

Cluniacs in Britain
The Studio, Clore Education Centre, British Museum
Friday 7th November 2014

Institutions represented

British Museum; Fédération des Sites Clunisiens; Lewes Priory Trust; Bermondsey Priory; Castle Acre Priory; Crossraguel Abbey; Delapré Abbey; Dudley Priory; Monk Bretton Priory; Paisley Abbey; Pontefract Priory; Prittlewell Priory; Reading Abbey; Thetford Priory; Wenlock Priory.

The morning started with a welcome and an introduction to the aims of the day by Chairman of the Lewes Priory Trust, Sy Morse-Brown. He then handed over to Christophe Voros who talked about the network of Cluniac sites throughout Europe and beyond to Jerusalem. The Federation now has 180 sites as members, most recently Tyniec in Poland, but there are hopes for more, as there were originally 1,400 sites with links to Cluny. The most powerful tool the organisation has is the very impressive Clunypedia, which was demonstrated on screen and is free to Federation members. It is a joint project between the local Cluny College and a private firm, commissioned by the Federation. It shows maps, digital models and interactive elements which are site specific. The resources can be used to great effect to increase accessibility for the public. It is currently only in French but a future aim would be to integrate the British sites into the framework.

The rest of the morning was taken up by presentations from the delegates about their own sites. There was considerable diversity, from Paisley Abbey which still functions as a church, through sites currently managed by English Heritage or Historic Scotland, to sites cared for by groups who demonstrate immense local level enthusiasm. Reading Abbey started as a Cluniac foundation but parted company later. The Heritage Lottery Fund has already supported many of the sites, but the high level of active support from local people is a vital factor. There was a great deal of common ground and shared experience, with participants creating a range of options from physic gardens to imaginative education projects, and there is an underlying need for funding.

After lunch, when there was a chance to see the Lewes Priory material on display in the British Museum, there was a presentation on one of the major items, the so-called St Peter Capital which was originally found by the Lewesian doctor, Gideon Mantell. The carvings on the four faces present different problems of identification and there are parallels elsewhere.

The rest of the day was spent in a general discussion about ways forward for the group and the potential for a Forum of British Cluniac sites. Various suggestions were made, as follows:

- Pooled resources on topics where members could post ideas or problems for others to offer constructive comments. As well as sharing expertise, there would be scope for showing unpublished research which could be beneficial to other sites.
- Advice on physic gardens, showing herbs that can be used for strewing, cooking, dyeing and medicine. Children can be involved in the growing and tending, which encourages return visits. 30 years ago Lewes's Herb Garden started with plants grown at Lewes Gaol. These examples illustrate the potential for community involvement on many levels. The gardens can also lead on to imaginative projects such as the Nettles Puppet Show at Lewes in 2014 or Herb Days, exploring major themes on a practical or academic level. Orchards can be set up, using old-style trees. The herbs can be a source of income if herbs are sold.
- Sharing initiatives on education is an option. Many of the representatives at the meeting described innovative work with children and adults. Cross curricular programmes should be encouraged, not least as this is beneficial to teachers. It is imperative to talk to the relevant staff, and there is also scope for liaising with local Universities. There are also possibilities of liaising with Cluny and French schools, perhaps leading to cross Channel visits.

- Visits between the British Cluniac sites have begun, but there is great potential for more ambitious liaison, perhaps even going to Cluny and other French sites. Some French examples survive in a much more complete form than in England, sometimes with wall paintings.
- There would be scope for individual sites to act as hosts for future Conferences where facilities permit.
- Links with the Council of Europe where cultural interaction is encouraged as a means of bringing people together. The Federation has belonged since 2005, so we could develop links as members, which shares information and is a good promotional tool. The Council of Europe is not a funding body, though the European Union can support projects. As a united body we would be taken more seriously for support for a UK itinerary, perhaps even cycle paths.
- There are currently problems of paying the 50 Euro membership without further costs. PayPal may be the easiest method of payment. The Federation's headquarters is in Switzerland, so options should be explored.
- Translation and better communication are top priorities. The Lewes Priory Trust has translated and circulated the relevant pages of the Gazetteer for representatives to check, but if this project is to be expanded it needs funding.
- Technology is one way forward for co-operation. Scottish Ten has scanned major World Heritage Sites, through a Californian company: this list includes Crossraguel and the results have been passed to the Federation. Clunypedia has the facilities to expand and would be able to include sites and emblematic artefacts, with permission. The condition for inclusion on Clunypedia is public access, though this can be at different levels, with some elements for members only. The images can be used by all Federation members and are useful for promotion, but commercial use would incur a charge. Each site retains ownership of their created images, but there are copyright issues which would need to be resolved. Reading Museum has a legal document retaining ownership of an image in its collection, even if that is done with someone else's equipment, and this could be a precedent.
- Where to apply for funding is an issue. This vital topic might form the basis of a workshop as it is critical to the future of most sites. Many representatives have useful experience to offer and this can be shared.

The day proved that there is a great potential for co-operation in a very positive and useful way. Everyone was thanked for their attendance and then dispersed, with hopes for future meetings.

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