

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

The Cistercians

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1881-82, Vol. 6, 80-87

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THE CISTERCIANS.

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WE meet as a Society to-day within the noble ruins of a *Cistercian Abbey*, and these venerable remains speak to us with eloquent voice of the character and force of a particular form of monastic life, in the day of its power. The stone is left to cry out of the wall, though the beam out of the timber is no longer here to answer it. True archæologists cannot rest satisfied with an examination of, and admiration for, the beauties of such a ruin as this, without striving to understand and recall that Spirit of the Age which caused such a building to be raised.

The older writers on monastic life love to trace back all its manifold developements and strange varieties to one or other of the *Four Rules* concerning religious community life, which still remain to us as they were written by *S. Basil S. Augustine, S. Benedict* and *S. Francis of Assisi*.

The Cistercian Order sprang out of the Benedictine, and is reckoned a reform of the Benedictine Order; *i.e.*, an attempt to return to the original strictness of S. Benedict's own Rule. Benedict died about 543, having lived 14 years in the Monastery which he founded at Mount Cassino. It can be no wonder to us that in the course of 400 years his disciples lost something of the original fervour which had enabled them to lead that austere life which their Master had laid down for them in his Rule. That Rule commences with the famous words;—“*Listen, my son, to the precepts of your Master.* [*Ausculta O fili, precepta magistri, &c.*] and the founder of the Cistercian Order, Robert, Abbot of the Benedictine House of Molesme in Burgundy, used these words as a text, when he tried to call back those who were Benedictines by profession to the exact practice of the simple and severe Rule which their Founder had intended them to follow, but which his degenerate sons had modified, as centuries passed on, to suit their own tastes, or the ways of the world.

The date of the commencement of the Cistercian Order is 1098, and Abbot Robert was ably assisted in his work of reformation by two other monks of Molesme, *Alberic* and *Stephen Harding*. In due time Alberic became the 2nd Abbot and Stephen Harding the 3rd Abbot of the new order. This Stephen Harding was an Englishman, and a west countryman, being a native of Sherborne. His ability was great, his zeal untiring, and his influence in moulding the new society scarcely inferior to that of Abbot Robert; indeed he is, by some, reckoned the principal founder. It is Stephen Harding's "*Carta Caritatis*," or Charter of Love, which lays down in detail the code of Statutes binding on all Cistercian Abbeys, then and in later times. The date of this code is 1119. This English influence in the founding of an Order which sprang out of a French Abbey has a special interest for archæologists, for it had been ingeniously suggested that Stephen Harding was the cause of the Cistercians adopting always the *square* east end to their churches, "at a time when almost all choirs in France were built with circular, octagonal, or polygonal apses, with ambulatories and radiating chapels." Certainly, the simple and severe character of the new Cistercian rule seems well expressed by the simpler and sterner form of square ended churches, such as Stephen Harding was used to in his mother country.

Like reformers in all ages, the first little band of Cistercians met with many difficulties, and with vehement opposition from those who hated to be reformed; but they succeeded in founding the mother house of the new Order at Citeaux or Cistercium,—the first Abbey giving the name to the order. In ten or twelve years they were joined by the illustrious S. Bernard, who founded a new house at *Clairvaux*, and who was the means of raising the order to great renown throughout Christendom. S. Bernard is indeed reckoned a second Founder, and Cistercians are sometimes called Bernardines.

In less than a century the Cistercians had nearly 2000 Abbeys in Europe. They assumed a white habit, in contrast with the black gown of the Benedictines, and so were popularly called "White Monks." Their houses were all termed Abbeys to secure "individual independence and equal rank," and their churches were

all dedicated to St. Mary; consequently we find no Lady Chapels attached to them. Unlike the Benedictine Abbeys which were of independent foundation, the English Houses of Cistercians all traced their origin to the parent French Houses; as Beaulieu and Netley to *Cîteaux*:—Fountains and Rievaulx to *Clairvaux*; Waverley, Ford, and Tintern to *L'Aumone*.

When a new site was to be occupied, an abbot and 12 Monks (symbolical of our Lord and His Apostles) were sent out to found the new colony. Alberic, the second Abbot of Cîteaux, established Cistercian Nunneries; and so greatly did this stern and silent Rule commend itself to the gentler sex in the 12th century, that 40 Polish princesses are said to have become Cistercian Nuns at Trebritz in Silesia.

