

ST COLUMBA'S HOUSE, RETREAT & CONFERENCE CENTRE

Iain Wakeford 2018

In recent years, as part of the Heritage Open Days Weekend, I have been conducting guided walks from St Columba's House on Maybury Hill to the Church of the Holy Cross in Sandy Lane.

The two contrasting ecclesiastical sites are linked by the St Peter's Sisterhood, whose former convent was on the crest of Maybury Hill - the Church of the Holy Cross originally being their chapel (at the time the second largest private chapel in Britain), and St Columba's House a later retreat and conference centre.

I have detailed the history of the Sisterhood in these pages before when I was covering the Victorian period in this chronological history of the area, but this week I want to concentrate on the history of St Columba's House.

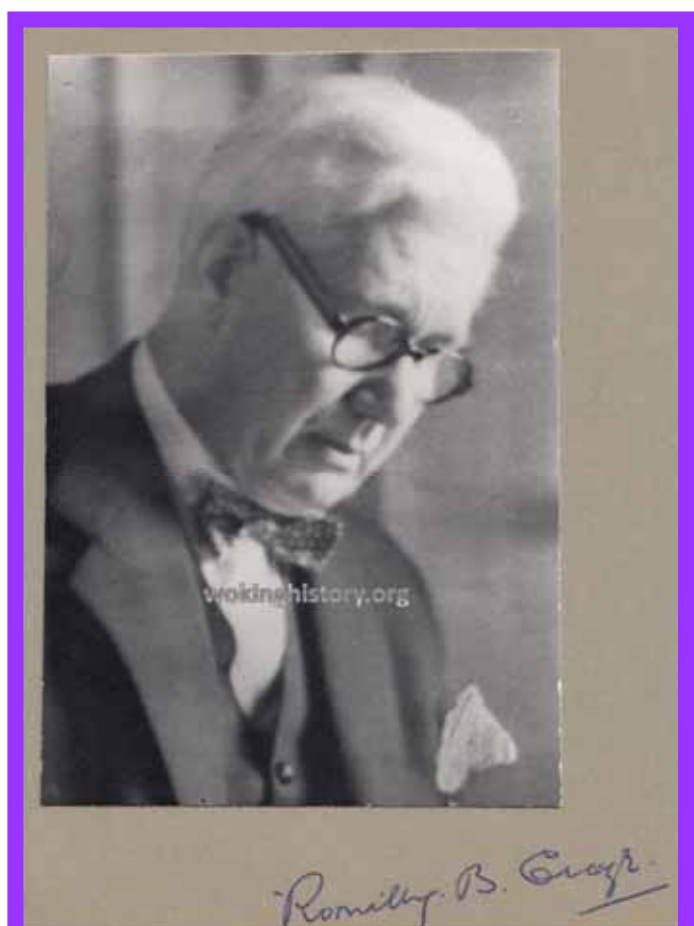
The story really goes back to 1964 when the Bishop of Guildford, the Rt. Rev. George Reindorp, first suggested to the St Peter's community that setting up a retreat in their grounds would be 'of great value to the Diocese'. There was some doubt at the time (the Charity Commissioners originally pointing out that it was not part of their 'charitable

objectives'), but these were gradually overcome and in the end it was decided that such a building could be built in the grounds of 'The Pines' - part of the convent's large estate on the lower slopes of Maybury Hill.

An ecclesiastical architect, Romily Bernard Craze, was appointed to draw up the designs (having recently completed the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St George, Southwark), which were soon approved by the Sisters and their Council (as well as Woking Council) with Sister Agnes Clare (who since 1959 had been the House Sister at The Pines) working alongside the architect to perfect the plans.

The work did take a slight back-seat whilst changes were taking place within the Sisterhood itself, but in 1966 Sister Agnes Clare was elected the new Mother Superior to the convent and from then on work on St Columba's House continued apace.

Apparently the Lovell (Sussex) Ltd (the builders) had already been working on the site for several months by the time the Bishop of Guildford was ready to lay the foundation stone of the 9th October 1967 (and a couple of years

