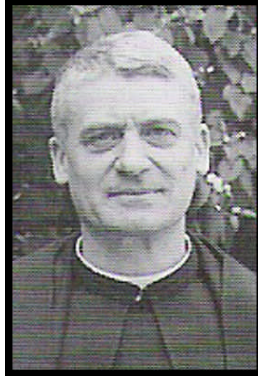


R.I.P.

John Bernard Orchard

3rd May 1910 – 28th November 2006



Dom Bernard Orchard OSB

The Very Reverend Dom Bernard Orchard who died on 28th November 2006 at Ealing Abbey aged 96 was first and foremost a prayerful and conscientious monk and a really holy man. He joined Ealing Priory School in 1919 as a ten year old, being No 323 on the formal Registration Books of the School kept since its foundation in 1902. He distinguished himself in many ways, but especially in his athletics talents, achieving a long jump record which remained unbroken for twenty years until surpassed by Anthony (later Abbot Francis) Rossiter; He left in 1927. Fr Bernard entered monastic life at Downside Abbey near Bath in 1932 and was sent to Ealing to take over the Headmastership of his own school in 1945. He had himself been the first Old Priorian to go to University when he got a place at Cambridge in 1927 and he set himself to make sure that as many of his own pupils as possible would enjoy the same experience. Nigel Watson's history of the school *From the Smallest Beginnings* (2002) records that at this date he was already a formidable character.

Tall, striking and athletic in appearance, with a perpetual gleam in his eye, his resemblance to a leading film star of the day earned him the complimentary title of 'the poor man's Cary Grant'. He was a charismatic and awe-inspiring presence. Though he would have had every reason to succumb to the temptations of vanity, he was to the end the humblest of men. Dedicated and enthusiastic, he was brimful of ideas but relied on others both to implement the best and dissuade him from the worst. He was a man of strong opinions who did not believe in half-measures. Highly regarded by his staff because he rarely interfered in their work and did not expect them to interfere in his. He was direct and straight forward but could be unthinkingly, perhaps 'inadvertently' would have been a more accurate word, tactless. Sometimes he heard what he wanted to hear and he had a tendency to sweep all before him in his march towards his objective. But strongly voiced criticism or properly argued protest he might listen to.

One pupil from this era testifies to the enormous energy and drive which characterised his whole life. The fast expanding school needed equipment of every kind. Fr Bernard heard that the Hanwell Social Centre in Cuckoo Lane was about to close. He organised Fr Kevin and a Cadet Corps lorry with a contingent of 'volunteer' pupils to do a little legal scavenging for desks and chairs. And when the Lime Grove

film studios closed, the school gym profited by some much needed lighting and stage equipment.

One of Fr Bernard's greatest talents was picking lay teaching staff to complement the monks with whom Downside at this time supported Ealing. He went for men and women who were themselves scholars and who understood what high standards the older universities required. He collaborated enthusiastically with Middlesex County Council when the eleven plus was introduced and enabled poorer Catholic boys to benefit from the sort of education he was aiming to offer. His ambition for the school was, in Watson's words, 'the Conversion of England through the education of Catholic boys in the practice and knowledge of their religion.'

In 1947 the school was at last 'recognised as efficient' by the Ministry of Education enabling the staff to participate in the Teachers' pension scheme and in 1951 Fr Bernard was himself admitted to The Headmasters' Conference, making St Benedict's (as he had renamed it) one of only seven Catholic schools and the only Catholic day school in membership. And in the same year a pupil won the school's first Open Scholarship to an Oxford College.

As Headmaster he played a full and conscientious part in religious education teaching, though as time went on past pupils report his growing exasperation with the routine apologetics course from Mgr Sheehan's textbook which in the fifties was still apparently a staple of the senior seminaries and which Fr Bernard had earlier hoped might suit his Sixth Formers. His rigorous loyalty to the Church *semper reformanda* and to his own vocation as a monk and a priest provoked many Old Priorians to try their vocation either to the priesthood or the religious life, or both, and there can be little doubt that nothing gave him greater satisfaction than seeing his boys taking up these ways of serving God.

