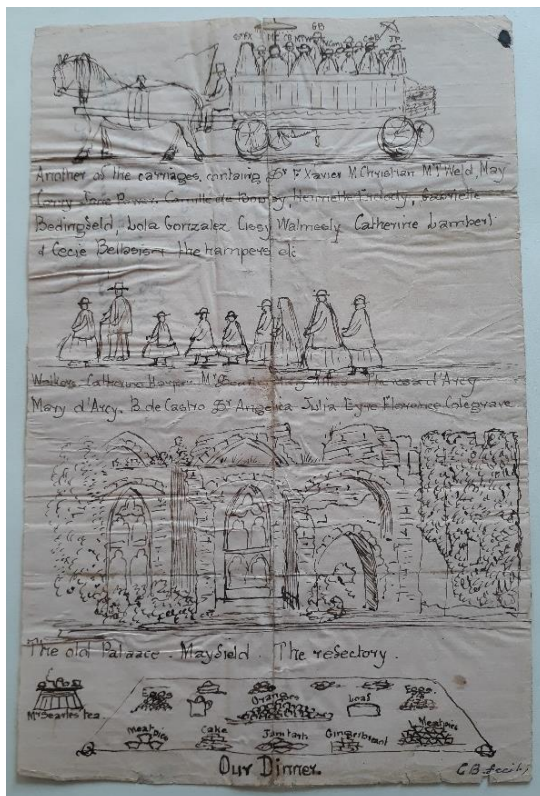


2023

'Never had there been a more glorious picnic': the Bellasis Sisters and SHCJ picnics



After the celebration of Whitsun last month, over 141 years have passed since the famous Mayfield picnic shared by the sisters and girls of the Holy Child Convent school of St Leonards-on-Sea. Now summer brings hope of brighter, warmer days, it is hoped readers of this article are enjoying being out and surrounded by nature – with or without refreshments - as generations of Holy Child sisters and pupils have done. This September will also mark 140 years since the Duchess of Leeds, Louisa Catherine Osborne (née Caton), transferred the grounds and ruins of Mayfield Old Palace to the SHCJ, since a small group of sisters received the keys to the farmhouse on the 29th September 1863.

Left: Cecilia Bellasis' 1862 sketch of the Mayfield Picnic.

This article focuses on a first-hand account of the picnic contributed to *the Mayfield Review* by Mother Mary Francis Bellasis, the sister of Cecilia 'Cissie' Bellasis, who made the charming pen sketch of the picnic kept within the SHCJ EP Archives today. Cissie Bellasis' sketch was sent to Mother Lucy Ignatia just after this joyful excursion as a simple illustration to her letter.¹ She could not have known it at the time, but her drawing was to provide a vital glimpse into a moment of SHCJ history.

¹ EP/1/31/d Original sketch of the Mayfield Picnic 1863 by Cecilia Bellasis.

The expedition to Mayfield began simply as a promise Cornelia made to the boarding school girls of St Leonards on 21st December 1861, Cornelia's feast day, to join them at the annual school picnic. This was to take place, as according to Holy Child custom, during Whitsun on Tuesday, 26th May 1862. Cornelia herself chose 'Old Palace Farm, Mayfield' from a book of *Historical Sketches of the Ruins of Sussex* as a suitable setting for their meal and so the SHCJ's connection with this historic site began.²



While her younger sister observed the Mayfield picnic from a pupil's perspective, M.M. Francis experienced it as a novice SHCJ since she had been clothed in October 1861. Cissie was to follow in her elder sister's footsteps and entered the Society in August 1869 taking St Aloysius as her name in religion, while the youngest Bellasis sister to join the SHCJ, Mother Mary Edward, entered in 1879. M.M. Edward's necrology records that she was a 'sympathetic friend to the poor' and was the last postulant 'who had the privilege of receiving the hood from our dear Mother Foundress'.³

Above: Mother Mary Edward Bellasis.

