

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Bristol		
Unit of Assessment: 31) Theology and Religious Studies		
Title of case study: A Beacon of Learning: Unlocking the Monastic Heritage of the Past for Today		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Carolyn Muessig George Ferzoco	Professor Medieval Religion Teacher and Research Fellow	1995-6/2020 2007-8/2020
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1/8/2013-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Ferzoco and Muessig's research on medieval monastic culture, especially in relation to biblical learning and preaching, has had demonstrable impacts on the Benedictine Downside Community in Somerset, England. Downside's considerable library is home to a wealth of medieval monastic holdings, which remained largely unexplored until 2013. Ferzoco and Muessig helped Downside Abbey to uncover and interpret this rich religious heritage, transforming the Abbey into an institution of learning and culture. Consequently, this has 1) enhanced Downside Community's understanding of their heritage and how to showcase it; 2) opened Downside Abbey to new and hard to reach visitors; 3) provided heritage staff and volunteers with skills in explaining medieval religious practice to visitors; and 4) equipped research students for their future careers.

2. Underpinning research

Ferzoco and Muessig's research from 2000 onwards focused on the Benedictine nun Hildegard of Bingen, but explored more generally how preaching, education and liturgy shaped the monastic identity of monks and nuns in medieval Europe [3.1, 3.2, 3.4]. A critical edition of the sermons by Hildegard of Bingen, including a codicological study of the manuscripts, demonstrated the importance of understanding the material culture of monasticism, especially manuscripts and how liturgy, prayer and the Bible informed this culture [3.3].

The central aspect of Benedictine monasticism examined was the importance of 'listening' — a key factor in teaching, preaching and edification, as expressed in the *Rule of Benedict*: 'Listen carefully my son/daughter to the master's instruction and attend to them with the ear of your heart' [3.1, 3.2]. Monastic culture was built around the importance of listening to the human voice as articulated in song/worship, preaching and reading in the belief that these vocal activities embodied the divine voice. These forms of worship instilled certain expectations about how religious perfection would be achieved through a complete immersion of the monk or nun in biblical language. The continuous repetition and rhythm of the liturgy became embedded in the way nuns and monks expressed themselves [3.2, 3.3].

Ferzoco and Muessig's research has also underlined that medieval biblical/liturgical forms of expression were fluid and reflected the views of users of the Bible. Medieval monastic communities such as the Benedictines and Cistercians read the Bible through a process of rumination whereby portions were memorised [3.3, 3.5]. This memorisation and mental absorption of the Bible, known as the *lectio divina*, was intended to underpin and elevate the moral behaviour and disposition of monks and nuns.

Impact case study (REF3)

3. References to the research

- 3.1 Ferzoco G and Muessig C**, eds. (2000), *Medieval Monastic Education*, London/New York: Leicester University Press, pp. xiv +237. ISBN 0-7185-0246-9 [Available on request]
- 3.2 Muessig C** (2000). Learning and Mentoring in the Twelfth Century: Hildegard of Bingen and Herrad of Landsberg, in **Ferzoco G and Muessig C** (eds.) *Medieval Monastic Education*, London/New York: Leicester University Press, pp. 87–104 [Available on request]
- 3.3 Kienzle B** (Harvard University) and **Muessig C**, with **Ferzoco G**, ed. (2007). *Expositiones euangeliorum Sanctae Hildegardis, Hildegardis Bingensis Opera Minora*, Turnhout: Brepols, (Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina — Continuatio Mediaevalis, 226) ISBN: 9782503052618, pp. 135–333, plus indices, pp. 555–590, codicological study by **Ferzoco G**, pp. 144-156 [Available on request]
- 3.4 Kienzle B, Stoudt DL, Ferzoco G**, ed. (2013), *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen* (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 45), Leiden: Brill [Available on request]
- 3.5 Ferzoco G** (2015-2017) author of following in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception (EBR)*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter [Available on request]:
- Grosseteste, Robert; Hagiography (2015), *EBR*, vol. 10, coll. 962–963; coll. 1159–1163;
 - Holiness (2016), *EBR*, vol. 12, coll. 61–63;
 - James, Epistle of; Jeremiah (Book and Person) (2016), *EBR*, vol. 13, coll. 731–732; col. 935;
 - Joachim (Father of Mary); Jonah (Book and Person) (2017), *EBR*, vol. 14, coll. 273–274; coll. 582–583;
 - Lamentations, Book of (2017), *EBR*, vol. 15, coll. 753–755

