

Interviewee(s): Philip Bell (PB)	Interviewer(s): Caroline McGregor (CM); Philip White (PH)
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SUBJECTS/KEYWORDS	<i>Early Life, Working for Consett Iron Company, Early Curiosity for Religion and how he came to be a monk, The First visit to Nunraw and a growing interest in religion, Challenges of Being a monk, Cooking in the Guesthouse, Becoming the Monastery's tailor, Overseeing the Poultry, Putting Prayer before work, Peak Population of Nunraw Abbey, Relaxation of Church rules and the effect it had on Nunraw's community, Morning Routine, Determination to Stay at Nunraw, Runaways from Nunraw, Importance of Friendship within the monastery, Not Getting to know the villagers of Garvald, Building Friendships with the guest of Nunraw, The Abbot as the father of the monastery, Past Health Issues and stays in the hospital, The Old guesthouse and a near-incident with a sleepwalker, Current Health issues</i>
SUMMARY	<i>Caroline McGregor and Philip White interview Brother Philip Bell at Nunraw Abbey to discuss his life, both before and after he entered the monastery. Brother Bell speaks of his early career in the Ironworks, the interest he has always had in religion, the wide range of skills he has acquired within Nunraw and the challenges he has come up against, both in terms of monastic life and personal health.</i>

Brother Philip Bell- BPB; Caroline McGregor- CM; Philip White- PW

Key Words:

Early Life 0h 00m 00s; Working for Consett Iron Company 0h 01m 25s; Early Curiosity for Religion and how he came to be a monk 0h 2m 03s; The First visit to Nunraw and a growing interest in religion 0h 05m 16s; Challenges of Being a monk 0h 06m 30s; Cooking in the Guesthouse 0h 08m 24s; Becoming the Monastery's tailor 0h 11m 39s; Overseeing the Poultry 0h 13m 27s; Putting Prayer before work 0h 16m 43s; Peak Population of Nunraw Abbey 0h 17m 19s; Relaxation of Church rules and the effect it had on Nunraw's community 0h 17m 35s; Morning Routine 0h 19m 18s; Determination to Stay at Nunraw 0h 20m 29s; Runaways from Nunraw 0h 21m 40s; Importance of Friendship within the monastery 0h 22m 35s; Not Getting to know the villagers of Garvald 0h 23m 37s; Building Friendships with the guest of Nunraw 0h 24m 14s; The Abbot as the father of the monastery 0h 25 05s; Past Health Issues and stays in the hospital 0h 26m 07s; The Old guesthouse and a near-incident with a sleepwalker 0h 27m 17s; Current Health issues 0h 29m 41s

Early Life 0h 00m 00s

0h 0m 00s

CM: So this is our second recording of the day, Caroline McGregor and Philip White, are interviewing Brother Philip Bell and we're at Nunraw Abbey, outside Garvald, the date is the 12th of February 2019

and so first of all Brother Philip is going to tell us where he was born, where he grew up and how he came to be at Nunraw.

BPB: Yeah, well I was born in, as I was saying there, you know, Consett, that was really, Lydgate was the, you know, the place I was actually born which was a- our address would always be Lydgate Consett, you know, because Lydgate was so small, it was a little mining village, you know, and so that was where I spent all my life before I entered the monastery, you know, at 26, and the chief employer of the area was Consett Iron Company, so it was natural that I would seek work, you know, from there, you know, at 16 and that sort of thing, I went in to their offices, their drawing office at the time, so I only worked there, that was my only employer before I entered here, you know.

Working for Consett Iron Company 0h 01m 25s

CM: Where was that drawing office, was it in Durham itself, or was it-

BPB: Yeah, in Durham at the- yeah, no I never moved anywhere, you know, I just worked there and then, for my particular job, you know, I had to attend classes, you know, so I attended Rutherford Collage in New Castle, you know, and you had to get various things, you know, for your job, you know, your examinations and things like that, you know.

Early Curiosity for Religion and how he came to be a monk 0h 02m 03s

PW: So when you decided to join the monastery, why did you come to Nunraw, was there a choice, could you have gone anywhere else?

