



Abbot Aldhelm (Donald) Cameron Brown was born in London on 27th September 1929, the elder of two children of Charles Alexander Cameron Brown and Amy, his wife. His younger brother, Alistair, predeceased him by many years, leaving a wife and descendants in New Zealand. Early childhood memories were of summers spent with paternal grandparents in Fife. He would sometimes tell stories of the strict Presbyterian background they came from: everything the adventurous young brothers proposed to do would be greeted by Grandma with the comment, "If ye're spared!" He delighted, too, to tell the possibly apocryphal story of the Minister who preached hell and damnation in the Kirk, climaxing with "and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!" to which one of the congregation responded, "But Minister, I hav'ne any teeth"; a pause followed, then, "Teeth will be provided!"

Donald grew up in the mostly Anglican environment inherited from his mother, Amy, and eventually attended Claysmore School, in Dorset. National Service followed, 1947-1949, part of his training (in Northern Ireland) given by Major Barry Flint, who was to become D. Hildebrand RIP of our community (+1991).

Three years at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, during which he read English under F.R. Leavis and once attended lectures given by a visiting C.S. Lewis, led to his at last acting on a steadily growing conviction that he must become a Catholic. He used to say that books like, "Now I See" by Arnold Lunn, and the seminal "The Golden String" by Fr Bede Griffiths of our community, were largely influential in this journey. A lifelong friendship with the RC Chaplain at Cambridge, Mgr Alfred Gilbey RIP followed, and convert's instructions began. Gilbey later published these as "We Believe" by "A Priest".

After reception into the church (of which his father strongly disapproved) and graduation, Fr Aldhelm lived and worked in London for a brief spell, during which he trained as a librarian in a public library, a skill that he was to bring to the monastery. He thought at first he should become a Trappist, and tried Mount St Bernard for a short time, only to be told by the then novice master, Fr Gregory Wareing (Old Bedian) that he would be better in a less strict form of life. And so he came to Prinknash, then home to a large group of converts like himself. Wareing had taught him that "every monk should have the heart of a parish priest, and every parish priest the heart of a monk"—sound advice that he would later pass on in homilies and conferences to the community.

At Prinknash his novice masters were, in quick succession, Fr Alfred Spencer (later Abbot of Pluscarden) and Fr Alban Léotaud. Professed on 29th April 1957 (then the feast of the Cluny Abbots) he went to Pluscarden, then our dependent house, to study Philosophy under Fr Bruno Webb RIP. After theology at Prinknash, he was ordained priest on the feast of St Samson, 28th July 1963. He served as Guest Master, Librarian, and, towards the end of Abbot Dyfrig Rushton (his predecessor's) reign, Cellarer.

Elected 3rd Abbot of Prinknash in April 1979, his Abbatial Blessing was held in Gloucester Cathedral in front of a large and ecumenical congregation. One of the first decisions he took was to allow the dependent priory of St Michael's, Farnborough, to achieve independence (1980). In early 1985 came the invitation to make a monastic foundation in Ghana. Fr Aldhelm's Prior, Br Bede Kilgallon, took up the cudgels and spent an immense amount of time and effort in studying its feasibility, and in visiting Ghana. The project was adopted by Pluscarden and Ramsgate (now Chilworth) and has since become the independent priory of Kristo Buase, Ghana. Fr Aldhelm was their founding abbot.

A large body of mostly typed sermons and homilies remains in our archives. He drew on his love of English literature (Tolkien, Lewis, and especially, the poetry of T.S. Eliot) but he had also read much of Thomas Merton and would later meet and admire the Belgian Trappist abbot, André Louf whose books on prayer are very popular. In sermons and homilies, Fr Aldhelm shone.

Two important and not unrelated skills were bird-watching (a little figure in blues, with binoculars, round the estate), and his work for Interreligious Dialogue (he toured the Buddhist monasteries of India with Fr Francis Baird and met the Dalai Lama several times, ending his tour with a stay at the British High Commission in New Delhi, guest of Sir David Goodall, HC at that time).

But he would be the first to admit that being a manager (a role which Abbots of Prinknash have often been compelled to assume, due to the nature of our estate and businesses) did not suit him at all. It cannot have been easy for him to succeed Abbot Dyfrig Rushton, whose management skills and practical competence were legendary. The fact that he was extremely sensitive to other people's needs and much sought after as a confessor and director meant that he often agonised about administrative decisions because of their impact on individuals, even when his council and chapter were fully in agreement with his proposals. Fr Aldhelm ("Aldi", as he was affectionately known to friends) was very much aware of the underdog, and would often allow himself to appear weak or even ridiculous so that a more important truth could come to light.

After twelve years in the saddle, he decided to retire from office, but a few years later he was chosen to be Abbot Visitor of our far-flung English Province, with houses in UK, various parts of the US, and Ghana. Our houses are indebted to him for wise guidance and counsel during these years. He retired in 2003 and was succeeded by Ab Anselm Atkinson of Pluscarden, who holds that office to this day.

He became a much loved and respected Oblate Master and, during his time, the Oblate community began to expand and diversify in unprecedented ways, a movement that happily continues. For about the last ten years his memory began to fail him and he became increasingly frail. The decision was taken in 2016 to admit him to Nazareth House, Cheltenham, where he was most lovingly cared for by the sisters and professional staff, and became a great favourite. He died at 6am on 8th November 2018.

Fr Aldhelm often said his verse of choice was from Psalm 118:

I have seen that all perfection has an end, but your command is boundless

It expressed for him the futility of human attempts at holiness and the all-embracing power of God's command or will, which is to save us. May he now experience the reality of that truth which he so wholeheartedly lived. RIP.

**All are welcome to attend the Funeral Mass which will take place
at St Patrick's RC Church, 24 Ermin St, Brockworth, Gloucester GL3 4HL
on Wednesday, 21st November at 11am, followed by light refreshments in the Church Hall.
Priests wishing to concelebrate are asked to inform Fr Mark on 07821 754243**