material from the Haslemere collection at Downside Abbey. ¹ The main sources consist of approximately 28 boxes of loose, mainly unsorted, documents, kept in the archives of the Abbey. This collection contains the profession lists; obituaries; financial and legal documents; histories and other documents which demonstrate the social, cultural and religious activities of the nuns of the English Benedictine Monastery of the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady between foundation in 1597 and suppression in 1976.

Nunneries were quite often under the protection or oversight of some other ecclesiastical institution, and these held their own visitations. However, the Brussels Dames, as they became known, were under the jurisdiction of the local bishop, and so, as part of my current project, my paper will examine one aspect of this major collection: the extant visitation records: the 'Book of Bishops Visitations from 1794 to 1878 with names of Religious and Officials' and 'Acts of visitation (East Bergholt) 1922-39'. ² The Visitation returns place in stark relief the intersection of gender, power, and materiality in these institutions. The records catalogue, for example, individual items that nuns held in safekeeping. These items undoubtedly had significance for these women and represented their interaction with the world of material culture. Yet at the same time, the nuns were accountable, as religious women, to a gendered ecclesiastical hierarchy which scrutinized these possessions.

When the Benedictine Dames of the Monastery of the Glorious Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Brussels, evacuated to England in 1794 they came under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Winchester and liable for Visitations.

¹ I am deeply indebted to the community at Downside Abbey for access to the Haslemere Collection.

² 3134 V.I.C and 3136 V.I.C

Visitations have had a long history in the Church existing in some form since that time of the early Christians. In general Benedictine monasteries are autonomous, and although most of them belonged to a monastic congregation, such a body was only a loosely organised association for mutual assistance. It does not often impinge upon the daily life of its member monasteries. In the case of the Monastery of the Glorious Assumption the exception to this was the Visitation, when the Bishop, and latterly, an abbot or monk from a Benedictine house, came to examine the life of the nuns. It provided an opportunity to revise the Constitutions, clothe and profess nuns, suggest changes that should be made, and sanctions that should be imposed to bring the Order back in-line with the Rule. However, the Visitations were intended, in general, to pick up on problems, only rarely does the Visitation record begin with an outline of what was done well.

In Brussels the Community was under the Episcopal care of the Archbishop of Mechelen. During his 1620 visitation, Matthais Hovius, reminded the nuns of the importance of religious services and appropriate silence, and warned against the nun's proclivity for entertaining visitors in the parlour and even within the enclosure. The Archbishop cautioned the Community against socialising with both clerical and lay friends at the grille or allowing them to dine at the convent. This, he considered, was a source of distraction and potentially damaging to the Monastery's reputation.³ The warning does not appear to have been taken seriously—just three years later, Dame Anne Ingleby complained that guests in the enclosure had brought, 'much vanity and distraction in to our house'.⁴

The Community received their first Visitation, in Winchester, from Bishop John Douglass, Bishop of Centuria, Vicar Apostolic of the London District, when he came to bless the nuns' chapel on 25th September, 1794. The Visitation Report provided,

an explanation of certain points in the Statutes of the Religious Dames of the late Convent of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Brussels by the Right Reverend Father in God John Douglass, Bishop of Centuria, Vicar Apostolic of the

³ AAM, Mechliniensia, 10th May, 1620.

⁴ Anne Ingleby to Jacob Boosen, AAM, Fonds Kloosters, Englese Benedictijnen/12 (1623)

London District, and Superior of the said Community now settled in the House of the said Bishop in the City of Winchester.

Further it contained a note informing the Community that these 'Explanations only to be held good for the present time, and present circumstances.'

