# A Symbol of Hope in a Traumatised World

## Buckfast Abbey in the 1920s

***Steve Roach***

The church at Buckfast Abbey is home to many works of art, but one that never fails to fascinate visitors is a bronze bas-relief on the south side of the sanctuary. Created in 1951 by the sculptor Benno Elkan, it commemorates the life and work of Dom Anscar Vonier, Abbot of Buckfast from 1906 to 1938. Nikolaus Pevsner described the bronze relief as 'a remarkable Expressionist piece',[1] but more remarkable still is the story of the man and his monastery, which it depicts. Elkan's work of art portrays an astonishing narrative: the rediscovery of a medieval abbey, a tragic event at sea, a survivor determined to honour the dead, and the stunning monument he built as a result. The destruction of Buckfast Abbey during the Dissolution in 1539 and the more personal tragedy of a shipwreck in 1906 that took the life of Anscar Vonier's predecessor, Abbot Boniface Natter, were desperately dark times in the Abbey's history. Nevertheless, with the return of monastic life to Buckfast in 1882, and with Abbot Anscar Vonier's rebuilding of the Abbey church, it became clear that these medieval roots were bringing forth new life.

I will argue in this essay that the rebuilding of Buckfast Abbey, and especially the Solemn Inauguration of the Abbey church in August 1922, became a symbol of hope for a nation traumatised by the First World War. We shall discover that, as important as events at Buckfast were for the Catholic church in this country, an audience far beyond ecclesial boundaries found itself captivated by this striking sign of 'the possible' in South Devon. The fact that the majority of these monks, including those building the church, were from Germany, only served to underline the extraordinary significance of what was taking place.

In order to appreciate the full impact of events at Buckfast in the early 1920s, it is essential that we do what all good stories do, and that is to start at the beginning. Having assessed the history of Buckfast Abbey, most significantly from its restoration in 1882, we will be able to understand how Buckfast came to embody a genuine sense of hope. In particular, we will focus on the story of Abbot Anscar Vonier, of his arrival at the monastery as a boy, his survival of the shipwreck and his monumental achievement in rebuilding the Abbey church. In a sense, the devastated monastic community at Buckfast in 1906, following the loss of Abbot Boniface, can be seen as a precursor, albeit in microcosmic form, of a traumatised nation following four years of war. And just as Abbot Anscar Vonier brought hope and purpose to his grieving monks, so their rebuilding of the Abbey church proved an inspiration for a country devastated by the First World War.

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[1] B. Cherry and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Devon* (Yale University Press, 1991), p. 224. Marian Campbell, writing in a book to commemorate Buckfast Abbey's millennium in 2018, has praised Elkan as 'a distinguished and original artist and sculptor'. M. Campbell, 'Sacred Silver and Other Metalwork' in *Buckfast Abbey: History, art and architecture* (Merrell, 2017) p. 175.

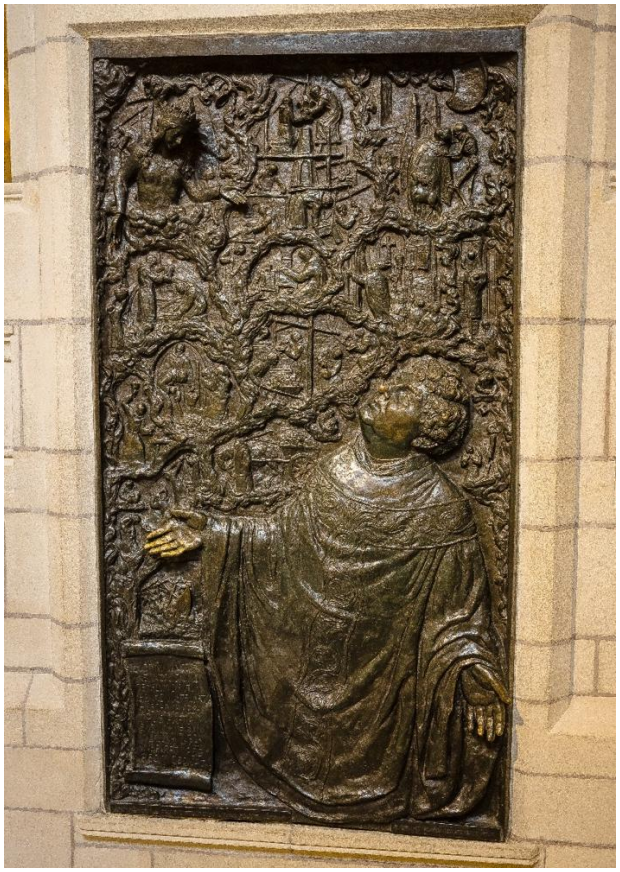

**Figure 1:** Bronze bas-relief of Abbot Anscar Vonier by Benno Elkan in Buckfast Abbey church.[2]

**Figure 2:** Scene from Elkan's bas-relief, depicting the monks rebuilding the Abbey church.[3]

[2] Photo by kind permission of Buckfast Abbey Media Studios.
[3] Photo by kind permission of Buckfast Abbey Media Studios.

# Part One: The restoration of Buckfast Abbey in 1882

St Mary's Abbey, Buckfast, was founded in 1018 and dissolved during Henry VIII's religious reforms in February 1539. However, nearly three and a half centuries later, monastic life was restored at Buckfast due to events that took place in Burgundy, Central France. On 5 November 1880, the Benedictine community of La Pierre-qui-Vire was expelled from its monastery, due to the anticlerical legislation of the Third Republic. A large group of the monks came to England and were welcomed by the community of Ramsgate, who offered the use of their property at Leopardstown, on the outskirts of Dublin. To act as interpreter, Dom Adam Hamilton accompanied the French exiles to Ireland, where they arrived on 28 November 1880, three weeks after leaving France.

It was in September 1882 that Fr Adam noticed a letter in the Catholic periodical, *The Tablet*, signed by a Brother Lawrence, stating that a property known as 'Buckfast Abbey' in Devon was on the market. Having alerted the Superior, Dom Thomas Dupérou, the two monks left immediately for Plymouth to consult Bishop William Vaughan and meet with the property's owner, Dr James Gale. They agreed to rent the property for a period of seven years with the option of a purchase within two years. The first members of the community arrived at Buckfast on 28 October 1882, and the remainder soon followed, with thirty monks in all moving to Devon. Eight months later they were able to purchase the property for £4,700. Fr Adam organised a committee to help the monks in restoring the Abbey, the chairman of which was Lord Clifford of Ugbrooke House near Chudleigh, who became a most generous friend and benefactor of the community.

**Figure 3:** The exiled monks of La Pierre-qui-Vire who moved to Buckfast from their temporary home at Leopardstown, Dublin, in October 1882. The Superior, Dom Thomas Dupérou, is seated third from left on the front row; Dom Adam Hamilton is seated on his left.

The committee appointed Frederick Walters as architect, and he began work on plans to rebuild the Abbey. However, in 1883, Br Paul Lascaraboura discovered the foundations of the medieval church while digging in the monastic garden, which necessitated a drastic change in the architect's plans. The idea of rebuilding was there in theory, but it would take a tragedy at sea to make those dreams a reality.

## The German connection

Once conditions in France began to improve, a number of the monks returned to La Pierre-qui-Vire. The austerity of monastic life at Buckfast meant that an influx of English candidates to replace them was very unlikely. However, a potential solution to the situation was already present within the community. At the time of their expulsion from France, there were two young Germans among the French monks: Dom Wilfrid (Augustine) Schneider and Dom Boniface (Anthony) Natter, both natives of Swabia. During the *Kulturkampf*, there were no monasteries in Württemberg, and so Augustine Schneider, having been alerted to the monastery in Burgundy by his religious sister, had left home for La Pierre-qui-Vire, shortly followed by his cousin, Anthony Natter. These two young religious arrived at Buckfast in 1882 alongside their French confrères.

It was decided that the two Germans should return to Swabia and recruit as many potential monks as possible from parishes in the area. In 1884 an alumnate was established at Buckfast, a sort of monastic school, where the young boys from Germany who showed signs of a monastic vocation were educated. Following their studies, they either joined the community at the proper age, or became secular priests, or returned home to their families. It was in 1887, on one of his trips to Southern Germany, that Dom Boniface Natter visited the village school of Rißegg, near Biberach. After his talk, six local boys expressed their enthusiasm for the idea of travelling to this far-away monastery in England. One of them was a twelve-year-old called Martin Vonier.

## Introducing Anscar Vonier

One of fourteen children, the future Abbot of Buckfast was born on 11 November 1875, the Feast of St Martin, in the small village of Ringschnaitt in the Kingdom of Württemberg, near the ancient town of Biberach. Some 13 years later, on 29 September 1888, having responded so positively to Dom Boniface Natter's talk, it was arranged that Martin Vonier and the other boys should first go to a college at Beauvais, run by the Holy Ghost Fathers, to learn French, which at that time was the language of the Buckfast community.

Martin arrived at Buckfast on 22 August 1889, whereupon he spent four years in the alumnate, before becoming a novice and receiving the name of Anscar on 28 May 1893. Just over one year later, on 2 July 1894, Anscar Vonier pronounced his Simple Vows and commenced his philosophical and theological studies, during the course of which his outstanding gifts were recognised. He was appointed Assistant to the Novice Master even before making his life-long Solemn Vows on 11 July 1897, with his ordination to the

priesthood following on 17 December 1898. The Buckfast community was far from wealthy, but it found the means to develop Fr Anscar's intellectual potential by sending him to read philosophy at Sant'Anselmo, the Benedictine College in Rome, from the autumn of 1899 until July 1900.

