



Left: Worth Abbey and School, set in the beautiful rolling countryside of the High Weald in Sussex. Right: Abbot Mark Barrett

# Worth – breathing with two lungs

Vocations might have stalled but the abbot of Worth is looking outwards rather than inwards, with several initiatives launched to reconnect the monastic community with the Catholic world and beyond / **By ELENA CURTI**

**T**HE SCAFFOLDING is down, the roof re-covered, leaking windows mended, and a start made on repairing the furniture. All is ready for a new round of activities centred on the abbey church at Worth, and beyond.

It is a busy time with the start of the school term, the launch of new initiatives and the advancing of existing ones. I hear about them in a phone call to Abbot Mark Barrett, elected in June last year, who is keen to get things moving following freedom from the fetters of the Covid-19 restrictions.

I got in touch with the abbot to talk about the abbey church. Our conversation quickly strays to talk about Worth's early experiment of sharing the monastic life with lay men and women, begun in 1971. Abbot Mark himself joined the resident lay community after university and entered the novitiate at Worth in 1980. In conversation he reminds me a little of his predecessor but two, Abbot Christopher Jamison, currently Abbot President of the Benedictine Congregation. Jamison is a writer and broadcaster who put Worth on the map in 2005 when he made *The Monastery*, a BBC fly-on-the wall documentary. Barrett is also a published writer and just as fluent and polished. I suspect he too would be good on television.

As the monks continue their work of introducing the world to the Rule of St Benedict, they are helped by the abbey's location, which is rural but convenient. Gatwick Airport is

close by, and there are good road and rail links. The campus is set in beautiful countryside on the Sussex High Weald. Worth is in the centre of the diocese of Arundel and Brighton and is often chosen to host diocesan events. Tomorrow, 23 October, the relics of St Bernadette will arrive at the abbey church, as part of the national tour. The community has a good working relationship with the diocesan bishop, Richard Moth, who is a Benedictine oblate, and a number of projects are run jointly with the diocese.

Barrett is eager to reconnect with Worth's various constituencies. Worth Pilgrims is a new group that he hopes will attract those who have been on the abbey's retreats, parents of pupils at Worth School, staff, members of the parish and others who live locally. On the August Bank Holiday, the community hosted the Worth Abbey Pilgrims Festival, a day when members mingled with visitors for a programme that included prayer and reflection, a campus tour, tea and cake, and a concert by the resident organist, D'Arcy Trinkwon.

The early resident lay community gradually evolved into young families moving away to different parts of the country. In 2003, the independent Lay Community of St Benedict was formed, with members meeting several times a day to pray the Office online and to gather regularly for meetings and retreats. However, there are currently half a dozen young

Catholics and Anglicans living at Worth. They receive formation from the monastic community and work across the school as lay chaplains. They are known as Forerunners, in honour of John the Baptist, and are part of Catholic Youth Ministry International, a movement that began in Australia. The chaplains organise faith-based events at the school while the monks offer sacramental ministry at the abbey church.

Worth School opened in 1959 as an independent school for boys. It started to admit girls in 2008, and today it is fully coeducational with more than 600 pupils aged between 11 and 18. Pupils are allowed to board from the age of 13, but fewer than half do so.

A report by the Independent Schools Inspectorate last February found that the school meets safeguarding standards and concluded that it "actively promotes the well-being of the pupils, including boarders". A separate charitable trust has run the school since 2002.

No monk has taught at the school for some years; Barrett was probably the last to teach full-time. So, can the school still be said to offer a Benedictine education? "Benedictine education used to mean a school owned and run by monks. That's a very dated model and a contemporary Benedictine school is one that lives and professes values grounded in the Rule of St Benedict," Barrett says. "There is a great value in not having monks teaching at the school – when they do, they become totemic bearers of ethos. There is the perception that the monks do the values and the teachers do the education. If you take the monks away, everyone is responsible for the values of the school."

**ANOTHER INITIATIVE** is a programme starting in the new year for men aged between 18 and 35 to live at Worth as monastic interns for two months. Unlike Quarr Abbey, which has a similar programme, the invitation is to Christians only, at least for the moment. The monks will offer a process of accompaniment to help interns determine their vocation in broad terms and not necessarily to the religious life.

There are 19 monks currently in the community, just 11 of them living at Worth. There are no novices. Given the low numbers, it is remarkable that in 2019 four monks were sent to Brighton to found a monastery in a terraced house. They worked in partnership with Wellspring, a mission community working with young people in the town, founded by two children of Worth lay community marriages, and the local diocese.

One of the four monks was immediately offered the post of chaplain at the University of Sussex and moved there. The remaining monks have just relocated to the presbytery of the Church of St John the Baptist in Kempton, from where they will run half of the parish of East Brighton (the other half will continue to be run by the parish priest

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from the parish's second church, St Joseph's). Already established at St John the Baptist is the Fitzherbert Community Hub, which runs a food bank and café. It is named after Maria Fitzherbert, a famous beauty of her day, a Catholic and the morganatic wife of the future George IV, who was the first patron of the church. The monks and Wellspring will offer ministry to Sussex and Brighton universities.

