



The following article gives some of the highlights of the history of the site of what is now Princethorpe College. It draws from information provided during a visit by the Local History Group to the College in 2012 and other sources.

In 1792 Benedictine nuns from Montargis near Orleans fled from France after being persecuted during the French Revolution and landed at Shoreham, near Brighton, on October 17th of that year. Mrs Fitzherbert, mistress to the Prince Regent (later King George IV), was a godmother to one of the nuns. She brought the Prince to visit the community and he asked them to stay in the safety of his country. The nuns sang the psalm verse "Domine salvum fac regem" for the Prince and the Prioress promised that they would continue to sing it daily in thanksgiving for the help they had received from him. This custom continued unbroken until the Order disbanded in the early 2000s.

Princethorpe (St Mary's) Priory was established by these nuns in 1835. The delay in having a permanent site in England was mainly the result of laws, which, until the late 1820s, meant that land belonging to Catholics could be confiscated. When they moved to Princethorpe the only building present was, what is now, the gate house. At Princethorpe the nuns built a monastery (as nunneries were often called in those days) and school in a style reminiscent of their former

home at Montargis. The land was used as a farm which was run by a bailiff. Originally the whole site was enclosed within a 6 foot high wall as the nuns were a closed order. At one time it was the biggest convent in England with over 200 nuns.



The community remained at Princethorpe for well over a century but dwindling vocations combined with educational developments ultimately made it impracticable for them to continue with the school and with a property of that size and they moved in 1966 to St Mary's Priory, Fernham in Oxfordshire. Subsequently the decision was taken in December 2001 to close St Mary's and the remaining nuns dispersed to other locations. (For further details see the [report to the Charity Commission](#) on the events surrounding the closure.)

The original Priory building works (1833-35) were by Craven, with additions to the west and a former mortuary chapel of 1842-43 by Joseph Hansom. The old church, now, on the upper level, the College library, of 1835-7 by Craven, with alterations by Hansom completed in 1843. The Nun's Cemetery dates to c.1837-38. The front range, originally a Guest House of 1836-40, is probably by Hansom. More details are given on the [Listed Buildings website](#) .

The following historical comment is from the [memoirs of Francis Kerril Amherst](#) , D.D. Lord Bishop of Northampton: "Having been temporarily established in more than one house, they determined to purchase a property and build a convent as far as possible on the plan of that at Mont Argis, of which a cardboard model had been ingeniously made by one of their number. The first prioress of Princethorpe was Madame des Chastulet, a grand specimen of the ancient noblesse of France, commanding in her figure and presence, yet with all the courteous manners of a time gone by. The manners and customs of the house were for a long time French, and, to

judge from the architecture, Mont Argis must have been erected in the tasteless style which prevailed in the time of Louis XVI”.



A.W Pugin had not been commissioned to do any of the original work at Princethorpe and does not seem to have thought much of the results. From a book about Pugin ([The Pugins and the Catholic Midlands](#))

he is quoted as saying: “It is a miserable specimen of the tawdry trashy taste of Modern religious. It is not even a ghost of an ancient nunnery”.

Part of the funding for the nuns at Princethorpe came from the dowry of nuns who joined the order. These latter nuns were usually titled ladies and were known as “Choir Sisters” who spent much of their time in the chapel, attending about 6 services a day. Nuns who had not brought funding with them were known as “Lay Sisters” and they had the role of a domestic servant. (This two-class system was typical of Benedictine nuns at that time).

Funding for the present Church came from (Mary) Hilda de Trafford (1875 -1965) daughter of Lady Annette Mary de Trafford; the family title having been taken from Trafford Park in Manchester. (Sources differ on which of these two actually funded the work, but it seems likely that it was paid for by Hilda’s dowry, which would have been funded by her mother Annette). Work on the church began in 1897 and completed in 1901. The designer was Peter Paul Pugin (son of Augustus Welby Pugin) who had developed his own recognisable style of church, curvilinear Gothic. Many of the internal furnishings were designed by Joseph Pippet, and most of the stained glass was by John Hardman and co. The organ was built by James Bins of Leeds. Extensive details of the Church architecture are given on the [Listed Buildings website](#) .



When the nuns moved to Fernham they took everything they could with them from Princethorpe. All that was left of the chapel were its basic structure which included the stalls attached to the walls. When St Mary's Fernham closed some of the original items from the chapel were returned to Princethorpe including the statue of Our Lady Abbess, which is now back in its original location at the back of the church (pictured right). [In the days at Montargis it was the custom of the King of France to establish his favourites as Abbesses. To prevent this happening at Montargis, the community elected Our Lady as Abbess in perpetuity. When the community fled into exile in 1792 they were unable to take the original statue of Our Lady with them. The statue at Princethorpe was acquired in 1892. See [Catholic Herald article](#) for more details]

The current church is dedicated to "Our Lady of Angels" and 177 angels are depicted in it. In the covering over the altar are statues of four Archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel. There are also two kneeling angels made from Italian marble (see picture top left). The Princethorpe Foundation have produced a booklet about "The Chapel of Our Lady of the Angels" which gives further details about all the angels depicted in the church. Under the altar is a reliquary containing the thigh bone of a saint from the catacombs in Rome.

History of Princethorpe College

Written by Andy Bolam



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