## A tragedy on the Mediterranean

Fr Anscar returned to Rome in 1905, when he was appointed professor of philosophy at Sant'Anselmo. Letters he wrote in French to his older sister, an Assumptionist nun in Paris, Sr Marie Switbert Vonier, reveal that the academic life in Rome suited him well.[4] In the summer of 1906, just as he was preparing to visit his sister on the way home to Buckfast, Fr Anscar was instructed to abandon his plans for the summer holidays and instead meet with his abbot, Boniface Natter, at Barcelona.[5] Abbot Boniface, in his capacity as Abbot Visitor of the Cassinese Congregation of the Primitive Observance,[6] was to visit a monastery in Argentina, and Anscar Vonier was to act as *socius* or assistant.

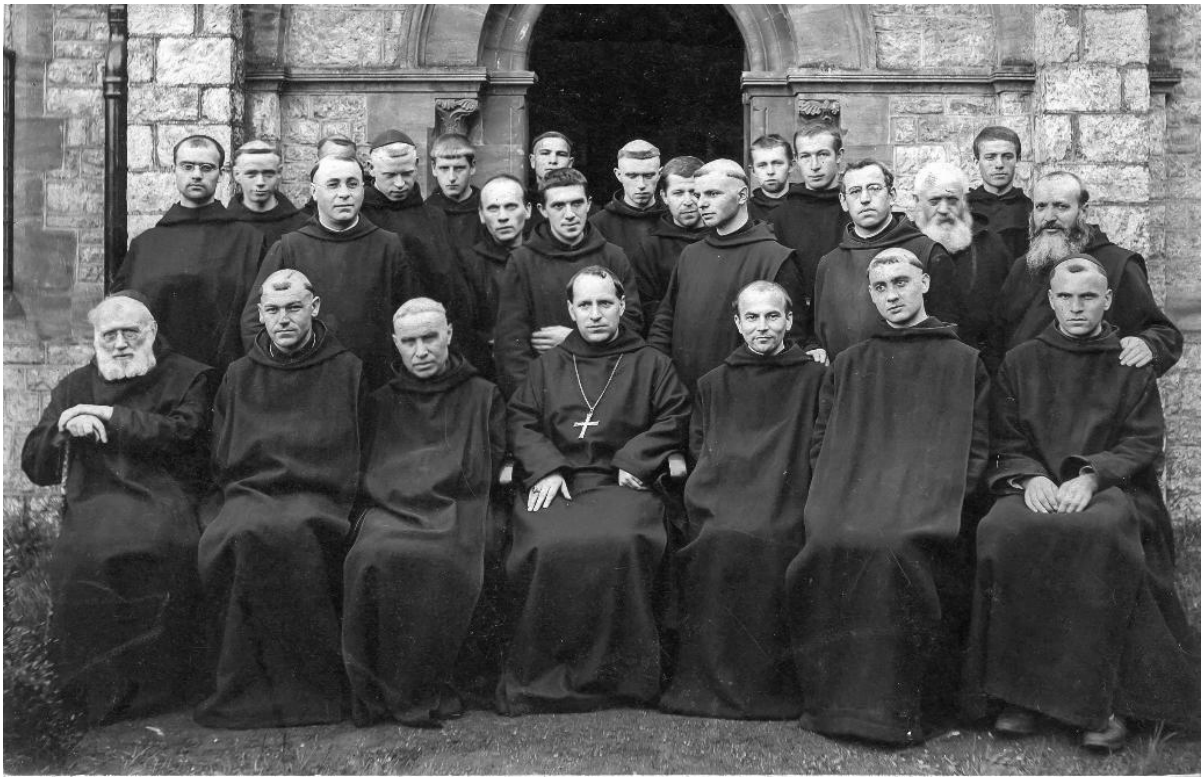

**Figure 4:** The Buckfast community in 1905, with Abbot Boniface Natter in the centre of the front row, and Dom Anscar Vonier two places to his left.

[4] Between 1899 and his death in 1938, Anscar Vonier wrote 175 letters to Sr Switbert, all of them in French. I have translated and annotated this correspondence.

[5] Buckfast became an independent Abbey in 1902, and on 18 November of that year, Boniface Natter was elected Buckfast's first abbot since the Dissolution.

[6] Buckfast Abbey belonged to the French Province of this Congregation at that time. It wasn't until the 1930s that it became part of the English Province, before joining the English Benedictine Congregation in 1960.

On 4 August 1906, as the *Sirio* was sailing along the coast of Spain on a perfectly calm afternoon, it suddenly ran aground and began to sink. This terrible tragedy took the lives of 382 people, one of whom was Abbot Boniface Natter.[7] Fr Anscar was one of the 550 survivors, rescued by the captain of a small ship, the *Joven Miguel*, and taken into the care of a local Spanish family. There can be little doubt that this disaster was profoundly traumatising for the young monk and, I believe, would stay with him for the rest of his life. The following description of his horrific experience comes from a letter that he wrote to his sister in Cartagena on 8 August 1906, just days after the disaster:

> Our vessel was well and truly shipwrecked off the coast of Spain last Saturday. Given that I'm announcing this news to you, you'll conclude that I survived. But a terrible doubt hangs over the fate of Abbot Boniface. A Brazilian Bishop, himself thrown into the sea before being fished out, told me that he saw Abbot Boniface a quarter of an hour after the disaster struck, clinging to a plank of wood. Several steamboats were gathering around the disaster zone, and they might have saved him. May God's will be done. Pray, pray hard for all the dead and for all those whose hearts have been broken by this terrible disaster.[8]

**Figure 5:** Dom John Stéphan discusses this picture of the sinking of the *Sirio* in his book, *Buckfast Abbey: A Short History & Guide*.[9] Standing on the left is the Bishop of Sao Paulo, Brazil, José de Camargo Barros, who died in the shipwreck; standing to his left is the Archbishop of Belém do Pará, José Marcondes Homem de Melo, who survived and commissioned this picture; kneeling on the left is Abbot Boniface Natter; kneeling to his right is Dom Anscar Vonier.

[7] His body was never recovered from the Mediterranean, and instead of a grave in the Buckfast cemetery, a large crucifix commemorates this devastating loss.

[8] Unless otherwise stated, the quotations from Anscar Vonier's letters are my translation of the original French.

[9] D. J. Stéphan, *Buckfast Abbey: A Short History & Guide* (Buckfast Abbey, 1977), pp. 315–17.

**Figure 6:** Fr Anscar (front row, left) photographed just days after the shipwreck, with the Spanish family who took him in.

It was on his return journey to England that Fr Anscar stayed at the convent of St Scholastica, Dourgne in the department of Tarn, and met Abbess Marie Cronier for the first time. The letters he wrote to her over the next 30 years provide us with invaluable insights into his life and personality, as do those he sent to Sr Switbert.[10] I will quote extensively from both sets of correspondence during the course of this essay.

**Figure 7:** Abbess Marie Cronier of St Scholastica's, Dourgne.[11]

[10] Between 1906 and 1936, Fr Anscar wrote over eighty letters in French to Abbess Cronier, all of which I have translated and annotated.

[11] Courtesy of Dourgne Archives.

## The young abbot

Just days after his return to Buckfast, Anscar Vonier wrote to Abbess Cronier for the first time. Discussing the painful yet necessary task of electing a new abbot, he expressed frustration that the monks were being unrealistic about the way forward: 'There is hardly any talk of a successor. People are asking to have the election at the earliest opportunity, yet no one is talking about the choices which need to be made.'[12] Fr Anscar, still only 30 years old, was expecting to resume his teaching duties in Rome, clearly presuming that someone else – someone older and more senior within the community – would be chosen as the new Abbot of Buckfast. The Buckfast Abbey Chapter Minutes reveal that the monks did initially choose Dom Benedict Gariador, a former Superior at Buckfast from 1888 to 1899, as their new abbot, electing him on 8 September 1906. However, at that time Fr Benedict was prior of a monastery in Jerusalem and could not be released from his position there. In the second election, which took place on 14 September, their choice fell on the much younger candidate, Dom Anscar Vonier.

**Figure 8:** Abbot Anscar Vonier after his election on 14 September 1906.
He was only 30 years of age.

[12] This first letter to Abbess Cronier lacks a specific date but was most likely written at the very beginning of September 1906, shortly after Fr Anscar's return from France.

