

The Fellowship of St Ethelwold

at

St Ethelwold's House
30 East St Helen Street
Abingdon



Introduction

The story of the Fellowship of St Ethelwold is inextricably entwined with the life of Dorothea Pickering, its founder, and her developing vision and purpose for St Ethelwold's House. This account derives from those who knew her well and who worked with her from early on particularly the local historian, Mieneke Cox, Beryl Niblett, and Susie Howard, a friend of Dorothea and still a trustee after 20 years. After Dorothea's death, Mieneke studied her many writings and wrote a summary of her life and work at St Ethelwold's.

She starts this summary as follows:

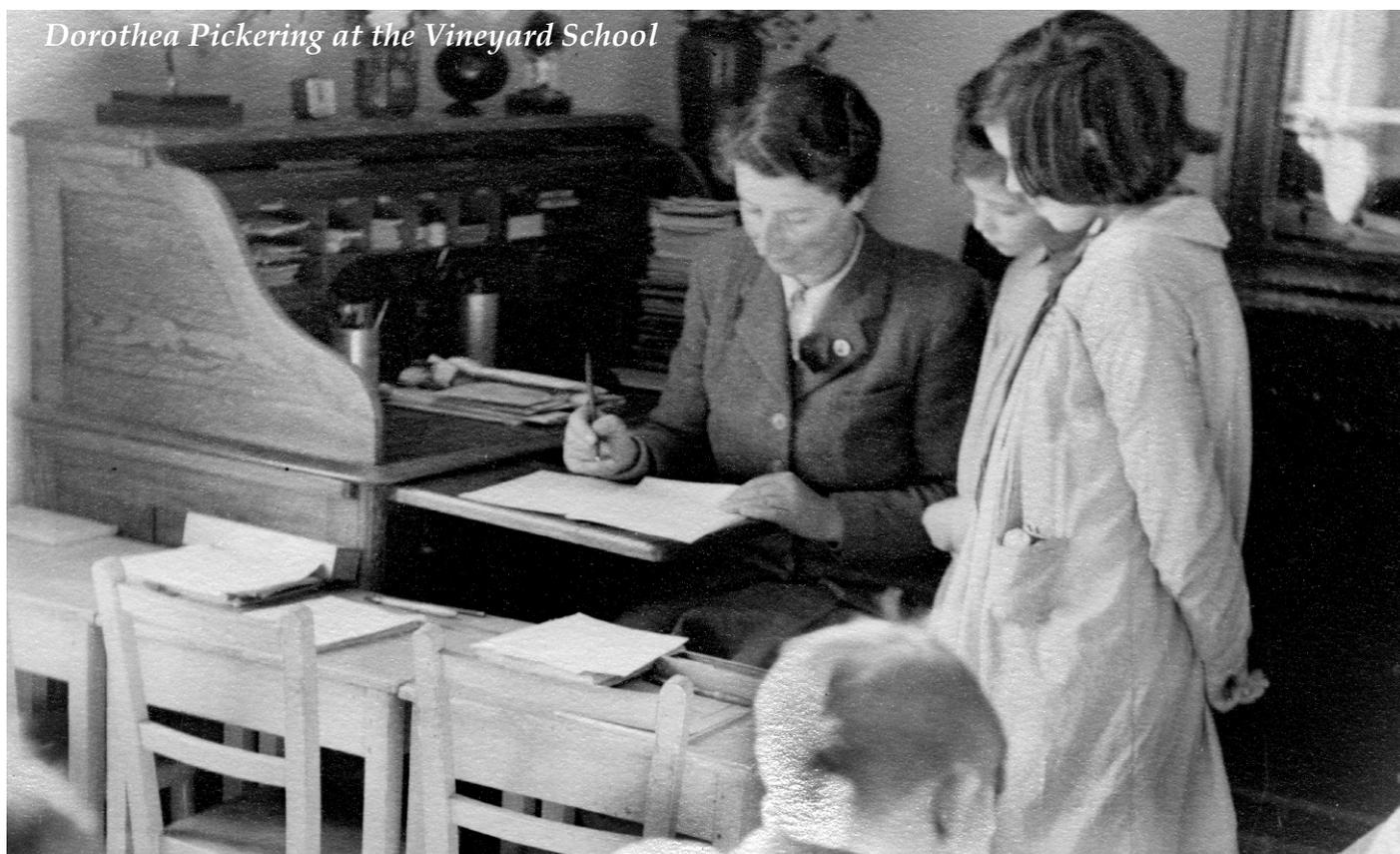
Since childhood Dorothea had believed

she had work to do for God in Abingdon, but its form eluded her; when she died the form was still more becoming than being.

Dorothea's early years.

