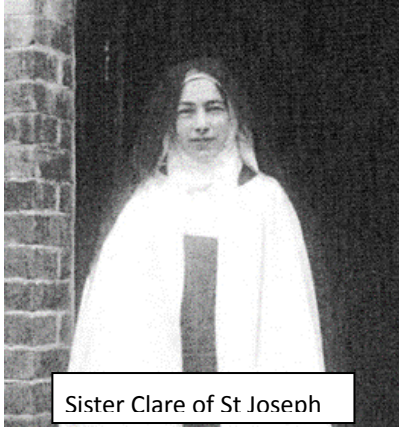


## Gillingham's Carmelite Convent



Sister Clare of St Joseph

There must now be very few people living in Gillingham who can remember when it was home to a religious order and a convent. The convent, which lasted for twenty years, is one of Gillingham's historical secrets. Its resident sisters long ago left it for elsewhere, and most of its buildings are no longer to be found.

The Gillingham convent had its origins in the Catholic mission of the Freame family. Major Bertram Freame and his sister Ethel both had a lifetime commitment to develop Catholic worship within the town. They achieved some of this in 1907 when Bertram gave a cottage he owned at Rolls Bridge to create a new church for the town's growing Catholic congregation. Bertram's vision was shared by Ethel, who was convent educated and had long harboured a vision of bringing a religious order to Gillingham.

The opportunity to do this came later in life when she and Bertram, unmarried and still sharing the family mansion of The Chantry at the bottom of Common Mead Lane, decided that they needed a smaller home. In 1923 they moved to a new house named Higherfield. Shortly afterwards the Freames made contact with the Bishop of Plymouth, who put them in touch with the Carmelite convent of Notting Hill in London. Notting Hill at this time was in the forefront of the Catholic revival, and was achieving a reputation for its many new convent foundations. In July of 1924 the Prioress came to see The Chantry and was immediately delighted with it. The house was in a convenient position for the town but secluded and not overlooked, making it suitable for a new Carmelite community.

The sale was quickly concluded, and comprised the main building and some outbuildings, together with the gardens and orchards. Through the autumn of 1924 and into the spring of 1925 much work evidently took place, including extensive interior alterations and a new higher wall to the adjoining lane, which can still be seen.

The opening and enclosure of the convent took place on Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> March 1925, and was fully reported in the next issue of the *Western Gazette*. The opening ceremony was led by His Eminence Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, and the Bishop of Plymouth, and was witnessed by a large number of priests from other Catholic churches around the Dorset and Wiltshire area. The newspaper reported that 'After the crowd had passed through the great entrance doors the enclosure was imposed, and they were shut against the outside world.'

### The Gillingham Carmelites

The founding group from Notting Hill were mostly of sisters well acquainted with the Carmelite vocation. The new Prioress for Gillingham, Mother Inez, was born of an English family in Chile, entering Notting Hill in 1918. Sister Carmel, chosen as Subprioress, had first joined the Carmelites at Liverpool before coming to Notting Hill. Sister Mary of St Joseph, born in Lancashire, came to Gillingham as a novice and later became Prioress at Bramshott. Sister Zoe, appointed as Depositrix, moved on from Gillingham in 1927 to lead the foundation of another Carmelite house at Branksome.



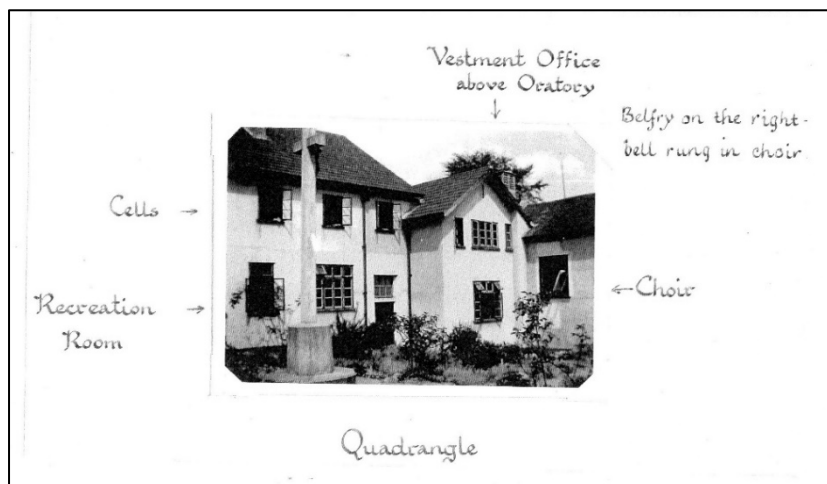
Mother Inez in later life

The sisters at Gillingham are not always easy to identify because they were usually known by their Carmelite names, eg Sister Clare of St Joseph. However birth names would be used for official records such as census returns, and from these references something of their previous lives can be reconstructed.