Abbot Vonier's Abbatial Blessing took place on the Feast of St Luke, 18 October 1906. He explains the significance and poignancy of this choice in a letter to Abbess Cronier on 2 October 1906:

> My Abbatial Blessing will take place on 18 October, the Feast of St Luke. Fr Adam Hamilton has found five supremely convincing reasons to have the Blessing on this particular day. They're all drawn from St Luke's account of the shipwreck, described in the Acts of the Apostles, and I'll leave you to guess what they are. If you don't believe in these connections, I'll start thinking that you have the mind of a sceptic. There is only one small detail which doesn't quite fit: St Luke reached the shore with his St Paul, whereas I…[13]

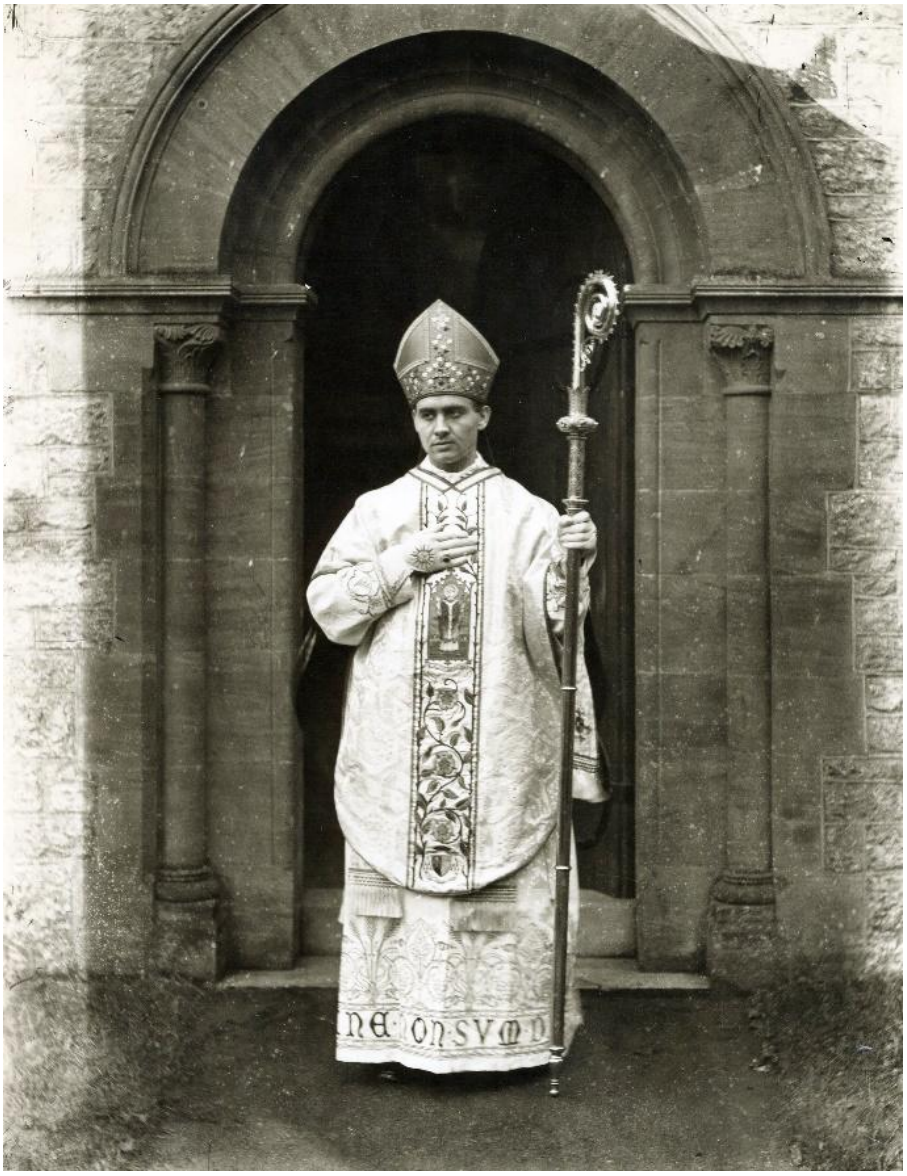

**Figure 9:** Abbot Anscar Vonier on the occasion of his Abbatial Blessing, 18 October 1906.

[13] This is a reference to Acts 27:27–44, where a ship carrying St Paul, his companion St Luke and others ran aground and began to break up. Abbot Anscar is pointing out that, whereas all of those onboard St Paul's vessel reached land safely, this tragically was not the case for Abbot Boniface and hundreds of others on 4 August 1906.

## Abbot Vonier's vision for Buckfast Abbey

We might expect that a newly elected 30-year-old abbot, one who had only just survived a traumatic shipwreck and who was now responsible for the care of a devastated and grieving community, would take things very slowly, gradually easing himself into this new role. In fact, he did the complete opposite. Less than two weeks after the Abbatial Blessing, Abbot Vonier announced his plan to build a new Abbey church in memory of Abbot Natter. An entry for 1 November 1906 from The Annals of Buckfast Abbey offers the following commentary:

> Father Abbot solemnly declared during yesterday's conference that he really does **mean to begin the restoration of the old Abbey church** [*emphasis in the original text*] at the commencement of next year. This news startled all present in the Chapter. But it was said in earnest. The Abbot added that the idea was welcomed by all who know of it, and that he had already received the promise of about £10 yearly for the purpose. He of course expects more, for only a few persons are as yet acquainted with his design…This restoration of the church will be the best memorial of our late Abbot Boniface Natter.

Abbot Vonier's work on the new church began at a breathtaking pace, with the first cartload of stone arriving less than one month after the project had been announced. Dom Ernest Graf highlights the young abbot's 'natural buoyancy, not to say venturesomeness and impetuosity of youth' that enabled him to undertake such a courageous initiative.[14] This might remind us of the young Martin, who left his home in Germany for a foreign land at the age of twelve. However, I would like to suggest an alternative interpretation. Was Abbot Vonier throwing himself into this work as a way of coping with the recent tragedy? It is inevitable that such a traumatic event would have a profound impact on his subsequent actions. The pervasive presence of Abbot Natter in his letters from this time suggests that the loss of Anscar Vonier's spiritual father, together with his own survival, were huge motivations in this historic undertaking. Indeed, in a letter to Abbess Cronier from 3 January 1908, he emphasised the foundational role of Buckfast's first abbot: 'I often think that when a great sacrifice lies at the foundation of a project, which is the case with us, then we can embark with audacity and with boundless hope. Otherwise, our dear Fr Boniface would have died in vain.'

[14] E. Graf, *Anscar Vonier: Abbot of Buckfast*, p. 124.

**Figure 10:** The first cartload of stone arriving at the Abbey. Br Peter Schrode, the master mason, can be seen on the far left, standing alongside the architect Frederick Walters and Abbot Anscar Vonier. It is believed that the horse, a gift to the monastery, was called Prince.

## News of Buckfast Abbey spreads

Dom Ernest Graf, in his biography of Abbot Vonier, explains how the young abbot's audacious plan was soon put into action:

> Having taken the momentous decision, the Abbot's first step was to organize a group of workers – a building squad – since the undertaking demanded skill no less than good will. This proved easy enough, for in the person of Br Peter [*Schrode*] we had a most capable master-mason who had learnt his trade at Dourgne, in France.[15] Time and again the architect, Mr Walters, declared that with Brother Peter in charge there was no need of an architect's clerk to direct the work on the spot. The actual builders were never more than six, and most of the time there were only four or five.[16]

The fact that monks at Buckfast were building their own church became a huge news story, and the number of visitors coming to witness this phenomenon grew exponentially. It should also be acknowledged that the monks received enormous help, not just from their architect, F. A. Walters, but also from professional craftsman and local workers who provided invaluable support in this monumental task.

[15] As well as the convent of St Scholastica's, there was a community of monks in Dourgne: the Abbey of St Benedict's, En Calcat. Br Peter spent 18 months there in 1901–02, learning his craft under the monks.
[16] E. Graf, *Anscar Vonier: Abbot of Buckfast*, p. 44. The main builders alongside Br Peter were Br Ignatius Birk, Br Hilarion Mohn, Fr Richard Dillenz, and Br Paschal Dowling.

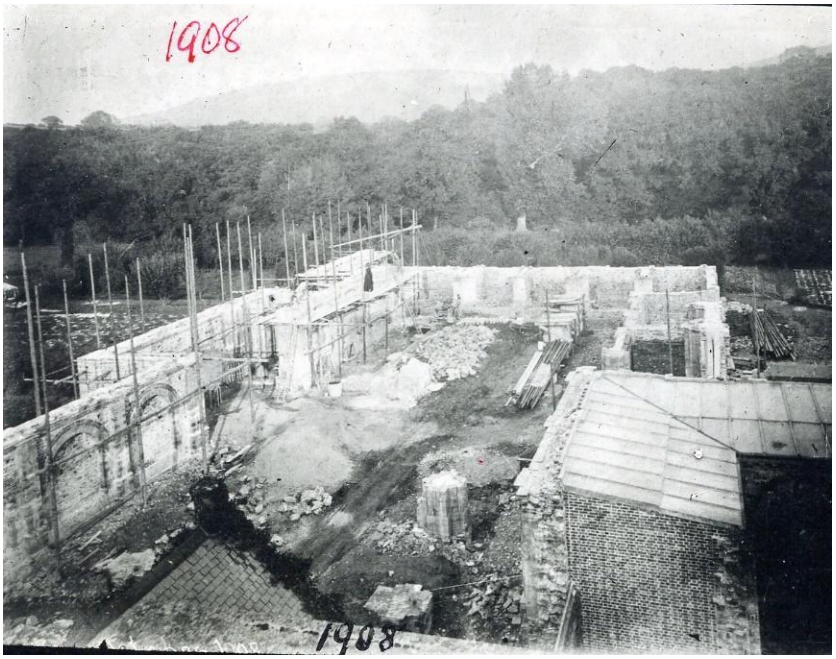


**Figure 11:** A photo from 1908 shows the progress made in a short period of time.

In the years leading up to the First World War, Abbot Vonier gained a growing reputation as a preacher and was invited to speak at various churches throughout the country and abroad. Furthermore, he was becoming well known and respected as an author, with the first of his fifteen books published in 1913. His works were principally aimed at the general Catholic reader, as opposed to a more limited academic audience. All of this had the added benefit of bringing Buckfast and its building works to an ever-greater audience, which in turn brought an increasing number of visitors and financial contributions to the Abbey. The Annals of Buckfast Abbey are full of clippings from both local and national newspapers, which record the extraordinary events taking place in South Devon.

