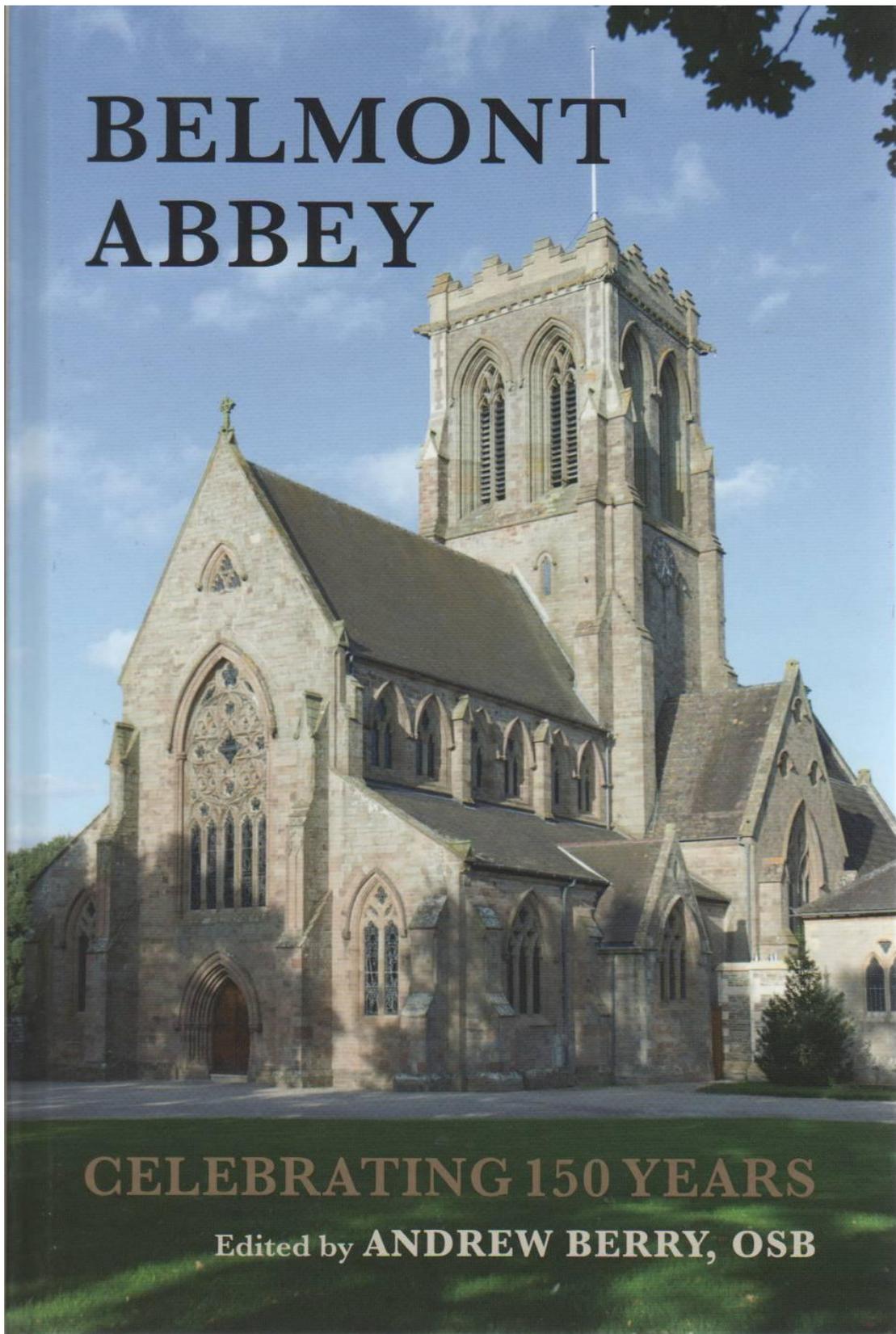


# BELMONT ABBEY



CELEBRATING 150 YEARS

Edited by **ANDREW BERRY, OSB**

First published in 2012

Gracewing  
2 Southern Avenue, Leominster  
Herefordshire HR6 0QF

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

Compilation and editorial material © Belmont Abbey Trustees

Copyright for individual chapters resides with the authors

The right of the editor and contributors to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

