

The Abbey Dore Merton Group

CHRISTINE HEMSON

describes creative goings-on at one of the increasing number of regular local 'Merton' gatherings

IN 1993 Esther de Waal and I travelled together to Winchester from our homes in the Golden Valley, on the Welsh Borders. We were attending the birth of the Thomas Merton Society in this country, and had no knowledge at the time just where that memorable weekend would lead, or that our Abbey Dore Merton Group would still be thriving and growing over the subsequent years.

Esther and I both prefer to travel along the quieter country roads avoiding motorways and giving ourselves the opportunity for exploring and talking. The result of our journey home was our decision to gather together a small group of Merton friends with the intention of meeting occasionally to pray and have Merton as our guide.

I AM very fortunate to live in an idyllic setting. My small cottage is situated on a hillside overlooking the beautiful Dore Abbey, a 12th Century Cistercian Monastery which is unique amongst all Cistercian Abbeys for having become, at the Reformation, an Anglican Parish Church. My home seemed the obvious venue for the beginning of our venture.

WE BOTH felt there would be no need to advertise as we wanted to keep everything informal. So it has been through word-of-mouth that some remarkable people from all walks of life, have come to enjoy the Abbey Dore Merton days.

OUR GROUP meets four times a year and the emphasis on the day is silent prayer. After the initial coffee gathering at 10a.m., Esther gives us a reflective talk on Merton themes. We then enter into silence to include a silent lunch.

AROUND 3pm we gather together again to listen to a tape of Merton teaching the novices, followed by open discussion on the theme. A short walk to Dore Abbey to say Vespers and sing the *Salve Regina* (still using the original Winchester 1993 Vespers!) is a perfect finish to the day. We depart around 4.30pm.

THE SURROUNDING countryside provides the solitude necessary for prayer and contemplation, sometimes using Merton's photos as an aid. There is a good sense of freedom to the day, yet one is also aware of our being in a true community. Over the years our numbers have increased to around thirty people with an average of twenty at most meetings. All are welcome. We are fortunate to include Baptists, Quakers, Anglicans, Buddhists, Roman Catholics and a retired Methodist Minister. So Merton's prayer, which we say at the end of Vespers holds, for us, a special significance: *"O God we are one with you, You have made us one with You. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, You dwell in us"*.

THE INCREASE in numbers meant that my house was too small to accommodate everyone in comfort. Lately we have met in a large upper room of a converted barn at Abbey Dore Court Gardens, and have the good fortune of another perfect setting for our Merton days.

SOME PEOPLE had never heard of Thomas Merton but have come to know him and his teachings through our meetings. They have thus been led to a deeper relationship and awareness of God. These are the true fruits of the group.

ESTHER AND I do not know for how long our Abbey Dore group will flourish but for now it clearly fulfils a need, giving an opportunity to find God in the silence of the day and through the wisdom of Thomas Merton.

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