

Dom Bede Camm's Travel Diaries



Dom Bede Camm (1864-1942) was an Anglican convert and joined the Downside community in 1913. He was originally a monk of Erdington Abbey, Birmingham and before that had spent some time at Maredsous. He was a keen theologian, having studied theology at Oxford and was also an expert on the English martyrs and relics. He was a fascinating character, interested in many areas of study and his archive here at Downside highlights these many interests.

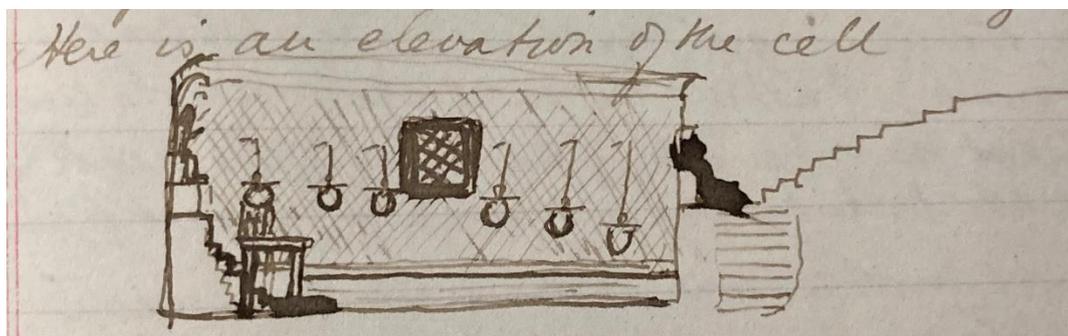
Dom Bede was a great traveller, visiting shrines, churches, cathedrals and holy sites around Europe and North Africa. He kept many diaries, writing in much detail his daily experiences and these give us an incredible insight into both the man and the world around him. Two of these diaries from 1894 focus on time he spent at the great Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino. This site, of huge importance to Benedictine monks as it was the monastery founded by St Benedict and is where he and his sister St Scholastica are buried, was a place of pilgrimage for Dom Bede. What is all the more important about these diaries is that they offer us a wonderful insight into the monastery before it was all but destroyed during the Second World War.

Dom Bede's commentary on his time at Monte Cassino is an invaluable historical record of a key site in Benedictine monasticism. His sketches of the site, his detailed accounts of the

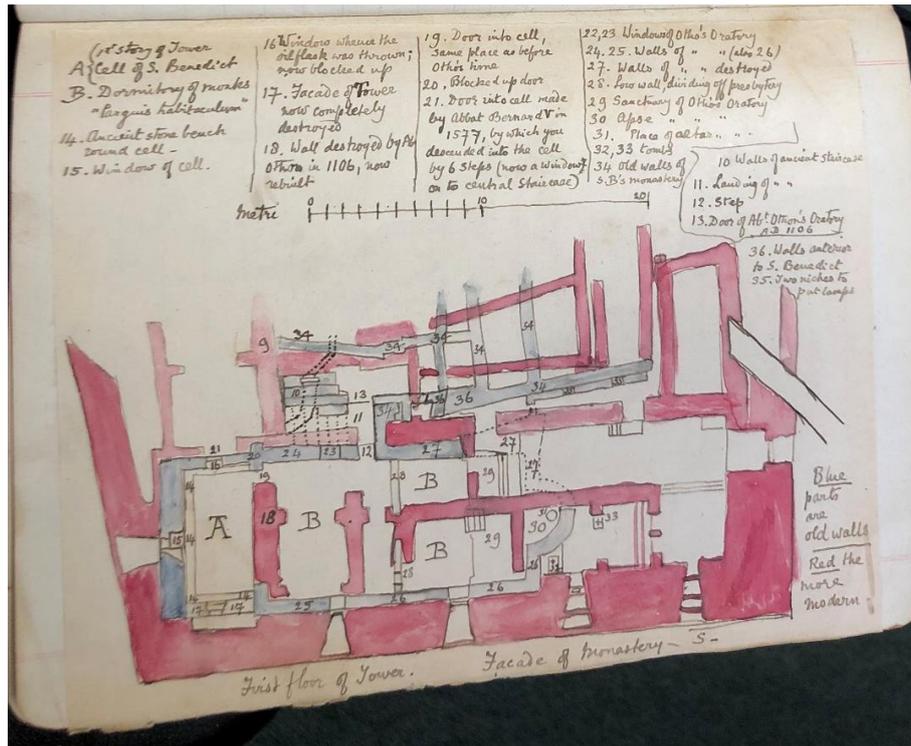
daily goings on and his recording of his time there are a wonderful snapshot of the monastery in the late 19th century. On the 8th June 1894, a day after his arrival at Monte Cassino, Dom Bede writes 'There cannot be imagined, I think, a more beautiful sanctuary than this upper room of St Benedict's tower, with its lofty roof, its exquisite frescoes and the adjoining chapel which forms the choir.' He went on to say that the tower had some of the walls which were around from St Benedict's time and which he would have seen while he was writing his Rule - Dom Bede then noted he read his own copy of the Rule while in this area.



Perhaps the one of the greatest accounts in the diary are of St Benedict's cell. Dom Bede visited the room on 13th June 1894, and wrote 'This cell is most beautifully restored. You have still the very walls, in one or two places left bare, to show the stones our holy father touched... One mounts on steps behind the beautiful little altar to kiss his foot. Many lamps burn all day long in this chapel, they are of a simple but beautiful pattern in bronze, and lay all along the side walls of the cell.' The below sketch is by Dom Bede and shows the cell layout. In his own words, 'The black blotch is meant to be a monk kneeling at the opening above on the landing, looking down into the chapel.'



Dom Bede was an accomplished 'sketcher', his diaries are filled with little drawings he has made to show what his words mean. It is almost as if he knew one day someone would be reading them, and he needed to be as clear as possible. His drawings of Monte Cassino give



This final view of the monastery is a beautiful sketch from a neighbouring hill and shows the skill which Dom Bede possessed.



If you would like to see more about Dom Bede and his diaries you can visit the History and Community website, an online exhibition created with Dr Ben Pohl of Bristol University <http://www.historyandcommunity.com/>

With thanks to Maria Abellan, Bristol University MA student for her work on the diaries and bringing their importance to our attention.

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