The first Cisterian Abbey in England was that at Waverley, founded in 1128. Furness was probably the second, and Tintern the third; but the great Yorkshire Abbeys of Fountains and Rievaulx were founded about the same time: as also was the small Abbey of *Grace Dieu* in this county (Monmouthshire) by John de Monmouth. Henry III.¹ gave to this house at Grace Dieu the Hermitage of St. Briavel, in the Forest of Dene, to maintain a chantry of two monks. At the Dissolution of the religious houses there were over 100 in England of the Cistercian Order; of these 75 were among the *greater* monasteries, and 26 were nunneries. There were also sundry smaller houses attached as *Cells* to the larger Abbeys. In Gloucestershire we had the Abbey of Hayles, and the Abbey of Flaxley in Dene Forest.

Hayles was founded by Richard, King of the Romans, in 1242, as a thankoffering for preservation from shipwreck. A tower, part of the cloister, and barn remain (so says Walcott). There were 21 monks. The Abbot of Hayles was mitred and summoned to parliament. At the dissolution the commissioners reported well of the community to Thomas Cromwell. They wrote: "We found the father and all his brethren very honest and conformable persons, and the house clerely *owt of debt*." The attractive nature of the spoil made them feel in a good temper.

¹ The Charter is dated at Westminster, 9th February, 1224-5.—Ed.

Flaxley is said to have been founded by Roger, Earl of Hereford, in the time of Stephen, on the site where his brother was killed; but this is scarcely probable. There were nine monks. A large hall with two or three other rooms remain.¹ Flaxley had a Cell at Regill, on Broadwell Down, in the parish of Nemnet, or Nempnett (Somersetshire), six miles from Bristol.

The Abbey of Dore in Herefordshire was another famous Cistercian house, founded in the reign of Henry I., by Robert, lord of Ewias Harold.

In Cistercian Houses the number of monks seems to us very small. In the noble Abbey of Tintern we are told there were only 13 besides the Abbot at the time of the Dissolution. But we must bear in mind that the monks formed only a very small part of the religious community which had to be provided for in the monastic buildings, and within this grand church. The *Conversi*, or Lay-brothers, were far more numerous than the monks proper. At Clairvaux, it is said there were 350 *Conversi*. At Fountains, Mr. Sharpe found sufficient accommodation for some 200. The small body of Cistercian Monks were the men of culture, who managed the house and land. They were the Masters or Farmers. The crowd of lay-brothers were mostly illiterate, and taken from the lowest classes of the people. They were the servants and farm labourers. Yet all formed *one family*, with common interests, and common pursuits. The Cistercian gloried in the dignity of labour. He worked with his hands the thing that is good, that he might have to give to him that needeth.

The Cistercian Order was essentially a poor man's Order. Here he got a labouring man's rough hard fare, but here he had a peaceful home, and found in it true Fraternity:—aye, and, in a good sense, Liberty and Equality also. The Cistercian Abbey was a House of Work, and hard work, too, but there was no taint of pauperism. It was free from the dangers which attended the Mendicant Orders in later days, and it was free also from the indignities of our modern work-houses. The lands of the Cistercians were the model farms of mediæval England, and even now

¹ See paper by Mr. J. H. Middleton, in Flaxley Abbey, post.

we can trace their success as farmers, as clearly as we can note their success as architects and builders. And when their Abbeys were destroyed, the Cistercian *conversi*, turned out of home, and out of work, no doubt swelled the ranks of "lusty beggars" who have been ever since one of England's curses.

It is the fact of the Cistercians having been *Farmer-monks*, and having done so good a work throughout England in promoting agriculture, and in the cultivation of waste lands, which makes this order interesting to those who have otherwise little sympathy with the ancient forms of community life. The principle of the adage, "*laborare est orare*," was thoroughly carried out by them. The lengthy choir offices required more than four hours daily for their recitation, but from the lay-brothers only such offices of devotion were required as did not interfere with the work on the monastic farms, though the *conversi* had a staircase leading direct from their great dormitory into the nave of the church,—part of which was allotted for their use,—just as the monks proper had their own staircase leading into the choir. "The Cistercian made agriculture his business, and sent the products of his lands forth for the use of the outer world." (*Rowe*)

Take another point of view, and those Cistercians,—those *Farmer-monks*,—may be taken to represent the Puritan or Quaker spirit of their day. Every age sees a school of thought which insists on the need of simplicity in externals, and of quietness and repose in daily life and work. The Cistercian Statutes ordered their monasteries to be built "in places far removed from the conversation of men." There was to be nothing in the building to "detract from the simplicity of the Order." No stone towers for bells were to be allowed, nor wooden ones of immoderate height,—(there was no tower here at Tintern.) Only one bell was to be struck at a time, thus, apparently, forbidding anything like a joyous peal. And as to interior decorations, "sculpture and pictures" were forbidden, as in some way offending against "religious gravity;" also all other "superfluities in paintings, pavements, and such-like things which sully the ancient purity of the Order, and do not agree with our Poverty." White glass was to be used for the windows, and

we can feel at once what a contrast this would be to the glories of other conventual churches. The number of candles and lights to be used was strictly limited. No doubt, as time went on, these early rules were relaxed in practice, but we still see the results of them on the architectural features of Cistercian Abbeys, "depending as they did on breadth of design, and nobility of proportion" for beauty, and so "always productive of buildings of the first order"—take for examples Rievaulx, Fountains, Byland, Kirkstall, Furness, and our own Tintern. And Mackenzie Walcott well says: "The chief charm and attraction of their buildings consists in the pure, though severe, style of the period of art in which they were mainly built, and in the sequestered nooks which they courted and turned from deserts into smiling gardens and fertile leas."

