



THE BAR CONVENT

Living Heritage Centre

Our Stories

THE BEGINNING: HENRY VIII AND THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

Our story begins with Henry VIII and his quest for an heir. This led him to divorce Catherine of Aragon and set up his own Church in England, separate from the authority of the Pope. Henry also introduced laws against Catholics in England, punishing as traitors anyone who denied his claim to be Supreme Head of the Church of England.



These laws continued under his daughter, Elizabeth I, who made it treason to harbour a Catholic priest. By law, people who did not attend their parish church for services were fined or physically punished. These people became known as ‘recusants’.

One person who refused to attend Anglican services was Margaret Clitherow, who lived in the Shambles in York, where she secretly sheltered Catholic priests. One day her house was searched during a Mass, and though the priest escaped, Margaret 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. Margaret Clitherow is sometimes called the 'Pearl of York'. A relic of her hand is kept in the Bar Convent Chapel.



THE INSPIRATION: 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. Rather than live the traditional contemplative life of a nun, Mary decided she wanted to be active in the world.



Mary wanted to do for women what Ignatius of Loyola had done for men with the Society of Jesus, doing missionary work and helping make the world a better place. She walked to Rome in 1621 to ask the Pope for his blessing, but the Pope thought her order was too controversial and she was suppressed. She travelled around Europe establishing schools for girls, returning to England in 1639, then in 1642 to York where she established a convent at Heworth before her death in 1645.

THE BAR CONVENT: FRANCES BEDINGFIELD

Frances Bedingfield bought the original house in 1686 under the name of Frances Long, as Catholics were still subject to heavy fines and imprisonment.

She was helped by Thomas Gascoigne, who gave £450, saying, “We must have a school for our daughters.”



THE SECRET CHAPEL: ANN ASPINAL



Ann Aspinal decided that the Bar Convent needed a new Chapel and in 1769 this was opened. However it had to be kept a secret, because of the threat of the laws or another angry mob. There was a priest hole for the priest to hide in, and eight exits for the congregation to escape – see if you can count them all.

THE WORLD WARS: HOPE AND TRAGEDY

During World War One the nuns looked after Belgian refugee children and turned their school hall into a ward for wounded soldiers. In 1942, during the Second World War, the convent suffered a direct hit by a Luftwaffe bomb – sadly, five of the sisters were killed.