During the next few years the original Gillingham Carmelites were joined by others, so that by 1930 there were 15 sisters. In 1939 the house had 18 sisters. Among the younger ones was the 19-year old Sister St Mary Immaculata or Maraglen, who came from Felixstowe; she would later become part of the founding group for a new convent at Sclerder in Cornwall. Later again in 1940 came Sister Mary Louisa, who much later in life would write biographies of the Gillingham Carmelites.

Some new building took place, much of it with help from Lady Arundell of Wardour Castle, which had long been a stronghold of Catholicism within the area. In 1929 a new wing was added. Surviving photographs indicate that the facilities included an oratory or chapel with a tribune (gallery) and vestments office; choir; provisory, kitchen, refectory, infirmary, library, recreation room, and kitchen; and printing, sorting, and cutting rooms for the house's printing activities. The chapel was known as the Chapel of Our Lady of Hope. A new cell block was built which included space for six novitiates.

The gates and walls were intended to keep the resident sisters entirely separate from the life of the town. The only exception to this was the oratory or chapel, which was accessible to the public at set times for attendance at Mass, Benediction, and Confession, and access to which would have been designed so as to maintain the privacy of the rest of the building.



Some of the new buildings of the Gillingham convent (*Quidenham archives*)

By virtue of the nature of the Carmelite order and its way of life, only a limited amount can be known about life within the convent walls. Carmelite sisters were distinguished according to their level of advancement within the vocation. A new recruit would join the community as a postulant or lay sister for a minimum of a year, and during this time would still wear her secular clothes. Only after satisfying the Mother of her vocation would she be allowed to take the Carmelite habit of white and brown dress and become a novitiate, a stage normally lasting two years. Later the novitiate would take final vows to which she was bound for life and receive a black veil.

The 'Clothing' ceremony, in which the newly inducted sister is allowed to assume the official Carmelite habit and becomes an official novitiate, was considered of such importance that the Gillingham Catholic public were allowed access. The first of these clothing ceremonies in the new convent was held on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1925. Ethel Freame in her diary gives some detail of the ceremony, noting that 'There was great excitement at the Convent, for Sister Michael was clothed and it was the first ceremony of the kind that Gillingham had ever seen.'

Three sisters of the community were known as extern sisters or outsisters: their job was to liaise with the world outside the convent walls in matters such as shopping, welcoming guests, etc. They

lived in separate quarters in the convent, wore a special habit for going out, had a modified rule and were not allowed to take vows. Another small group were the convent printers. The convent had a printing press which would have produced items such as prayer cards, and there may possibly have been commercial links with traders in the town. The community would have expected to grow most of its own food in the spacious grounds around The Chantry.

The memoir of Mother Inez records that 'the first years were a continuous struggle against poverty and dry rot.' While the building of the new wing no doubt brought much-wanted space and comforts, the war years of the 1940s brought its own hardships. Sister Mary Louisa, newly joined in 1940, writes:

The Community was very poor. We had no man to work for us - did most things ourselves. I learnt all about lagging pipes, cleaning gutters, pumping water out of drains – learnt to put a washer on a tap. Lot of vegetable gardening. Sowing, thinning out, pricking, watering, planting ... Never pick up a frosty pail with a bare hand – takes the skin off ...'

### **After Gillingham Carmel**

Gillingham Carmel came to an end on 12th December 1945. On that date the remaining 15 sisters left Gillingham. Mother Inez' memoir states that 'At the end of 20 years Mother Inez found it necessary for us to move elsewhere, for very many reasons.' It is known that at least part of the site was requisitioned for other uses during the war years.

A suitable house was found near Newbury, Berkshire. During the Carmelite time the property was known as Monastery Farm. The sisters were given a Jersey heifer, and Sister Mary relates 'When the cow calved I learnt to hand-milk. I made butter and cream cheese and hard cheese'.

However, the local authority would not allow a chapel to be built, and after eight years the sisters moved once again, to a former manor house at Bramshott in the east of Hampshire. 14 sisters made the move to Bramshott. Here they built a cloister, a novices wing, and a printing shop, and extended the drawing room to make a chapel. Printing became their main form of income. But by the 1960s the sisters were fewer in number and mostly elderly, and it was recognised that their future there was unsustainable.

This last removal of Gillingham Carmel took them in 1968 to the Carmelite monastery of Quidenham in Norfolk. Most of the remaining sisters died at Quidenham and are buried there. The last was Sister Mary Louisa, who wrote biographies of the other sisters; she died in 2015 at age 99.

In Gillingham the convent buildings did not long outlast the departure of the sisters. By 1947 some conversion of some of the property into flats was taking place. Not many years later most of the old Chantry and some of the newer convent buildings would be levelled to provide for the new residential road of Common Mead Avenue. Only the novitiate block, now flats, and most of the convent wall to the road, remain to remind us of the short existence of Gillingham's monastery.

*I am indebted to the Carmelite monastery at Quidenham, Norfolk, for supplying much of the information on the Gillingham sisters.*