Barrett says: "We are able by being present in Brighton to touch areas of Catholic life that are difficult to touch from the depths of rural Sussex, though we will offer opportunities to people to come out to Worth. We hope to develop two lungs: an urban lung and a rural lung."

**THE ABBEY CHURCH** will continue to draw people in from far and wide. The interior is vast, round and plain with light cascading down from a great central lantern. Barrett describes it as a place to gather in, a place of silence and sanctuary, and a place for the community to assemble. He tells me that the architect, Francis Pollen, planned a false ceiling but changed his mind when he saw the grandeur and scale of the ceiling with the exposed roof beams and the lantern "almost hanging in space". The architect used the apparent difficulty posed by a site that slopes downhill by creating a sense of descending into an underground basilica, with all the light coming in from far above: "He consciously chose to exclude the Sussex landscape and focus attention on the altar, the baptistry and the ambo, the central liturgical symbols. It is very much a consequence of the liturgical vision of the Second Vatican Council."

As for the striking furniture, which developed cracks soon after it was installed in 2009, the process of repairing it a few pieces at a time has started. Designed by Thomas Heatherwick, of 2012 Olympic Cauldron and new London Routemaster bus fame, it was the subject of a legal dispute between the designer and the monks. The matter is now closed, and Barrett says that once the repairs are complete, the furniture will look as good as new.

*Elena Curti's book, Another Fifty Catholic Churches to See Before You Die, will be published by Gracewing in September 2023. It will include the Worth Abbey church.*

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## My Dad walked five miles to Mass so that he might meet an Irish Catholic girl to marry



“ I grew up on a council estate, the child of southern Irish parents who had come to Britain in the 1950s to find work. They were needed to take up unfilled vacancies, but they were not necessarily always made welcome. My mother found work as a live-in maid with other Irish girls in what I have recently discovered was a finishing school in Ashridge, now a business education centre, and my father worked as a navy, or manual labourer, working on building sites and motorways.

They met because they both went to Mass – or rather, they met because my Dad, who was working in Hemel Hempstead, knew there were Irish girls going to Mass in Berkhamsted, and so walked five miles to go to Mass there every week so that he might meet an Irish Catholic girl he could marry. One Sunday he saw my mother wearing a little hat with a veil, sitting on the women's side of the church, and he knew he had found the one. His faith and determination paid off. My mother agreed to go out with him and they got married on the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, 11 February 1956.

My parents had four children. My highly intelligent, sensitive, kind mother lacked confidence, was very aware that her education had ended aged 14, and was painfully hurt by any prejudice she encountered. She was also phenomenally good at mental arithmetic and balancing the books, and utterly confident and on top of her role as stay-at-home mother and housewife.

My father was hard-working, gregarious, wise, charming and cheerful, a wonderful gardener and great storyteller, strong in his faith and much more socially confident than my mother. But Dad had great difficulty reading or writing, and was anxious in any situation that called for form-filling or signatures. He handed his pay packet over to Mum every week, in total confidence that she would make it cover all that was needed. He didn't drink alcohol, or swear, and he never missed a day saying the Rosary.

My father left the house very early in the morning to wait in all weathers at the side of the road where he would be picked up by a van and taken to work on the roads or a building site, but I knew that however early he left the house, he

would always have said his Rosary beforehand. My mother always knelt by her bed and said the Morning Offering every day, giving all the prayers, works, sufferings and joys of the day to God. Every night we knelt down and said the Rosary together, and my father, who never read anything if he could avoid it, would proclaim by heart the beautiful words of the "Hail, Holy Queen": "To thee do we cry, poor, banished children of Eve ..." My mother once said to me that she understood from her own experience what the words "mourning and weeping in this valley of tears" meant. My parents had more than their fair share of tragedies and difficulties, but through it all their Catholic faith sustained them and gave them a deep-down sense of their own worth and dignity.

Mum and Dad may have felt disregarded or ill at ease in some situations, but I noticed growing up that through all the troubles they had – the brain damage of one of my brothers, my mother's poor health, the constant need to be careful with money – their faith gave them a fundamental sense that, for God, we were each of infinite worth, and that our parish was a safe place where they felt totally at home and could hold their heads up high. They taught me to pray and their faith, passed on, opened the door to my own relationship with God. It was a gift beyond all price.

My parents were economic migrants. People like them who have come to Britain from all over the world have given so much to our nation and to the Church. I think as Catholics we have a special duty to speak out loudly when politicians and the media demonise them or subtly, but deliberately, conflate wanting to migrate to improve life chances for oneself and one's family with greed. We must keep insisting that all immigrants, all "strangers", whether fleeing from war or from economic hardship in an unequal world, must always be treated with love and respect, and their human rights affirmed and protected.

**Anne Booth** has published 23 books for children. Her first novel for adults, *Small Miracles*, about three nuns who win the lottery, is published by Harvill Secker.