At this time Douglass saw each nun in turn —14 choir nuns, 5 lay sisters, and 4 novices — and, with Dr Milner present, he assembled the whole Community

in order to consider what points of the Statutes it would be necessary to alter or modify; the Customs of the Country, especially being now a Protestant Country, required some alterations - changes were therefore made, even on essential points, such as the rules of Inclosure, in regard to admitting Seculars inside the Monastery, in order to do away with the prejudice and ignorance in which the people in England had been brought up to regard Religions and monasteries in general. The *Horarium* was changed - rising in the night was to be discontinued.⁵

One thing that is stressed repeatedly is that 'no stranger' may see a single Religious, two must always attend and that no strangers' male servants should visit the kitchen. At the same Visitation referring to Chapter 8, Verse 11 of the Constitutions, the nuns are excused from 'sleeping in clothes'. And again, relating to Chapter 4, Verse 11 they were now allowed to walk in the gardens alone. These may seem like minor amendments, but they do show that following their arrival in England, certain changes were necessary to allow them to fit more easily into their new surroundings. Other minor changes were made to the Constitution at this time, for example, the 'Bishop gave leave for the Converse Sisters to have curtains to their beds, which was not formerly the custom'. Another minor amendment allowed that on days of abstinence, the nuns could have their Greens dressed with fat in place of butter; Bishop Griffiths, however, rescinded this luxury, in 1836!

This was still a time of the Test Act and penal laws and there were constant fears amongst the Community that they would fall foul of the law and also attract the attention of anti-Catholic sympathisers in Winchester. In light of this, the nuns were given permission for

⁵ *Horarium*, Latin for 'the hours' is the name given to the schedule lived out by those in religious communities.

any of the lay and out sisters to wear 'civilian' clothes, and, following the 1810 Visitation, we find Bishop William Poynter writing to the Abbess that,

For certain just and proper reasons which your Ladyship and myself have duly weighed, I hereby direct that the Person who attends the door, as Porteress, in your house, should not after the end of this present month appear at the door in the dress of a Religious of your Community.

In 1811, Poynter again visited and this time prohibited the admission of newspapers to the monastery!

During the years at Winchester there appears to have been little or no controversy, so that of the fourteen recorded visitations, we find that most only re-avowed the recommendations of the previous visitation and in some cases did this without actually making a visitation.

However, this was changed by the 9th Visitation, 3rd August, 1853, after which the Bishop, Thomas Grant, recommended a Book of Visitations in which was to be inserted:

- The names of all Visitors
- A transcription, in chronological order, of the papers of all past visitations
- Names of Religious etc. at the Visitation
- Names of Religious at future visitations
- Acts of Visit

After this, the Visitation records become more telling of the condition of the Monastery and the Community therein.

In 1848 when Nicholas Wiseman made his Visitation he found that no sooner had he arrived than,

the pious and venerable Lady Abbess, [Lady Benedict MacDonald] of your house, of her own free will and full accord, signified unto us her earnest desire to be forthwith relieved of the heavy burthen of the government and administration thereof, on account of her great age and growing infirmities. [43 years]

And,

deeming this to be a matter of the greatest importance and worthy to be before all others entertained, but not to be decided without mature deliberation, and consideration had thereof, we proceeded to call before us separately each and every of the Religious and took her opinion thereon.

He was able to confirm the election of Dame Aloysia Brenan as Prioress, 'declaring her constituted, Prioress extraordinary and Superior of the Benedictine Convent at Winchester'. On 26th February, 1851, she was elected 16th Abbess and oversaw the move from Winchester to East Bergholt in 1857.

Following his 1852 visitation, the Right Reverend Dr. Grant enjoined the Lady Abbess to ensure silence was kept during meals in the Infirmary – obviously the sick nuns were too chatty. In 1853, it was confirmed that a Chapter of faults should be held once a week and that the nuns should renew their vows annually. As to visits by family and friends when they came to Winchester, they might see the Nuns between the hours 9 and 11 – 1 and 3 – 5 and 7. If they only remained a day or two, or came very seldom, the Superior had discretionary power to allow them to see the Nuns for a longer time.

Following the Visitation of 24th May, 1855, at which the Abbess petitioned for permission to use an abbatial crozier, Bishop Thomas Grant was happy to inform Lady Aloysia that the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda had written on 29th August 1855, 'Your question being proposed with respect to the use of the Crozier by the Abbess of the Benedictines of Winchester, the Sacred Congregation of Rites decided that in the case proposed the use may be tolerated on account of the very ancient and perhaps immemorial custom on which it rests.' The original crozier was one of the items which was lost to French Revolution.