Like other necrologies of the time, the content of these texts is mostly praise of the Bellasis sisters' virtues, so it is difficult to get a strong sense of their personalities. Nevertheless, the playfulness with which young Cissie drew her sketches of the nuns, girls and Reverend Father Joseph Searle is proven in Mother St Aloysius' necrology to be enduring trait. The necrologist remarks that her 'tender charity' was 'combined with a whimsical humour to form a most loveable character and Mother St Aloysius was everybody's friend'.⁴

Right: Mother St Aloysius (Left) and Mother Mary Francis Bellasis (right).

M.M. Francis remembered the convent had been 'filled with excitement' the week before the Mayfield picnic. To ensure the success of the expedition, each sister made thoughtful plans within their respective roles. Those working in the kitchen consulted *Mrs Beaton's Book of Household Management* to discover 'what fare would best stand the vicissitudes of transport'. The convent was searched for hampers and baskets to ensure the burden of food and other essentials was evenly divided. The clothing sister gathered 'umbrellas and waterproofs, galoshes and wraps galore'. The infirmarian had 'visions of children returning with pneumonia or broken limbs through the dangers of damp, mouldy ruins and crumbling walls'. To mitigate such hazards, she compiled a comprehensive



² Mother Mary Francis Bellasis, 'The Mayfield Picnic', *Mayfield Review*, 1919, p.22.

³ EP/4/3/Bellasis, Mary Edward, Mother Mary Edward's Necrology.

⁴ EP/4/3/Bellasis, St Aloysius Cecilia, Mother St Aloysius Bellasis' Necrology

first-aid kit complete with 'arnica, cold cream, peppermint and ginger drops, salvolatile, eau de Cologne and sticking plaster, all enveloped in various bandages.'⁵

Travelling first to Ticehurst Road by train, the joyful party of sisters and children, accompanied by Fr Searle, either sat in one of three wagons or were 'willing shank's ponies' on their journey to the Old Palace. The five miles were soon covered as they went 'singing and chattering on the way.' After negotiating a Toll-bar, M.M. Francis describes how Mayfield was hidden the other side of a 'steep, straight ascent,' so those in the wagons chose to walk to ease the strain on the horses. All were rewarded by the 'surprise' of Mayfield village with its picturesque, ruined walls and the discovery of 'the beautiful spot' itself, the Old Synod Hall and other remaining structures of the old archbishops' palace.

While the girls searched the village for treats such as Mrs Lusted's bullseyes which 'crowned their delight', Cornelia, the St Leonards SHCJ and Fr Searle admired the Palace ruins and arranged their picnic dinner.⁶ From the details in Cissie's drawing, we know it consisted of a loaf with piles of meat pies, eggs and oranges as well as jam tarts, cakes and gingerbread to satisfy all with a sweet tooth.⁷ Cornelia chose the picnic ground: an area 'outside the north wall of the Hall, on a green sward where stood several small ruined arches which framed beautiful vistas'. It was to become by 1919 the site of the sisters' refectory. In M.M. Francis' words 'never had there been a more glorious picnic' than the



summer banquet the sisters, Fr Searle and the young ladies tucked in to.

After they had eaten their 'invigorating meal', the girls explored the woods and cooled their feet in the brook. Cornelia named it 'St Thomas' Brook' after the Saint on whose feast she celebrated her Jubilee. The party returned 'enchanted' by Mayfield, but M.M. Francis sensed that Cornelia was drawn to the Old Palace 'in a far deeper sense [...] the Saints of God had trod on very ground on which she stood'.⁸

Left: Esmé Ellis, Ada Lane and Audrey Wilcocks sitting by St Thomas' Brook circa 1920.

Across Holy Child Schools, annual summer picnics of the sodalities, the orchestra and the entire school at Whitsun and other feast days continued the intrepid and joyful spirit of the girls and nuns venturing to Mayfield in 1862.

Right: An SHCJ sister with girls from Harrogate HCJ school on an outing to Fountains Abbey, circa 1905.

Harrogate Holy Child School explored sites of historic beauty similar to the Old Palace such as the magnificent Fountains Abbey and Bolton



⁵ Bellasis, 'The Mayfield Picnic', *Mayfield Review*, 1919, p.22.