UK ISBN 978 085244 730 7

Typeset by  
Action Publishing Technology Ltd, Gloucester GL1 5SR

Printed in England by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham SN14 6LH

# Contents

Preface	Abbot Paul Stonham	<i>page vii</i>
Introduction	Homily Delivered at 150 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary Mass Archbishop Vincent Nichols	1
Chapter One	Monastic History in Glass and Stone Dom Brendan Thomas	6
Chapter Two	The English Benedictine Congregation Abbot Richard Yeo	26
Chapter Three	The Foundation of Belmont Abbey Brenda Warde	45
Chapter Four	Bishop Thomas Joseph Brown, OSB (1798–1880) Dom Alban Hood	61
Chapter Five	Something of the Struggle for Belmont's Soul, 1859–1909 Abbot Geoffrey Scott	72
Chapter Six	Belmont and the Home Mission: Wales and Beyond Abbot Aidan Bellenger	110
Chapter Seven	The Pugins and Belmont Abbey Church and Monastery: History and Architecture Dr Roderick O'Donnell, FSA	125

Chapter Eight	A History of the Organ at Belmont Abbey Dr Roy Massey, MBE	145
Chapter Nine	The Australian Connection Brenda Warde	154
Chapter Ten	Belmont's Parochial Commitment Dom Luke Waring	160
Chapter Eleven	Peru and the Monastery of the Incarnation Dom David Bird and Abbot Paul Stonham	187
Chapter Twelve	The History of Belmont Abbey School Dom Simon McGurk and Bishop Mark Jabalé	208
Belmont Abbey:	The Future and Beyond Dom Andrew Berry	226

# Preface

*Abbot Paul Stonham*

Belmont has a unique and fascinating history, quite unlike that of any other Benedictine monastery in the United Kingdom. This book should have been published during the celebrations for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding in 1859 and dedication in 1860. We apologise to both our authors and readers for the delay. Originally the editors set out to produce a History of Belmont to augment and replace the book written by Dom Basil Whelan in 1959 to celebrate the Centenary and now out of print, but so many friends and scholars expressed an interest in contributing to the new book that it soon became obvious that we would end up not with a History but rather with a Festschrift. And this is what we place in your hands today.

I feel sure you will agree that the chapters included and all the information they contain give a good picture of this extraordinary history that Belmont has enjoyed in its short existence. I say short because 150 years are few indeed in comparison with the great monasteries of continental Europe, some of which go back to the days of St Benedict and even earlier. The sad events of the Reformation in Britain led to the dissolution of the monasteries and to the disappearance of the Benedictine way of life that lay at the heart of Christianity in these isles from the arrival of that band of monks sent over by St Gregory the Great under the leadership of St Augustine of Canterbury at the end of 6<sup>th</sup> Century. But the monastic ideal was kept alive and developed by men and women who left these shores for Italy and Spain, France, the Netherlands and Germany. Throughout penal times Benedictine monks returned home and worked assiduously to nurture the Catholic faith in our land. Then, as a result of the French Revolution and the relaxation of anti-Catholic legislation in Britain, most of the communities founded on the Continent returned to these isles. Yet it was only in the 1850s, following the re-establishment of the hierarchy and the re-emergence of normal, Catholic life that the conditions were set in place for what took place at Belmont.

Another vital aspect of Catholic life at this time was the conversion of so many Anglicans and others to the Church. One of these converts was Richard Francis Wegg-Prosser of Belmont House, Hereford, the founder of Belmont. It was he who, to celebrate his conversion, decided

to build a monastery on his estate. For this venture he enlisted the help of Edward Pugin, son of the great Augustus Welby Pugin. However, it was only when Bishop Thomas Joseph Brown, a monk of Downside and Bishop of Newport and Menevia, the new Catholic diocese that included Herefordshire as well as South, West and Central Wales, came on the scene, that the dream of a living medieval monastery gradually became a reality. Ultimately it all worked out for the best, though it was an uneasy settlement between Wegg-Prosser, Bishop Brown and the English Benedictine Congregation.