IMAGE: LADY ALOYSIA WITH THE CROZIER

After the death of Lady Aloysia, a monument had been erected to her memory. However, the 1878 Visitation qualified this by advising the Community that, 'The Monumental Cross which is erected for Lady Mary Aloysia Brenan by permission of the Bishop is the offering of her own funds, not the act of the Community, and is not to serve as a precedent for future Abbesses'.

The Community was visited on 24 occasions in its 88 years at East Bergholt. Despite meeting each time with all the community, most of the Visitation Book entries only list the names and offices of the religious, give permission for mundane things and reinforce episcopal or papal instructions. However, following his first Visitation to the Benedictines the report from Bishop Amherst, Bishop of Northampton, advised the community that he wished the Enclosure to be gradually promoted, but giving Lady Abbess a discretionary power on how and when this should be imposed. After the freedom the situation at Winchester allowed the community, it is noted that most were looking forward to rigid enclosure again. The installation of the grilles is discussed at great length in both the Visitation records and the Annals.

In 1871 the Bishop gave leave for the Religious to wear a silver ring as a sign of their marriage to Christ, whilst in May, 1891, we find that Bishop Riddell had taken the decision that S. Martina, an out-sister, should leave; the reason given was that she showed no real sign of a vocation. She subsequently became a lay-sister at Fort Augustus. At the close of the Visitation the nuns accompanied the Bishop to the cemetery, and round the grounds. It was on this occasion that he granted an indulgence of 40 days to anyone who should say devoutly three Hail Marys before Our Lady's statue on the lawn.

Image: Plan of the Statue

One Visitation which demonstrates the seriousness of the vow of poverty taken by the Nuns is that by Dom Aelred Kindersley, Abbot of Belmont, in October 1924 in which Item 4 demands that 'in order that the spirit of Poverty may be the better fostered, we ordain that no one should hold any money either in her own possession or in the hands of the Monastery, or any goods as her own, but that all things must be in common and held for the common good. To this end we also ordain that on a day fixed on by the Lady Abbess, all books borrowed from the Library be returned and be left in the Library for the space of two

full days. After that period, they may again be taken out according to the Rules and Regulations laid down for the borrowing of books'.

In the thirty years the Community remained at Haslemere only one visitation is recorded in the Visitation Book.

The Order of the Visitation, from Haslemere, found in the Archive gives us an insight to the importance placed on these visitations. The visit began with a ceremonial entrance in which the Chaplain, as representative of the Abbess and Community met the visitor and his secretary at the outside door of the Cloister leading to the Church. Here he was vested with the Cope of the colour of the day, and provided with a Cross-bearer and Acolyte, if possible. If not, a server carried the Thurible. At the entrance to the Church they were offered the Crucifix, which, kneeling, they kissed. The Chaplain then offered the aspersion to the Visitor who aspersed himself and his Secretary. After blessing the incense the Chaplain then sensed both the Visitor and the Secretary, and the Cantor then commenced the *Te Deum*. The Chaplain and Servers, followed by the Visitor and Secretary moved to the altar – the visitor in the centre with the Chaplain on his right and the Secretary, the left. When the *Te Deum* was completed the Visitor sang the Versicles and two prayers, after which the Chaplain and any servers retired; the Visitor then intoned the *Veni Creator*, the customary Versicles and prayers were said and the opening address given.

Once this opening ceremonial was complete the Visitor gave the Instruction on the purpose of the Visitation. He then appointed, after consultation with the Lady Abbess,

- Two of the Community to examine the Books of Accounts with the Rev Secretary
- Two others to make a list of 'Precious Goods', two copies of which were required
- A Sister to call each one in turn to see the Visitor.

Amongst the Visitation papers there is a small collection of records, which list the individual items that nuns held in safekeeping at the time of any specific Visitation. These were presented to the Visitor, and all are completed in the same format:

1. The usual allowance of Cell furniture, shoes and clothing
2. Any extras – glasses, pens, watch, clock, rosaries, medal, holy pictures
3. Books for constant use
4. Borrowed from the Library