⁶ Bellasis, 'The First Mayfield Picnic 1862', *Mayfield Review*, 1919, p.22-24.

⁷ EP/1/31/d Original sketch of the Mayfield Picnic 1863 by Cecilia Bellasis.

⁸ Bellasis, 'The First Mayfield Picnic 1862', *Mayfield Review*, 1919, p.24.

Castle.⁹ In 1927, a group of Aspirants found a cave in Middlesmoor and ventured further using candles from the nearby café, later discovering that they been walking beneath the church.¹⁰

The children of St Leonards enjoyed regular trips to the seaside, including Camber sands at Rye, where the only thing that marred their enjoyment of 'blue, beckoning breakers' was the sudden appearance of 'fearsome' jellyfish. Nonetheless, amongst the 1925 orchestra party 'some intrepid spirits dashed down for another bathe.'¹¹

In the same 1919 edition of *the Mayfield Review* in which M.M. Francis's reminiscences of the summer of 1863 featured, Nell Grindle gives an account of another Mayfield picnic, one enjoyed by the children of Poplar who attended the club within the Holy Child Settlement based there. This annual event 'like



so many other good things' had been stopped over the war years, but on 15th June 1919 it resumed. One girl had looked forward so much to the day that she had 'sat up all night for fear of missing the bus the next morning'.

Left: group photo from a Settlement Outing in 1949.

The day was 'glorious' and 'the Old Palace was looking its loveliest' for the new group of children. Their

picnic dinner was served on 'the bump', a familiar feature in Mayfield's grounds and soon 'the garden resounded with their happy talk and laughter.'¹²

On 27th August 1923, 60 years after the Duchess' fateful purchase of Old Palace farm was made on 18th August 1863, M.M. Francis gave her testimony of Cornelia Connelly. She describes the friendship between her father, Serjeant Edward Bellasis and Cornelia, the woman he entrusted with his daughters' care. Bellasis was the son of an Anglican Clergyman and had trained at the Inner Temple, going on to become a Serjeant-at-Law in a number of high-profile cases. Since he and his wife Eliza had heard from Bishop Thomas Grant that the criticisms against Cornelia were untrue, Bellasis befriended her and became a stalwart supporter, advising on property issues and other troubles faced by the SHCJ, such as the Annie McCave case.¹³



Right: Serjeant Edward Bellasis, circa 1850.

In her testimony, M.M. Francis describes her sense, on meeting Cornelia at 12 years of age, that she 'must be holy, for my Father to show her such respect and confidence'. M.M. Francis further attests 'from that day their friendship was for life. His opinion of her

⁹ *The Magazine: The Convent HCJ Harrogate*, 1928, pp.45-46.

¹⁰ *The Magazine: The Convent HCJ Harrogate*, Oct 1927, p. 43.

¹¹ Diana McNabb 'The Orchestra Picnic, July 1925', *The St Leonards Chronicler*, 1925, p.56.

¹² Nell Grindle, 'The Settlement Picnic', *The Mayfield Review*, 1919, p.34.

¹³ CC Doc., vol. 83, pp.24 -25.

was of the highest'. She repeated her father's endorsement that 'if he had fifty daughters instead of five he would entrust them all to her'.¹⁴

M.M. Francis spent her last years at the SHCJ's Harrogate Convent. After she died on 5th June 1927, an obituary in the school magazine described her as a 'one of the treasures of the Society'. Appreciating M.M. Francis' 'fine old world courtesy', her patience and 'interest in all that was going on', the Harrogate nuns and school felt it was 'a great privilege for Harrogate to have the care of her during her declining years'.¹⁵ As she remained at the centre of SHCJ community and school life, M.M. Francis was witness to and part of traditions which took fun seriously and put friendship at the heart of school and community life.

¹⁴ CC Doc., vol 76, p.67-68.

¹⁵ *The Magazine: The Convent HCJ Harrogate*, Oct 1927