## The First World War

Despite an initially calm period at the Abbey during the war's early months, we get the first indication of a change taking place in a letter to Sr Switbert from 21 June 1915, in which Abbot Vonier writes somewhat obliquely: 'We're still well, but the devil always wants to take advantage of these opportunities to harm us.' An entry from The Buckfast Abbey Annals during May 1915 indicates that it was the sinking of the *Lusitania* which 'roused very angry feelings against Germans in England', thus impacting directly on life in the monastery. As we noted at the start of this essay, Martin Vonier had arrived at Buckfast with several other German boys in 1889 to join many of their compatriots in the alumnate. In the years that followed Buckfast's restoration in 1882, what amounted to a concerted recruitment campaign in Germany ensured that a steady stream of young Germans replaced those French monks who had left Buckfast and returned to La Pierre-qui-Vire. All of which resulted in the situation outlined by Abbot Vonier himself:

> When England entered the war against Germany, two-thirds of the community of Buckfast consisted of German subjects, most of them – priests, clerics, novices, lay

brothers – of military age, not to mention some alumni who reached that age during the course of the war.[17]

On 12 February 1916, Abbot Vonier informed his no doubt anxious sister that they were facing difficulties, but that she need not worry on their behalf: 'Some enemies have recently been trying to cause us harm, but we're well protected and we quietly continue to live our life.'[18] He was more explicit in describing these dangers when writing to Abbess Marie Cronier just seven months later, on 5 September: 'For the past year, we've experienced a consistent and very systematic persecution carried out by a group of enemies who are sufficiently influential to cause alarm.' But he again emphasised the protection he and his community were receiving from the highest powers in the land: 'The Home Secretary defended us with great firmness on the day of the Assumption.'[19]

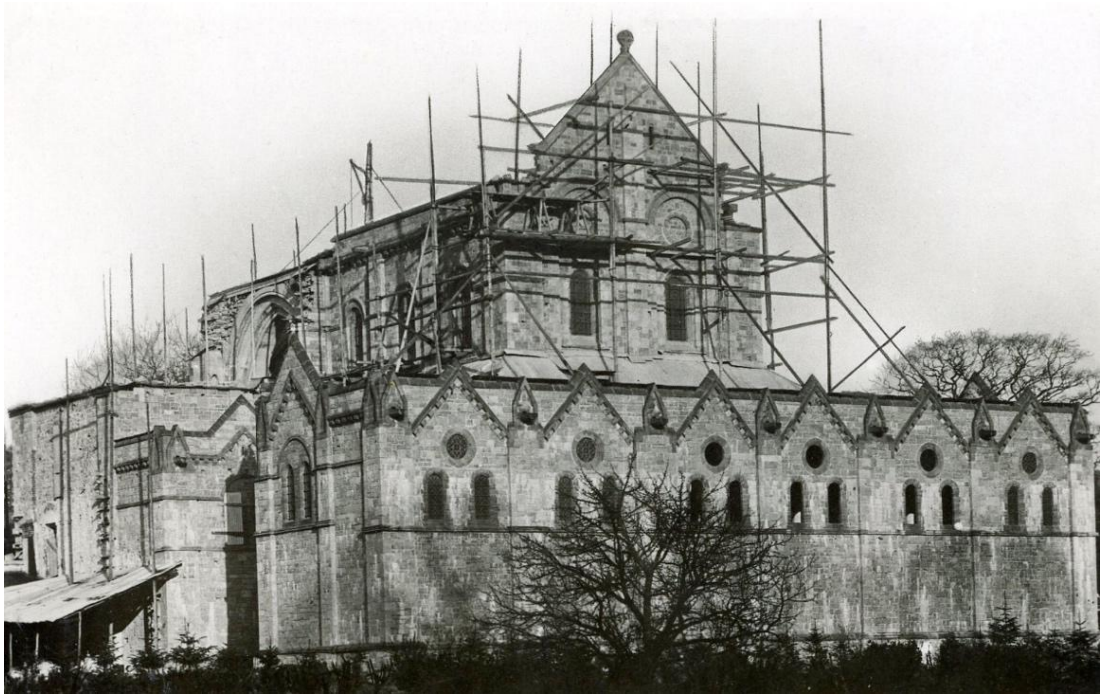

**Figure 12:** Despite the additional challenges of building during wartime, the monks made substantial progress on the church. This photo was taken in 1918.

[17] This quotation comes from a postwar memorandum written by Abbot Vonier, entitled *Buckfast Abbey from 1914 to 1918*, and which Ernest Graf includes in his biography, p. 61.

[18] An entry for 22 October 1914 from The Annals provides the background to this statement:

> Newspapers are publishing the sensational news that all Germans are to be arrested and conveyed to concentration camps. Father [*Abbot Vonier*] went at once to London, to see Mr [*Basil*] Thomson with whom he made friends when the latter was governor of Princetown [*Dartmoor Prison*]. Mr Thomson forthwith arranged that the Germans at Buckfast are not to be touched. Thanks be to God. The arrest of the Germans is due to the agitation of some newspapers. Mr Thomson said he did not like the measure at all; Lord Seaton said he was indignant at it.

An entry in the same volume of The Annals, for 2 July 1915, contains a copy of a letter from the Home Office addressed to Abbot Vonier, which decreed that the German monks at Buckfast Abbey were to be exempt from internment 'so long as they respectively remain in residence at the Abbey, provided you will undertake to give previous notice to the Police if at any time any of the persons named should be about to leave the Abbey.'

[19] Volume VI of The Annals of Buckfast Abbey contains a newspaper clipping from 16 August 1916 in which the Home Secretary, Herbert Samuel, defended the Abbey in response to hostile questions concerning 'alien enemies'.

## Part Two: 'Emerging from the Numbness'

For Abbot Vonier to have ensured the safety and wellbeing of his community – the majority of whom were enemy aliens – during four years of war was a remarkable achievement. But to have additionally made significant progress on building the Abbey church amidst a prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty, with reduced material and funds, was nothing short of extraordinary. Dom Ernest Graf provides his own eye-witness account of this period:

> All through the years of the organized, scientific destruction that we call war, work on the Abbey church went on from day to day, though progress was slowed down by the shortage of stone, cement, and the hundred and one requisites for an undertaking of such magnitude, not to mention the lack of funds. Those were anxious days, and but for the admirable and most self-sacrificing generosity of a benefactress whose name I am not at liberty to divulge, the work would of necessity have come to a standstill.'[20]

I believe that Dom Ernest's juxtaposition of the devastating destruction caused by war and the courageous construction of the monks is crucial to understanding the significance of what happens next. A comment made by Abbot Vonier when writing to Abbess Cronier on 14 November 1919, while describing the unique situation at Buckfast Abbey, could surely apply to the nation as a whole: 'We're gradually emerging from the numbness of five years of war.' As we leave behind the horrors of wartime and enter the 1920s at this Benedictine monastery in Devon, a very clear analogy presents itself – one with enormous resonance and profound significance in this particular context – that of *resurrection*. After four years of suffering and death there came the visible hope of new life. In a very real sense, this new life had begun with Abbot Vonier's plans for rebuilding in 1906, and had continued throughout the years of conflict. England had been victorious in the war, but at a horrifying cost. And while countless families grieved their lost loved ones, with the added tragedy of a flu pandemic bringing devastation to thousands, Buckfast Abbey became a concrete symbol, or a symbol in concrete, of a new dawn.

The letters of Anscar Vonier from this period suggest that he was very conscious of a traumatised nation in need of hope, and of his Abbey being in a unique position to provide it. His awareness of the pain felt by all is clear when writing to Sr Switbert Vonier on 15 November 1918: 'God be praised for the arrival of peace. It's been a terrible four years, even for those who weren't on the battlefield.' And on Christmas Eve of that same year, he expressed his faith that true peace only had one source: 'May 1919 bring clarity and a secure future for us all. We're in the hands of God, on whom everything depends.' Furthermore, in a very unassuming and matter-of-fact statement, he informed his sister the following month that his community were themselves far from being idle: 'We're continuing our work and our life.'

[20] E. Graf, *Anscar Vonier: Abbot of Buckfast*, p. 64.

**Figure 13:** Abbot Anscar Vonier watching as progress is made on the Abbey church by Br Ignatius Birk (left) and Br Peter Schrode.

