

ABBOT PATRICK BARRY OSB 1917-2016

Abbot Patrick Barry will be remembered not only as the most long-lived monk in the history of the Community of St Laurence, but also as one of its most distinguished members. The following obituary has been put together from the recollections of a number of people who knew him well in different areas of his long life.

(Noel Barry born 6 December 1917 in Wallasey, Cheshire; educated at St Francis Xavier School, Liverpool and Ampleforth College; clothed 22 September 1935; ordained 22 July 1945; 1938-1942 studied Classics at St Benet's Hall, Oxford; 1942-1964 School Librarian, Senior Classics Master; 1954-1964 Housemaster St Wilfrid's; 1955-80/1980-1997 Member of Abbot's Council; 1964-1979 Headmaster, 1975 Chairman of Headmasters' Conference; 1968-1990 various roles on external committees and governing bodies; 1981 St Mary's Cardiff; 1983 Worth Lay Community (St Peter's Dulwich); 1984-1997 Abbot of Ampleforth; 1997-2009 Resident at St Louis Abbey, Missouri; From 1986 Long-term engagement with the Manquehue Movement in Chile; 2009 Returned to Ampleforth; died 21 February 2016 in the Monastery Infirmary).



ABBOT PATRICK DIED peacefully in the Monastery Infirmary on 21st February 2016, aged 98. He had been Headmaster of the College from September 1964 to December 1979, and Abbot of Ampleforth from 1984 to 1997. Such major responsibilities would be heavy at any time. Undertaken during the second half of the twentieth century, they demanded from Fr Patrick understanding of, and response to, the many changes in the church and the world which marked his long life.

Noel St John Barry was born in Wallasey on 6th December 1917, four weeks after the Russian Revolution and with the Armistice still nearly a year away. Pope Benedict XV, who worked, mostly in vain, for peace during, and reconciliation after, the Great War, was trying to resolve difficult relations between church and state in Italy, and between the traditionalists and modernists in the Catholic world. In the Vatican the nineteenth century was not over, and Vatican II was nearly half a century in the future.

Noel Barry's parents were from County Cork, to which they returned when his father,

a general practitioner and surgeon, retired. He loved Ireland always. As a small boy he struggled with the journey by bus, ferry across the Mersey, and city tram to St Francis Xavier's School in Liverpool, until his parents decided to send him and his elder brother to boarding school. This was to have been Downside but when his mother saw the clothing list, she drew the line at three new hand-made suits for a ten-year-old in the middle of the Depression, and Ampleforth was chosen instead.

He arrived at Ampleforth late in the school year because there hadn't been a place for him at its beginning. At the door of the preparatory school he was met by Fr Paul Nevill, tall and apparently alarming but welcoming and friendly. The preparatory school, which became Junior House and is now St Alban Roe House, had been built 11 years earlier; Gilling Castle had not yet been bought. Fr Paul had been Headmaster of the College for only three years and was to serve as Headmaster until 1954. His presence and his example were to have a profound influence on Noel as a schoolboy, and later as a young monk (having taken the name Patrick).

Life in the school in 1927 was in the process of a profound change from how it had been a generation earlier. Young Noel watched the development of the house system, which Fr Paul and his predecessor as Headmaster, Abbot Edmund Matthews, were resolved to achieve, in the teeth of long opposition from the older fathers in the community. St Cuthbert's, the first external house for senior boys, had just been built. From the prep school Noel Barry followed Peter Perceval, later Fr Benet, a year older and a founder-member of St Wilfrid's, into this new house, at first within the main building and then in the brand-new first half of Bolton House.

The house system successfully devolved the Headmaster's authority both to monastic Housemasters – the weekly Housemasters' meeting became a key institution in the running of the school – and to senior boys who helped to run each House as a cohesive community. As Abbot Patrick, aged 97, wrote in an informative, incisive (and funny) essay on 'The Making of Modern Ampleforth:' "this represented a deep shift away from the style of supervision which had been current in the 19th century School and in the generally accepted Catholic model that had its roots in the Jesuit system...Fr Paul generated around himself an atmosphere of trust, liberty and joy, which communicated itself to all staff and boys who came into contact with it."

Since the foundation of St Benet's Hall 30 years before Noel Barry arrived at Ampleforth, monks had been able to take Oxford degrees in a variety of subjects, hugely improving the quality of teaching in the school.

Academic standards were further raised by another of Fr Paul's important innovations: the employment of lay masters. Abbot Edmund and Fr Paul had transformed the school – Fr Patrick remembered being told by one of the old fathers

that in 1903 “no single boy passed any public examinations at Ampleforth” – into a modern English public school, distinctive still but now also distinguished.

