

Obituary of Bro. John Berridge, O.Carm.

Brother John Berridge died on 8th February 2002

The Carmelite Community at the Friars, Aylesford, lost one of its stalwart members when Brother John Berridge died on Friday 8th February 2002 – his 81st birthday. Brother John had spent the previous few days busily involved in a meeting with his fellow Carmelites from all over Britain. Despite a stroke some three years ago, Brother John had continued to play an active part in community life.

John Arthur Berridge was born at New Malden, Surrey, in 1921. His father, Sidney, saw service in the Great War, and his mother Edith, came from Stamford Hill. John's parents were drawn to Catholicism and John remembers being received into the Church at St Elizabeth's in Richmond. The Berridge family then decided to emigrate to Western Australia. Sidney Berridge was an experienced market gardener and the hope was to make a living farming. However, the Australian dream was not to be and John and his parents returned, to live first at Becontree and then Dagenham. John remarked that while his parents knew poverty they were always happy and openhearted. John left school at 14 and was employed by a firm in Hackney that made wireless cabinets. However, a desire to travel drew him to join the Essex Regiment. John was in the army for eight years from 1938 to 1946, ending up as a military policeman in Iraq. It was during his time in the Middle East that he became aware of his calling to religious life and Carmel.

Back in England John's parents put him in touch with the Carmelites at Faversham and Fr Elias Lynch pointed him to the novitiate, which was then in Ireland. John found the discipline and the loneliness of life as a novice in Ireland hard going. However he persevered and to his great joy he was sent to Aylesford in November 1949. The Carmelites had only just returned to their ancient home in Kent and Aylesford was to be John's home, his community for the next 53 years.

The restoration of Aylesford as a key Christian centre and place of pilgrimage owes much to outstanding figures like Fr. Malachy Lynch the first prior, and artists like Adam Kossowski. However, the day to day life of Aylesford, its prayer life and hospitality depended on the love and generosity of a number of brothers, among whom John stands out for his faithfulness and commitment in seeing that essential but often unromantic jobs were done. John drove thousands of miles, ferrying visitors, buying supplies and delivering pottery. He kept the grounds tidy and was a friendly presence to all and sundry. No matter how busy the day, he found time to read his Bible. He was regular at office and in later years when reading was more difficult, he recited the rosary, often having said all fifteen mysteries by breakfast.

He loved great celebrations and was a familiar figure as the cross-bearer leading processions. John was a big man in every sense but he lived in trust and faith the Little Way of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. When sometimes the brethren were trying to be clever, his knowledge of the Bible and his humour brought them back to earth. He was a friend to countless friars and his humanity won the hearts of strangers.

He never lost his love of travel and in later years Ireland, especially where he had been a novice, became his favourite destination. He loves a good Irish fry and his friends, the Geary family, saw he was well cared for.

The Carmelite Order has been privilege to count John Berridge as a member of its family. His life, formed in a loving family, grounded in loving faith and shaped by discipline has been a lesson to many of us who have known him over the years. He preached love and fidelity by the consistency of his life and the love he showed to all he encountered. The Saints of Carmel and Our Lady inspired him but the verdict of his brothers in Carmel and his friends, will be that he inspired and sustained others. He was proud to have served his country and the Church through a life given without counting the cost.