In 1959 and at the peak of his powers he obeyed Abbot Rupert Hall's instruction to step down from the Headship in four terms' time. He invited the school inspectors to visit to prepare a report for his successor and in June 1960 they recorded that his contribution had been 'outstanding' and that his absence would be 'keenly felt.' 'His unshakeable faith in the school's future, his tireless energies and his qualities as a man and a teacher have enabled him to overcome the day-to-day difficulties and to keep the school on the course that he had early charted for it.'

Tragically his appointed successor, Dom Gerard Hayes, died after just one term, and *his* successor, Dom George Brown, asked to be allowed to give up only four years later. So in 1965 he obeyed the call to the Headship once more, rather less enthusiastically as he admitted. In his second term his self-confidence was undiminished. "Revolution" was abroad in Church and state and Bernard seems to have welcomed it both as an ecumenist and as a scripture scholar and to have managed it as a headmaster. In the school he oversaw a great expansion in music teaching and in modern language teaching with a language laboratory; traditional prizes were abolished for the boys: the cadet corps ceased to be compulsory. He did not give way over compulsory attendance at School Mass; Watson records that he understood that this might prove the focus for teenage rebellion, responding 'Very good. . . I'm here as head to be kicked but not to budge.'

'Not budging' was in the end the cause of his giving up the Headship for a final time at the end of the Easter term in 1969. He wanted the school to expand; the Abbot and Council felt that the costs involved, on top of repaying the considerable debts already incurred, were just too much to bear. So ended an era. The full story is recorded in the school's official Centenary History.

This Old Priorian obituary naturally concentrates on Father Bernard's achievements as Headmaster and has so far said nothing of the man either as the great scripture scholar or the ecumenical activist that he was. But there can be no doubt that he was the same man with the same determination and energy in these fields that he had shown as Headmaster. At Downside he had been scripture professor helping to train the junior monks and teaching in the school and was too useful in that role to be released when Dom Adrian Morey, Ealing Headmaster 1938-9, asked for him. It was in 1942 that the idea of a one volume Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture was first put forward at a meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association in Cambridge. And it was from Ealing Priory in 1952, exactly at the mid-point of his first Headmastership, that Fr Bernard put his signature, along with those of Edmund Sutcliffe, SJ, Reggie Fuller (another Old Priorian, 1921) and Ralph Russell, OSB on the preface of the first edition. This was a huge editorial job. Fr Bernard was General Editor and New Testament editor; he had also collaborated with William Leonard on the first and key introductory article 'The Place of the Bible in the Church', had written the introductory article on the New Testament epistles and himself done the commentary on Galatians and Thessalonians 1&2. He slaved over the editorial work involved and involved pupils in the school over the things like checking the index on wet Wednesday afternoons, as this obituarist can testify. But even this monumental work pales into insignificance in comparison to his successful work in getting an English translation of the Bible acceptable to Roman Catholics and the Protestant Bible Societies in the Revised Standard Version.

As variously General Secretary and Executive Committee Chairman of the World Catholic Federation for the Biblical Apostolate in Stuttgart between 1969 and 1972 Bernard played a pivotal role in ensuring that Catholics were fully involved in collaboration with other Christians in advancing scripture studies and in supporting the efforts of the Holy See to bring about that unity between his followers that Our Lord prayed for. He was actually Chairman of the original 1968 Steering Committee which was set up by Cardinal Bea as result of Fr Walter Abbott's pioneering world travels to see how the Second Vatican Council's *Dei Verbum* could be implemented and in particular the need for and chances of 'common Bible work' in line with the Council's cautious go-ahead for interconfessional collaboration. Fr Bernard was undoubtedly more cautious in his estimation of the timescale within which visible unity would be achieved than many fellow-workers in the field, but sadly he has proved more insightful in this, as in so many other things, than most of those of us who knew and loved him.



God gave him work till his life's end and gave him life till his work was done

May he rest in peace

***An Appreciation by The Old Priorian Association, with grateful thanks to David Murphy
(OP 1954)***