



PRESS RELEASE

Chance to tour Downside Abbey

March 29, 2016

Visitors will have a unique opportunity to hear the former abbot of Downside Abbey talk about this magnificent building in Stratton-on-the-Fosse, thanks to Somerset Churches Trust.

The charity, which gives grants to churches and chapels of all Christian denominations for schemes that will help improve community use, is holding its annual meeting at Downside on Saturday April 9.

The event is open not only to trust members but to anyone who is interested in church history and architecture.

Dom Aidan Bellenger, who retired in 2014 after eight years as abbot, will give a talk and lead a tour of the Basilica of St Gregory the Great, commonly known as Downside Abbey.

The abbey is home to the oldest and most senior Benedictine monastery in England and a famous independent Roman Catholic school which educates both girls and boys between the ages of 11 and 18.

It is a grade I listed building and the great architectural historian Sir Nikolaus Pevsner described the abbey as "the most splendid demonstration of the renaissance of Roman Catholicism in England".

The community was founded in 1605 at Douai in Flanders but was driven out during the French Revolution and in March 1795 moved to England finally settling at Downside in 1814.

The monastery was completed in 1876 and the abbey church in 1925 and is only one of three in the United Kingdom designated as a minor basilica by the Roman Catholic church.

The church is built in the Gothic Revival style and is designed to rival in size the English medieval cathedrals that were lost to the catholics when Henry VIII broke away from Rome during the reformation.

Downside's library is the largest monastic library in Britain. It has 450,000 highly valuable and varied books including a Bible printed in English in 1571. Much of the collection has been digitised using a lottery grant and is now open to the public.

Somerset Churches Trust chairman David Sisson said: "I am really looking forward to the opportunity to tour the abbey and to meeting old friends, existing members and potential new members."

There is no charge for the visit but everyone is asked to book a place by contacting Hugh Playfair on 01963 440611 by April 5.

The event begins at 2pm in the Abbey Visitor Centre. Tea will be served at the end of the tour.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICER MAXINE IRVING ON 01278 787199.