From St Wilfrid’s, Noel Barry joined the monastic community at 18, in 1935. He was solemnly professed on 23 September 1939, three weeks after the outbreak of war and, as part of his formation, spent four years at St Benet’s where he took a degree in Classical Mods and Greats. He was ordained priest in 1945. He regretted always that the war made it impossible for him to study theology in a European university: his own theology remained English, rooted in the thought of Newman, whom he revered all his life. As Abbot he commissioned the fine bust of Newman, placed in the little garden next to the monastery refectory. Late in his life Abbot Patrick delighted in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose books he discovered in the 1980s.

The young monk soon became a key figure in the life of the school. He taught Latin and Greek, and was appointed School Librarian: his love of learning and his very monastic sense that a library should be a place of order and of tranquil beauty had a profound and lasting influence on generations of boys. The only occasions in which speech was allowed in his library were during the popular weekly meetings of the school’s debating society, over which he presided with total fidelity to parliamentary procedures. He spread among many boys a keen interest in the recent revival of italic script: his enthusiasm can still be traced in the handwriting of Old Amplefordians infected by it. He trained some boys in the craft of printing, operating a small press in the school and for the abbey, an interest resumed decades later when, as Abbot, he organised the Ampleforth Abbey Press to publish short books by members of the community, including the much-valued St Benedict’s Prayer Book for Beginners, which he put together himself. His own perfectionist appreciation of lettering developed into his serious skill, admired by expert practitioners in the field, as a letter-cutter in stone: examples of his work can be seen in the Abbey Church, the library and on the gravestones of his brethren.

In 1954, the year in which his friend and mentor Fr Paul died, he became Housemaster of St Wilfrid’s; he was also the Senior Classics Master and worked closely with Fr Basil Hume in the management of the school’s studies. Those who were taught Latin and Greek by him remember a perfectionist schoolmaster, himself an excellent classicist, who inspired awe and hard work and kept perfect order without ever raising his voice, but who also had an engaging sense of fun and a smile which could light the bleakest grammar class on a Yorkshire January morning. He was perhaps happier in the classroom than as a Housemaster living in close proximity to 50 adolescent boys. For ten years he presided over St Wilfrid’s, an austere and rather intimidating figure in the eyes of the younger boys in the House (and most of the older ones too). No pop music was ever heard on the House gramophone in his

time; the radio was permanently tuned to the Third Programme. Senior boys, however, might discover that much of his reserve was a matter of shyness, and that it concealed not only his sense of humour but a depth of understanding that could much encourage those in trouble or distress.

In 1964 Abbot Basil Hume, elected the year before, appointed Fr Patrick, to no one’s great surprise, as Headmaster. He governed the school for 16 years, piloting it successfully through the choppy waters of the swinging sixties and the uneasy seventies, “the age of permissiveness,” these waters made rougher for a Catholic school by the rolling waves that spread through the whole Church from Vatican II. It was a challenging time for an institution rooted in the traditional certainties of the faith and of the public school ethos. Fr Patrick’s response to the challenge was both clear and subtle.

Temperamentally conservative, he was no pushover for the pressure to change, but was far-sighted enough to see the need for a deep-seated shift in educational style, which involved both fidelity to roots and an openness to what was authentic in the new climate. In this sense he was a careful visionary who, after appearing to resist the normal strident calls for reform, would suddenly introduce significant changes which were surprisingly ahead of merely popular trends.

He quickly brought able lay masters into positions of major responsibility, and thus opened the way for a significant change in the school’s ethos. He set up consultative committees and included representation from all levels of the school. Above all, he inaugurated a wide ranging process of consultation with parents, for whom this period of social upheaval was very disturbing. He did not merely hold Parents’ Days; he went round the country, accompanied by members of staff, to regional meetings in parents’ homes, disarming the current tendency for parents to blame schools for the more perplexing aspects of their children’s behaviour. His rather forbidding style as headmaster in the school was counter-balanced by his warmth and openness in these meetings.

Monks, boys and teachers under his authority as headmaster testify to the weight of his presence and the wisdom of his judgement. Always quiet and careful in manner, he would listen to what someone was saying, without replying, and then listen some more, in more silence, as the other person gradually lost confidence in the case or the request they were making, often no doubt because the case didn’t amount to much or the request was not going to be granted. At last you might, or might not, receive the smile.

Meanwhile he quietly loosened many accepted religious practices in the school (such as the daily compulsory Mass), recognising that their time had passed. He also

adapted the school curriculum, modifying the traditional pre-eminence of Classics and History, widening the range of choice, and achieving a greater parity between the different disciplines. In particular, he made it his business to give far greater prominence to the place of Music. He called in the help of the distinguished musicologist, Martin Cooper, in appointing David Bowman as Director of Music, and this, together with his subsequent appointment of Simon Wright as organist, gave music a status in the life of the school which it still retains.