Dorothea was born in 1906. From 1912 to 1938 'home' was Denchworth, near Abingdon, where her father was the Anglican vicar. After attending St Mary's School, Wantage and Hampstead High School, she trained as a teacher at the Froebel Institute, which pioneered early ideas on Kindergarten education.

While still living at home during the 1930s, Dorothea met the Rev Jack Winslow who had worked at a



Catholic ashram in India, for a long time run by Benedictines monks and the Wantage Sisters and which still exists.

Jack's teachings and books introduced thousands to the idea of 'listening to God' in a daily Quiet Time, an idea increasingly important to Dorothea in the last years of her life and still at the heart of meditation practice at St Ethelwold's today. The concept of 'ashram' was a dormant seed for Dorothea for more than 50 years. Dorothea took her first job in Palestine from 1928 until 1935. Until she went to Palestine she had been a fervent Anglican but after her return in 1937 she became a Roman Catholic for reasons which are not completely clear.

The Vineyard School

After a period of private teaching, she decided to open her own school in Abingdon. The Catholic sisters at the Convent helped her to find a room for the school at the Old Quaker Meeting House in the Vineyard. Accordingly the school was named Vineyard School which name it kept when it moved first to Park Road, thence here to 30 East St Helen Street in 1964. The land from what we now call the Vineyard slopes down to the medieval abbey of Abingdon and onwards to

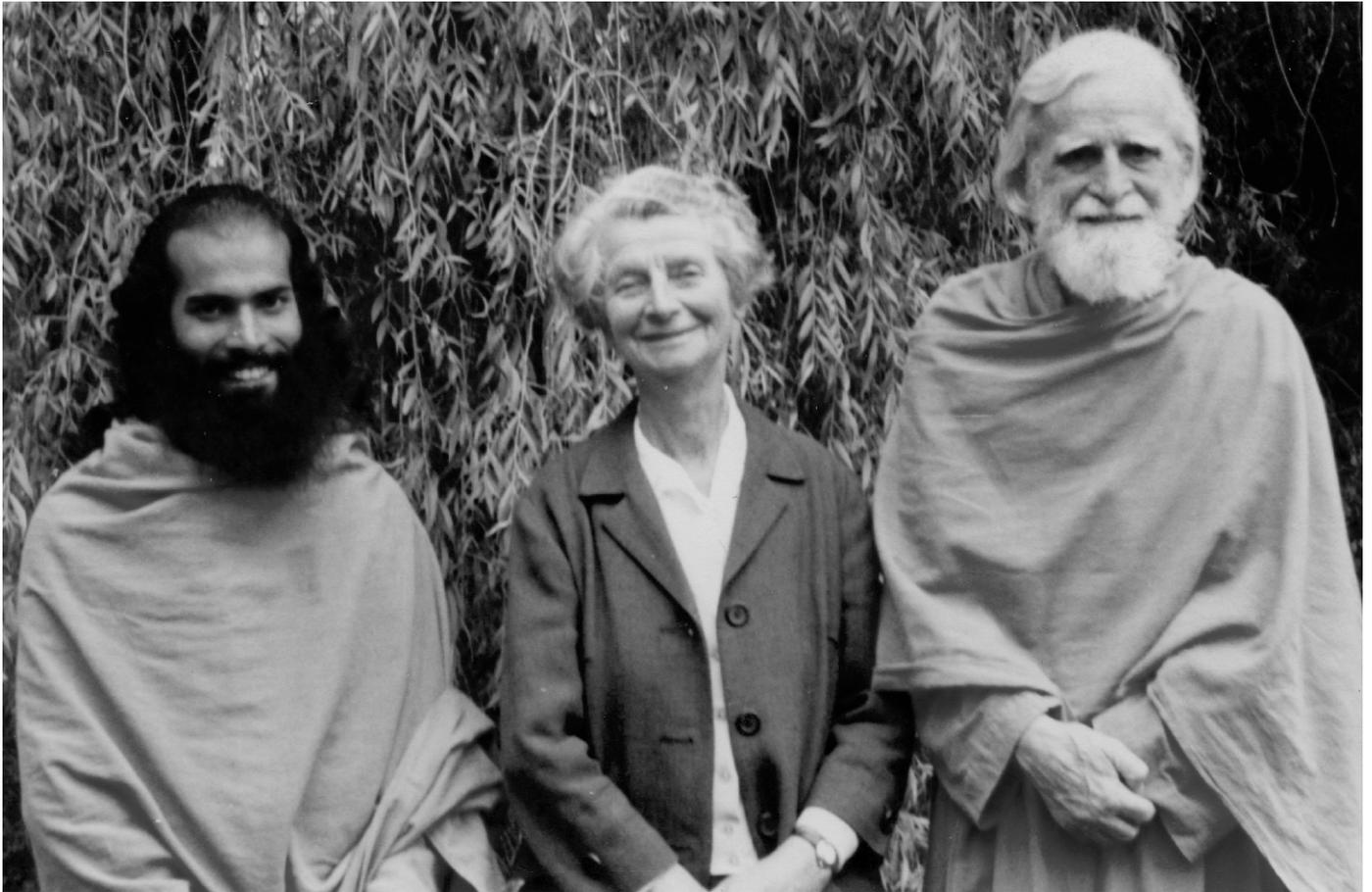
the river. In the tenth century it was cultivated by the monks as a vineyard.