It was precisely this 'work' and this 'life' that were to become such powerful symbols of hope for many thousands of people. Notwithstanding the modest picture painted by Abbot Vonier, Dom John Stéphan conveys the energy and urgency of what was taking place, framing this activity within a paradigm of death and resurrection:

> With the return of peace and the relaxation of the control of building materials, the pace was greatly accelerated, especially as new friends began to show a keen interest in the undertaking. Considerable progress had been made during the war years. Whereas such wanton destruction had been perpetrated all over Europe, this quiet spot along the Dart had been spared and had witnessed a startling rise in the reconstruction of an ancient monument.[21]

## A great announcement

Following this summary of postwar activity, Dom John went on to describe the announcement of the church's inauguration, explaining which parts of the building would become available for use:

> In the January issue of the Abbey quarterly for 1922, the Abbot announced that the Solemn Inauguration would take place later that year. This would not mean the opening of the *whole* church, but only of the part comprising the sanctuary, transepts, the monastic choir, and a section of the nave.[22]

[21] J. Stéphan, *A History of Buckfast Abbey* (The Burleigh Press, 1970), p. 337.
[22] Ibid.

The announcement referred to above came in the January 1922 edition of *Chimes* and appeared under the title, 'The Abbot's Christmas "Wishes"'. In his touching article, Abbot Vonier relates a story from his youth, one full of the hope that the church itself came to embody. We will also notice his use of resurrection imagery, a key motif of this essay:

> Our friends and readers of *Chimes* will be interested to hear from me that this is positively the last Christmas which the community of Buckfast celebrates in the temporary church.[23] In the days of my noviciate (an epoch now nearly thirty years distant), one Christmas night I was keeping vigil in the little oratory of the Novices, a Bethlehem-like chapel overlooking the foundations of the ancient Abbey church. Peeping through the window at the empty space, I asked myself whether it would ever happen that the community, and I with them, would sing the Midnight Mass on the old spot. In the morning I spoke of my meditation to the Novice Master; he smiled benignly at the dreams of youth.
>
> Christmas of next year will be greater than the dreams of my monastic childhood, as the new church is a bigger thing than I had visualised when gazing at the outlines of the ancient foundations. It was a big Christmas 'Wish' I had then, as a mere child. But the wish has been granted, in spite of its formidable proportions. I had wished for an Abbey Church, for the resurrection of the church built in the Twelfth century: the Blessed Mother of God, more gracious than any fairy, has granted the Christmas 'Wish' of my Noviciate. We hope to inaugurate the new church next August; our friends will see on that day with their own eyes what may be done by a mere wish, provided Our Lady be the fairy Godmother.[24]

## The countdown begins

Volume VI of The Annals of Buckfast Abbey contains extensive entries and newspaper reports concerning the Solemn Inauguration of the Abbey church. The section for 1922 begins with a list of all the monks then resident at Buckfast, with the number coming to forty-eight, of whom twenty-five were priests. It becomes very clear, from the first entries in January, that the overarching focus of this year was preparing the church for its grand opening in August:

> 1st January 1922 – With January we begin a New Year and please God it will be a red-letter year in the Annals of the Abbey, since it is in August of this year that we will take possession of the new church.[25]

[23] Following the monk's arrival at Buckfast in 1882, a temporary church was constructed and opened on 25 March 1884. After the Inauguration of the Abbey Church in 1922, the temporary church became the monastery library and, most recently, the chapter house.

[24] A. Vonier in 'The Abbot's Christmas "Wishes"', *Chimes*, January 1922, pp. 239–40.

[25] The Annalist during this period was Dom Mellitus Hauler. He entered Buckfast Abbey in 1886 at the age of thirteen. He was originally from Emerkingen in Baden-Württemberg, which was just 12 miles from Biberach, the hometown of Abbot Vonier. As we saw earlier in this essay, Anscar Vonier himself arrived at Buckfast in 1889 aged thirteen.

> 4th January – At the daily conference, Fr Abbot made known the amount of alms received for the church during last year: nearly £3000. The total amount since we started is £20,000, a visible proof of Our Lady's special protection.
>
> 7th January – At a meeting of the Deans, the arrangements for the opening of the new church were finally fixed.[26] His Eminence Cardinal Bourne is to be asked to preach for the occasion.[27] Other bishops and abbots are to be invited.
>
> 12th January – The bishop [*of Plymouth*] has been interviewed by Fr Abbot and the programme fully sanctioned.

Having announced the Solemn Inauguration to the public and established the timetable, it became a race against time to get the church ready. What becomes clear is that, as the August deadline approached, it wasn't just the four or five main builders who were busy: the whole community was involved and hard at work. We can also see Abbot Vonier's gift for garnering attention from the press, which had been instrumental in raising the £20,000 referred to above:

> 14th January 1922 – Preparation was made to start flooring the church. It will be in concrete.
>
> 3rd February[28] – Feast day of Fr Abbot, but all holidays are suppressed until the opening of the new church, so there was concreting instead. The east ambulatory was done this afternoon, the pioneer work being done by the junior monks, cheerfully as usual.
>
> 22nd February – Over the past few days, there has been great activity in mixing concrete, both for flooring as well as for filling in the arches of the nave which the masons have finished by now. This filling in with concrete is more solid and done more quickly though somewhat more expensive. While hands were busy, minds were not idle and the theologians had great argument as to the sacramental existence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. At least 500 wheelbarrows were mixed.
>
> 27th February – A reporter of the *Daily News* visited today. Fr Abbot showed him over the Abbey; he is going to write an article about his visit.
>
> 31st March – The *Daily News* article has made great sensation and has been repeated by most newspapers in England. It has also been copied by French, German, Italian, Austrian, and Canadian papers, so we are well known.

[26] The Deans in a monastery effectively formed a council that the Abbot would consult on matters concerning the community. This tradition has its roots in the Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 21: 'If the community is rather large, some brothers chosen for their good repute and holy life should be made deans.' (*RB 1980*, The Liturgical Press, 1981).

[27] Cardinal Francis Bourne was the Archbishop of Westminster and spiritual head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

[28] 3 February was the Feast of St Anscar.

## ‘The expression of a spirit unique in modern history’

This article deserves to be quoted at length because of its illuminating exchange between the reporter and Anscar Vonier. The journalist (and by extension his audience) is clearly fascinated by what he observes, and his depiction of life at Buckfast supports my argument that the Abbey had become a symbol of hope in the postwar period:

> The restored church is not only a place of worship. It is an eloquent challenge, if only because the work was carried on during the Great War by Frenchmen, Germans, and Englishmen working quite peacefully together. When the Lord Abbot, the Rev. Father Anscar Vonier, was telling me something of the history of the work, a Bavarian brought in coffee, and he was followed by a young English monk, an ex-soldier who lost an eye at Ypres, and who now offered us a cake.
>
> When they had gone I said to the Lord Abbot: ‘You must find the outside world a very ridiculous place.’ ‘We do,’ he agreed. ‘Extreme nationalism is its ruin. Pride in one’s own country is a legitimate and admirable thing, but when this pride becomes passionate and intolerant…’ He made a gesture of dismay. ‘During the war,’ he added, ‘the Home Office were very good to us. They accepted my word that we would stay inside our walls, and we became our own internment camp. The work went on as happily as before.’
>
> We went outside into the church, where I found Brother Peter, the genius of the work, dressed in the uniform of the order, busily engaged in the difficult task of completing a groined roof. He is a German. Helping him were a Frenchman and an English ex-soldier. I asked the Lord Abbot how he explained the presence of English ex-soldiers. ‘The war,’ he replied, ‘either increased the religious sense or killed it entirely. That Englishman over there, who lost an eye at Ypres, is one of my best monks.’
>
> Early in August the old church will be reopened by Cardinal Bourne. He will be able to claim it as the expression of a spirit unique in modern history. He will have an opportunity of making it clear that during the war the work was carried on by Frenchmen, Germans, and Englishmen working side by side, and that since then, many stones have been added by a soldier for whom the world was well lost at Ypres.[29]

## All hands on deck

During the next four months, the Annals recount in almost breathless fashion how hard the monks worked to get the church ready in time for August, with the additional employment of ‘20 outsiders’, carpenters, masons, and altar builders, to meet the deadline. The entries for the first half of July form an ever-growing list of completed tasks, with the Annalist indicating the enormity of what was still to be achieved: ‘Work in the new church is being pushed as much as possible, the brothers and workmen are very early in starting and work until late in

[29] ‘Abbey Rebuilt by Monks’ *Daily News*, 31 March 1922.

the evening, after 8pm.' And nearly four weeks later, on 26 July, just days from the deadline, the urgency is tempered by a genuine sense of confidence: 'There is a swarm of workers about, all busy, in earnest, cheerful, and hopeful that everything will be ready, as no doubt it will, because where there is a will, there is a way.' The final entries for this month reveal an excited, albeit exhausted, community carrying out the finishing touches:

> 29th July – The floor of the church is being washed, all take a hand in it: priests, masons, everybody. Singing practice every day besides all the work.
>
> 31st July – Activities of every sort in church and outside. Earth has to be carried away so as to have level ground for some yards in front of temporary entrance. Visitors arriving; village full; many stationed in neighbouring towns such as Totnes, Ashburton, Newton Abbot, Teignmouth, Torquay, Plymouth etc.

