

Ora et Labora



An intimate film documents the lives and deaths of monks living behind the walls of a closed monastic community brewing the UK's first Trappist beer

By Gerard Condon

ENGLAND'S only Cistercian Abbey, Mount Saint Bernard, lies in rolling countryside near the city of Leicester. Founded in 1835, it was once home to a community of over eighty monks. Nowadays, most of the choir stalls are empty and the community has dwindled to twenty-five, mostly elderly monks. Nick Hamer's 82-minute documentary *Outside the City* (Intrepid Media, 2019) has been compared to the work of David Attenborough, the naturalist who records species in danger of extinction. But not just yet. Hidden within are signs of recovery. Or, as Hamer puts it, "The absolute best place for new life is the seedbed of decay."

Mount Saint Bernard is "outside the city" in more ways than one. The film's title is taken from the *Letter to the Hebrews* 13:13-14, which reminds us that Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem and that his disciples had to "go out to meet him." This is a meta-

phor for the Saviour stepping beyond the culture of his time in order to find God's kingdom.

Hamer presents the monastic life as a criticism of contemporary society and even his own evangelical Christian background, which he characterises as "busy, noisy, full of certainty." The slow and silent atmosphere of the monastery is an antidote to our fast paced lifestyle. His camera dwells on the present moment and the simpler details of life: one monk's morning shave; a group of four or five shucking beans; a novice learning how to make pottery. Whereas our culture teaches the value of gathering up privileges and possessions, the monk's life is about surrendering to God and others. The monks' cells are spartan. The abbey's décor has that de-cluttered or minimalist look which interior designers often recommend.

Our culture's obsession with youth and wellbeing is contrasted with the monks' acceptance of aging and fragility. While filming was tak-

ing place in 2018, two members of the community, Brother William Strahan and Father Hilary Costello, passed away. Their funerals were occasions of dignified thanksgiving as well as sorrow. The film takes some minutes over their burials in shallow graves and without a coffin, in accordance with Cistercian tradition. The abbey graveyard is located within the monastic complex, as a constant reminder to the monks of their mortality.

Surrender

The documentary opens with a poignant interview with Brother William (aged 84), shortly before his death. As a young monk, the then abbot had noticed Br. William's physical strength and assigned him the task of maintaining buildings. He learnt construction techniques and became an amateur architect. He spent many years in building up Mount Saint Bernard's daughter house in Cameroon. Even as his physical strength gave way, the foundations he laid in Africa prospered.

That culture of surrender also extends to the monks' views on the future of their abbey. They lament the decline in vocations, but accept its consequences with equanimity.

ity, rather than despair. One of the monks points out that, on entering the monastery, they are not rejecting the world, just bearing witness to its spiritual dimension. Britain has, in many ways, become a post-Christian society, yet the film documents a modest upswing in vocations from abroad, notably the European Union and the Far East. The abbey, once almost exclusively British, is now home to eleven nationalities.

New spirit

Mount Saint Bernard traditionally ran a dairy farm, but this became unprofitable in the early 2010s, and the Abbot (at the time of filming), Fr. Erik Varden, began to look for an alternative. The community decided to take up the ancient Cistercian practice of brewing. After much groundwork, in July 2018 the abbey joined an elite group of fourteen Cistercian monasteries worldwide that brews its own beer. *Tynt Meadow*, so named after the location of the monastery, is a strong dark English ale, one that fulfils the Cistercian maxim, “beer should be liquid bread, not coloured water.”

At the launch, Abbot Varden compared the process of brewing to that of monastic formation: gathering together authentic ingredients, treating them with respect and giving them time to mature. When brought together in the right order, the ingredients that go into a monastery, its people, facilities and work, form something sublime.