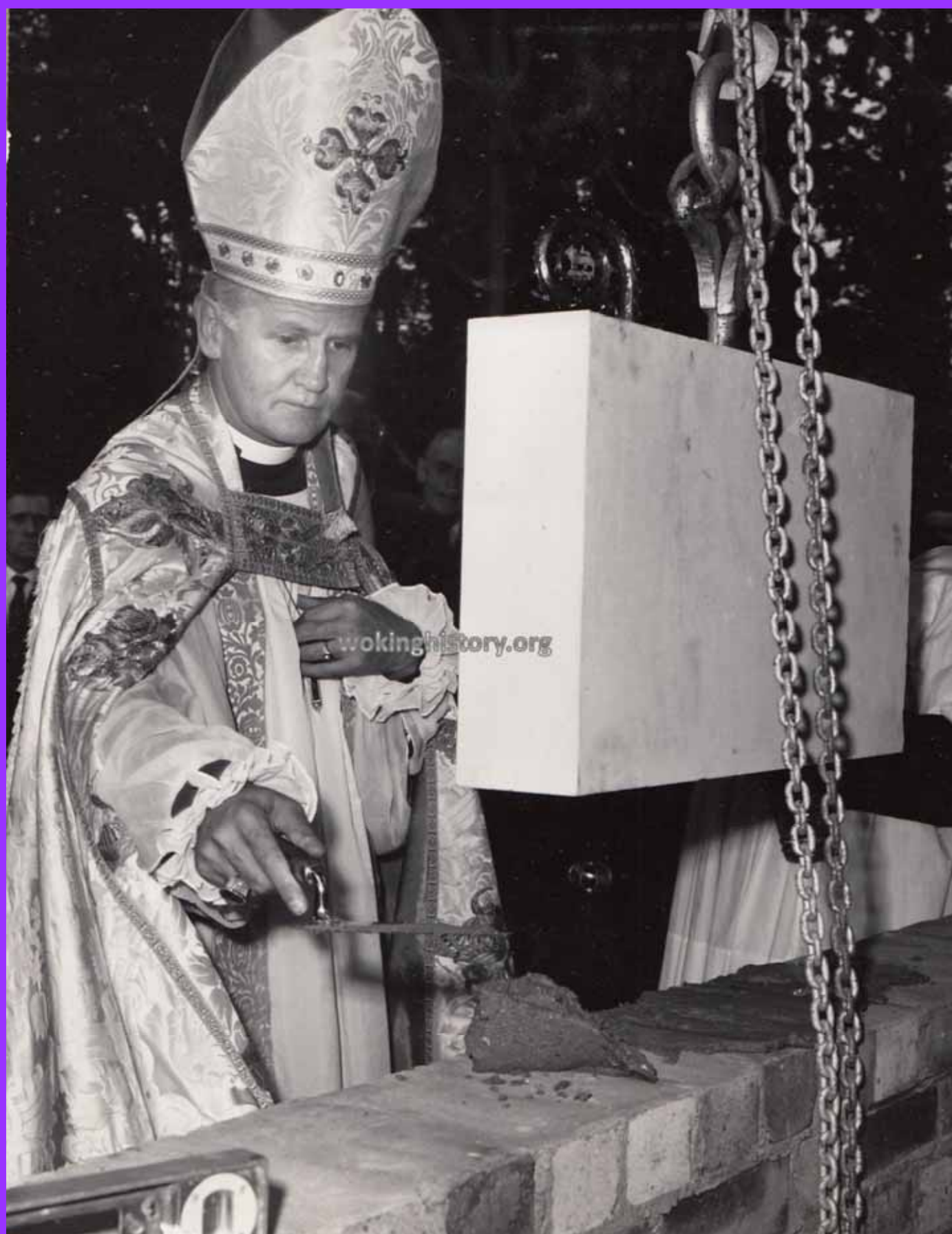


The architect, Romily Bernard Craze

The builders, Lovell (Sussex) Ltd, began work on the site in the spring of 1967.







The foundation stone of the St Columba's House Retreat and Conference Centre was laid by the Bishop of Guildford on the 9th October 1967.



before it was officially dedicated) – but the spirit of optimism surrounding the project encouraged the nuns to take bookings for the retreat in the autumn of 1967 for the following November, even though it was not guaranteed that the buildings would be complete by then!

Sadly, since then, the number of nuns has dwindled to none. The original convent at the top of the hill was sold off and converted into the apartments and houses of Oldfield Wood, with the more modern convent built in the grounds in the late 1980's also closing down and replaced by the houses of Convent Close.

Although maybe not as ornate as the Victorian Church of the Holy Cross, the simple chapel at St Columba's has its own tranquil charm.

The 1960's buildings have been greatly improved with every room of the retreat now en-suite and modern conference facilities available for hire by all denominations (and none).







When that new convent was built, St Columba's House was also refurbished with the addition of a new conservatory, but in 2009 another major refurbishment took place to make the centre fit for the 21st century, with a stunning new entrance (and oratory) – all rooms becoming on-suite and modern equipment installed in the conference facilities.



