



INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS



THE BAR CONVENT

Living Heritage Centre

A HOUSE WITH A STORY...

A HOUSE WITH A SECRET



To the outside world, this was the first school for girls in the north of England and the teachers were ordinary widows.

Behind closed doors, these women were nuns and their house hid an illegal Catholic convent.

At the time of our founding in 1686, only boys received a formal education - but continuing the mission of their foundress, Mary Ward (1585-1645) our earliest sisters established the first school for girls in the country in London, and the second in this house.

More than 300 years later, this is the oldest living convent in England and the main house of the worldwide order, the Congregation of Jesus. There are now over 200 schools across the globe in Mary Ward's name.





PLANNING YOUR VISIT

If you have any questions which are not covered here, please contact our team on 01904 643 238.

How much do you charge for school visits?

Organised school and educational groups cost only 50p per pupil when booked with us in advance.

How long do you recommend for a visit?

We estimate that your visit to the Bar Convent will take no more than half a day.

Do you have a risk assessment we can download?

We have a risk assessment available online for schools to download. Alternatively, visiting group leaders may choose to do their own risk assessment. If you need to carry out a preliminary visit for this purpose, please contact our reception team on 01904 643 238.

What is your Child Protection Policy?

Although senior staff have been DBS checked, children remain the responsibility of accompanying adults at all times and this extends to formal school and educational visits. This covers all areas of the site, including toilets. If a child becomes lost during their visit, they should report to a member of staff who will escort them to reception in the Entrance Hall.

Which other places would you recommend for a combined trip?

York has a host of museums and attractions suitable for educational visits. Depending on your pupils' current topic of study, you might like to visit York Minster, Fairfax House or one of the attractions owned by York Museums Trust.

Who are you insured with?

The Bar Convent is insured with Allianz Insurance Ltd – further details are available on request.

What should our pupils do in the event of a fire?

In the event of a fire, all visiting school parties should follow the guidance of staff and evacuate safely to the Entrance Hall, where you will be asked to wait for further instructions.

If it is deemed necessary to evacuate the building, school parties will be guided out into the garden by staff.

We ask that, in the event of a fire, schools and other visitors do not immediately evacuate via the front door, as this poses a safety risk due to the proximity of the main road.





Is the building accessible to wheelchairs?

Yes – we have a disabled access passage from the street, as well as a lift in the Exhibition to take visitors to the upper floor. For further guidance relating to the individual needs of your pupils, please contact our reception team on 01904 643 238 in the first instance.

Is there somewhere to park a coach?

We have no on-site parking available but but coaches can drop visitors off directly at the front of the Bar Convent on Blossom Street. Traffic can be busy here, so we ask you to be careful as you disembark. Upon arrival, group leaders should report to our reception team at the front desk.



What can our pupils learn?

A visit to the Bar Convent can help young learners to...

- Establish narratives within and across historical periods
- Understand historical concepts such as continuity and change, similarity, difference and significance
- Understand how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of different sources
- Explain and interpret ways that the history and culture of religions and worldviews influence individuals and communities

KEY DATES

1585 - Birth of Mary Ward

1586 - Margaret Clitherow is martyred in York

1609 - Mary Ward founds her new religious order

1631 - Pope Urban VIII refuses to recognise Mary's order

1639 - Mary Ward returns to England

1642 - Mary Ward and her followers live in Heworth, near York, during the Civil War and the Siege of York

1645 - Mary Ward dies; her order continue her work

1686 - Frances Bedingfield buys the house here on Blossom Street and opens the Bar Convent School

1769 - Ann Aspinal's hidden chapel is completed

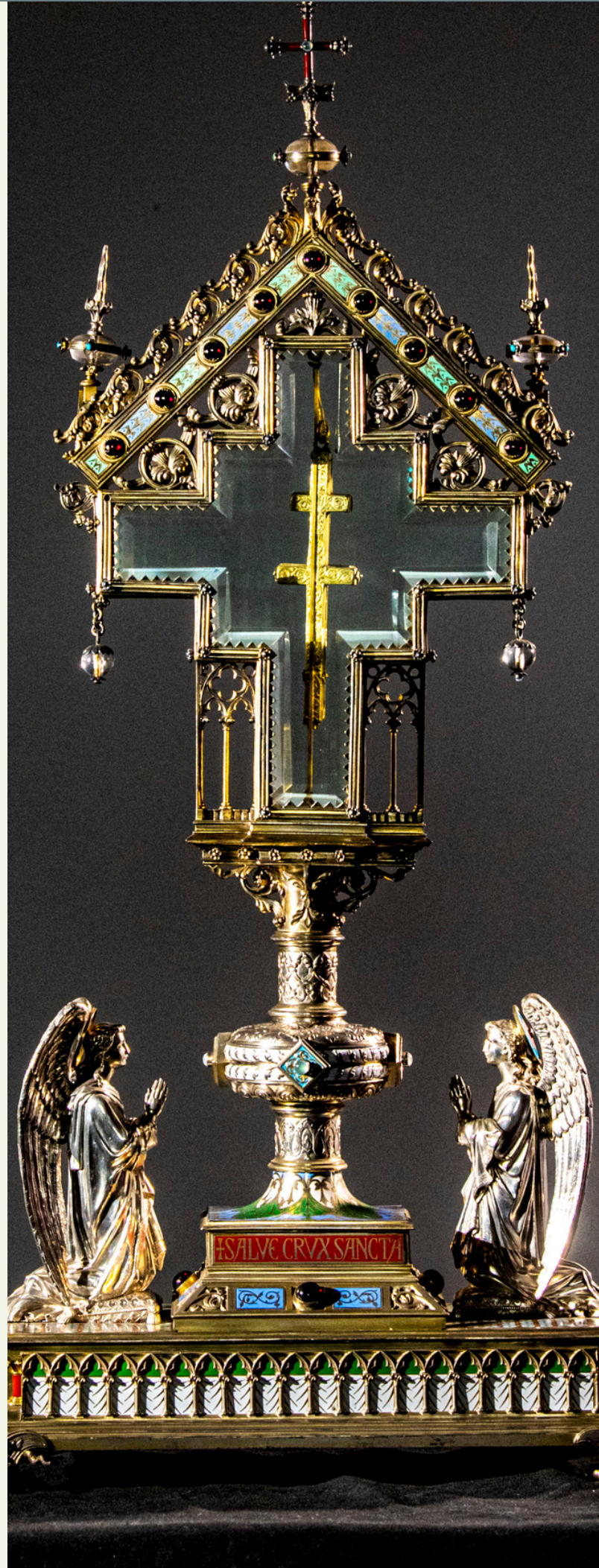
1877 - Mary Ward's order is recognised by Pope Pius IX