BPB: Yeah, well I always wondered from an early age, you know, say 11 years old, you know, to give myself like totally to religion, you know, and, I was terribly shy and things like that, so nobody asked me [*chuckles*] you know, so I just carried on, you know, at school and things like that, you know, but I then, this idea never left me, I quite wrongly took up a relationship with a girl, you know, this would be when I would be about 20 or 21, or something like that, you know, and I should not have, really, because I had this idea of wanting to go into religion and give myself totally to God, you know, and I had that from an early age, you know, that I wanted to- all my recreational reading actually was religious, you know, reading about this sort of thing and I would attend any religious gatherings and meetings and things like this, you know, and so that- I'm not quite sure why I took up with Jean and it was unfair because she was really a nice girl, she was a local teacher, you know, and she had hopes, you know, and so I had to finally say, you know, you know that wasn't what I wanted, you know, that I wanted to go into a monastery and so I came here, in 19- I entered the 1st of January 1952, you know, when I came at 26 years old, you know, and I never regretted that decision.

PW: So what did your parents think at the time, did they realise you had a calling to join the monastery?

BPB: Yeah, they were, I think a bit mixed up, you know, the fact that I had been keeping company with Jean and things like this, you know, but at the same time, you see I spent a lot of time going away on weekend retreats and this sort of thing, so it wasn't totally a surprise, you know, really, you know, that I was inclined to that, and all my recreational reading was on religion, you know, on religious orders and things like this, you know.

The First visit to Nunraw and a growing interest in religion 0h 05m 16s

0h 05m 16s

CM: Had you visited Nunraw before you came?

BPB: I visited Nunraw first in 1948, now I would have entered there and then, you know, but I had a lot of things to tie up, you know, with work and things like that and, so the idea never left me to enter, you know, Nunraw.

CM: So you came as a guest then, in 1948, you came as a guest?

BPB: Yeah and as I say my total recreational reading and that was on religion, you know, it was on that and any religious happening around Newcastle or something like that, you know, speakers or things like that, you know, I'd be there, you know, and I was totally taken up with, you know, with religion and things like that, you know, and so that was my early background, you know, before I came.

Challenges of being a monk 0h 06m 30s

PW: So when you first joined was it quite a challenge, was it quite different to obviously what you- was it what you expected?

BPB: Well, when I first came?

PW: Yes.

BPB: Yes it was, because I think, God challenges you, you know, so that life here was completely different for me, because I'd never done any manual work, you know, to begin with, you know, and the work here was on the farm.

PW: Yes I'm told it was really hard work.

BPB: It was hard work you see, I didn't even know how to shovel, you know, and people don't have a lot of patience with you, you know, so I had to put up with that, you know, but right from the moment I entered I think I had the idea come hell or high water and I would stay, you know, and so I was quite prepared that I would be tried, you know, and I was, you know, by men, by the work and things like this, you know, and then you had to accept that not everyone liked you, you know, you had to just face up to this and say, you know, and-

PW: You can just imagine that everybody would get on with everybody, but I suppose in life that doesn't happen does it?

BPB: No it doesn't actually, and I think especially in religious life, you know, you were tried, that way, you know, you were put to the test, you know, so that I found out that, you know, that not everyone loved me [*chuckles*].

PW: And did you have any skills that you, you know, I know that there were chickens and there was farming and, what was your sort of-?

Cooking in the Guesthouse 0h 08m 24s

BPB: Yeah, well the first job they gave me was, I'll just get the order of this, I think the first job they gave me was cooking, I cooked in the guest house, now I'd never done anything like that at all, I had 2 sisters, you know [*chuckles*].

PW: Mum would do the cooking.

0h 08m 44s

BPB: I was never asked or anything like that, you know, but anyway I was determined to do the best I could, you know, and they put me into the guesthouse kitchen so I was cooking for guests, you know, and somebody was asked, you know, to instruct me but the man that was instructing me actually had so many other things to do, you know, he could only give me a small part of his time, you know.

PW: So what sort of number of people would you have to cook for?

BPB: Well you could get up to 30, 40, something like that, and you just had to use your intelligence, you know, and I did learn by my mistakes, you know, because I remember having custard one day for, you know, the dinner, for the lunch, you know, and I had poured the milk on before it was boiled, you know, so that custard was, the great pan of custard, was all lumpy, you know, so I just was prepared, you know, to, well it would just had to be lumpy, until the man who was cooking for the community happened to come in, you know, and he saw the state of the thing, so he just took a sieve and lifted out the lumps [*laughing*] and so the custard was alright, you know, and I learnt by my mistakes and things like that and you're using your intelligence.

PW: Did you quite enjoy cooking in the end?

