

Berkshire Records Office - St Gabriel's

Reference: [D/EX2398](#)

The community was founded as the Congregation of Jesus the Good Shepherd in 1920 for unmarried Anglican women teachers who felt called to a religious life. It eventually evolved into a fullscale conventual religious community within the Church of England, following the Augustinian Rule.

It evolved out of a call in the magazine of the Guild of the Good Shepherd, in 1919, inspired by a conversation between a member of the Guild and Sister Hilda, CSMV [the Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage], a year or two earlier. The Warden of St Mary's Convent, Wantage, arranged the first retreat of 25 potential members in 1920, following which the Congregation of the Good Shepherd was formed with 20 women becoming Probationers. Initially there was no convent, with members meeting in the holidays for common life at St Michael's House, Wantage, and vows being regarded as temporary rather than permanent. Sister Mary Beatrice of the Community of St Mary the Virgin at Wantage became the first Mother Superior, and she was followed in that role by another Sister of CSMV in 1938. It was not until 1951 that a member of the CJGS was elected as Mother Superior. A few Companions were able to live together in a House of Common Life, at St Wulfstan's House, Birmingham, where three Companions set up home together in 1925-1926.

The Community set up St Gabriel's School in Mill Hill, London, in 1929 as a private secondary day school for girls, at the invitation of the vicar of St Michael's, Mill Hill, and the Companions teaching there were also able to live a full-time community life. Between 1931 and 1938 St Michael's Guest House, Wantage, was their base for the holiday retreats, with retired Companions being permitted to stay there full time, while it continued to be used as a guest house for St Mary's Convent during term times. In 1939 they were allowed to use St Agnes House, Ormond Road, Wantage, as the community's mother house and a House of Common Life for 12 of the Companions, who were engaged in parish work, including visiting the workhouse. The community was reorganised in 1942 as 'a Third Order of St Augustine', to bring it into line with other Anglican communities, and the name of the Community of the Companions of Jesus the Good Shepherd was adopted. From this date the members took the title of Sister, and new members undertook a two-year Novitiate.

The Fellowship of St Augustine was formed in 1944 for priests and laypeople wishing to be associated with the order in work and prayer, and members were individually known as Associates CJGS. Meanwhile, from 1956 women might choose to become Oblates of the community, following a modified version of the Rule while living a secular life. The Associates had all died by 2013. The Fellowship of the Good Shepherd, founded in 1948, was for girls and young women aged 15-30, and catered principally for former pupils at the community's schools, both in England and overseas.

St Gabriel's School had started with just eight pupils, rising to 20 by the end of the first year and growing continually through the 1930s, with almost 100 girls by 1935 and 130 by 1939, and a separate junior school existed by the mid 1930s. A Governing Body was formed in 1936. It was evacuated to West Oghwell, Devon, following the outbreak of the Second World War, but this proved too expensive to run as a school, and in late 1942 St Gabriel's moved to Ormond House, Oxford Road, Newbury. They had purchased Shaw House with a view to this becoming the school's permanent home, but Berkshire Education Committee had requisitioned it during the war and seemed unlikely to relinquish it, so the community sold it in 1947 in order to purchase Sandford

Priory for St Gabriel's. The school opened at Sandlesford in 1948. Part of the stables at Sandlesford Priory were converted into a convent building for the Sisters teaching at the school. They also acquired Falkland Lodge for the Junior School in 1949, and this was subsequently renamed Falkland St Gabriel. By the 1950s it comprised a secondary boarding and day school, with a separate junior school and kindergarten at Falkland St Gabriel, Andover Road, Wash Common, Newbury. The Mill Hill premises were used for another school (also called St Gabriel's) for very young children between 1942 and 1947, when the school amalgamated with a neighbouring one. The Sisters ceased involvement with St Gabriel's in 1974, having withdrawn from Falkland St Gabriel earlier, and the convent at Sandlesford Priory was closed. The school was transferred to a new Governing Body and continued as an independent Church of England day school. The premises were sold to the school governors in c. 1983-1984.

A small preparatory school opened at St Michael's House, New Bank, Shaw, near Manchester, in 1937. It closed in c. 1947 and the community sold the building in 1949.

St Gabriel's move to Newbury left the West Ogwell premises vacant for use as a convent and mother house of the order. Conventual Sisters were admitted to the resident Novitiate for at least 2 ½ years before taking final vows and dedicating themselves to a permanent conventual life. The first eleven Sisters took their vows in 1944, and a Novice Mistress was appointed in 1945 to govern the novices and postulants. Tertiary Sisters, who continued along the original lines, were employed in the outside world, almost all as teachers, with some retired teachers engaged in parish work; they joined in community life during the school holidays. The Tertiary Sisters did not generally wear habits when away from the convent.

They carried out overseas work in Borneo from c. 1929, the latter in conjunction with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. When a second Companion arrived in 1930, they were able to commence Common Life. They took over St Monica's School in Sandakan, North Borneo, in 1933. It was destroyed during the war, but when the Sisters had recovered from their ordeal in Japanese internment, they returned to Borneo to resume work and reopen the school. Tertiary Sisters were still there in 1962, running both the school and a hospital and nursing training school, and were hoping to train indigenous teachers to take up the work in future. By 1958 they had a small Novitiate in Borneo, and the small Community of the Little Sisters of the Epiphany was formed. The Sisters ceased to teach at St Monica's in 1962, although one returned in 1965. In the early 1960s the Sisters were also helping at Holy Cross School and mission at Sapi, Sabah, North Borneo. In 1963 a new House of Common Life was established at Simanggang, Sarawak, where they ran St Luke's School for boys and girls. The Sisters were still active in Sandakan and at Kuching in Malaysia in the 1970s.