Dom Ernest Graf, who was an active participant in all of these activities, captures the frenetic quality of these final days, and indeed hours:

> There was a tremendous amount of hammering, concreting of floors and similar disturbances, while the organ-builders were busy with pipes and electric blowers, and a frantic tuner – for whose work quiet was essential – did what he could amid the general din. We were still concreting the floor of the sacristy on the day before the opening.[30]

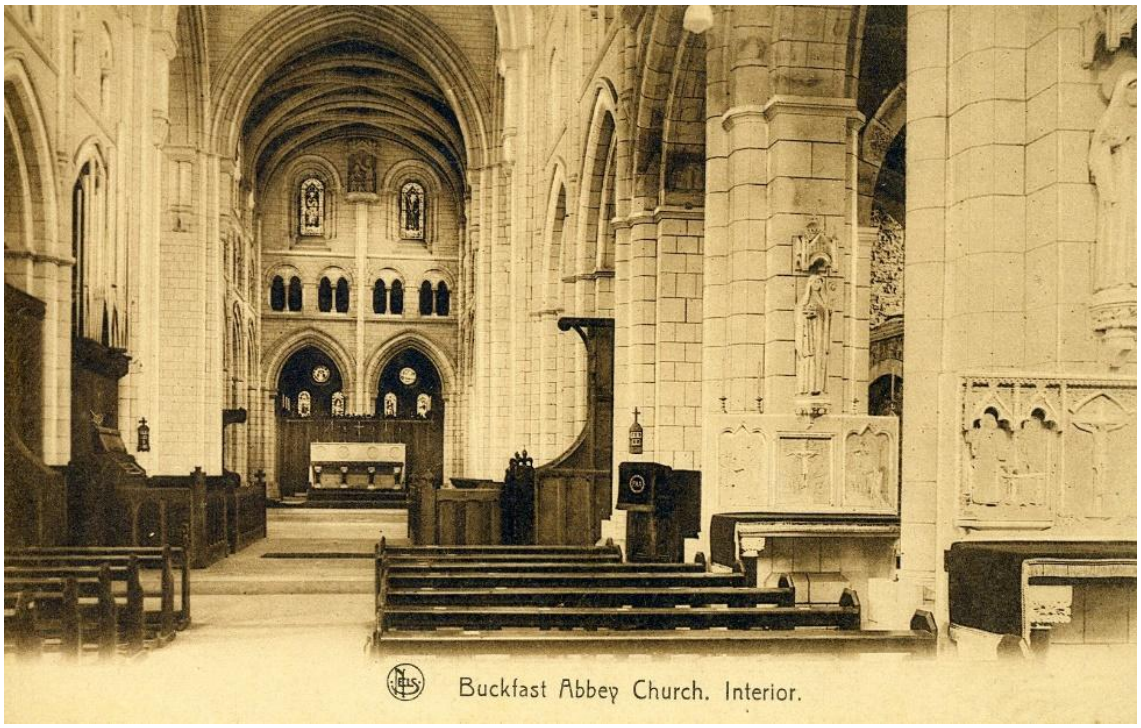


**Figure 14:** The nave and sanctuary of the Abbey church at the time of its Inauguration in August 1922.

[30] E. Graf, *Anscar Vonier: Abbot of Buckfast*, p. 65.

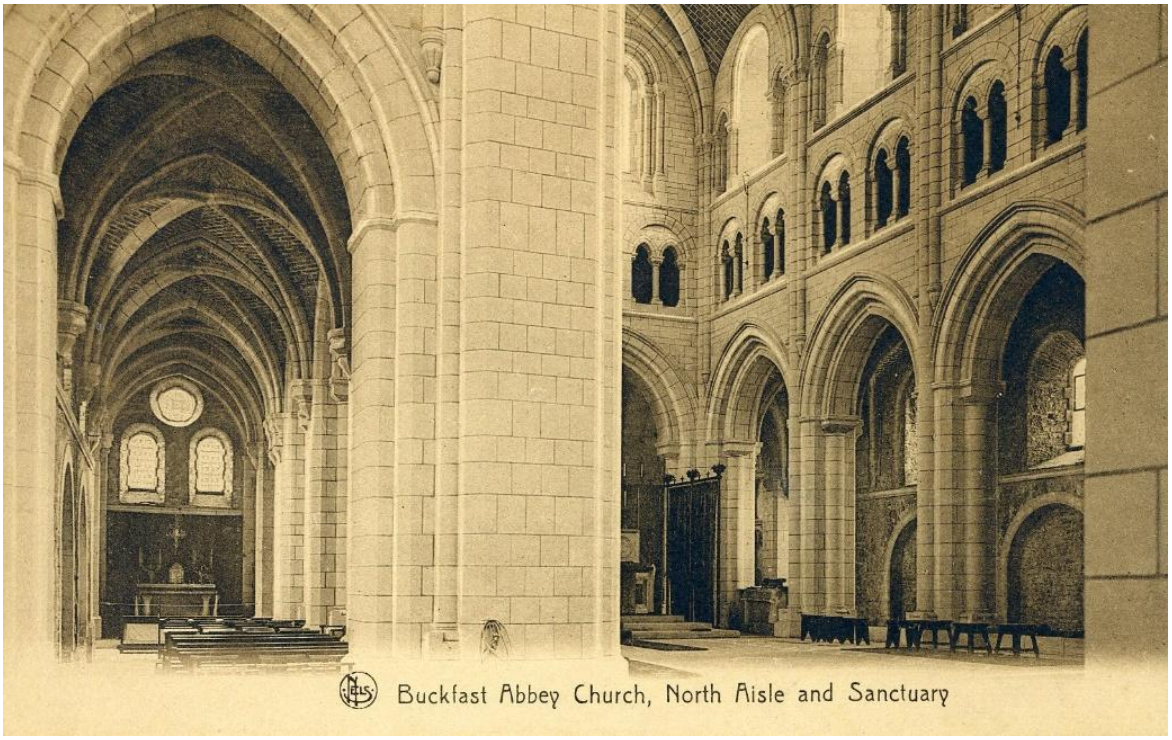


**Figure 15:** The North aisle and sanctuary of the Abbey church at the time of its Inauguration in August 1922.

## The Solemn Inauguration of the Abbey Church

It becomes very clear when reading accounts of the Solemn Inauguration that the frantic activity and back-breaking work were instrumental in creating a remarkable legacy. Dom Ernest Graf underlines the religious significance of what took place on those memorable summer days, and his comments on the extensive press coverage highlight the national interest in events at Buckfast:

> The inauguration of the Abbey church – incomplete though it was[31] – was regarded by the Catholics in England as an event of national significance. Up to this time, out of many ancient abbeys whose picturesque ruins may be seen in every part of the country, Buckfast alone had been awakened from its long slumber.[32] Our friends accordingly urged us to leave nothing undone in order to stress the significance of the solemn ceremony. It was not difficult to fall in with these wishes seeing that for years our building activities had been brought to the notice of the nation at large, not only by the religious and the local press, but by the big London papers.[33]

[31] Building work on the church, principally the West front, nave, and tower, would continue until December 1938. Following the events of August 1922, the monastic community and parish could use the Abbey church for Mass and other liturgical services.

[32] This image of the Abbey church waking from a prolonged period of sleep echoes that of resurrection.

[33] E. Graf, *Anscar Vonier: Abbot of Buckfast*, p. 66.

**Blessing of the Abbey Church**

The Solemn Inauguration comprised a series of ceremonies, which took place from 2 to 6 August 1922, starting with the blessing of the Abbey church by the Right Rev. John Keily, Bishop of Plymouth. The Buckfast Abbey review, *Chimes*, describes the event that Anscar Vonier had dreamt of as a young boy:

> On Wednesday August 2, 1922, after the singing of Solemn Vespers in the temporary church used at Buckfast for over 37 years, his Lordship the Bishop of Plymouth, accompanied by the community and a goodly number of laity, parishioners and visitors, proceeded through the Abbey grounds to the West entrance of the new church, singing litanies and hymns. The Bishop then went round the outside walls of the building, sprinkling them with holy water, and then blessed the inner walls and pillars, according to the prescriptions of the Roman ritual...Thus briefly, but solemnly, was performed the first part of the Inauguration of the Abbey church. God had been 'welcomed' into His own temple. What before had been an immense workshop had now become the sanctuary of the Most High.[34]

**Translation of the Statue of Our Lady of Buckfast**

The next event that took place, the translation of the statue of Our Lady of Buckfast, seems to have had a particularly profound impact on those present. The rediscovery in the mid-1880s of the medieval statue of Our Lady of Buckfast – or, more accurately, the bottom part of it – is somewhat obscure. Dom John Stéphan, in his 1970 *History of Buckfast Abbey*, states that one-third of the original statue was found 'under strange circumstances, embedded as it was in a wall separating the Abbey property from the neighbouring Mill.'[35] The *Buckfast Abbey Chronicle* describes how 'the discovered fragment was sent to London and incorporated into the new statue designed by the Abbey architect, Mr. Frederick A. Walters.'[36] On 24 May 1903, the fully restored statue was installed on a side altar of the temporary Abbey church by the then abbot, Boniface Natter.

[34] J. Stéphan, 'Solemn Inauguration of Buckfast Abbey Church', in *Chimes*, October 1922, pp. 73–74.
[35] J. Stéphan, *A History of Buckfast Abbey*, p. 302.
[36] J. Stéphan, 'Quarterly Notes', in *Buckfast Abbey Chronicle*, Spring 1953, p. 4.