The church, consecrated on 4<sup>th</sup> September 1860, became the pro-cathedral of the Diocese of Newport and Menevia, the mother church for Wales and the Marches and powerhouse for the re-evangelization of Wales. The monks were to be the canons of the diocese and formed the Bishop's Chapter. The monastery became the Common Novitiate and House of Studies of the English Benedictine Congregation. Belmont, following the medieval English custom, became a Cathedral Priory and its superior the Cathedral Prior. The Conventual and Capitular Mass was sung each day by the monks in the cathedral church together with the whole of the Divine Office, introducing into Britain the method of interpretation of Gregorian Chant used by the monks of Solesmes, France. For sixty years, Belmont would be the only cathedral in the world where the Mass and Divine Office were sung in full every day and to authentic Gregorian Chant. Among the cathedral priors were Dom Bede Vaughan, who became Archbishop of Sydney, Australia, and Dom Cuthbert Hedley, the second Bishop of Newport and Menevia. Monks trained at Belmont served on parishes throughout England and Wales and further afield on Mauritius and in Australia.

Bishop Hedley died on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1915, the year in which everything changed for Belmont. The decision was taken by the Holy See to create the Archdiocese of Cardiff, while the English Benedictine Congregation decided that Belmont should become an independent house, a Priory. Belmont is thus unique in being a foundation of the whole Congregation rather than of a single monastery. The other houses of the Congregation were now abbeys with their own novitiates, so Belmont's congregational role became obsolete. Also, with the reorganization of the diocese, the cathedral was moved to St. David's Church, Cardiff, though for four years Belmont would continue as co-cathedral and the new Archbishop, the Douai monk, Dom Romanus Bilborrow, enjoy the privilege of two chapters, a monastic one at Belmont and a secular one at Cardiff. In 1920 the Papal Bull "Praeclara Gesta" raised Belmont Priory to the status of an abbey, the arrangement with the Archdiocese ceased and Prior Aelred Kindersley was elected first Abbot of Belmont.

With independence a new chapter begins in our history and with it new challenges. Belmont had been made independent by the English Benedictine Congregation, but it was not endowed in any way nor was there any real source of income. To begin with, Belmont did not have any incorporated parishes, so monks were lent to the other houses to work on their parishes. It should be said that pastoral work does not generate the sort of income needed to support those priests who do the work, let alone a monastic community with both young monks in formation and elderly monks in retirement to take care of. In the foundation charter Wegg-Prosser had stipulated that the monks of Belmont were not to open a school and become involved in education. Somehow this had to be revoked in order to begin an income generating work at the abbey to supplement the almost insignificant income derived from pastoral work and farming. In the 1920s Belmont was known in monastic circles as being one of the most observant and austere monasteries in the Benedictine Confederation. In fact, the community was desperately poor. Although there have been periods of relative affluence, that situation has not changed much to this day. Our finances are still precarious.

The details of all these events and developments can be found in the pages of Dom Basil's History and in this Festschrift. Gradually Belmont acquired a number of incorporated parishes from other houses in the Congregation, of which four remain today. We have also had the pastoral care of several diocesan parishes under contract and this work continues to the present moment. Then there are chaplaincies to nuns, especially our Poor Clares at Much Birch (formerly Bullingham), and to the Armed Forces. The school, opened in 1926, grew and flourished until forced to close for economic reasons in 1994. A foundation was made in Tambogrande, Peru, in 1981 and this continues to flourish, though now at Pachacamac, on the southern outskirts of Lima. In recent times Belmont, as at other key moments in its history, has had to reinvent itself, particularly in finding work that can support the house and community and in developing its spiritual and pastoral outreach. We continue to be blessed with vocations, somewhat against the trend in England and Wales, and we continue to attract guests, retreatants and visitors in general. Our successful Schools Education Programme brings thousands of children and young people into contact with the monastic life and tradition. We continue to sing Gregorian Chant on a regular basis at the daily Conventual Mass, to which we have added the singing of the Divine Office in English to the prayerful modal music of Dom Alan Rees.