Image: Dame Mary Ida Barinou's List

The first Visitation following their admission into the EBC was confirmed by an edict signed by the Abbot President, Dom Edmund Kelly, which ordered that so that, 'no one may plead ignorance of the Visitation, We order this Our Edict to be promulgated in Chapter and then to be affixed to the door of the Chapter-room.' A follow-up letter from Dom Cuthbert Butler, of Downside Abbey, dated 16th September, 1933, notes that the 'Chapter desired that the Visitation be a full Canonical Visitation according to our Constitutions'. The letter goes on, 'in regard to the *Memoriale Paupertatis* [**Poverty Bill**], in the matter of clothing it is enough to say: Habits (so many) and in general 'regulation underclothing', without specifying articles.'⁶

The Monastery was, on occasions a site of controversy and at times the nuns who lived there were plagued with scandal or were caught breaching the code of the Rule of St. Benedict. A specific example from the records, that of 1962 at Haslemere, suggests that some activities occurring at the Abbey were unsuitable for religious life. The Bishop, Cyril Conrad Cowderoy, made suggestions of things to improve and suggested that the Abbey was not behaving as expected, for example:

1. We found undeniable evidence that special and unregulated friendships are responsible for much unhappiness, Jealousy and a lack of religious spirit

⁶ Visitations, VI. C xxxx

2. There seems a lot of gossip and the rule of silence is not properly kept.
3. It is alleged that there is unfair lobbying and pressure before voting in Chapter, and recrimination and discussions afterwards.
4. It is alleged that certain members of the Community have a far greater freedom than the rest in the reception of books and parcels, even parcels of food. It is also alleged that there is defect in the observance of the vow of poverty, and that one member of the Community retains and administers her own money and uses her own cheque-book.
5. In general the religious observance seems fair enough, but it is alleged that some Sisters rarely visit the chapel during the day, and that conduct in choir is often wanting in reverence.
6. We feel that certain Sisters are inclined to discuss the affairs of the Monastery with persons outside and accept conclusions under such influence....
7. This seems to be much uninstructed comment on the canonical in the validity of the novitiate of one of the choir sisters. This is the unfortunate result of persons with little knowledge making unhesitating judgements in a case which is much needed consideration, and further it was another case of accepting direction and advice from without the cloister which was given without due authority....
8. Is alleged that there is a great lack of charity and consideration towards the lay sisters by certain of the choir sisters and an absurd sort of class distinction. We feel there may well be some foundation for this compline, although there could be some slight exaggeration. In general the lay sisters made a fairly good impression on us and they seemed to be less jealousy and dissension among them than among the choir sisters.

However, not all visitations were episcopal. In 1909, following the publication of a book written by the former nun, Mary Maurus Moulton, the so-called 'Escaped Nun', the Community arranged for a visitation by a J.P., the local vicar at Manningtree who was a barrister and William Sydney Calvert, the Lord of the Manors, to examine whether the claims made about life at the Abbey were as described by Miss Moulton.

The report, published after the visit on 30th October 1909 read:

Going at an hour arranged by ourselves we were received at once by the Lady Abbess and her secretary and were shown over the entire establishment. We were allowed to converse freely with any of the nuns apart from the presence of superiors, and were struck with the expressions of contentment and happiness used by all whom we addressed in talking of their daily life. None of them used any words of complaint or discontent, and many said that to nothing would persuade them to give up their profession. We were much impressed by the order, cleanliness and appearance comfort that pervaded the whole house.

Among other departments we were conducted to the Store house and the kitchen where we saw the food in preparation for the mid day meal.

Being an abstinent day (all Saints Eve) the food consisted of fish and pudding which was both good in quality and abundant in quantity.

From personal inspection we were satisfied that the sleeping arrangements were both good and comfortable and very clean. Books were allowed to be taken from the Library to the cells for private reading during spare hours.

The grounds surrounding the house were also visited by us and we were satisfied that if any nun really desired to escape an easy exit could be found in various directions. The whole house is well warmed by hot water pipes and well lighted by petrol gas.

The discipline appeared to us to be fairly strict but not more so than is necessary to maintain order.

In fine, after a lengthened investigation we could find no foundation for the charges made in the book published under the title of 'The Escaped Nun'.

(Signed.)

Thos. Robertson, J. P.

W. S. Calvert, Lord of the Manors.

E. A. Ley, Vicar of Manningtree and Barrister at Law

Clearly these gentlemen were happy with the conditions in which the Community lived and felt that the accusations of the 'Escaped Nun' were rather exaggerated.