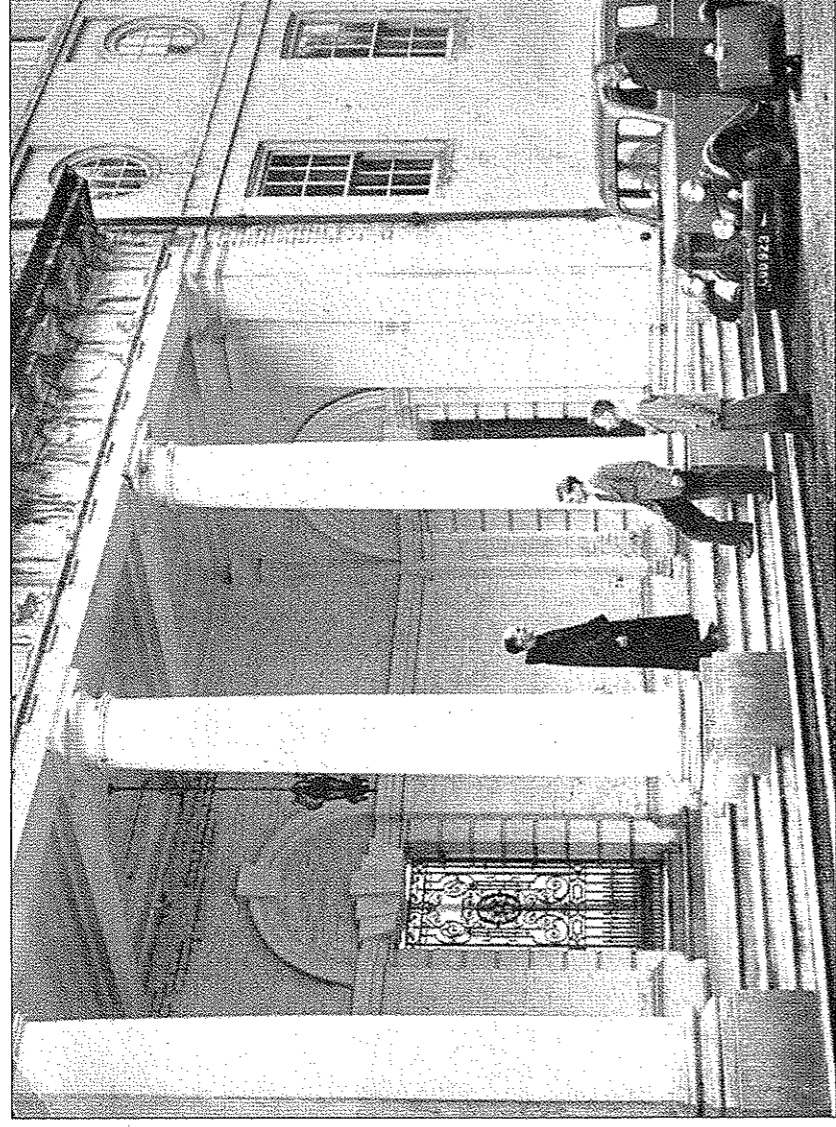


Monks amid the maelstrom

Petà Dunstan tells how, as Nashdom was at its zenith, the 1960s' ferment upset its ordered Benedictine life



IN MAY 1964, the Nashdom monks privately celebrated the 50th anniversary of their community's formal inauguration. In July, a series of more public celebrations followed. The mass was celebrated outdoors in marquees, with festive refreshments following, the abbey thrown open for guests to admire its library, its vestment collection, and other treasures.

One of these occasions, on 15 July 1964, represented something more than an anniversary, for on that day the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, was the president of the mass (sung in English, not Latin) in the morning and after lunch gave an address on the legacy of St Benedict for the Church and ecumenism. It was an unequivocal public recognition at last of the monks' place in the mainstream of the Church of England. The community even featured in television programmes on the BBC and ITV.

