

The legacy of monastic hospitality

2 The lasting influence

In this the second of two articles **Kevin O’Gorman** continues his exploration of the influence of Western monasticism on hospitality. He shows how monastic hospitality evolved to become the foundation of modern hospitality in the secular states. **Ewan MacPhee** reports on receiving monastic hospitality almost 1,500 years after St Benedict. The article concludes with a set of modern principles of hospitality derived from St Benedict’s Rule, which are relevant to today.

HOSPITALITY AS A commonly accepted criterion of judgement emerged in the High Middle Ages: to receive guests is commendable; to be held in high esteem you must be considered a good host.¹ This is applied broadly, whether to countries, towns or individuals, nobles, clergy or monastic communities. Illustrative examples would include: Gerald of Wales (1146–1223) who notes the praiseworthy hospitality of the Welsh;² St. Thomas à Becket (1118–70) who was esteemed for his lavish and cheerful hospitality; William FitzStephen (biographer

Cardinal Wolsey, chancellor of England, archbishop of York, and successor of St Augustine, seems to have taken the concept of religious hospitality to excess and beyond. Cardinal Wolsey’s gentleman-usher, George Cavendish, gives an account of dining in the cardinal’s household as an example of conspicuous consumption:

Now to speak of the ordering of his household and offices, I think it necessary here to be remembered; first you shall understand that he had in his hall, daily three special tables furnished with three principal officers. That is to say, a Steward, who was always a doctor or a priest; a Treasurer, a knight; and a Comptroller, an esquire; these always carried their white staves within his house. Then had he a cofferer, three marshals, two yeomen ushers, two grooms, and an almoner. He had also in the hall-kitchen two clerks of his kitchen, a clerk-controller, a surveyor of the dresser, a clerk of his spicery. Also in his hall-kitchen he had two master cooks, and twelve other labourers and children, as they called them; a yeoman of his scullery, with two others in his silver scullery; two yeomen of his pantry, and two grooms.

Now in his private kitchen he had a master cook who went daily in damask, satin, or velvet, with a chain of gold about his neck; and two grooms with six labourers and children to serve that place; in the Larder there, a yeoman and a groom; in the

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and contemporary of St Thomas à Becket) who listed amongst the virtues of Londoners their entertainment of strangers, their spread of feasts and the cheering of guests,³ and Abbess Euphemia of Wherwell, Hampshire (1226–57), who was held in high esteem for her diligence in administering hospitality and charity.⁴ However, extravagant hospitality was also being criticised: William of Malmesbury (1090–1143) argued that hospitality should not be excessive and criticised those who had resorted to prodigality.⁵

The magnitude of some types of religious hospitality was indeed overwhelming. For example, Thomas,

Scalding-house, a yeoman and two grooms; in the Scullery there, two persons; in the Buttery, two yeomen and two grooms with two other pages; in the Pantry, two yeomen, two grooms, and two pages; and in the Ewery likewise; in the Cellar, three yeomen, two grooms, and two pages—beside a gentleman for the month; in the Chaundry, three persons; in the Wafery...

And in his chamber, all these persons; that is to say, his High Chamberlain; his Vice-Chamberlain; twelve gentlemen-ushers, daily waiters—besides two in his private chamber; and of gentlemen-waiters in his private chamber he had six; and also he had of lords nine or ten... Then had he of gentlemen, as cupbearers, carvers, sewers, and gentlemen daily-waiters, forty persons; of yeomen ushers he had six; of grooms in his chamber he had eight; of yeomen of his chamber he had forty-six daily to attend upon his person; he also had a priest there, who was his almoner, to attend upon his table at dinner...⁶

Cardinal Wolsey was a Bishop, but he was also King Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor, therefore this extravagant hospitality would have been expected for the King's principal minister.⁷ The clergy generally were part of the ruling class, and therefore also had particular roles to play in affairs of state.

