

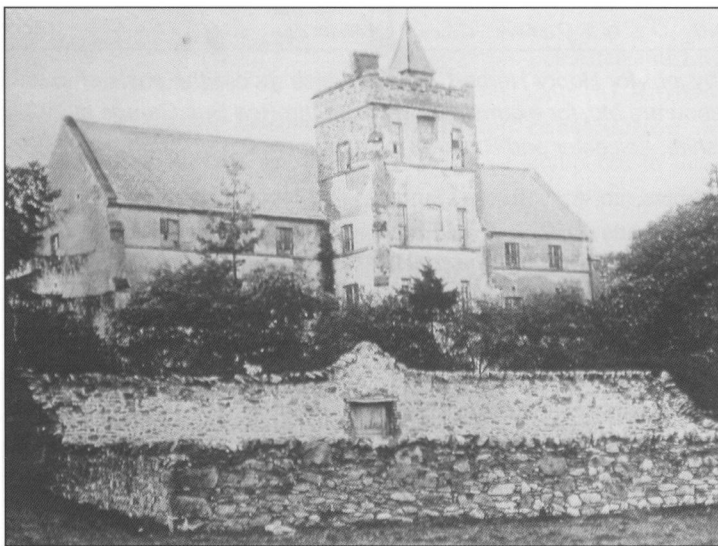
Uncovering the Facts about St Mary's Agricultural Colony, Whitwick

Maureen Havers

The gaunt grey buildings, almost derelict, on the estate of Mount St Bernard Abbey had long held a fascination for me. There was a stillness about the place that seemed different to the peace of the abbey gardens and church, but the story of the St Mary's Agricultural Colony was shrouded in mystery and myth, and it was not until I came to live in the locality that I attempted to discover the story behind this extraordinary combination of monastery and reformatory.

Basic facts were known: the Colony, also known as the Reformatory, was instituted in 1856 by the then Abbot, George Burder, for the purpose of housing and reforming the young Catholic delinquents whose demeanours were punished by incarceration in the state gaols. This was the accepted method of punishment and deterrent for all young offenders, but public opinion was in the process of demanding that separate provision should be made for young people, to avoid their further contamination by hardened offenders. Reformatories as methods not only of punishment for juveniles, but also for rehabilitation and reformation, were advocated by various individuals and philanthropic groups, and there was growing Catholic concern that religious faith and practice could not be addressed in these institutions. In response to this need, Abbot Burder decided to make use of redundant buildings on the monastery estate to provide a Catholic reformatory. Consequently, St Mary's Agricultural Reformatory was duly established amid much publicity in Catholic circles and with the approval of the Government Inspectors who would have the duty of ensuring that standards were maintained.

The proposal was not at all popular with the monastic community, but the plans were well advanced before the monks were aware of them. Almost immediately difficulties arose which caused great friction between the Abbot and the Community, and within two years of the opening of the

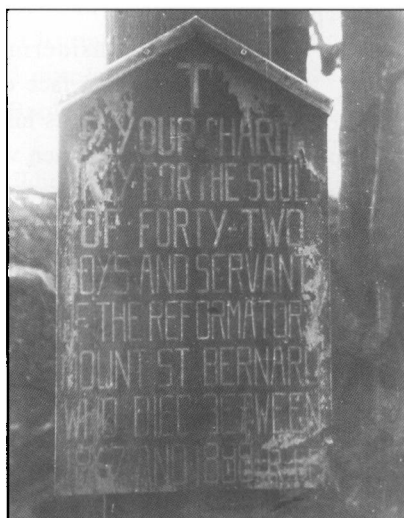


The Colony, Mount St Bernard Abbey, with Tower built by Abbot Burder.

Reformatory, Abbot Burder was required to resign and the management passed to other hands. Later, there were the infamous riots among the boys which provoked questions in Parliament, and ultimately, in 1881, the Government revoked its licence and the Reformatory was closed down.

Such were the bare bones of the story with tantalising brief additions such as a photograph of a notice board which asked for prayers for

the forty plus boys and servants who had died at the Reformatory. Also the local tale that the deaths had been caused by an outbreak of typhus (or variably, measles), and



The wooden notice board which asked for the public's prayers for the forty-two persons who had died at the Reformatory.

the knowledge that one boy had committed suicide and been buried outside the cemetery. There were the remains of buildings whose interiors gave no indication of their use in the time of the Colony. The lack of a story was perplexing especially as the great number of boys who had passed through this place had apparently left no mark, no evidence of their communal life or of their individuality.