**Figure 16:** The restored statue of Our Lady of Buckfast in the temporary church, c. 1905.

Some 20 years later, it was Boniface Natter's successor, Anscar Vonier, who created a permanent home for Our Lady of Buckfast in the new Abbey church. This statue, with its pre-Dissolution provenance, came to symbolise the new hope offered by Buckfast's 'resurrection', which in turn helps us to appreciate the emotional significance of an event described by Dom John Stéphan:

> The second act of this sacred drama followed closely on the first. In the evening of the same day [*2nd August*] we witnessed one of the most inspiring scenes of the Inauguration celebrations, the one that is perhaps destined to remain most vividly impressed on our memories.[37] This was the translation of the restored statue of Our Lady from her temporary altar to her new shrine. Nature lent itself admirably to this impressive scene. The silence and stillness of a summer evening, the air still perfumed with the scent of countless flowers, all this presented an attractive theatre for a variegated procession, which unfolded itself slowly and majestically in the direction of her shrine…What meaning was conveyed by this simple, quiet ceremony! For centuries the shrine had been wrecked and ruined; for centuries, too, the very traces of the statue had been lost sight of, and, when discovered, it was only in part. This spectacle stood out before us as we moved slowly towards the site of devastation. But another vision quickly took its place; in fact a triple vision succeeded each other in our minds: one of light and glory, then another of chaos and ruin, and lastly one of joy and hope.[38]

[37] This opinion is echoed in the comments of another witness to the ceremony, the novelist Katherine Olive Parr (Beatrice Chase), whose account of the Inauguration was included in the Annals: 'The first ceremony at which I was present was, to me, the most touching and significant of all. That was the translation of Our Lady's statue back to her own original resting place.'

[38] J. Stéphan, 'Solemn Inauguration of Buckfast Abbey Church', in *Chimes*, October 1922, pp. 74–75. The 'triple vision' corresponds to: life at Buckfast from its foundation in 1018 until 1539; the Dissolution, abandonment, and destruction of the Abbey; the restoration in 1882, culminating in this Solemn Inauguration.

**Figure 17:** The translation of the statue of Our Lady of Buckfast, from the temporary church to the new Abbey church, 2 August 1922. Abbot Vonier can be seen in the white cope in the centre of the picture.

**Figure 18:** The statue of Our Lady of Buckfast in the Lady Chapel of the new Abbey church, where it remains to this day.

**First Mass in the Abbey Church**

A more formal liturgical ceremony took place the following day: the first Mass in the newly blessed Abbey church. As we have seen, the senior prelate of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Cardinal Francis Bourne, had been invited to preach at this Mass, and his presence demonstrates how important Buckfast Abbey had become for the church in this country, and beyond. Once again, Dom John Stéphan will be our narrator:

> All roads led to Buckfast on Thursday, 3rd August, for the solemn High Mass which was to inaugurate public worship in the restored Abbey church. People came from far and wide to witness this impressive event, and tickets had been refused to numbers of applicants. Though the church is large, and every effort was made to secure seating for as many as possible, we could not accommodate all those who had expressed a wish to be present. Buckfast had never seen so many motor cars and motor buses wending their way through its narrow street. Yet perfect order reigned throughout, and even the unsatisfactory weather did not seem to dampen the ardour of the numerous pilgrims. An hour before the church door was opened, long queues were formed in the Abbey grounds, reaching the village road.[39]

The Annals of Buckfast Abbey contain several newspaper cuttings that report these events, and the picturesque, almost exotic nature of the scenes described is very striking. We can well imagine how fascinated readers would have been by news of such ceremonies taking place in South Devon. We might equally surmise that they experienced, albeit vicariously, that 'joy and thanksgiving' evoked in the Cardinal's address, as reported in the following article:

> **Miracle of Buckfast Abbey Church**
>
> In the Abbey garden a gorgeous parade of bishops, canonry, clergy, and the russet clad figures of the brotherhood, awaited the guest of the day; and when the reception resolved into ecclesiastical procession, the scene was one which awoke even the secular mind to reverence…Crowded to the last, a mass of 1,500 worshippers, the floor of the church hushed to a solemn silence as the Bishop of Plymouth offered the opening sentences of pontifical High Mass. A thrill passed through the congregation as clarion voices rang from the lantern gallery, singing the mysterious music which adds so much to the solemnity of the Mass…Cardinal Bourne ascended the steps of the altar. He spoke impressively of the joy and thanksgiving which must always accompany the opening of a new church, be the sanctuary as humble as the manager of Bethlehem. But the opening ceremony in which that congregation was privileged to take part had a character quite its own, for they were witnessing in very truth, a resurrection.[40]

[39] J. Stéphan, 'Solemn Inauguration of Buckfast Abbey Church', in *Chimes*, October 1922, p. 75.
[40] Unfortunately, the name of this newspaper is not recorded in the Annals.

**Figure 19:** Tickets were allocated for the inaugural Mass, with a large queue forming before the service commenced at 11.30am on 3 August 1922.

**Figure 20:** Crowds gather outside the Abbey church on 3 August 1922.

**Figure 21:** Cardinal Francis Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, arrives at the Abbey church, where he delivered the sermon during Mass.

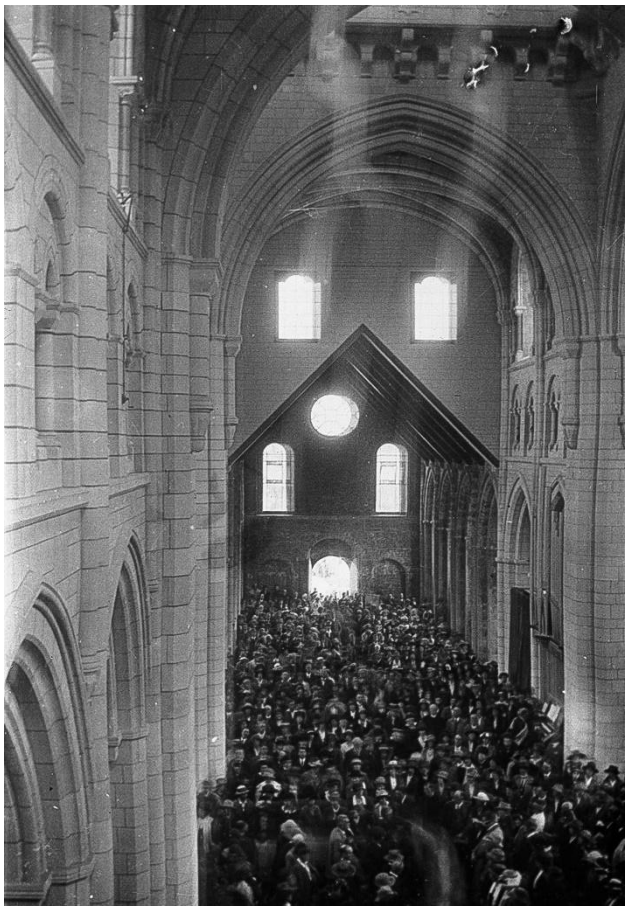

**Figure 22:** According to press reports, there were 1,500 people present in the Abbey church for Mass on 3 August 1922.

**A festal lunch**

The number of guests invited to lunch in the monastery after Mass was so great that additional space was required. The Annalist, Dom Mellitus Hauler, provides an account of proceedings, with a keen eye for detail:

> Two lines of tables were placed in the middle of the East and South cloisters. The Fathers served. The wine for the occasion was given by Mr Schiller from his own cellar.[41] The wine was 25 years old and the guests all appreciated it, though it came from Germany. (Many of the guests spoke often of it afterwards: Sir Robert Harvey told me that he never tasted better wine and that he nearly had too much of it.)[42]

The newspaper article that described scenes from the inaugural Mass also reported on the festal lunch, focusing in particular on a speech given by Abbot Vonier. I will provide an extensive quotation from this speech, for it includes a number of themes that we have observed during this essay. It is particularly significant that, having started by offering 'the loyal toast', a key part of his speech expressed gratitude to England and praised its stability and generosity. This would surely have been noted by any readers who harboured residual suspicion about Catholics – particularly Catholics born in Germany. Bearing in mind Abbot Vonier's astute political sensibility (which was employed to great effect during the First World War years), his words may have been chosen for just such an audience:

> The chair was taken by Abbot Anscar Vonier, who by his genial personality and happy humour gave a delightful touch to the subsequent speeches. Proposing the loyal toast he said there was a French proverb, the meaning of which is that the builder has had a hard time of it.[43] He could assure the community that if they wanted to build a church it was not an easy thing to do. 'I think we have accomplished a great task. It is my only boast, but it will always be my boast, that I started with a pound sterling in my pocket, and without the promise of any more. I had two or three good brothers to work for me, and they have carried on all this time. I had an old horse, and an old cart to carry stone. We have gone along, and we have never stopped. You will understand therefore that such an achievement is not only the work of those who put their backs into it, but also certain things that are of moral and spiritual worth. It means confidence in God. I do not want to boast spiritually, but I am sure I have confidence in God. It is no compliment; it is merely the beggar's privilege.
>
> 'There is another confidence of which I want to speak. I always felt that the tragic death of my predecessor, whose fate I nearly shared, was to me a mine of spiritual comfort; that I was meant to do work which he could not do himself. I was spared at the supreme moment of peril to carry out the wish of his heart. I have done it, and it is more to me than if he were alive. I am not superstitious, but I feel I have a right to speak of the great secret that is in my heart today.'