It was probably this place, at this period of her life that gave the first concrete form to Dorothea's vision, that of bringing the Benedictines back to Abingdon. She was fascinated by the history of Abingdon Abbey and the work of Ethelwold, the Benedictine monk who rebuilt and reorganised it in the tenth century, leaving behind him a flourishing community of monks.

The pressures for Dorothea of running her school, side by side with a persistent belief that she was called to be a nun, could have left little room for the emergence of the deeper vision at that time. This had to await her retirement more than thirty years later. Meanwhile, after her conversion to Rome, she joined the Third Order of St Francis, a Franciscan order of lay women and men committed to living a life of simplicity.

The emergence of the Fellowship at St Ethelwold's House

In 1967 Dorothea retired and closed the school. However, she continued to live in the house in East St Helen's Street. In the following ten years she studied medieval history to better understand the separation of the



Father Amaldass, Dorothea Pickering and Father Bede Griffiths

Anglican from the Catholic church, she invited archaeologists to dig in her garden, and became an active participant in the emerging movement for church unity in Abingdon and elsewhere. Dorothea was an enthusiastic apostle of ecumenism which at that time provided for her a helpful bridge between the Anglicanism of her youth and her later conversion to Catholicism. Soon afterwards Dorothea invited one of the St Helen's Bible Study groups to meet in her house. This was the beginning of making the house into a spiritual centre and it was named St Ethelwold's House a few years later.

As well as Bible study the group began to practise meditation, following the tapes and books of John Main (an American Benedictine) and meditation has continued in the house ever since.

In the early 1970s Dorothea wrote to various Benedictine monastic foundations, offering her house as an Abingdon base for their work. All regretfully declined, for reasons of finance or lack of recruits. By 1978 she had accepted that the house would not become a traditional Benedictine community. It was then that the idea of a 'Fellowship of St Ethelwold' was born. With her usual enthusiasm and

vigour, she pursued this vision, consulting as many people as possible in Abingdon and further afield, inviting them to become members and supporters of the new fellowship. The house would be a spiritual centre with a Christian emphasis, a centre for meditation, lectures, discussions and hospitality and in 1984 the Fellowship became a Charitable Trust.

Bede Griffiths

At this time, she began a correspondence with Bede Griffiths, a Benedictine monk who had been exploring Eastern spirituality, to find the 'other half of his soul'. He had settled in at Saccidananda Ashram, a Christian community in South India where he became a sannyasi, integrating the Hindu Indian tradition into his monastic life.

At Dorothea's invitation Bede came twice to stay at St Ethelwold's House and celebrated mass in the sanctuary to the delight of all who took part, particularly Dorothea. Bede spoke of his mission through the spiritual practice and work of the ashram to help connection with that power of Being he called the Love of God. Dorothea often quoted his remark that England needs ashrams, and new forms of spiritual community.

Interfaith dialogue and practice

But Dorothea's relationship with Bede also widened her understanding of ecumenism, beyond the confines of Christianity, to other faiths and was the start of her subsequent dedication to inter-faith dialogue. The Interfaith Study Group was an important part of the development of Dorothea's vision for St Ethelwold's. Speakers from other religions were invited and religious practices were shared and much enjoyed.

The First Community

Although St Ethelwold's House was working well, albeit on a small scale, as an inspiring and ecumenical spiritual centre, Dorothea became increasingly concerned about its long-term sustainability, particularly after her death. The dream of an ashram-like spiritual community was still in the back of her mind. She was therefore pleased when a small group of modern Benedictines (if by another name) following a tradition of work, study and prayer offered to live and develop the work of the House in partnership with her. As Dorothea's health deteriorated further they took over responsibility for the maintenance of the house and her care until she died in 1997.

The group then disbanded and the trustees made another attempt to set

up a small ashram-like resident spiritual community by renting a number of rooms to interested individuals, with a live-in warden. It eventually became clear that the hoped-for cohesive community did not develop. It is apparently notoriously difficult to create and sustain financially and spiritually a small live-in spiritual community.