Research for a Local History course at the University of Nottingham brought a more academic interest about the Colony and led to the Local History sections of Loughborough and Coalville Libraries, the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, and finally to the National Archives at Kew. The

information found in these places was scant, but a single line in a report hinted at a link with the Reformatory at Castle Howard which provided the comparison of both reformatories necessary for a dissertation. A Whitwick man, Arthur Robinson, offered his own collection of archives relevant to the Colony whose source he was reluctant to reveal but there were photocopies of Government Returns, handwritten details of admissions giving the names, ages and offences of some of the boys, but, again, these were scraps of information with little source value but extremely important as evidence that primary sources had, or still, existed into the twentieth century. Some of the monastery archives were made accessible but these shed only a small amount of light on what was already known.

Books fleshed out the national background to reformatories: Radzinowicz *A History of English Criminal Law Vol 1*; The Movement for Reform (1) gave chapter and verse of the evolution of juvenile punishment. This moved from incarceration in adult gaols, to transportation, towards a system entirely focussed on the child as a malleable young person capable of being retrained and reformed by kind, firm discipline into a worthy member of society. Similarly, there were books detailing the growth in Catholic confidence after the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850, which enabled the Catholic population to take upon themselves the social and educational needs of the poor in general, and of children in particular. But the particular story of St Mary's Agricultural Colony remained elusive until a new archivist at the Abbey released all the documents relating to that period and it soon became apparent why that period was regarded as a bleak time in the Abbey's history, acknowledged but best forgotten.

The first sources to be scrutinised were the letters of Abbot George Burder to Cardinal Wiseman over a period of about two years, and while these contained little specific information about the boys, they revealed the growing rift between the Abbot and his monks and much about the character of the Abbot himself. The correspondence from Wiseman is not in the Abbey archives but the gist is discernable from Burder's replies. The one hundred and thirty-two letters, each one lengthy, begin in July 1855, and the first reveals the most dominant thought in Burder's mind, that the Cistercian life was not suited to England or the English temperament. This radical view was the more challenging because George Burder was a convert from the Anglican priesthood, and had been a monk at Mount St Bernard for only seven years, and also, the Abbey itself had been in existence for a mere twenty years. That argument was to persist throughout Burder's time as Abbot, and the letters indicate the manoeuvrings he undertook to persuade and at times, bully, the community to agree to change its allegiance from the Cistercian order to the Benedictines. The

majority of the community was fiercely against the idea, but some were swayed by Burder's rhetoric, later retracting their support. It seems that this idea of transferring allegiance predated the initiation of the Reformatory, and it may have been that Burder was experiencing personal difficulties with the strict, silent, contemplative regime of the Cistercians, and hoped that an Order which combined both contemplative and active life would prove less difficult to live. In his letters he argued that the change would attract more candidates to the monastery, and be a means of personal sanctification of the monks and also of their immediate neighbours, and especially help in the 'conversion of our beloved but Protestant country'. Throughout the letters there is a sense of manipulation, of appearing to be reasonable, but always a return to his own agenda and providing more justification for his stance.

In the initial, difficult years of establishing the Reformatory, Burder presented conflicting statements about its progress. At first all is well and it is evident that he visited frequently, but within months of its opening the letters revealed problems with staffing and the monks' opposition to the Reformatory. All this, Burder again argued, could be resolved if the Abbey were to follow the Benedictine rather than Cistercian Rule, and then the Lay Brothers could justifiably be employed for the welfare of the boys. His plan

Daily timetable for the Colony boys.