[41] Josephine and Henry Schiller were two of Buckfast Abbey's most generous benefactors, responsible for the whole of the church's West front, the Golden High Altar, the font, two farms and many other gifts.
[42] Sir Robert Harvey of Dundridge, like the Schillers, was a great benefactor of the Abbey; his most generous gift being the peal of bells that he donated in 1910.
[43] This was reported in *Chimes* as being: *Qui veut bâtir doit pâtir*.

> It had also meant faith in the stability of the Church to which he belonged, and, in particular, faith in the temporal, political stability of England. Was there anywhere more stable than England? He would remind them that they had built this great church under conditions which to human thinking were almost impossible. They had carried on during the terrible five years of war, when the whole of Europe was in turmoil. The fairness of England during this great crisis – and he did not hesitate to say it publicly – had been one of the glorious things that had enabled him to do the work. He did not think there was any other administration in the whole world which would have been so considerate and so kind to them as aliens in their midst as had been the English administration.

**Requiem Mass, diocesan pilgrimage, and ordination**

If the ceremonies outlined above formed, as it were, the 'main acts', then the next three days contained 'supporting acts', themselves integral to the Solemn Inauguration. In a sense, this triumvirate of events looked to the past, celebrated the present, and offered hope for the future.

4 August is a date rich with poignancy and significance in the life of Buckfast Abbey. As we saw near the start of this essay, it was on 4 August 1906 that Abbot Boniface Natter died when the *Sirio* ran aground off the coast of Spain. Having barely survived this tragedy himself, Anscar Vonier, upon becoming the new Abbot of Buckfast, declared his intention to rebuild the Abbey church on its ancient foundations as a memorial to his predecessor. Dom Mellitus Hauler makes this connection explicit in his account of 4 August 1922:

> This being the 16th anniversary of Fr Abbot Boniface's death, to whom we really owe the church, it had already been planned for some time by Fr Abbot Anscar that its opening should coincide with this anniversary, and that after the inauguration Mass, the first sung Mass should be a High Mass of Requiem for Abbot Boniface.

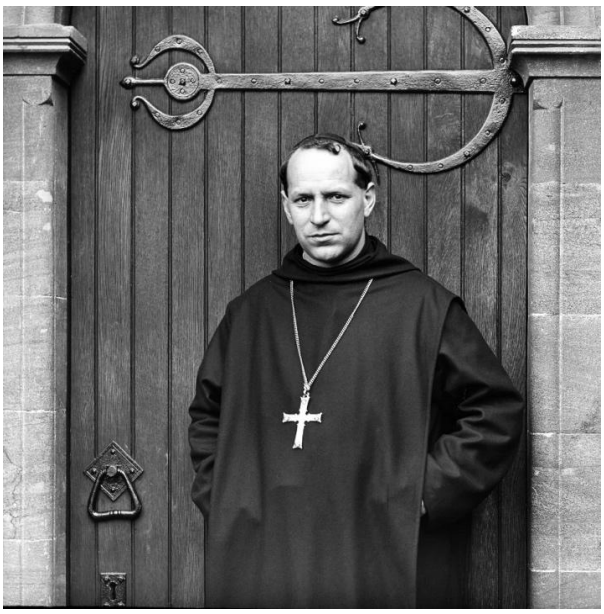

**Figure 23:** Dom Boniface Natter, Abbot of Buckfast Abbey 1902–06.

The following day, 5 August, saw Buckfast Abbey host a pilgrimage from the Diocese of Plymouth, an ecclesiastical area that covers Cornwall, Devon and Dorset. Although we are presenting this as one of the 'supporting acts', the Annals suggest that it almost stole the show:

> Today was quite a success, almost better than on the opening day. Between 1 and 2pm, the whole of the village [*of Buckfast*] was lined with motor cars and charabancs. The police say they never saw such a crowd. It is estimated that over 3000 people were here.

Bishop Keily announced during his sermon that, due to the wet weather, the scheduled outdoor procession would no longer take place. However, the Diocesan pilgrims were determined to process outside as planned, and impromptu measures were taken to ensure that they could.[44] Our Annalist recounts the successful outcome of these improvised endeavours: 'At the end, when we'd returned to the sanctuary, Fr Abbot had tears in his eyes and said, "That was the greatest thing of our three days." And on entering the sacristy, the Bishop said to me, "That was grand Mellitus, that was grand." And indeed it had been grand.'

The final event of the Solemn Inauguration ceremonies, one very much looking to the future, was the ordination of two monks to the Priesthood, and two to the Diaconate. The Annals express the hope that these would be the first of a 'long series of ordinations in this new church.' Once again, mention is made of the great number of people who attended: 'There were crowds of people again this morning. The newly ordained priests gave their blessing to the people, and the numbers were so great that the usual dinner hour had to be postponed so as to allow them to be present.'

## Conclusion

> The glorious Inauguration was not the end of the enterprise. It was, one may say, the 'end of the beginning', and a splendid encouragement to proceed with what remained to be achieved. A short respite was given to the brethren who had devoted themselves to this excruciating task.[45]

Such was Dom John Stéphan's jubilant yet realistic assessment of the Solemn Inauguration, when writing some fifty years later. Once the builders had taken their well-earned rest, they began work on the West front and nave, determined to complete their memorial to Abbot Boniface Natter. Cardinal Francis Bourne would return to Buckfast on 25 August 1932 for the Consecration of the Abbey church, an occasion that attracted larger numbers and even greater national attention than a decade before. Nevertheless, for our essay on Devon in the 1920s, and *contra* Dom John Stéphan, August 1922 *was* 'the end of the enterprise'.

The following article from the Catholic newspaper, *The Universe*, was typical of reports on the Solemn Inauguration in religious publications, with its emphasis on the joy experienced

[44] The Annals for 5 August 1922 has some touching examples of those present working to ensure that the procession took place: 'Priests in cassocks took wheelbarrows and spread cinders where there were big pools of water.'

[45] J. Stéphan, *A History of Buckfast Abbey*, p. 339.

by Catholics in England. But the writer also alludes to a wider audience, indicating that Buckfast Abbey had become famous well beyond religious circles, with the word 'fame' occurring more than once. This dynamic would have been accelerated by an event that Dom Mellitus records in the Annals almost as a passing thought: 'The ceremonies of August 3rd were shown in cinemas in London and the provinces.'

> **The Glory of Buckfast**
>
> It is not too much to say that the Catholic world in England has this week been united in the opening of Buckfast Abbey church – an opening with characteristics so clear and evident and so wonderful that it stands out alone among celebrations of the same kind. The inauguration of Buckfast's new church has in it a peculiar joy, a wonderful record of graces, that could not be passed over.
>
> Forty years ago the name of Buckfast was on the map, but no one could say much more about it. Connected with medieval monasticism, its old ruins alone remained as a relic of the past. Now it has risen to a height of fame to which in its brightest days it had never aspired. It may be said now, without exaggeration, that Buckfast is one of the most famous sanctuaries in England.
>
> And who has made it so? Not troops, nor wars, nor kings, nor princes. No one looks now to the old ruins to explain the fame of Buckfast. The new church on the old ruins is now the attraction, the glory of Buckfast, the centre of England's Catholic attention and the Church's joy. Looking at this fact, everyone with an historical instinct will wish to ask: who has done this? Who has made Buckfast known to the ends of the British Isles and beyond?[46]

In a sense, this article encapsulates the core themes of our essay. Where the writer refers to the 'old ruins' of the medieval monastery, we could justifiably read an allusion to the devastation caused by the First World War, especially with the further reference to 'troops' and 'wars'. The despair epitomised by this 'relic of the past' and by these 'old ruins', is vividly contrasted with the 'wonderful' 'joy' of these 'brightest days' in August 1922. Furthermore, in using the word 'risen' to describe Buckfast's growing 'fame', I see a strong echo of the resurrection imagery that has been evident throughout accounts of the Solemn Inauguration.

Finally, I believe this article demonstrates that what took place at Buckfast Abbey from 2 to 6 August 1922, as profoundly significant as it was for the Catholic Church in England, had an impact far beyond ecclesiastical circles. It has been my contention throughout this essay that the story of Buckfast Abbey was one that offered hope and new life to a nation devastated by war. What made this narrative so compelling was not simply a dissolved, medieval monastery coming back to life in 1882, with a new church being opened some 40 years later, as gripping as that tale was. Rather, it was a deeply personal story, one that began as a tragedy in the Mediterranean with the shocking death of Abbot Boniface Natter. This disaster nearly took the life of his companion too; but, having been rescued by a Spanish fishing vessel, Anscar Vonier returned to England and became the new Abbot of Buckfast. He decided to honour his beloved predecessor's memory by building a new Abbey church on its medieval foundations,

[46] This article, originally published on 4 August 1922 in *The Universe*, was reproduced in *Chimes*, October 1922, pp. 89–90.

with the Solemn Inauguration in 1922 celebrating a grace-filled past and a hope-filled future. It was this personal narrative of triumph over adversity, one that symbolised both Buckfast Abbey *and* a nation recovering from a devastating war, which proved so intoxicating. The fact that it was the monks themselves who built their church – men from England, France, and Germany working together while their nations fought on the battlefields – offered further evidence that darkness and death would ultimately be conquered by light and new life. For the abbot and monks of Buckfast Abbey, it was this profound belief in the resurrection that lay at the heart of everything they did and inspired them to create a symbol of hope for a traumatised world.