Funding information

Muessig C (PI), *The Expositiones Evangeliorum of Hildegard of Bingen*, AHRC, 09/2015-01/2016, GBP19,196

4. Details of the impact

Ferzoco and Muessig's research on medieval monasticism, codicology and biblical reception [3.1-3.5] has enriched the cultural, educational and economic experience of the Downside Abbey community in Somerset, England, ranging from the monks who live there, the Heritage staff and volunteers who work there, to the public and students who visit and learn. Their research has led to organisational changes at the Abbey, and they have assisted in the development of the Centre for Monastic Heritage, (<https://www.downsideabbey.co.uk/downside-library/centre-for-monastic-heritage/>) which facilitates interaction and engagement of Downside Abbey with Higher Education Institutions. Furthermore, their research has led to organisational changes in which the Downside Community thinks of itself not only as an example of lived monasticism but as a keeper of its past heritage and guardian of its future.

Enhancing Downside Community's understanding of their religious heritage

Downside Abbey has the largest monastic archive and library in the UK. In 2013, Ferzoco and Muessig assisted the former Abbot of Downside in his preparation of a Heritage Lottery Fund bid to establish the Abbey Library as *a beacon of learning* (the research of these two scholars had been known to the Abbot since Muessig's appointment as Newman/Downside Research Fellow, University of Bristol in 1995). The Director of Heritage at Downside Abbey said that the researchers 'were instrumental' in Downside's success in securing the HLF award (GBP856,000, Sept 2013) [5.1]. Consequently, they were invited by the former Abbot to participate actively in opening up the collection to the wider world.

Ferzoco and Muessig's research on medieval pastoral literature, monastic preaching and spirituality [3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4] enabled them to unlock the meaning, interpretation and importance of Downside's medieval collection, and how it could be best explained to a broader audience.

Impact case study (REF3)

Since 2013, they have worked closely with the Downside monks so they could gain a deeper understanding of their own medieval monastic holdings. In 2017 and 2019, Ferzoco presented two workshops at Downside addressing the religious and codicological importance of medieval manuscripts and early printed books. One Downside monk said the workshops helped him understand '[his] community's library much better and enabled [him] to explain the collection to visitors'; another said that the workshops 'increased [his] enthusiasm' as a guide' [5.2]. Due to Covid-19, an additional workshop exploring Downside manuscripts and early printed books that was due to happen in March 2020, was rescheduled as two Zoom workshops in June 2020 and led by Ferzoco (<https://www.downsideabbey.co.uk/monks-and-dante/>). One monk who attended virtually said: 'I have become more appreciative of the items in the collection, and I know more about what we have and why some items are considered important' [5.7]. Another monk indicated: 'I am responsible for teaching Latin and New Testament Greek to the young monks in our community. George and Carolyn have inspired me to explore afresh the treasures of our remarkable library and to use material from it in my teaching. Recently I have discovered a 17th century text on conversational Latin for children at school, which adds some delight to basic Latin classes' [5.7].

In July 2018, Ferzoco and Muessig organised the international academic conference, '*Medieval Monastic Preaching*' (<https://www.downside.co.uk/imsss-symposium-at-downside-2018/>); more than 70 attendees lunched with the monks in their refectory and attended an exhibition entitled '*Words for Life, Spoken and Written: Monasticism and Homiletics*' in the Downside Abbey sacristy. The researchers, with the assistance of student interns, prepared the descriptions for this display; the monks, volunteers, and Heritage Team (Johnson/Parsons) chose and arranged some of the items displayed at this exhibition.