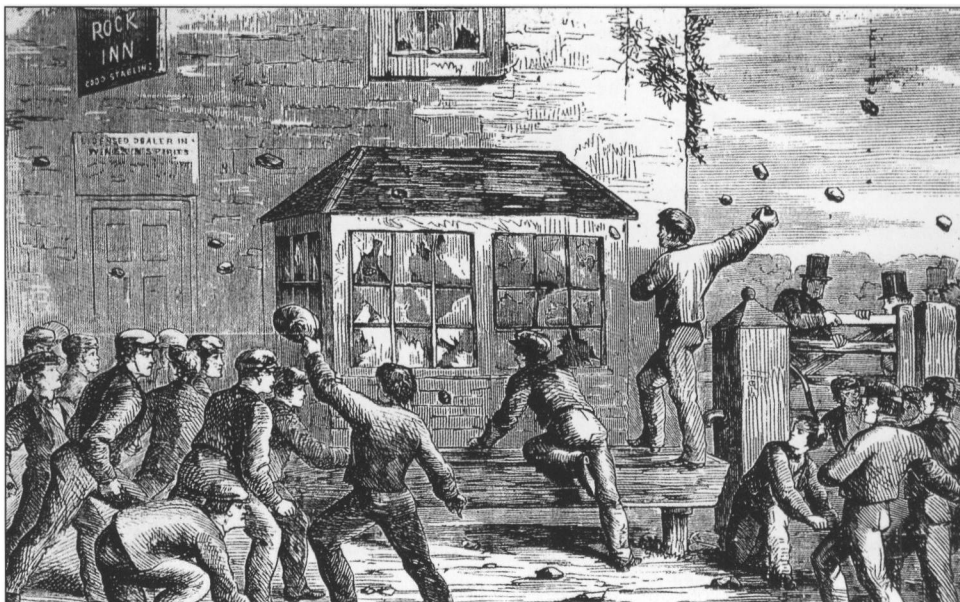
| CHAPTER II. | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| DIVISION OF EXERCISES AND TIME. | |
| SUMMER SEASON. | |
| WORKING DAYS. | SUNDAYS AND HOLIDAYS. |
| Hours A.M. | Hours A.M. |
| 5 Boys rise, wash, &c. | 6 Boys rise, wash, &c. |
| 5.30 Morning prayers in common. | 6.30 Morning prayers in common. |
| 5.45 Moral and intellectual training. | 7 They assist at Mass. |
| 6.30 Breakfast. | 8 Breakfast. |
| 6.50 Recreation. | 8.30 Recreation. |
| 7.15 Distribution of work. | 10 Sunday report. |
| 11.30 End of work. | 11 Recreation. |
| 11.45 Midday prayers. | 11.45 Midday prayers. |
| 12 <i>Angelus</i> . Dinner. | 12 <i>Angelus</i> . Dinner. |
| P.M. | P.M. |
| 12.30 Recreation. | 12.30 Recreation. |
| 1.30 Distribution of work. | 2 Catechism. |
| 5.30 End of work. Recreation. | 3 Vespers. Recreation. |
| 6 Supper. | 6 Supper. |
| 6.30 Recreation. | 6.30 Recreation. |
| 7.30 Night prayers. Singing. | 7.30 Night prayers. Sacred singing. |
| 8 Boys retire to rest. | 8 Boys retire to rest. |

to form a Third Order of Cistercians had not resulted in sufficient recruitment to meet the needs of staffing the Reformatory, and the existence of these men 'neither secular nor religious, without training, without novitiate, without vows', was another cause of dissent in the community. Of even greater concern to the community was the state of the finances at the Reformatory. There were government grants, but in a very short time the Reformatory was in debt, and it would seem that there was little or no separation of the Colony and monastery accounts.

The extent of the financial problem was never specified in the letters, but after Burder's resignation the amount of money owed was calculated to be in the region of £12,700. For a community living frugally and intent on being self-sufficient and dependent only on the goodwill of visitors for an income, the prospect of repaying this amount of money was horrendous.

Taken individually, Burder's letters have a rationality and could come from the pen of a man wanting to do what was right and best for his community, spelling out the reasons for his arguments and what great damage and scandal could result if his suggestions were not implemented, but in their entirety – and the letters were written almost daily – a pattern unfolds. Burder acknowledges what Wiseman has written to him and admits its good sense and his obedience to the Cardinal's wishes; then there is the 'but' and he embarks once more on his argument, often lapsing into personal vindictiveness about his monastery and fellow monks.

The Burder letters revealed the less than tranquil lives led by the community during the years 1855-58 but told little about the boys, whose juvenile escapades, rarely criminal acts, had caused their banishment to the wilds of Charnwood Forest. During the relevant years in the nineteenth century, someone had been sufficiently interested in



Colony boys attacking the Forest Rock public house.

the Reformatory to collect cuttings of newspaper correspondence and articles and stick them into a scrapbook, which is in the Abbey archives though its origin is not known. These were mostly undated and rarely gave the title of the newspaper, but many could be dated to the time of Abbot Burder and several of the letters were written by him. Some of these cuttings contained national information about the controversies surrounding reformatories and their value, the cost involved in keeping children in them, opinions about better alternatives such as emigration to Canada and several were comments on the perceived inadequacies of Roman Catholic Reformatories compared with those run by other organisations. These were valuable as an indication of the wider public opinion about the topic, but personal circumstances did not permit that this source could be followed up by a general search of national newspaper archives. The cuttings gave the first indications about the activities of the boys and also some unexpected glimpses

into life and death at the Reformatory. Local Leicestershire newspapers were full of graphic accounts of the riots at the Colony and these are the events which are well known and have been retold over the years.