An open spiritual centre for the modern world

So it was decided to fulfil Dorothea's vision on a different basis, one which would be more likely to be sustainable in the long term both financially and

spiritually. This has been operating successfully for the last five years. This is to see St Ethelwold's House as an open spiritual centre, rooted in the Christian tradition, committed to interfaith dialogue and practice and providing a space of spiritual peace and refreshment for anyone whether or not they practice a religious faith. The House now has a secure financial basis with income from bed and breakfast accommodation for the general public, the hiring of the function rooms for spiritual courses and social and community activities, and the fees for spiritual courses and activities put on by St Ethelwold's itself.



The gardens at St Ethelwold's House are a haven of peace and meditation

Throughout the year there is a varied programme with is a rich variety of spiritual opportunities on offer: these revolve around the weekly Christian meditation and monthly contemplative Eucharist and include courses and events from a wide variety of traditions.

In this way, although the House does not have a resident spiritual community, its peace and tranquillity and the activities that take place are very much in keeping with Dorothea's original vision for St Ethelwold's.

Ways of getting involved

In order that the Fellowship of St Ethelwold continues to flourish we need the support of our local

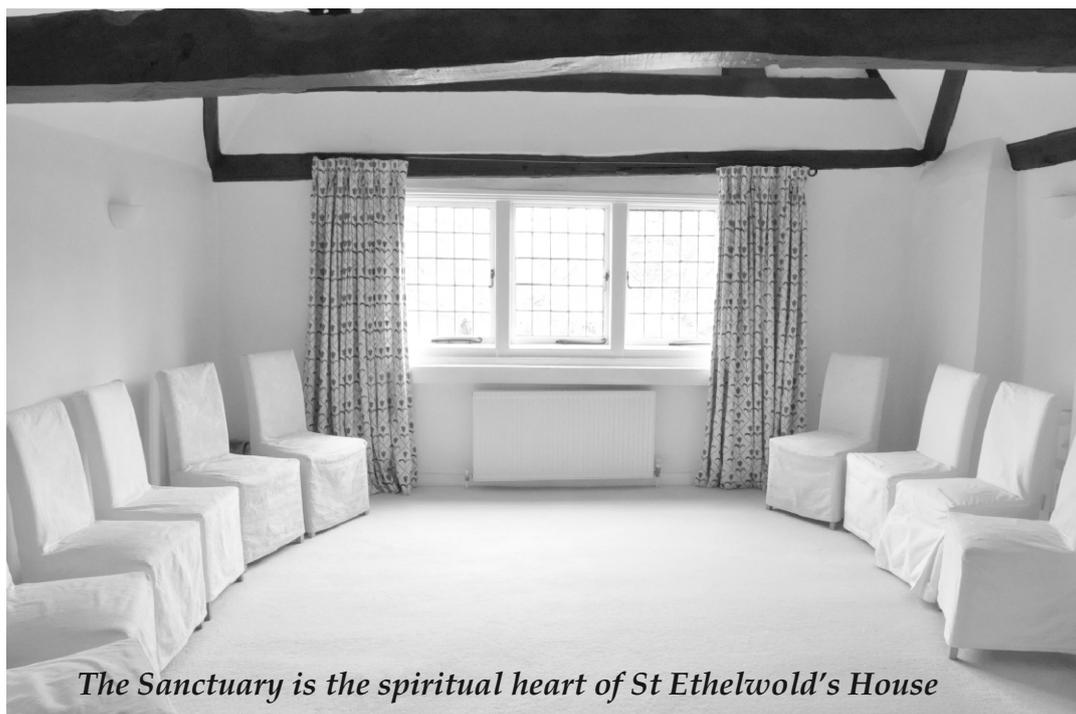
community. We therefore invite you to become a Friend of the Fellowship. For an annual subscription of £10 you would have free use of the sanctuary and the garden.

We should also be grateful for offers of voluntary work for the Trust. There are many jobs which need to be done and many hands make light work!

If you would like to book a room for bed and breakfast, hire a room or suite of rooms to run a retreat, a daytime course or other activity, a party or other social occasion please contact the Administrator in the office.

In keeping with Dorothea's wishes we want St Ethelwold's to be a social and spiritual resource for the community.

Text by Jill Gant, a former Trustee of St Ethelwold's House. July 2011



The Sanctuary is the spiritual heart of St Ethelwold's House

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“I am very closely united to you in all that you are doing. I see more and more clearly that the hope of the world is in the growth of contemplative life, first of all in the Church and then in all religions and all human society. It is for this that we were created! I value therefore especially every movement, such as yours, towards a contemplative life based on shared meditation and inter-faith dialogue. I am sure that it is through such small groups, especially of lay people, that the renewal of the Church will take place.”

Bede Griffiths to Dorothea Pickering August 8th 1992