The success of this exhibition led Downside to host their first ever public exhibition in their Grade I listed abbey church, which was co-curated by Ferzoco, Muessig and Downside's Heritage Team. The exhibition, '*Voices from the Cloister: Medieval Treasures at Downside Abbey*' (6 December 2018 and 11 April 2019), featured some of Downside's finest manuscripts, reliquaries, and vestments, not within a museum, but within the context of a lived monastic experience. The impact of the '*Voices from the Cloister*' exhibition on the attitudes of the monks was noteworthy. The Director of Heritage states that the monks 'traditionally opposed to such innovation, have been converted' [5.1]; while The Prior states: 'These activities have made the monks feel more proud of their heritage, and more greatly determined to make it known not only to scholars, but especially to the public' [5.6].

Ferzoco and Muessig's research led the monastic community and the Heritage Team to reimagine the Abbey itself as an exhibition space. According to the Director of Heritage: 'The nature of the '*Voices from the Cloister*' exhibition required interpretation of such a type that could not have been provided without the university's contribution' [5.1]. Until the '*Voices from the Cloister*' exhibition, there was no designated exhibition area. Following this model, two more exhibitions have taken place in September 2019 and from November 2019 – February 2020 (described below). Downside are planning a fourth exhibition with Bristol medievalist Dr Ben Pohl and postgraduates Maria Abellán and Alice Morrey. "History @ Downside. An Exhibition in 20 Objects" held its first planning meeting in August 2020 [5.9].

Opening Downside Abbey to new and hard to reach visitors

The '*Voices from the Cloister*' exhibition was a radical shift in how Downside engaged with the public. Through interacting with and participating in the exhibition, which featured Ferzoco and Muessig's research on monastic preaching, biblical studies, learning and codicology [3.2, 3.3, 3.4], the Downside monks reconsidered the Abbey space itself and established a new-found understanding of the cultural importance of their monastic collection and interest in how they can convey this significance to visitors. For the first time ever, items were selected for public viewing from these rich holdings [5.3]. Here not only can the general public learn about the past, but they can also speak to monks who carry on the tradition to the present day, making the Abbey a living library.

Impact case study (REF3)

The ‘*Voices from the Cloister*’ exhibition attracted c.200 people; nearly 70% who visited were hitherto hard to reach audiences, mainly local communities living within 15 to 20 miles of Downside, who had never set foot in the Abbey [5.2, 5.4]. The overwhelming assumption of the locals had been that they were not permitted to visit the Abbey, but the public exhibition made them feel otherwise. Visitors commented ‘we never knew this was here’, and ‘we thought it was just a school’; local residents as close to the Abbey as Chilcompton some two miles away noting how pleased they were to be able to share the abbey’s rich cultural heritage, co-curated with Bristol [5.1]. According to the Abbey Outreach Officer ‘the exhibition broke down barriers that had existed in previous attempts to get local residents to Downside’ [5.1]. The success of the exhibition has made Downside Heritage Team think about where they advertise in order to attract local people and to this end are now advertising in local newsletters.

The Prior of Downside, in his preface to the ‘*Voices from the Cloister*’ catalogue, indicated that the exhibition acted as an invitation to the general public to visit Downside [5.3]. One monk stated ‘I had not imagined that many of the items in the library would really be of interest to the public in particular, but this has been changed... the [exhibition] showed that there is an interest in the monastic life as lived at Downside.’ [5.7]. Another monk wrote: ‘I believe that the engagement with the public has shown that we are keen to share our treasures and knowledge with others, especially those who may have felt to be outside the academic circle. Visitors have been introduced to things that they were unaware of or would have found difficult to discover locally’ [5.7].

The Abbey began to embed this practice of inviting in the public during the Heritage Open Days (18-19 September 2019, <https://www.downsideabbey.co.uk/heritage-open-days-2/>) when the monks welcomed 173 members of the general public, mainly locals, into their cloister and monastic gardens for the first time ever. During this event, without Ferzoco and Muessig’s involvement, the Heritage Team *themselves* hosted a second public exhibition in the abbey church that included several medieval items. Furthermore, between October 2019 and February 2020, Ferzoco and Muessig co-curated a third public exhibition in the abbey church, ‘*The Bibles of Downside*’, for which the monks *themselves* chose, prepared and presented several items alongside those prepared by Ferzoco and Muessig and PhD students.