In the early years Abbot Burder wrote about the boys' excursions, marching along the country lanes to the accompaniment of fife and drum and, on one

| INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNT—Continued. | | | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|---|------------------|--|
| No. | Date of Admission. | Offence and Previous History. | Date of Leaving. | Conduct of Boy since he left, and Present Condition. |
| 7 | Jan. 20, 1862 | Larceny—First conviction. | April 9, 1864 | Went to America with his parents; not since heard of. |
| 8 | May 21, 1861 | Begging—First conviction. | May 10, 1864 | This lad has not conducted himself well since he left. |
| 9 | Jan. 1, 1861 | Attempt to Steal.—Had been convicted once before | May 14, 1864 | Has been working steadily at his trade since his discharge. |
| 10 | Oct. 23, 1860 | Larceny—Fourth conviction. | May 14, 1864 | Going on well, working with his father a skilled artisan. |
| 11 | Dec. 22, 1859 | Larceny—First conviction | May 24, 1864 | Unknown. |
| 12 | Dec. 26, 1863 | Larceny—Second conviction. Mother dead; has a very bad father | June 7, 1864 | Re-convicted. |
| 13 | June 7, 1859 | Larceny—First conviction. | June 9, 1864 | Now in New Zealand doing very well. He paid for the passage thither of a companion in the reformatory. |
| 14 | Dec. 30, 1859 | Attempt to Steal—First conviction. | June 11, 1864 | Always a doubtful case. One of the committee obtained him twice excellent situations, but he misconducted himself, and has been re-convicted and sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment. |
| 15 | Jan. 1, 1861 | Attempt to commit Felony.—Sent here on the third conviction. This boy's mother is a brothel keeper. | July 11, 1864 | Has a very bad mother; the lad went to sea to escape the dangers of his home. His conduct in the reformatory was very good. |

Admission and discharge records for the Colony, although the data is tantalisingly anonymised.

occasion the writer invokes a picture of three hundred boys being marched from the Reformatory to fields in Wards End, Loughborough for a feast provided by local businessmen with sing-songs and sweetmeats to follow. This account provoked a terse reply from a local Vicar who thought the whole episode distasteful. But even Burder had to admit on occasion that not all was joy and delight with the boys; his recounting of the last days of John Hannon was printed in one newspaper omitting no detail of the lad's demise and his associates' reaction to it:

I came suddenly into the room the day after his death, and a beautiful sight indeed I saw, which must have rejoiced, I think, the Holy Angels. There was John, dressed in white, in the centre of the room, lying on his humble bier, the hands crossed meekly on his breast, a sweet smile on his face, and all his little Holy property arranged about his person... By the side of the white body was a group of three little boys kneeling; one of them was reading some prayers as well as he could, and the other two, with hands lifted up and their palms closed were listening and responding... It was a scene for a holy painter...

By now the work of several years had resulted in the names of about one hundred boys being amassed from various sources, but for the most part they were names only. What names were known were collated along with any minute detail that could be found of their history. These names were the keys which unlocked the next area of research when the National Census returns were published on the internet. Within a very short space of time, the inmates and staff of St Mary's Agricultural Colony had been located for 1861, 1871 and 1881. It was as though the Colony was suddenly peopled again. There were now nearly 1000 names in our record and the boys who had been committed to the Colony in the years between the Census would probably have doubled that number. Not only had individuals been convicted and sentenced, but so had brothers and even twins. The National Census provided their birth place and date of birth thus giving the opportunity for further research at a later date. Through the internet it was also possible to find what records were

held by museums in towns and cities where the boys had been convicted, and from these, photocopies of committal orders, escort orders and admission procedures of the Reformatory were obtained, and it was at this stage that it was felt that there was sufficient material to warrant the telling of the Reformatory story.

