

From 'A Brief History of the Orthodox Parish of the Holy Prophet Elias in Devon, England'

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Archimandrite Barnabas was born Ian Burton in 1915 in mid-Wales. Drawn from an early age to faith that centred on sacramental mystery, he joined the Anglican order of the Cowley Fathers in 1932, and after a period studying theology at Lampeter he was ordained an Anglican priest in 1939. After several years of inner struggle as to the canonical authenticity of Anglicanism, he became a Roman Catholic in 1949. However he found the authoritarianism of the Roman Church difficult to come to terms with, and he became increasingly drawn to Orthodoxy.

He was received in Paris in 1960 and ordained later in the same year, taking the monastic name of Barnabas. He spent some years immersed in Orthodox monastic practice under Archbishop Nicholas (Eremin), Exarch in Paris of the Moscow Patriarchate, returning to England in 1965 to look for a suitable site to establish a monastery. Eventually he learnt of a property at Willand in the south-west of England, where he moved on 31st July 1967 to found the monastery of the Holy Prophet Elias, under the aegis of Bishop – later to be Metropolitan - Anthony of Sourozh (Moscow Patriarchate) in London. From the first he was helped by a young local convert, Norman Wilkins, who had found the property. Norman was soon ordained deacon, taking the name of Nicanor, and was in due course to become assistant priest of the Devon parish. Other key figures in the growing community were John Marks, a drama teacher from North Devon who was received in 1971 and ordained priest on Thomas Sunday 1974, and Peter Scorer, who as the child of an émigré mother had known Bishop Anthony virtually all his life, and had recently returned from three years' study at St Vladimir's Seminary near New York to take up a teaching post at Exeter University. Peter was ordained Deacon in 1973.

Father Barnabas' lifelong wish was to establish an Orthodox monastic tradition in Britain. What in fact happened at Willand was not a flowering of monasticism, but the gradual emergence of a scattered but committed Orthodox community throughout Devon. People from an Orthodox background joined with English converts and those on the road to conversion, most travelling long distances to take part in Orthodox worship. By the time Fr Barnabas left in 1975 to return to his native Wales, still in the hope of founding a monastery, there was a small but active parish in North Devon.