Providing heritage staff and volunteers with skills in explaining religious practice to visitors

Ferzoco and Muessig’s research on monastic religious practice has had an educational impact on the Downside Heritage Team, volunteers, and student interns. Historically, Downside’s medieval resources have been largely elusive, but through a series of workshops, exhibitions and internships related to their research, Ferzoco and Muessig have unlocked the medieval treasures of the collection. This has enabled the Downside Heritage Team and volunteers, upon whom it is incumbent to explain the diverse holdings at the Abbey, to present these materials with confidence and authority to visiting groups.

Ferzoco’s workshop series in 2017 and 2019 helped the Project Activity Manager explain the significance of the Abbey’s medieval manuscripts when giving tours [5.1]. The Abbey Outreach Officer stated that ‘Ferzoco’s knowledge of manuscript studies and monastic history made these previously indecipherable documents comprehensible to the volunteers who assist me with tours and other public engagement activities’ [5.1]. The volunteers, who knew little about medieval manuscripts but were required to show Downside’s ancient books to tour groups, voiced a newly acquired confidence. One volunteer said that the workshops made ‘my role more relevant on a daily basis’. Another said that s/he would ‘imitate the lively and engaging and interactive style of the presenter [Ferzoco]’ [5.2].

Equipping research students for their future careers

Since 2013 students at the University of Bristol have benefitted from Ferzoco and Muessig’s research [3.1-3.5] which highlights the historical value of Downside Library. Students have actively used Downside Library for both training and research. Downside’s medieval holdings offer an insight into both past practices and present religious engagement, making Downside an

Impact case study (REF3)

unusual and enriching location for religious heritage. Student interns involved with the curation of the exhibitions have also developed their skills set related to medieval monasticism and material culture that has been instrumental in their securing postdoctoral positions.

One AHRC-funded PhD student interned for six weeks at Downside (September-October 2019) and wrote and edited the catalogue for '*The Bibles of Downside*' exhibition. The student said that her time at Downside taught her a new set of skills, including curation and presentation of materials in an engaging manner to the public; and how to prepare an exhibition catalogue. These valuable skills facilitated her securing a three-year postdoc at Heinrich Heine University, Düsseldorf (2020–2023). She described the training at Downside as 'enhancing her application' [5.5]. Another student who started researching Downside manuscripts in 2016 as a University of Bristol PhD candidate, published a scholarly article on a Downside manuscript and was editor-in-chief of the '*Voices from the Cloister*' catalogue. He wrote '... being physically at Downside made the lived context of how these books were used all the more poignant and meaningful. I have no doubt that the experience I gained was instrumental in my securing a postdoc at the British School of Rome' (<https://www.bsr.ac.uk/research/award-holders-at-the-bsr/award-holders-2019-20>) [5.5].

Downside becoming an exemplar for monastic communities

Ferzoco and Muessig's research and work with Downside has been noted internationally by the Benedictines at Glenstal Abbey (Murroe, County Limerick), Ireland. They were invited by the monks there to present a talk on the medieval monastic collection of Downside and their partnership with the Downside monks in June 2020 at Glenstal Abbey. This was rescheduled as a Zoom workshop with Ferzoco, Muessig and PhD students. The Glenstal community expressed great interest and support in working with academics and students in a manner similar to how Ferzoco and Muessig worked with Downside Abbey in a continued common endeavour to explain religious culture to the wider community. One participant commented that they would 'devote more time to preparing, in accordance with best practice, the significant amount of primary material relating to the estate here in Glenstal' [5.8].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

-
- 5.1 Downside Staff Interviews (2019) – Heritage Team and Visitor Centre Manager
 - 5.2 Workshop Feedback (June 2019) – Volunteers and Monks
 - 5.3 Exhibition Catalogue (2019), *Voices from the Cloister: Medieval Treasures at Downside Abbey*
 - 5.4 Exhibition Visitor Feedback (2019-2020) – *Voices from the Cloister*
 - 5.5 Testimonials (2019) – Bristol PhD Students
 - 5.6 Testimonial (January 2020) – Prior of Downside
 - 5.7 Feedback (July 2020) – Downside Monks
 - 5.8 Feedback (June 2020) – Glenstal Monks (2020)
 - 5.9 History @ Downside: An Exhibition in 20 Objects (August 2020)
<https://www.downsideabbey.co.uk/history-downside-and-bristol/> [Accessed 11 February 2021]