Fr Patrick's outstanding qualities as a Headmaster in a very difficult time were recognised in the wider world of independent education and he was, in 1975, elected as the first Catholic, and of course the first monk, to be Chairman of the Headmasters' Conference. Reluctant at first, he was persuaded to accept the office by Abbot Basil. He presided over the HMC when educational discourse was dominated by the challenge of comprehensivisation, as a result of which many of the great grammar schools were entering the independent sector. His successor as Chairman, Sir Roger Young, Headmaster of George Watson's College in Edinburgh, paid tribute to "his mixture of charm, modesty and efficiency (which) made meetings pleasurable and businesslike – a rare combination."

When Abbot Basil Hume was appointed to Westminster in 1976, it seemed to many that Fr Patrick was the obvious choice as successor. The fact that he was not elected throws an interesting light not only on his style of leadership, but also on the particular temperamental qualities which characterised it and on the way these were perceived by the Community. Whereas Abbot Basil had been, by nature, a consulter and a builder of consensus, Fr Patrick was more inclined in his decision-making to be something of a loner. He was not inclined to seek advice and preferred to think his way through to making major decisions. This gave stability and continuity to his style as Headmaster, but it was one that appeared threatening to a lively Community which was grappling with the many changes in the life of the Church. The fact is that Fr Patrick did not really welcome wide-ranging discussion of policies and ideas, and was temperamentally inclined to be somewhat intolerant of those who opposed his own view. His superficial steeliness of purpose concealed an underlying vulnerability and complexity which inhibited his ability to handle areas of personal conflict. No-one was more aware of this handicap than he himself, and he would continue to struggle with it when he was later elected Abbot.

After his retirement as Headmaster at the end of 1979 he spent some years on an Ampleforth parish in Cardiff and served as the English Benedictines' adviser on adult education until, in 1984, he was elected Abbot.

Some members of the community were daunted by the prospect of the renowned and formidable Headmaster as their superior. An elderly parish father who was being

cared for elsewhere in his final illness (this was before Abbot Patrick's enlargement of the monastery to the west to include a professionally staffed Infirmary) dreaded the visit from his new Abbot that took place a few weeks after the abbatial election. Whatever took place between them had an effect close to miraculous: the long-troubled old monk died shortly after the Abbot's visit, at peace with himself, with his community and with God.

For 13 years Abbot Patrick carried the arduous responsibility of presiding over a large community with a number of different kinds of work, schools and parishes, as well as St Benet's Hall and increasing pastoral work at the Abbey to be sustained and developed. The challenges, common, in the wake of Vatican II, to all traditional religious communities which were also coping with new pressures from the outside world, were very demanding. As had been the case when he was headmaster, he responded with the care and foresight represented in the title of a paper he produced for the community, *Stability and Change*. As ex-officio Chairman of the government of the school, he took steps to formalise and modernise this role by setting up a body of lay advisers, and he identified and addressed key areas in which the school needed to develop, including an extensive building programme which he oversaw with shrewdness and prudence. Most notable was the decision to combine at Gilling the prep school populations of Junior House and Gilling, as Ampleforth College Junior School (later to become St Martin's Ampleforth), so freeing St Alban Roe House for monastic use.

He was always open to the challenge of new initiatives and two of these in particular were close to his heart. He took in hand an informal relationship which existed between Ampleforth and the Manquehue Apostolic Movement in Chile, a lay movement which was in the course of founding important schools in Santiago, and which had looked to Ampleforth for Benedictine guidance and example. Abbot Patrick saw in this movement an embodiment of the new emphasis placed by Vatican II on the involvement of lay people in major apostolic works. He also, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Harare and with the full support of his community, founded what was to be the only monastic house in Zimbabwe, and this at a time when that country was suffering great difficulties.

Abbot Patrick retired in 1997, in his 80th year. For the next 12 years he lived at St Louis Abbey in Missouri, founded from Ampleforth in 1955. This was in some ways one of the happiest periods of his life: relieved of the burden of authority, he was, in "his depth of spirit and his serenity" (the words of the Abbot of St Louis), a source of inspiration and encouragement to the American community, particularly among its younger members to whom he taught monastic history. While at St Louis he suffered and survived a serious illness, and wrote a heartfelt book, *A Cloister in the World*, in tribute to the Manquehue movement. He also wrote a new and beautiful

introductory essay to his own translation of the Rule of St Benedict, originally published by the Ampleforth Abbey Press in 1997.

He returned to Ampleforth in 2009, and his last years, during which he faced declining sight and hearing and the deprivations of extreme old age with exemplary courage, were marked by the blessed survival of his lucidity of mind (evident to readers of recent Journals), and by warm friendliness (tempered occasionally by the Celtic twilight of the moodiness which sometimes made him hard to approach). Right to the end, appearing daily in choir, in a cloak and woolly hat in his wheelchair, he participated as much as he was able in the liturgy and the life of the Abbey. His life was not only the longest in the history of St Laurence's, but also one of the most significant.