Forget yourself

But the beer is a subplot. Hamer’s film is focused on the monastic experience. What is it like being a monk? Snippets from his interviews with the monks are interspersed with scenes from the monastery over the course of the four seasons. His camera pays closest attention to the faces of the monks at prayer. One novice tells him that he wants to be like that elderly monk who remains in the church, even after prayer-time has ended. Another contrasts the distractions of contemporary life with the silence he experiences: “here all of that is stripped away and you realise, God is just there.” There is no shirking the discipline required to protect that sacred space. A newly professed monk, Brother Bernard John Tantiado, from the Philippines, notes that, “You really have to forget yourself. And in order to give yourself to God, you have to mortify your longings, your desires, what you want; and really face humiliation. It’s forgetting yourself, and it’s really tough. Our nature is so proud.”

There is a humility in living at close quarters with a group of middle aged and elderly men, each with their own idiosyncrasies. The Cistercians, also known as Trappists, were founded in the 12th century, to provide a stricter interpretation of the rule of Saint Benedict, than that lived by the Benedictines. The Cistercian monk promises “stability unto death” on the day of his profession. That means not travelling beyond the confines of

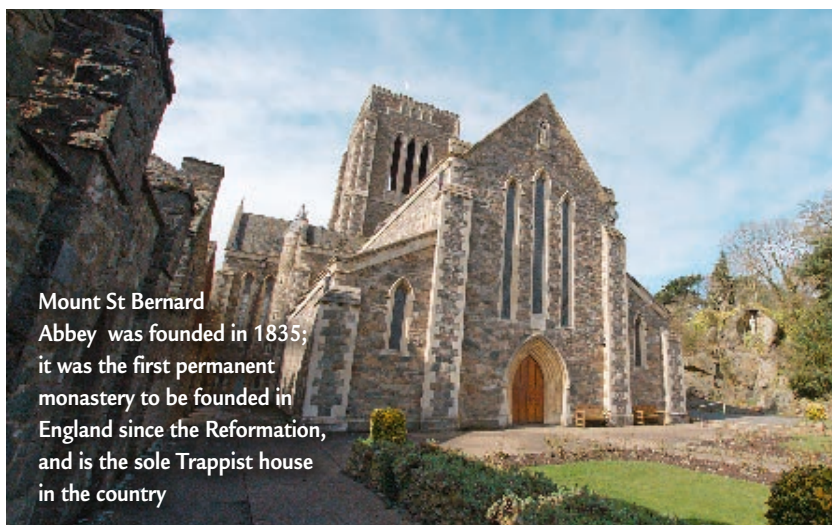


The daily timetable of the monks is demanding, from waking for Vigils at 3:15am until bedtime after Night Prayer at 8:00pm

the monastic enclosure except in case of medical need or other urgent circumstances. The monastic discipline also requires obedience to the abbot, poverty and celibacy. The daily *horarium* (timetable) is demanding, from waking for Vigils at 3:15am until bedtime after Night Prayer at 8:00pm. The daily routine of work and prayer (*ora et labora*) is the scaffolding which the monastery provides so that the monk can listen for the voice of God.

Lived-in experience

Nick Hamer first came across Mount Saint Bernard while working on his previous film, *Dear Albert* (2014), concerning recovering alcoholics in Leicester. They would stay at the abbey guesthouse as part of their Twelve Step programme. When the filmmaker then proposed a documentary on the monastery, the Abbot first invited him to study the writings of Cistercians like Thomas Merton and to have a live-in experience with the monks. The result is an intimate portrayal of life at the monastery. *Outside the City* is a worthy companion to *Into Great Silence* (2005) and *Of Gods and Men* (2010) even if it is produced on a smaller scale. The severity of the monastic lifestyle is tempered, in this film, by the monks’ wry, typically English, sense of humour. Mount Saint Bernard presents itself as a wholesome and happy place. Yet there is no doubting the heroism of its monks, who have left the mainstream to dedicate their all to God. ♦



Mount St Bernard Abbey was founded in 1835; it was the first permanent monastery to be founded in England since the Reformation, and is the sole Trappist house in the country