Although hospitality was being given in excess at one end of the spectrum, it was also being forgotten about at the other. At local level the clergy were working with minimal resources. The mediaeval poor laws give examples of exhortations to provide an adequate level of hospitality and relief and emphasise that pastoral care includes the feeding of the hungry and also the reception of guests.⁸ Parishioners were expected, but not forced, to pay tithes (regular donations) to the Church from which funds for hospitality and relief for the poor were taken. The clergy were required to provide hospitality, but the record of their work was mixed; in many parishes the clergy were simply absent.⁹

The Church challenged

Whereas the mediaeval scholars believed that they were living in the final age before the Last Judgment, and had considered the Greek and Roman worlds as simply pagan, the Renaissance authors who had explored the rich history of the ancient and classical

worlds, considered the Middle Ages as ignorant and barbaric, and proclaimed their own age as being the enlightened rebirth of Classicism.

Spirituality in the late Middle Ages, characterised by an intense search for the direct experience of God, was also to register the social and cultural turmoil of the age. Mystical experience was potentially available to everyone, and the resulting heightened awareness brought with it a realisation that the Church, as an all-encompassing and worldly mediaeval institution, had become different from the original simplicity of the church of Christ and the apostles. Using the life of Christ as a model to be imitated, apostolic communities were formed. Two examples of these were to be The Brethren of the Common Life (1376) and the (reformed) Spiritual Franciscans or Order of Friars Minor (1517). These and other groups proliferated throughout Europe. Sometimes these groups focused on the reform of the Church from within, and sometimes they simply disengaged from it.

After the plague of the 1340s (which became known as the Black Death), bands of penitents, flagellants and followers of new messiahs and charismatic 'saints' could be found throughout Europe. During this period the established Church, both in its traditional function as interpreter of doctrine and in its institutional role as conveyor of the sacraments, found itself embattled and often marginalized.

The continuing spiritual unrest and innovation was to lead to the Protestant Reformation. This was most manifest in the British Isles with the dissolution of the monasteries (brought about by the Acts of 1536 and 1539) which effectively ended monastic hospitality in Britain for a period of some 300 years. This event though did not happen in isolation. In Germany and her Austrian dominions, the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 saw the confiscation of religious property to the benefit of Protestant princes, and in later centuries a similar situation was to arise throughout the Iberian peninsula, in France, and in what would now be considered Italy.

The Protestant reformers were also attempting to redefine the practice of hospitality. They offered unrelenting critiques of the extravagance, indulgence and waste associated with late mediaeval hospitality. Luther and Calvin (Protestant biblical reformers c1550) in their studies of scripture gave limited but explicit attention to hospitality and to how it should

be practiced in their own day.¹⁰ One of the beliefs of the Reformation was that there was supposedly an enhanced appreciation for the value of so-called ordinary life.

The protestant reformers no longer recognised, in the ancient sources, an apposite understanding of the church as an important location for hospitality; instead, they identified hospitality within the civic and the domestic spheres. The protestant Reformation consequently was to have a transforming affect on religious hospitality, hospitals, poor relief, and the responsibility to refugees:

*the sacramental character of hospitality was diminished and it became mostly an ordinary but valued expression of human care.*¹¹

These activities became separated from their christian roots as the state increasingly took over more responsibility. New national identities would lead to the establishment of the modern, and secular, nation-states, who adopted the principles of hospitality that had already been established within the monastic tradition.

Monastic hospitality today

As a way of exploring to what extent monastic hospitality is still practiced today, a series of visits to various Benedictine monasteries have been undertaken. This article reports on one of these visits: the hospitality experience at Pluscarden Abbey in July 2006.