BPB: I did because it was my job and I applied myself to it, you know, and then I would take- my sister was in actually school meals, she was an organiser for school meals, so she was giving me tips about this and that, you know, for cooking.

PW: Did you have any books that you could look up?

BPB: I'm not quite sure there were, you know, it was just a matter of intelligence, just apply it.

PW: A lot of potatoes, I would hope?

BPB: Eh?

PW: A lot of potatoes?

BPB: Yeah, potatoes and those sort of thing, and also in the kitchen there was the boiler that heated, you know, the hot water system, the heating system for the whole place, and this was my responsibility as well, you know, keeping that fed with coke and things like this.

CM: Oh, it was a solid fuel boiler?

Becoming the Monastery's tailor 0h 11m 39s

BPB: It was [*chuckles*], it was quite a job anyway, but I was only at it for only 9 months, you know, and you weren't warned about things like this, we would all assemble in community, you know, and Dom Columban was the Abbot, you know, so he then would speak to us and that, and he would make announcements at the end of what he was speaking and he said from now on Brother Philip will do the tailoring, you know [*laughs*], so that was me to do the tailoring.

CM: Would that mean make the habits?

BPB: Make the habits, yeah.

CM: So they are all, or at that time, all made in Abbey.

0h 12m 23s

BPB: Yeah so I had then do that and up there, there were sort of patterns, you know, for doing the things and things like that, well, you know, you pray about it, you know, and somehow you get an inspiration, you know, to carry on and do that sort of thing, you know, so I did the tailoring for quite a bit, you know and-

CM: So the material would come in and you would cut out and sew them in to habits and [is it cowls]?

PW: How did you feel when the announcement was made that you were going to do the tailoring, was it sort of shock-horror or?

BPB: Yeah it was, you know, well I had already had a shock being put in as cook, you know [chuckles] so the second shock was, you know-

PW: I suppose you must know then 'I'm going to get every job', in one time you're gonna move form-

Overseeing the Poultry 0h 13m 27s

BPB: Yeah the job followed me in the wardrobe was looking after the chickens, you know, looking after the hens, you know, so I then had to find out, you know, how to look after the chickens and hens, so I used to have to order, you know, day old chickens, you know, and then rear them, you know, and that sort of thing, and then the whole idea of the thing was a hen has a laying period, you know, it comes to its peak and it dies off, so the whole art of getting a profit out of it, was to know when to sell the hens, you know, because they weren't paying their way [chuckles], you know, they weren't producing enough eggs, so then I would have to re-start the whole thing, you know, and build up, all the things like that, so I used to sell the eggs, you know. At that time there was an egg marketing board, you know, and they used to come and collect the, you know, the surplus eggs and that sort of thing for me, and then I finished with that and I'm not quite sure what I did after that, I worked in the guesthouse, you know, for a long time and, so I had experience of like most things and I found if you applied yourself to it you could begin to like the job, you know, and that sort of thing, for example, looking after the chickens, I used to get poultry advisors, ladies used to come from the Agricultural Collage, you know, and they would help me, give me tips, you know, about rearing the chickens.

PW: So how many chickens would you have had?

BPB: I'd have about 2 or 300, yeah, and you see because we sold the eggs, you know. I had to contact the egg marketing board to come and collect, you know, the surplus eggs that we had.

CM: When did the abbey stop keeping chickens?

BPB: When they stopped?

CM: When did there stop being chickens over at the abbey?

BPB: Yeah we had chickens to begin with up here, you know, we had, I think the man that looked after them didn't look after them very well so they sort of faded out, you know, and here we were establishing ourselves as so many things here and that was just one of the things, you know, because we were building and ordering, you know, and that sort of thing, you know, so you were- but you just had to do what you were told.

0h 16m 16s

PW: Because the changes that are being made are not really to do with your monastic life, it's what's happening round about, with modernisation, with technology.

Putting Prayer before work 0h 16m 43s

BPB: Yeah, we used to do- you had your particular job but the most important thing that you never forgot about is that your work was among a prayer, you know, that you hadn't to neglect that at all, that you would attend choir and, you know, make sure you were there and that sort of thing, because that was what made you a monk, not keeping chickens or things like this, that was only part of it, the principle thing was, you know, to be a man of prayer, you know.

Peak Population of Nunraw Abbey 0h 17m 19s

PW: But when you had, was it 60 monks at the height?

BPB: At the?

PW: Was 60 monks was the maximum that you-?