For all this the monastic community, and all those connected with Belmont in any way, give thanks to Almighty God, whose hand can be seen at work on every page of the rich tapestry of our history, past, present and to come. Ultimately, a monastery that follows the Rule of St

Benedict is a community of men or women dedicated by vows to living the life of the Gospel to the full. The monks of Belmont seek God through prayer, work, hospitality and community life. The story told in these pages is one of fidelity to the Rule and to the Gospel, to the Benedictine tradition and to the Church. At the same time it is the story of men with hearts open to the call of Christ, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the needs of the world around and beyond them. Seen through the eyes of faith, it is the story of the manifestation of God's love and mercy and of our working with our Creator and Redeemer in building up his kingdom of love, justice and peace. In giving thanks to God for this precious vocation and way of life, we also pay tribute to those who have gone before us, be they famous or unknown. We pray that our community today may continue to build on the foundations others have left behind and that we in turn may preserve the grace and beauty of Belmont and its mission for future generations. We also pray for our founders and for our benefactors, living and dead, and for all those associated with Belmont. In the words of St Benedict, "Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life." (RB 72: 11-12)

On behalf of the monastic community, I thank all those who have contributed in any way to the writing and production of this book.

FOUNDED IN 1859, a product of the Catholic Revival, the monastic community at Belmont has for one hundred and fifty years provided a faithful witness, its work and mission reflecting the changing needs of the Church and her people. The monks of Belmont seek God through prayer, work, hospitality and community life.

The lay founder of the monastery, Richard Francis Wegg-Prosser, commissioned Edward Pugin as his architect, and the Abbey church is one of Pugin's finest works: the quality of the building materials and the lavishness of the surviving furniture make it one of the high points of the Catholic and English Benedictine Revival.

Consecrated on 4 September 1860, the church became the Pro-Cathedral of the Diocese of Newport and Menevia, the mother church for Wales and the Marches and powerhouse for the re-evangelization of Wales. The monastery was to be the Common Novitiate and House of Studies of the English Benedictine Congregation. Monks trained at Belmont served on parishes throughout England and Wales and further afield in Australia and Mauritius. Belmont introduced into Britain the Solesmes style of Gregorian Chant, and for sixty years it was the only cathedral in the world where the Mass and Divine Office were sung in full every day and to authentic Gregorian Chant.

On 11 November 1915, the Holy See created the Archdiocese of Cardiff, and the English Benedictine Congregation decided that Belmont should become an independent house. Belmont is thus unique in being a foundation of the whole Congregation rather than of a single monastery. It was raised to the status of Abbey in 1920. The school, opened in 1926, grew and flourished for nearly seventy years.

The story told in these pages is one of fidelity to the Rule of St Benedict and to the Gospel, to the Benedictine tradition and to the Church. At the same time it is the story of men with hearts open to the call of Christ, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the needs of the world around and beyond them.

*This beautiful church, and the entire monastic building of which it is the heart and soul, stand in the landscape of our history as a monument to faith, to perseverance, to prayer, and to the richness of the monastic tradition as a clear witness to faith in this land.*

**Archbishop Vincent Nichols**

*Contributors:*

Abbot Aidan Bellenger • Dom Andrew Berry • Dom David Bird  
Dom Alban Hood • Bishop Mark Jabalé • Dr Roy Massey • Dom Simon McGurk  
Archbishop Vincent Nichols • Dr Roderick O'Donnell • Abbot Geoffrey Scott  
Abbot Paul Stonham • Dom Brendan Thomas • Dom Luke Waring  
Brenda Warde • Abbot Richard Yeo

GRACEWING

ISBN 978-0-85244-730-7



9 780852 447307 >