History of Pluscarden

Pluscarden Abbey, near Elgin in the north of Scotland, is the only mediaeval monastery in Britain inhabited by monks and being used for its original purpose. Pluscarden Abbey is one of fifteen Houses of Benedictine monks in Britain. These comprise 13 Abbeys and two Priors. In addition there are 11 Houses of Benedictine nuns. At Pluscarden there are 27 monks.¹²

The abbey was originally founded by King Alexander II of Scots in 1230. Alexander Dunbar, Prior of Pluscarden from 1533 to 1560, had the foresight to anticipate the events of the Reformation in Scotland and brought the monastery under the control of his family. Records show that some monks continued in

decreasing numbers to inhabit the monastery buildings until almost the end of the century. It was not dissolved at the Reformation; it rather fell into disuse and from 1600 the buildings stood unprotected against the elements. In 1943 the Marquis of Bute gave the monastery and its land to the Benedictine community, having already started the work of preserva-

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tion, which was then taken over by the monks. The community were able to take up residence by 1948 and in 1974 the monastery was elevated to the status of an abbey. Today, the physical labour of re-building goes on as time and funds permit; however, there is the hope to see the monastery eventually restored to its former glory.

Arrival at Pluscarden

A crumbling mediaeval gate provides the only entrance to the Abbey of Pluscarden. Cornfields stretch out on the right-hand side and in front of the gate is a small graveyard full of simple moss-stained wooden crosses. It seems apt that this is the only physical thing these monks will leave behind them when they die. Once the weather has eaten the wooden crosses away one wonders whether they will ever be replaced or repaired. Pluscarden Abbey is the next thing I see. The mystical vision of the monastery and its setting conjures up thoughts of Hogwarts.¹³ A first glimpse of a monk in the distance wearing white robes swishing in the wind brings to mind a Hogwarts professor on his way to teach arithmancy or ancient runes.

Pluscarden has the aura of a dream. It was so still when we arrived that you were almost afraid of the crunching noises your feet made as you walked along the gravel path to the guesthouse. Pluscarden seems to be a motionless painting that captures a simpler life from the past. The motto of the abbey is *In locto isto dabo pacem* (In this place I will give peace). However, the peace that floats around the abbey and the surrounding area is not as complete as it first seems. During our stay we shared the abbey's grounds with an excitable visiting French scout troop and the silence was periodically also shattered by Tornado fighter jets

blazing across the sky while on flight practice from RAF Lossiemouth.

On entering the guesthouse we were met by the guestmaster, Brother Gabriel—the first monk I have ever met. It was extremely difficult to know exactly what to expect. I seem to have worked myself up slightly about the whole situation and was, as a result, nervous. I looked at the monk standing before me. His head was shaved. My hair was long and held a wealth of hair wax. He wore full white robes with a hood. I wore a polo shirt and jeans. He wore sandals and white socks. I wore Converse. This whole experience was far from comforting; the divide between us was just too great. Then he spoke and I remembered we were both human and he was probably going through exactly the same emotions as I was. He held out his hand and I held out mine to shake his. I looked down at his sandals and saw he was wearing Birkenstock; it occurred to me that I also owned a pair.

Guests and hospitality

This visit to the monastery had been arranged prior to our arrival through e-mail; the monks use this as their main form of communication. It is also possible, but not encouraged, to arrive at the monastery without prior arrangements and ask to stay. A fellow guest I spoke to did just this and had plans to stay for six days in total. I asked him about any similar situations he had experienced in the past. He replied

I've been to many places travelling over the past 20 years... I've slept in the Church of the Nativity at Christmastime but nowhere compares to these guys... there is nothing like this place—they are so

accommodating.

This guest also raised the issue of payment for using the monastery's facilities.

When I arrived I asked Brother Gabriel how much it would cost per night. He said: 'Have you got a platinum special-edition Mastercard?' and I said 'No'. Brother Gabriel then responded by saying 'Looks like you'll be staying for free then'.

Basic manners would dictate that leaving behind some kind of donation after your stay would be appropriate. However, as with helping with day-to-day chores, the monks do not care whether a donation

is left behind, although one is very much appreciated. I spoke to Brother Gabriel about this. The only thing that perhaps irritated him was people using the monastery as a one-night stop-off and treating the monk's hospitality as a bed-and-breakfast; this is disrespectful behaviour and it is understandable why Brother Gabriel takes this view. The monks are surprisingly also used to high-profile figures using Pluscarden in the same way.