BPB: Yeah we would have, there would be about 65 of us and then [inaudible].

PW: But then it would have been a really busy place would it not?

Relaxation of Church rules and the effect it had on Nunraw's community 0h 17m 35s

BPB: Yeah, yeah, well actually what happened was, there was like a change in the church really, because, up to a certain point, if you went to a religious order you were there for life, you know, but then what crept in, you know, people could get dispensations, you know, from their vows because- and you could understand it, young men and young women, I suppose, would enter a monastery, you know, at 18 and they hardly realised what they were taking upon themselves, you know, so after being in a monastery for a certain time they would, quite honestly come to the decision, you know, and it was square peg, you know, and a round hole, you know, but up to then, up to that sort of periods, to ask for a dispensation and things like, that was rare and then it got more familiar, you know, so that we had, really, an exodus from-

PW: From here in Nunraw?

BPB: From Nunraw, because a lot of the lads who had come from Ireland, had come collage into a monastery, you know, that they didn't know anything about, you know, life as it was lived, you know, you see they were growing up in every way themselves and they thought well- honesty come to this 'I'm a square peg in a round hole'.

Morning Routine 0h 19m 18s

PW: Because even the daily routine of getting up at 3 o'clock in the morning must be a real shock for a lot of people.

BPB: Yeah generally then we used to get up at half 2 and on a Sunday we used to get up at half 1, you know, on a Sunday, because the offices were so long, you know, like we had to get up at half 1, well when you came in to the monastery you expected all these things, you know, so that was part of what you expected, it wasn't a surprise, you know, when you got a knock at half 1, you know, to go- and I think you had to be determined, like myself, you know, come hell or high water, you know, I'm going to put up with this, because I knew if I ever left, as soon as I left the monastery gates

0h 20m 21s

I'd begin to regret it, you know, I would be saying to myself 'well God called me [laughs] and I said', you know.

Determination to Stay at Nunraw 0h 20m 29s

PW: If you don't mind me asking-

BPB: No, no.

PW: Did you ever have any times when you faltered, that you thought 'I want to go back out'?

BPB: No I don't think I did, no, because when I came I was-as I said, determined to stay and I was mature to know that life wouldn't be easy, you know, so in a way I was prepared, it was going to be difficult, you know, and the particular temperament I had, you know, was I hadn't done hard work, you know, I hadn't done a thing and so I think this became obvious, you know, when they would see me performing, you know, the things I would do, so they would put me in to kitchens, you know, and other places, you know, where the work wasn't as good, you know, so this was how I existed until I'm 94 [*chuckles*].

Runaways from Nunraw 0h 21m 40s

PW: In all these years you must have some stories you could share with us?

BPB: Aw yeah, I've seen a lot of comings and goings, you know, of people, you know, somebody would join, you know, and they would disappear overnight, you know [*laughs*].

PW: Yes? They'd just *leave*?

BPB: They got such a shock when they were coming through the thing, you know, somebody'd be looking for them for breakfast and they'd have just gone, you know, [*laughing*] but that didn't happen often but I can remember one lad, you know, he had someone lift all the way back down to Yorkshire somewhere, you know, but you can imagine it, you know, he must have got an awful shock, you know.

Importance of Friendship within the monastery 0h 22m 35s

PW: I know you were saying that there were square pegs in the round holes, you must have, you must build up a friendship with fellow monks over the years that you?

BPB: You did, I don't think you could've survived without having somebody, certain special, somebody who could support, you know, somebody you could talk to, you know, and-

PW: In a difficult time you could speak to somebody?

BPB: Yeah, yeah you would, you would go to a certain man, or you know, or somebody like that, and I think God provides these people for you, you know, and they would, you know, help you, you know, and say put you back into it, or, so [*chuckles*], you know this that and the other, but God does provide, you know, people like that, you know, people for you, you know.

Not Getting to know the villagers of Garvald 0h 23m 37s

CM: And have you ever- you've always been at this Abbey in East Lothian, does it mean, have you got to know East Lothian?

BPB: Got to?

0h 23m 49s

CM: Have you got to know this area, or is it very much-?

BPB: No, not really, you see we were enclosed, you know, I didn't even know the people in the village, you know, no I had no contact with that at all, the only thing is I worked in the guesthouse so I would meet visitors from Edinburgh and all over, you know.

Building Friendships with the guest of Nunraw 0h 24m 14s

PW: There used to be a lot of, whenever we would walk our dog round the guesthouse, we would always meet a lot of people that I like came from the West coast, Glasgow seemed to have a lot of people would come across.