Mr. J. Arthur Reeve, in an able paper, printed in the Berkshire Archæological Society's Transactions, points out in the great Cistercian Abbey of Fountains, the same characteristics which we must notice here in Tintern, viz.: "The extreme simplicity of form in the plan and elevations of the church," and the fact that "the interior decoration of the building was equally simple." At Fountains the mural decorations were of the plainest character, merely consisting of red joint lines on a white ground, covering the surface of the walls, piers, and arches.

There is, so far, a common design followed in the arrangement of Cistercian houses, that we know where to look for the different buildings clustered round the church, and are seldom out of our calculations. Usually the monastic buildings are found *south* of the church, but when more convenient, the north side is taken, as here, and as at Buckland, Devon. The Chapter-house, rectangular, and divided into three alleys by pillars, is a Cistercian use; also, the refectory at right angles with the cloister garth; and the cloister-garth, according to Walcott,¹ usually without a cloister.

¹ English Minsters, Vol. II., p. 20.

Mr. Walcott, following previous writers, is inaccurate upon this point. It is true that the cloisters of Cistercian Abbeys have, unfortunately, to a great extent been destroyed, at least in England, but in several instances their foundations have been traced. According to the rule of the Cistercian Order, a cloister could no more be dispensed with than the Dorter could. Fine cloisters still remain at the Cistercian Abbeys of Fontenay, Vallemagne,

The peculiar Cistercian system of screens, dividing, not only the nave from the choir, and the choir from the retro-choir (where the infirm were placed), but also dividing the nave from the aisles, is well worthy of special notice. The *conversi* seem often to have occupied the aisles of the nave, the middle of the nave being left for outsiders.

When we visit the lovely valleys where the Cistercians dwelt, we are apt to say: "These old monks knew how to choose the most beautiful spots," but we forget that the beauty is in great measure the outcome of the hard work of the monks themselves; the work of many long years. They made these lovely places, and these fruitful fields. To the Cistercians more than to any other Order belongs the honour of literally fulfilling the prophetic vision. By the work of their hands, by ability in planning and directing, and by industry in execution, the Cistercian monks made the desert and solitary place to blossom as the rose.

The description of Tintern, given in Coxe's Tour in Monmouthshire, A.D. 1801, and quoted in Ellis's edition of Dugdale's Monasticon is worth recalling to memory. He says: "From the length of the nave, the height of the walls, the aspiring forms of the pointed arches, and the size of the east window which closes the perspective, the first impressions are those of grandeur and sublimity. But as these emotions subside, and we descend from the contemplation of the whole to the examination of the parts, we are no less struck with the regularity of the plan, the lightness of the architecture, and the delicacy of the ornaments; we feel that elegance is its characteristic no less than grandeur, and that the whole is a combination of the beautiful and the sublime."¹

Most of us will recall with pleasure, amid the ruins of Tintern, Wordsworth's lovely and well-known Sonnet on a Cistercian Monastery.

and Fontfroide (in France), at Brombach (in Germany), and at Vernela (in Spain), whilst at Chiaravalle, near Milan, the oldest Cistercian Monastery in Italy, having been founded by St. Bernard, good work in cloisters of early 13th century date still exists.—ED.

¹ Dugdale, Vol. V., p. 267.

*“ Here man most purely lives, less oft doth fall,
More promptly rises, walks with stricter heed,
More safely rests, dies happier, is freed
Earlier from cleansing fires, and gains withal
A brighter crown.”*¹—On yon Cistercian wall
That confident assurance may be read :
And, to like shelter, from the world have fled
Increasing multitudes. The potent call
Doubtless shall cheat full oft the heart’s desires ;
Yet, while the rugged Age on pliant knee
Vows to rapt Fancy humble fealty,
A gentler life spreads round the holy spires ;
Where’er they rise, the sylvan waste retires,
And aëry harvests crown the fertile lea.”

¹ This sentence, taken from St. Bernard, is usually inscribed, says Dr. Whittaker, in some conspicuous part of the Cistercian houses.