The guests who usually visit the monastery are priests taking time out from their daily routine for a period of reflection, meditation and relaxation or other people with other links to the monastic

community. The monastery is welcoming, but does not just open its doors to anyone. Brother Gabriel believes that Benedict's Rule needs to be read 'in light of our changing times'. When the abbey was first established 800 years ago, there were no publicly run facilities for the sick or the homeless; now things are different. Brother Gabriel notes that it is not uncommon for the local police to drop off people with social problems such as drug addiction or homelessness. If



Giles Comacher OSB

they arrive at the monastery, they are given soup and sandwiches and are invited to sleep in a lodging in the grounds just a few minutes away from the monastic cloister and main guesthouse. It is

simply not practical to the running of the monastery... we are not here to be saints; we are monks, that is the path we have chosen.

Brother Gabriel outlined no rules that we had to abide by during our stay; however, silence is observed in the church, refectory and other monastic areas.

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Guests are also encouraged to keep silence in the individual rooms. He asked for only one thing—that we change our beds with new sheets on the day of our departure. Guests are not expected to help out with the daily duties although it is very much appreciated. Brother Gabriel mentioned that roughly a quarter of the guests offer to help with daily chores but only a quarter of that number again actually help out anyway. Personally I felt a sense of duty to aid with the upkeep of the guesthouse. I thought of it from the perspective of visiting a relative during the holidays. There is no way the average person would stand back and let the relative do all the work. My task was to vacuum the floors of the guesthouse. However, like everything in the monastery the task seemed that little bit less monotonous compared to completing this kind of job at home. I wanted to give something back to the monastery no matter how small this gesture was.

The monastic routine

A monk's duty is to separate himself from any distractions of the outer world as much as is possible; their life is one of solitude and separation that will enlighten them spiritually. The monks' day is based around Mass and eight other choral services (all in Latin) starting at 4:45 in the morning and continuing at intervals throughout the day until 8:45 at night. All guests are invited to join in the religious celebrations throughout the day; prayer in the monastic church is

a very profound experience that seems to gain greater significance at daybreak or late at night when the tones of darkness are coming and going. One of the things I will always remember from my visit is sitting on a church pew at 4:45 in the morning, smelling sweet incense and watching the rising sun caress the stained-glass windows and project jewelled colours through the smoke onto the church walls.

The act of meditation is personal and just because there is a religious backdrop to the process here doesn't mean the individual has to meditate in that way. Modern life holds little time for meditation. Before coming to Pluscarden I couldn't remember the last time that I sat down by myself in silence and reflected on my life and decisions that I have taken and would have to take in the future. Our rushed way of contemporary living has left our brains wired to concentrate on speed, time and deadlines. The monks seem to have figured out the difference between living and having. Perhaps if we learned to let go to an extent and reflect for a small time each day our lives would be very different.

Accommodation and food

Men are accommodated in a wing of the abbey consisting of 14 bedrooms, each with a sink, a wardrobe, a

4:30am	Rise
4:45am	Vigils and Lauds (Prayers during the night and at dawn)
7:00am	Prime (First prayer of the day) Pittance (Breakfast) Private prayer
8:45am	Mass and Terce (Prayer during the morning)
9:45am	Work and classes for novices
12:35pm	Sext (Midday prayer)
12:45pm	Dinner
2:15pm	None (Afternoon prayer), followed by work
4:30pm	Tea
4:45pm	Private Prayer
6:00pm	Vespers (Evening prayer)
7:00pm	Supper followed by Recreation (can include conversation)
8:00pm	Compline (Prayer before bed)
8:45pm	Retire

Monastic timetable at Pluscarden abbey

The monks of Pluscarden process past the East windows of the choir of the abbey. At either end of the hood moulding over the main windows—once a complete wall of medieval glass—are finely carved heads of a king and queen, believed to be Alexander II and Queen Joan, who founded the abbey in 1230. The oval window is known as a vesica and contains a design of St Benedict holding the Rule.