BPB: We met them from all over, I was a long, long time in the guest house, you know, so I knew a lot of people, you know, who remained friends, you know, and they would write to me, you know.

PW: And you would get them coming back presumably?

BPB: Oh yeah, yeah, I mean of the years, you know, I would have people now, you know, that I've known for years and years, yeah.

CM: Does there come a time when monks retire from their work part, and then they're just left to do contemplation and so on after that?

The Abbot as the father of the monastery 0h 25 05s

BPB: Yeah, you know, that would happen, you know, sometimes, you know, through health and things like this, you know, men would have to- for example, working on the farm that men no longer able to do it, you know, and, oh no the Abbot would see to it, you know, that he would be accommodated in some other way, you know, and the Abbot, he never forgets he's the father of the community, you know, and so that you're quite surprised actually that- I remember my first abbot, Dom Columban and he could be quite maternal, you know, in his concern for you, that you have, especially if you were ill, you know, if you were in hospital, or going to hospital, or something like that, you know, he'd give orders that you had to have this or that or the other, you know.

Past Health Issues and stays in the hospital 0h 26m 07s

PW: And have you had good health over your lifetime?

BPB: Did I?

PW: Have you had good health?

BPB: I have, I would say yes, the only illnesses I've had are like appendix and things like that, you know, that needed surgery, you know, I haven't needed anywhere where I'd be nursed, you know, as a sick person, you know, I had to have the appendix out, I was in hospital for that, I was in quite a while because my wound wouldn't heal, you know, and at that time they were so careful, you know, they wouldn't discharge you at all, you know, so that I was like 5 weeks in the hospital, you know, and that was in the local hospital here, and I thoroughly enjoyed it, you know [*laughs*] because it was such a contrast, you know, to the monastery, you know, so that I was there for quite a long time, you know, with the blinkin', you know, thing, you know.

The Old guesthouse and a near-incident with a sleepwalker 0h 27m 17s

0h 27m 17s

CM: And the new guesthouse must be quite a contrast to the old guesthouse.

BPB: It was, it is, yeah, the other one was an old, like country mansion, you know, with winding staircases and things like that, and we lived at the top of the house actually, our quarters were like the servants quarters, you know, they'd be-these houses had quite a number on the staff, you know, and, you know, the housekeeper would have a special room, and this person would have a special room but, you know, the hoi polloi were all together [chuckles] in like a big, you know, carry-on, you know, and we took over that as a dormitory, you know, and we lived in sections, we were, you know, curtained off, and there was this big open window at the bottom and you would have about, you know, up to about 10 or more men here, you know, so you needed an open window, you know, and so we had a [inaudible] at that time and he goes sleepwalking, you know, and he made his way to the open window, you know, and we only found him out on the balcony, he could have gone over, you know, and so anyway when you come in to a monastery you kind of expect it to be difficult, you know, so that you just- I'm not surprised, and, you know, God is going to put you to the test as well, you know, and if you have the intelligence and that sort of thing you just face up to it, you know, and- but that's not to say that you didn't find it hard [chuckles] or, you know, difficult at times and you would like somebody to put their arm around you, or something, but anyway I've been here all these years, so I've survived, through God's help anyway, yeah, you know-

Current Health issues 0h 29m 41s

CM: Yeah thank you very much for speaking with us, I believe you're having another operation tomorrow is it? On your eye?

BPB: I am, yeah, you know, this is glaucoma, and I had 1 eye done and I have to go and get the other eye done, tomorrow.

CM: Well let's hope you don't have to stay in hospital for 5 weeks this time, or mibee you would like that [chuckles].

BPB: So that, it's amazing what a difference even 1 eye, you know, I can read without spectacles in just one eye, you know, but when I get the 2 eyes done it will be wonderful.

PW: Well it's been great to hear your stories, to hear your life and how it's all progressed, so Caroline and I are really grateful for the time you have given us, have you enjoyed it?

BPB: It's my pleasure.

PW: It's not been a challenge for you? No.

CM: Thank you very much.

BPB: I can remember, you know, if you attend the theatre and things like this, you know, the cast would always come to the, you know, front of the stage, they would all assemble, you know, now the leading players would all come forward, you know, and I can remember one man 'it's my pleasure, my pleasure', so it's my pleasure, you know.

CM: Great, thank you.