Work in India (starting around the same date) was still extant in 1962, but depended on the presence of one or two Companions/Sisters working alone. One Sister was in charge of the nursing side of St Stephen's Hospital, Delhi, in the 1950s.

The Archbishop of the West Indies had also called on the Sisters for help. In 1945 the community took over the work of the CSJB in Bridgetown, Barbados, renaming the convent the Convent of the Good Shepherd. In 1950 it was agreed that this should be the mother house for all the community's West Indies work and the place for all local Novices to be trained. They opened a preparatory school in Bridgetown in 1947, and a secondary school (St Gabriel's) in 1957. There was a wafer bakery at the convent. The Sisters left Barbados in 1966.

In 1946, the community took over St Hilda's College, Belize, British Honduras, at the request of the Bishop of Honduras. They withdrew from Belize in 1950 to join the Sisters in Barbados.

In 1948 they began work in Georgetown, British Guiana (later Guyana), and began to accept West Indian novices. There they undertook a hostel for girls over nine 'from the sugar estates' attending the town's high schools; and (from 1950) St Gabriel's School, a junior mixed school for children aged 6-12, funded by the sugar planters. They also worked with local Mothers' Unions. A convent was built in 1949 and opened in 1950. By the 1960s there was also an altar bread bakery in Georgetown. The Guyanese government forced foreign sisters to leave in the late 1960s and nationalised all schools in Guyana in 1976, leaving the Sisters to concentrate on parish work and the wafer bakery. From c. 1980-1981 the Guyana sisters began to spend lengthy periods in Haiti with the Sisters of the Society of St Margaret. This branch of the community ceased with the death of the last Guyanese Sister.

They were also invited to Antigua to run a preparatory school for 'coloured boys', but felt they could only make occasional visits there. However, by 1950 they were engaged in parish work and in that year they started St Michael's School, a private boys' junior/preparatory school. By 1957 work in Antigua included running the Mothers' Union in the island. They left Antigua in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

They started work in Grenada in 1954 and ran a High School and junior school there as well as working with Mothers' Unions. The work in Grenada was given up in 1963 to allow reinforcement of work elsewhere.

In 1965 one Sister moved to Trinidad for parish visiting and Mothers' Union work, and a group of Associates was still active there in the mid 1970s although no Sisters were based on the island.

Hosting retreats was the principal work undertaken at West Oghwell. By 1960 the mother house in Devon had a small wafer bakery producing communion wafers and a printing room (the latter producing parish magazines and Christmas and other cards). The wafer bakery closed in 1974. In the 1970s the Sisters were also doing prison work. The convent was sold in 1995.

From 1952 to 1958 they ran a Retreat House at Chester. This had previously been conducted by the CSMV, and was passed to the Community of the Holy Name in 1958.

In 1974 they opened a branch house at Deerhurst, Gloucestershire, in the old vicarage. They ran a Christian centre, helped with parish work and work with children, and led retreats and Quiet Days. They ceased this work in January 1980 in order to do similar work in central Torquay.

The remaining sisters joined forces with the Community of St John Baptist at Clewer in 1995, moving with the latter to Begbroke Priory, Kidlington, Oxfordshire, in 2001 and then to a purpose-built convent building at Ripon College Cuddesdon, Cuddesdon, Oxfordshire in 2012.

Source: The Berkshire Records Office (retrieved December 2020)

<http://ww2.berkshireenclosure.org.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=DEX2398>

The Records Office also has the following catalogue of items which were deposited with them in October 2013 (acc. 9289)

Arrangement of the catalogue

1 Community

1/1 Chapter minutes

1/2 Council minutes

1/3 Conferences of Sisters Conventual

1/4 Log books

1/5 Novitiate log books

1/6 Other records relating to the Novitiate

1/7 Statutes, constitutions, Rules, and related papers

1/8 Property and finance

1/9 Common life, retreats and services

1/10 Newsletters and magazines

1/11 Circular letters

1/12 Correspondence:

1/13 Miscellaneous

2 West Oghwell Convent, Devon

2/1 Registers of services

2/2 Convent accounts

2/3 Miscellaneous

3 Sandleford Priory Convent

3/1 Convent log books

3/2/Miscellaneous

4 Fellowship of St Augustine

4/1 Log books

4/2 Rule of Life books

4/3 Lists and registers of Oblates and Associates

4/4 Miscellaneous

5 St Gabriel's School, Sandleford

5/1 Minutes

5/2 Miscellaneous

6 St Gabriel's School, Mill Hill [second foundation]

6/1 Log books

7 The Retreat House, Chester

6/1 Log books

6/2 Miscellaneous

8 Deerhurst Vicarage, Gloucestershire

8/1 Convent log books

8/2 Registers of services

8/3 Miscellaneous

9 House of the Good Shepherd, Torquay

9/1 Registers of services

10 Borneo

10/1 Photographs

10/2 Miscellaneous

11 West Indies

11/1 Belize

11/2 West Indian Chapter

11/3 Convent of the Good Shepherd, Barbados

11/4 Convent of the Good Shepherd, British Guiana

11/5 St Gabriel's School, Georgetown, British Guiana

12 Documents not related to the community