Giles Conacher OSB

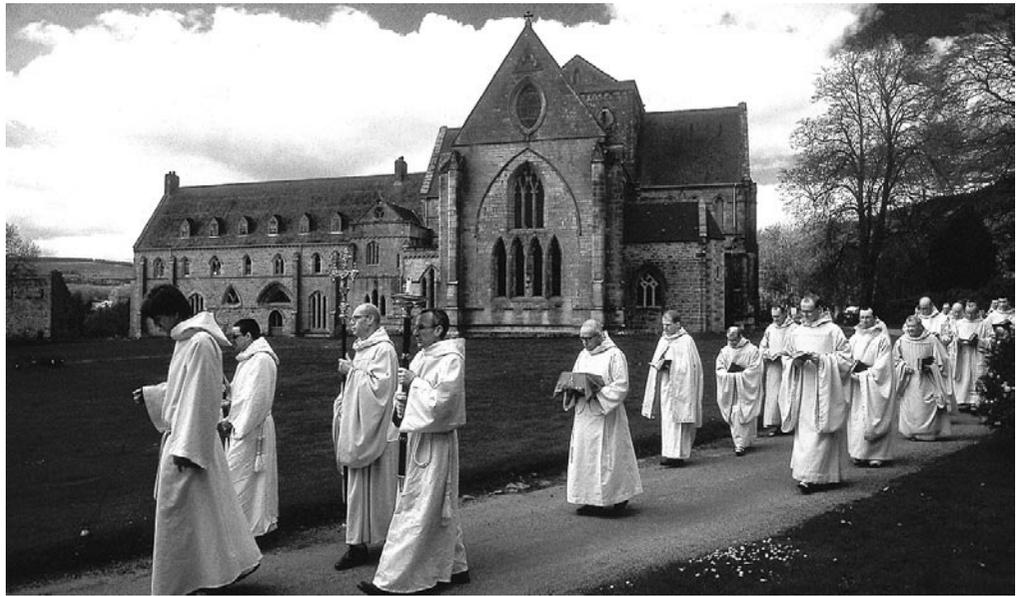


table and a bed. There are two rooms with *en suite* facilities, one of which is on the ground floor and is accessible. For the other guests, there are separate toilet areas and showers. On the first floor there is a guests' common room, and on the second floor, a room suitable for quiet reading or talks. Women and married couples are accommodated in St Scholastica's retreat, a self-contained building with 12 bedrooms and modern facilities. Accommodation in a monastery is a question of understanding and respect, not sexism. If a male were to visit a convent surely he would not expect to be allowed to live in close contact with the nuns.

The monastery provides not just accommodation, but also three meals a day and free all day access to a pantry that is well stocked with homemade bread and jam, cereals, milk and eggs taken from hens living on the grounds of Pluscarden. Meal-times in the monastery were probably the most awkward as it was here that the guest was most actively involved with the monks. During time in church with the monks there was a clear separation between themselves and the congregation. We entered through a different door than they did and couldn't even see the monks during the ceremony. At meal-times everyone eats the same food at the same time and is in clear view of each other.

Only the male guests are allowed to eat with the monks, as their refectory is part of the cloister. The

guests gathered five minutes before the stipulated meal-time and waited for the guest master to lead them to the dining room. We were led through the library and then through part of the cloister, which is usually always in silence and completely off-limits to anyone but the monks. From the moment you enter the library there must be complete silence.

The refectory is a large and cool brick room with whitewashed walls. The tables and seats are made of tough wood slightly mirroring the texture of the pastry on one of the pies we were served. Every guest is given a place name on top of a napkin and must listen to the short prayers in Latin before sitting down. The guest has to do nothing but eat during the meal; the individual doesn't even have to wash up, all the food is served on trays in serving dishes and the guest merely helps himself. The guests are served immediately after

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the Abbot, but before the rest of the monks, again illustrating how accommodating the monks are.

The silence is a slight problem throughout the meal. I felt isolated in the dining room and on my own despite being surrounded by some 40 other people. I kept my head down and ate quickly. Meal-times are a necessity and not designed to be drawn out. On

occasion it felt as if you could hardly taste the food as you felt obliged to eat it so quickly in case the efficient 'monk waiter' cleared your plate away mid-bite! The serving monk offered more food but accepting this would hold up the whole meal and so no guests would take up the offer. The Rule seems to be very concerned about avoiding any kind of gluttony and states that 'there is nothing as out of place in a Christian life as gluttony'.¹⁴ This might suggest that at meal times there

allowed to eat outwith the stipulated meal times; it is widely known that chocolate helps meditation!