These occasions were all held against the background of a revolution in the ecumenical climate that followed the election of Cardinal Angelo Roncalli as Pope John XXIII, in 1958. He initiated a range of ecumenical contacts that astonished other Christians used to the more austere policy of his predecessor, Pope Pius XII.

The leaders of the Roman and Anglican obediences met for the first time since the Reformation when Pope John received a visit in late 1960 from Geoffrey Fisher, the latter nearing the end of his years as Archbishop of Canterbury.

In 1963, following Pope John's death, his successor, Paul VI, pledged to maintain this new approach to other Christians. This change of policy was taken up by some (though not all) Roman Catholics in Britain with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

The Pope's representative in Britain, Monsignor Cardinale, visited Nashdom during the jubilee celebrations, along with the Roman Catholic Bishop of Northampton and two monks from Douai Abbey. Roman Catholic visitors, especially Religious, now became as frequent as Orthodox.

One of the Nashdom community's strongest hopes had now become a reality — official and substantial links with the Roman Catholic Church.

As well as Roman Catholics, the Nashdom jubilee celebrations drew attendance from representatives of Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Baptist, Methodist, Congregationalist, Quaker, Presbyterian, and French Reformed traditions. Compared with a decade earlier, this was a striking collection of Christians to gather at an Anglo-Catholic monastery.

It represented a triumph of Nashdom's principles: Catholicism could bring Christians together. The community and its historical stance now appeared prophetic instead of being on the margins. Nashdom was no longer under suspicion of disloyalty, but an acknowledged part

of an Anglican witness to ecumenism. Amidst all the external praise and celebration, there was another reason for the community to feel full of hope. The novitiate at Nashdom had begun to grow as fast as it had ever done.

Yet among all these positive developments there were others that were threatening to shake monastic confidence. On 10 October 1964, the Abbot, Augustine Morris, formally minuted in Chapter what he had been saying to the seniors for some time: that the community had to consider what was happening to the Church and monastic life in general. "Change" was on the agenda.

This was the direct consequence of the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council in Rome (1962-65). The decree on ecumenism was an encouragement as it endorsed the new approach taken from 1958 by Pope John XXIII. The main areas of significant challenge to the Nashdom community, however, were the Council's decree on liturgy and the decree on Religious life.

One of the issues to be faced was the status of the five lay brothers in the monastery, who while vowed for life nevertheless were not members of the community's Chapter and could not even vote in abbatial elections.

The origin of this second-class status was the admittance to communities in centuries past of those with little education, or aptitude for learning the Latin necessary for full participation in the Divine Office. In the 20th century, it now looked more like the perpetuation of a "servant" class.

The Vatican Council's decree was unambiguous in its direction to integrate. One of the stumbling blocks to the process was the issue of Latin. As the Abbot made clear in April 1965, the equality of all within the community was an ideal that could not be realised unless the vernacular was used in chapel. This proved a divisive issue for the community. But in 1965 the Abbot asked that scripture readings at the mass should be in English.

It was to be alterations in the liturgy of the mass that made overall change more likely. Much of the ceremonial associated with the old Latin Tridentine mass was discarded, as were some items of the traditional

vesture. For those who were inspired by the visual imagery of the "back to Baroque" movement, it must have seemed that all for which they had fought so valiantly was being taken away from them — and by the very institution they had assumed they were serving in that struggle, the Roman Catholic Church.

As the new mass was in English, the issue of the vernacular in the Office had now to be faced again. Augustine became persuaded that Latin should be abandoned.

The new pattern established by Vatican II was to have a conventional mass, concelebrated by all the priest monks, at which the whole community received the sacrament. Each priest monk was therefore no longer required to say mass daily himself. For some of Nashdom's monks, this attacked a significant element of their vocation, at least their own interpretation of it.

IF CHANGE in the Roman Catholic Church challenged the Nashdom community, parallel upheavals in the Church of England meant their own communion could not be a shelter from the storm of change.