It was the issue of the deaths at the Colony which was perhaps the most intriguing, but even with the increasing volume of records which were being discovered, it had been possible to find the names of only twelve of the forty-two for whom prayers were asked on the notice board. When individual names had come to light, it had been possible to obtain copies of the death certificates from the Leicestershire Registrars' Department, but initially where there was no name a death certificate could not be located. In the summer of 2006 however, as the requests for certificates relating to the Reformatory trickled through, permission for the registers to be searched using the place of death rather than by name was given, and within three weeks an additional thirty-three entries certifying deaths which had occurred at the Reformatory were found. It was then back to the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland to find the newspaper stories behind the manslaughter of one boy, of the accidental death of a female member of staff, and the report of the inquest into Henry Kelly's suicide. The detailed and graphic reporting of the Victorian journalists not only gave the facts, but showed the power of words to recreate an event in the mind of the reader. The death certificates themselves contained surprises; there were deaths of infant children of staff members; there were several deaths in one year as a result of typhoid fever thus proving that the local story did have a basis in fact; and many deaths from tuberculosis, the disease of the impoverished. The magazine *Household Words* had included an account of a visit to the monastery and Reformatory written by one of Charles

Dickens' reporters in which he tells of the Christmas Eve death of Brother Lawrence, the monastery Guest Master, as he was accompanying him to a service in the Reformatory. Again, the scene is recreated and made real for the reader, even after one hundred and fifty years.

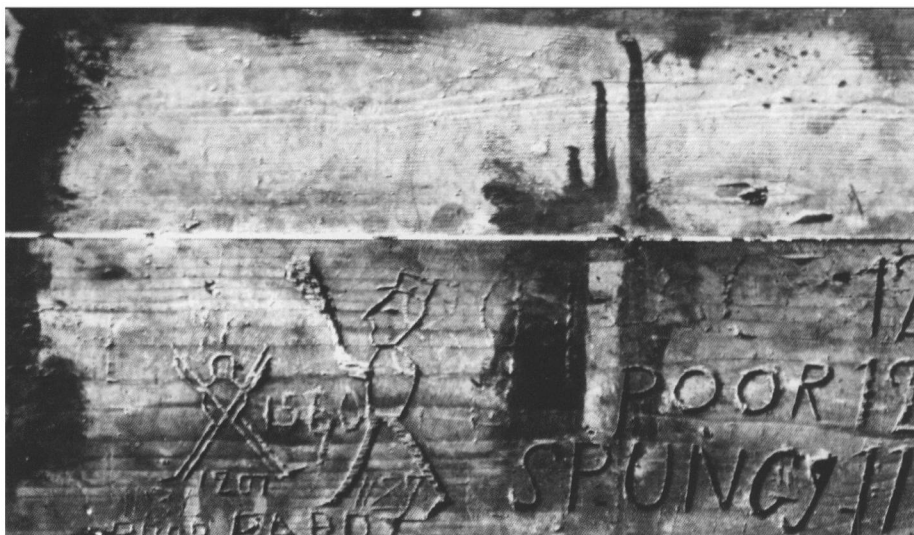


Carved graffiti found on wooden plank in the monastery paint store in 2004.

The Victorian words are powerful and evocative, and it did not seem to lessen their impact that no material evidence of the boys' existence had remained, but the story came to life when an exciting artefact was found on top of an old cupboard in the monastery. A wooden plank covered in carved graffiti, names, numbers and self-commiserating phrases 'poor old basket' had lain undetected for over one hundred years. There was a very clear carving of the implements of physical punishment which most of the boys had had to endure as part of their sentence before being sent to a reformatory, and possibly for misdemeanours conducted within. This was the voice of the boys themselves, and, so far, the only personal record of their experiences.

I had thought that uncovering so much information would quench my thirst for knowledge of how the boys had spent their years of punishment in the area I know so well, but that has not been so. There are now more questions. What happened to them after they returned home? Did they tell their children and grandchildren of their exile from home? Did any of them write about their experiences? The day that a family historian arrives at Mount St Bernard with a tentative query about an ancestor is eagerly awaited, but meanwhile there is a certain satisfaction in knowing that for

The last of the Colony buildings 1995.



Carved graffiti found on wooden plank in the monastery paint store in 2004 .

the majority of the boys there were good times, kind mentors, and much more wholesome surroundings than their inner city homes.

Notes and References:

More about this interesting story can be found in Maureen Havers book, *The Reformatory at Mount St Bernard Abbey 1856-1881* (Mount St Bernard Abbey, 2006).

1. L. Radzinowicz, *A History of English Criminal Law Vol. 1 The Movement for Reform*, (Stevens and Sons Ltd., 1948).

Acknowledgements:

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