Reflections on the visit

The experience at the monastery continually shattered any expectations of a monk's life that I had. This group of monks were some of the wittiest people I have ever met. One only needs to look to the example of the Scottish Tourist Board who presented the Abbey with a three-star Scottish Tourist Attraction Award. On receipt of the award the monks, in typical tongue-in-cheek fashion, hung it in the visitors' toilet. They have an understanding of us that we do not have of them. They know what to expect from a guest but a guest has no idea what to expect from them. As guestmaster Brother Gabriel knows a new guest will be nervous and so he strives to put them at ease.

It is pointless to judge Pluscarden by its outermost appearance for this gives few clues as to the true inner workings of the day-to-day life of the abbey. To get any sort of feel and experience for the hospitality and life of a Benedictine monk, a day visit to a monastery is simply not adequate. This sort of experience can only be gained by staying with the monks for no more than a few days. Staying for a shorter period than this would not result in the encounter being a memorable one. However, staying beyond three days would see experience becoming too relaxed and

simply not as profound; routine would take over and, depending on an individual's character, monotony could set in.

As with everything else in the monastery time brings much greater understanding. Each meal I attended was easier to handle. Every week a monk is given the task of reading throughout the meal. The reading is not censored in any way: during one of our meals I was read an article discussing the blossoming opium trade in Afghanistan and the effects it is having on the West. It seems that the monks continually manage to blow away the inhibitions and expectations that an

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was little food but in actual fact there was always more than enough.

The food is simple and wholesome, clearly giving the monks enough calories to keep healthy so that they can continue in their daily work. There is not too much and there is not too little. The majority of meals in the monastery are vegetarian but on feast days and Sundays, as a celebration, meat is served. Luckily our visit coincided with one of the major feast days on the Benedictine calendar, that of the founder St Benedict himself. On this day at dinner time we ate a homemade beef curry with rice and mango chutney, had a choice of beer or wine, and had tinned peaches and meringue cream for desert. For supper we had a savoury mince pie with baked beans and for desert we were served cheese, fruit and jam. Compared to the monastic food experienced on the previous days this meal was almost indulgent and extravagant. Looking at some of the monks would suggest that they may also be



Giles Conacher OSB

Breakfast	Boiled eggs; Cereal; Toast, marmalade or jam
Dinner	Soup and bread; Vegetable pie, potatoes and beans
Tea	Tea or coffee, Biscuits, Fruit
Supper	Pasta and sauces; Cheese; Bread, Fruit and jam.

Typical monastic menus

average individual may have of them.

The monks believe they are carrying out God's work on earth and hospitality is an integral part of this work so it would be true to say that a visitor to Pluscarden is not just the guest of the monks but a guest in God's house. Everything that the guest experiences within the guesthouse and beyond seems to be a symbol for how Christians should treat both followers of the faith and outsiders. The monastery appears to be actively partaking in everything God teaches and few areas of Christianity can claim to do just that.

The Rule of St Benedict is clearly still of the utmost importance to the running of the monastery at Pluscarden. To the monks the Rule is as solid as the foundations of the abbey buildings. However, as with the abbey buildings, an element of change has been necessary to ensure the continuing survival of the monastery and its way of life. The monks have avoided severing the homely and accommodating links with the original Benedictine rule by continually applying it effectively to the changing times. Monasteries no longer need to look after the sick as there are state hospitals, nor should they be expected to look after those with drug or alcohol problems, as other agencies exist for this purpose. The modern world impedes like creeping creatures all round Pluscarden's walls, threatening the monastic life. The outside world is continually being pushed away and kept at arm's length and yet an element of it must be allowed to enter. It is this balance that the monks must retain in order to continue a life that has existed for nearly 800 years.

