



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



### **A Priory Legacy: Father Ralph By Andrew Wilson '64**

“Hail to thee, blithe spirit!”  
Shelley

Father Ralph (rhymes, incongruously, with strafe) is Priory’s “blithe spirit.” Within the rookery of monks at the Saint Louis Abbey, he is, distinctly, a bird of a different feather.

Take his arrival in Saint Louis in 1970. It was not by plane or bus. He completed the last leg of his journey from England by hitchhiking down from Chicago. Twice, the unlikely sight of a hitchhiker in monk’s habit—a tall, stork-like figure—caused a state trooper to pull over and make inquiries (one solicitous; the other incredulous).

If Illinois’s finest were further startled upon hearing an English accent, they would have been even more surprised had they pressed the hitchhiker for more details regarding his identity and purposes.

They would have learned that this man—with the gentle demeanor and sensitive nature of a true poet—had been trained in jungle warfare. Even more interestingly, they would have discovered that he was, in a sense, a fugitive, having bolted a well-known English lock-up, called Ampleforth, wishing to put some distance between himself and two of his blood brothers. If they had been especially acute, the state troopers might have sensed that he was headed for trouble—for what Father Ralph has subsequently described as “one of the worst years of my whole life.” But all this is getting ahead of the story.

To begin at the beginning, he was born in Ollerton, England, in 1938. His father, a plain-spoken engineer, was a local Rock of Gibraltar—revered rather than feared as the CEO of a mining company and a community leader. His mother was the literary and expressive one. Both were devout Catholics. Together they produced four boys. Remarkably, three of the four are now Benedictine monks. That includes Father Timothy Wright, the new Abbot of Ampleforth.

“We went in not because of each other, but in spite of each other,” Father Ralph notes. He adds mischievously that he would like to see a video of his older brother kissing his younger brother’s ring upon the latter’s election as Abbot in 1997.

It is hard to see how such rivalry could arise in a family so dedicated to helping others. Soon after the birth of Ralph, for instance, his parents became acquainted with a visiting doctor from Czechoslovakia. When the news came that Hitler had invaded his country, they immediately invited the doctor to spend the duration of the war at their house. And so he did.

Father Ralph felt the stirrings of a Calling from a young age. However, since the oldest brother, from the age of 13, had said he wanted to become a monk, Ralph decided to follow in his father’s footsteps in becoming an engineer. So he loaded up on math and physics courses one year at Ampleforth. Bad idea. He found himself out of his depth and so fled back to classics. He also discovered a deep interest in poetry.

Upon graduation, he pondered three options. One, proceed into the priesthood. Two, go on to Oxford (where he had won a minor scholarship in classics). Three, go into



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the Army and do something totally out of character. He took the third option, and that is how he wound up in Malaysia in the late '50s, learning jungle warfare.

In 1959, Ralph entered the novitiate and monastic training at Ampleforth, a two-year program. He was ordained in 1970. The intervening years were filled with higher level education: earning an undergraduate degree in “Greats” at Saint Benet’s Hall, the monastic college at Oxford, and a masters degree in Theology at Fribourg, the only Catholic University in Switzerland.

He became fluent in both German and French while studying at Fribourg. He also took to hitchhiking across France in his many trips between England and Switzerland.

Soon after his ordination, the Abbot at Ampleforth asked him to join the new community in Saint Louis. He was thrilled, seeing this as an opportunity to join a “new venture” in a new land at a time of great ferment in the Catholic Church as a whole. He also admits to thinking, “Maybe two (rather than three) Wrights are enough at one monastery.”

Ah, but poor Father Ralph. He was not fully prepared for the fate that awaited him in the fall of 1970. As a new priest with little teaching experience, as a (self-described) poor disciplinarian, and above all as someone who was facing American school boys for the first time, he could be likened to the tuna in a game of sharks-and-tuna. Moreover, with the Vietnam War in full flood, this was an agonizing period of time for students—and for anyone else with the acutely sympathetic nature of a Father Ralph.

Father Ralph recovered by learning to make teaching fun. As a teacher of English and Religion, he has done that in his own inimitable way—with humor, with ingenious ways of encouraging the creativity of students, and with generous dollops of his own poetry thrown in wherever possible for good measure. To borrow a line from a well-known hymn, “Behold a Mystical Rose from thorny stem has sprung.”

He has the gift of inspiring the devotion of his students. Many Priory alumni remember him as their favorite teacher. More than a dozen have asked him to officiate at their weddings. One student, a published novelist, submits his manuscripts to Father Ralph for his review before sending them to any publisher.

His career as a poet has also flourished, comprising both frivolous verse and serious poetry (collected in five published books). He has also contributed more than two dozen hymns (both translations and originals) to *Hymnal For The Hours*, one of the standard hymn books used by religious communities in the English-speaking world. Along the way, he has done many other strange and wonderful things, such as completing a dozen marathons and coaching the Priory tennis team to five consecutive ABC championships—despite the lack of facilities for hosting even a single match at the Priory. He became an American citizen in 1977, and is currently serving his second “term” as Saint Louis Abbey’s Director of Vocations.