The sociological and cultural changes that prompted reform in Rome were the same as affected Anglicans. If the Church was to connect with modern society, its inter-actions could not remain governed by the style and customs of a previous generation. The beliefs at the heart of the faith had to be presented in a renewed guise.

Statistics for confirmations, vocations to the priesthood, and general attendance began to spiral down from 1964 onwards. Could Nashdom's training of monks respond to the new spirit?

In the first half of the 1960s, the enlarged novitiate at Nashdom began to develop a culture of its own, gradually leading in some to an instinctive feeling of rebellion, especially against what might be perceived to be pointless traditions and restrictions. Some of those who outwardly conformed, even perfectly so, were inwardly questioning aspects of the life.

The overall scheme of training was not, in the event, judged to be at fault, and therefore was not altered. With 15 first professions in the period 1963-

The seniors' example was not necessarily helpful. For all the simplicity of life of some, others were more flamboyant and individual. The contemplative austerity of the life taught to the novices could seem at odds with the privileges, sometimes eccentric, that were enjoyed by some of the senior monks — Dom Maurus Benson, the Prior, had once been in the Army in India, and still strode out into the grounds with a gun to shoot squirrels, or (his heart condition notwithstanding) energetically saw logs for the wood fire he was allowed to light in his room. He also partook of a shot of whisky and several pinches of snuff every day.

Eventually, the suggestion was made that the community should accept help from outside. The Society of St John the Evangelist had spent a year in the mid-1960s receiving outside speakers to inform its internal debates. Nashdom now did the same in 1971, in what was termed the "renewal year". The talks were certainly informative for the monks in the maelstrom of ideas swirling through the contemporary Church, but, on most issues, the community remained deadlocked on possible changes.

Some of the monks had originally felt drawn to the life precisely because the old monasticism had a certainty and regularity. Vatican II blew away all this security. The monastic way of life was no longer seen theologically as "higher", only as an alternative. The rules were relaxed. Change was thrust upon them.

Guests were now allowed in chapel, instead of being confined to a gallery. Monks went out on visits more often. Dom Wilfrid Weston, the new novice master, was one of a group of young novice guardians in Anglican communities, both men and women, who were in regular contact and encouraged links between Religious. Monk novices were now allowed to visit convents, and Sisters visited Nashdom. Some of these Sisters were no longer clothed in traditional habits. There was open conversation on topics once seen as taboo. There was no longer a bar on physical contact, and Religious even began to hug each other when greeting.

The traditionalists could have been reassured if they had known where and when the boundaries of the experimentation would be drawn. Then they might have seen some value in compromise. But the great difficulty with the movement of monastic renewal was that it was an exploration, and no one could be sure where precisely it would end, or indeed for how long it would continue before a new settlement was reached.

An edited extract from *The Labour of Obedience: The Benedictines of Pershore, Nashdom and Elmore — a history by Petà Dunstan (Canterbury Press, £21.99 (CT Bookshop £19.79); 978-1-85311-974-3).*

"Guests are never lacking in a monastery": Nashdom Abbey with its imposing entrance, from the 1957 edition of a booklet for visitors

68, there seemed no need. Yet the promising growth of the community in the mid-1960s was not to be sustained.

A sea-change seemed to occur in 1967. From that year, the glut of young professed began to leave: of the 15 mentioned, only six made it to life profession, and of these only four remained in the community by the end of 1971.

Outside the monastery, the old class distinctions in society were being eroded, and the automatic respect once given to those in positions of power no longer could be assumed.

Obedience to the customary, a document that governed the minutiae of monastic life, such as how to behave if a mistake was made in the Office or a monk was late for chapel, or the details of interactions within the refectory, was no longer easy to maintain either.

The generation entering the monastery in the 1940s and 1950s had nearly all been in the armed forces. They were used to unquestioning adherence to rules, however bizarre, and the immediate obedience to superiors inculcated in all those subject to military training. Those entering later were not so prepared to follow without reason.