1909 - Mary Ward is recognised as foundress of her order by Pope Pius X

WWI - The Bar Convent hosts Belgian families fleeing the Great War and becomes a hospital for wounded soldiers

1942 - The convent is blitzed during WWII; five of our sisters lose their lives

2023 - Sisters continue to live in the Bar Convent, now open to the public as a heritage centre



OUR BEGINNINGS

The convent's story begins long before its founding, with the English Reformation and the decision by Henry VIII to break away from the Roman Church. This led to the introduction of harsh penal laws against Catholics.

Fierce anti-Catholic sentiment continued into the reign of Elizabeth I, who made it illegal to harbour priests and set heavy fines for 'recusants' - people who refused to attend services at their parish church.

1586

Death of Margaret Clitherow

1686

Founding of the Bar Convent



One well-known recusant was **Margaret Clitherow**, who sheltered Catholic priests and held illegal Masses in her home on the Shambles here in York. One day, her home was raided by the authorities during a Mass. The priest escaped to safety, but Margaret was arrested and brought to trial.

To protect the priest and her family, she refused to plead either guilty or not guilty. In an attempt to induce a plea, the courts ordered that Margaret was to be 'pressed' - laid down with a sharp rock underneath her back, then to have weights added on top of her. Margaret died during the ordeal and was declared a saint in 1970 by Pope Paul VI. Her relic is in our chapel.

A WOMAN OF VISION

Mary Ward (1585 - 1645)

Mary Ward is the founder of the Congregation of Jesus, to which our sisters belong. She was a remarkable woman and a pioneer of women's education.

Mary Ward was born to a devout Catholic family in Yorkshire. From an early age, she felt called to the service of God. The Catholic Church at that time said that all nuns were to be 'enclosed', which meant that they had to live their lives within the safety of convent walls. Mary Ward thought differently, saying, **"There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things."** She founded her own religious order based on this conviction, then set off across Europe with her followers, founding schools for girls.

In 1621, she walked to Rome to ask the Pope to approve her order. He refused, saying it was too controversial - and so in 1631, Mary's order was suppressed and all her schools were closed. She returned to England in 1639, and eventually to Yorkshire in 1642. She died in Heworth outside York a few years later, but her followers decided to carry on her good work.



Frances Bedingfield (1616 - 1704)

One of Mary Ward's early followers was Frances Bedingfield - our very first mother superior. In 1686, she bought the original house which developed into the Bar Convent as we know it today. The £450 for the house was given to her by Sir Thomas Gascoigne, who said, **"We must have a school for our daughters."** She bought it under the false name of Mrs Long: Catholics at the time often used assumed names as a way of avoiding fines or imprisonment.

The sisters set up their school and went about their business privately, but rumours soon spread. In 1695, the community faced an angry mob of people coming to attack them. The sisters, terrified, prayed to St Michael for protection. Legend has it that without any discussion, the mob silently went away, leaving the nuns in peace. An engraving of St Michael hangs over the front door and our sisters commemorate the eve of his feast every year.



Ann Aspinal (1710 - 1789)

Ann Aspinal, a later mother superior, transformed the Bar Convent into the building as we know it now. She settled the convent's finances so the sisters were no longer in debt, then decided to build a new chapel. The Catholic faith was still illegal, meaning the new chapel had to be kept a closely-guarded secret. Eight separate exits allowed an easy escape for the congregation, and a priest hole offered sheltered in the event of a raid by the authorities.

Refugees

In the last years of the eighteenth century, the community were finally free from persecution as the laws against Catholics were lifted. They were able to help refugees from the French Revolution, including several communities of nuns.

War in Europe

The community continued their tradition of hospitality in the First World War, giving shelter to Belgian children and turning their school hall into a ward for wounded soldiers. In the Luftwaffe bombing raids of 1942, the convent suffered a direct hit and five of our sisters were killed.



Recognition

The Institute was granted papal approval by Pope Pius IX in 1877; in 1909, Mary Ward was finally recognised as its founder.

Today

The Bar Convent is still home to religious sisters, who you are likely to meet on your visit. Today, Mary Ward's institute exists in two branches: the Congregation of Jesus (our sisters) and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, also known as Loreto. The Congregation of Jesus is present in twenty-two countries; the sisters of the IBVM are present in a further twenty-three. Together they have a presence on every continent on earth.





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Photography: Anthony Chapel-Ross, Gareth Buddo, Greg McGee.
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