



THE BAR CONVENT

Living Heritage Centre

Learning Resources for Schools

Teacher Information Pack

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A Brief Timeline

- 1585** - Birth of Mary Ward
- 1586** - Death of Margaret Clitherow
- 1609** - Mary Ward founds the Congregation of Jesus
- 1631** - Pope Urban VIII refuses to recognise Mary's order
- 1639** - Mary Ward returns to England
- 1642** – Mary Ward and her sisters in Heworth, near York, during Civil War, Siege of York
- 1645** - Death of Mary Ward
- 1686** - Frances Bedingfield buys the original house on Blossom Street
- 1769** – Ann Aspinall's new 'hidden chapel' is completed
- 1877** - Congregation of Jesus recognised by Pope Pius IX
- 1909** - Mary Ward recognised as Foundress by Pope Pius X
- WW1** - Convent hosts Belgian children and wounded soldiers
- WW2** - Direct attack on the Convent; five nuns killed
- 2016** - Sisters continue to live in the Convent, now a Living Heritage Centre

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Our Stories

As the oldest living convent in England, with a history spanning over three hundred years, The Bar Convent has many stories to tell of courageous and inspirational people.

The Reformation

Our story begins with the English Reformation and the decision by Henry VIII to break away from the Roman Church and the Pope in order to marry Anne Boleyn, in the process creating his own English Church.

This led to the introduction of penal laws against Catholics. This was continued in the reign of Elizabeth, who made it illegal to harbour priests and set heavy fines for 'recusants' - people who didn't attend services at their parish church.

Margaret Clitherow

One such recusant was Margaret Clitherow, who lived in the Shambles in York. Her story is told in our Exhibition. One day her house was searched and though the priest escaped, she was arrested.

To protect the priest and her family she refused to plead either guilty or not guilty, and was sentenced to be laid down with a sharp rock underneath her and to have weights pressed on her until she died. Rather than give anything away she stayed true to her faith until the end. You can now visit her shrine on the Shambles, though her real house is now thought to be where Cuffs and Co. is.

The Bar Convent has its own priest hole in the Exhibition that pupils can hide in to see what it would have been like.

Mary Ward

In 1609 Mary Ward founded the Institute which the sisters still follow today, the Congregation of Jesus. Mary was unusual for a woman of her time. The Catholic Church at that time said that all nuns were to be 'enclosed', which meant that they had to stay within the convent walls.

However, Mary Ward wanted to start a new order for women which would be active in the world, especially in education. She first walked to Rome in 1621 to ask the Pope to approve her order, but he thought it was too controversial - so, in 1631, Mary's order was suppressed and all her schools in Europe were closed. She returned to England in 1639, and eventually to Yorkshire in 1642. In 1645 she died at Heworth outside York.

You can find out much more about Mary Ward in our Exhibition.

Frances Bedingfield

Mary Ward inspired Frances Bedingfield, who bought the original house which was later to be developed into The Bar Convent as we know it today. The £450 for the house was given to her by Sir Thomas Gascoigne, who said, "We must have a school for our daughters." She bought it under the name 'Mrs. Long': Catholics often used assumed names to hide their true identity, as a way of avoiding fines and imprisonment.

Though the sisters set up their school and went about their business privately, rumours soon spread. In 1695 the community faced an angry mob of people coming to attack them. The sisters, terrified, prayed to St Michael for protection. Legend has it that without any discussion, the mob silently went away, leaving the nuns in peace. An engraving of St Michael hangs over the front door and the nuns commemorate the eve of his feast every year.

Doctor Sterne

The sisters' troubles were not over however. Doctor Jacques Sterne visited in 1748 and insisted that the schoolchildren be sent home and the community dispersed, threatening to take them to court and punish them with the laws against Catholics. The nuns bravely

stayed and Dr Sterne did take them to court for not attending their local church, but the case fell apart as the priest had not held a service on that day. After this Dr Sterne became a firm ally of the Convent and offered to fight on their behalf.

Ann Aspinal

Ann Aspinal, a later mother superior, transformed the Bar Convent once again. She settled the finances so the nuns were no longer in debt and decided to build a whole new chapel. Because of the laws and the danger of another angry mob, this had to be well-hidden and easy to escape from. There were eight different exits to allow easy escape, and a priest-hole for the priest to hide in as saying Mass was still illegal.

Refugees

In the last years of the eighteenth century the community were finally free from persecution as the laws against Catholics were lifted. They were able to help refugees from the French Revolution. They sent people to meet the stage-coaches arriving in Coney Street, and so were able to help many French priests and several communities of nuns.

Recognition

The nuns still fought to have their way of life recognised by the Pope, and this was finally granted in 1877 by Pope Pius IX after a petition sent by Mother Juliana Martin. This was followed by the recognition of Mary Ward as founder of the Institute in 1909, meaning the community was fully recognised.

World Wars

The community continued their tradition of hospitality in the First World War, giving shelter to Belgian children and turning their school hall into a ward for wounded soldiers. During the Second World War, in 1942, the convent suffered a direct hit, in which five nuns were killed.

Today

The Bar Convent is still lived in by nuns today, who you might see on your visit. The sisters continue to do work in the local community and across the world, which you can find out about in our Exhibition.

Our Facilities

The Bar Convent has all the facilities your group will need. You will have use of the Gascoigne room where you can leave bags and coats, eat packed lunches and use our projector and interactive whiteboard. On a sunny day you are welcome to eat lunch in our enclosed garden. The exhibition stretches over two floors and children can look through keyholes, use our interactive displays and even hide in a priest hole. You can also visit the Chapel, with its eight exits and hidden dome roof. Finally, we have a Gift Shop where children are welcome to browse for small gifts and pocket-money souvenirs.

There is a cafe on site where drinks, sandwiches and hot food such as jacket potatoes can be purchased. There are toilets just along the corridor from the Gascoigne room.