The enduring principles of monastic hospitality

This article and its prequel¹⁵ have explored the development and regulation of hospitality in the Western European monasteries, from the beginning of the Middle Ages through to the Renaissance. Following a brief consideration of the origins of monasticism, they have focused on the establishment and development of the Western monastic tradition. Parallel developments that were taking place during the same period have also been summarised. The significance of the monasteries in Western European development has been explored and the diminishing significance of the

monasteries at the start of the Renaissance has been identified. This had been a consequence of a variety of factors, and most notably: the development of humanism; the effects of the Protestant Reformation across Europe; and the creation of the secular nation-states.

During the Middle Ages the monasteries (as well as being the custodians of civilisation, knowledge and learning) had provided detailed and formalised rules for religious hospitality, the care of the sick and the poor, and responsibilities for refugees. The spread of

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Western monasticism (primarily based on the Rule of St Benedict for monastic life), together with its influence on religious life generally and also throughout society, had led to generally accepted and well-understood principles of hospitality. These principles, in their original form, were to become the foundations of the provision of hospitality that were later to be adopted and modified within the nation-states and by the secular organisations as they took over greater responsibilities for the full range of hospitality activities. However, it seems that these principles of hospitality are as relevant now as they were 1,500 years ago. From the translation of chapter 53 of St Benedict's Rule¹⁶ with an analysis of the rule, the changing influence of monasticism and the parallel developments up to the Renaissance, a new taxonomy of principles of hospitality has been derived. These principles of hospitality, now in a secular and more modern terminology, are presented below:

Business principles

- Guests are central to the purpose of the business
- When providing service the management and staff are separate from the society to which they are providing service
- The level of service offered is determined by the type of the business
- Businesses have a responsibility for the health, safety and security of the guests
- Management and staff should display personal

integrity and be practically competent

- The business, and its management and staff, must maintain a professional relationship with guests at all times

Guest principles

- Guests are to be treated with respect
- Welcoming gestures and language are as important as the acts of service
- Delays in the provision of hospitality are a hardship for the guests
- Guests should not feel that the provision of service is an inconvenience to the business
- The difficulties in providing the service are of no interest to guests
- Providing the service and improving it is more important to guests than providing additional features of hospitality

Hospitality provision principles

- All guests are welcome
- Service is offered at different levels
- Hospitality is offered based on the needs of the guests at the time
- There must be provision of hospitality for guests with special needs
- Provision must be for basic needs (food, drink and accommodation) as well as other needs as required
- Food and drink should be available at all times for guests as they arrive

Staffing principles

- The person providing the service is seen by the guest as representing the business as a whole
- Personal characteristics of staff must include being genuinely disposed to providing service
- There is a need for specialised staff as well as multi-skilled staff
- Staff roles should be clearly defined to indicate which members of staff are to interact with guests and how
- The level of staffing needs to match the business demand
- Staff should maintain their dignity in providing service: service not servility
- Staff must not cause the guests unnecessary disturbance

Management principles

- Hospitality managers must be professional and competent
- Managers have a responsibility to balance the provision of service and the requirements of the business
- Managers, as well as having to responsibly manage the business, also have to be seen by the guests as the host
- Both expected demand and unexpected demand need to be prepared for
- Guest and staff areas should be separated and access controlled
- Teamwork is important for efficient service
- Staff who are providing hospitality must be fully resourced and supported by the management team
- The management is to blame if staff do not have the skills or equipment to carry out their duties

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KEVIN D O'GORMAN is currently completing his PhD in the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Strathclyde, in Glasgow. His research interests comprise the history and philosophy of hospitality and his PhD research is an analysis of ancient, classical, mediaeval texts, both in their original languages and using modern commentaries on them, to establish the true origins of hospitality.



EWAN MACPHEE is reading for an LLB at the University of Strathclyde. He has particular fervour for human rights law and journalism and aims to combine these interests in his future career. Ewan works on the Spoken Word project at Glasgow Caledonian University (with the BBC and US Universities) which exploits the use of audio and video materials in digital learning.