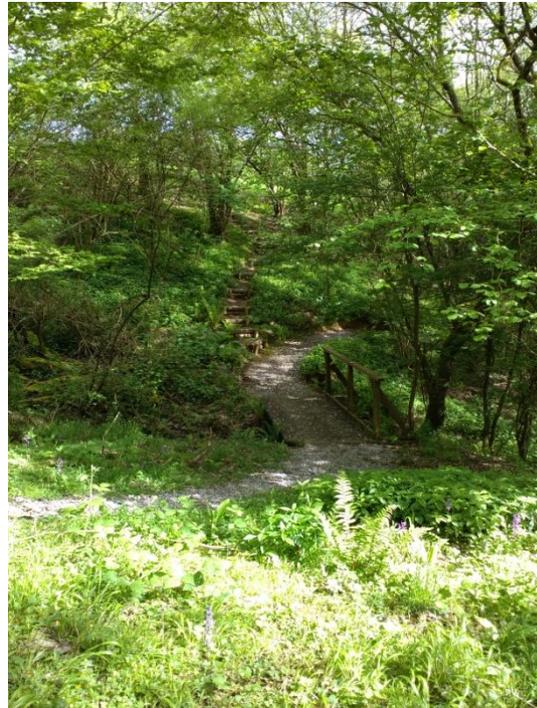


An Account of the [Sheldon Hermitage](#)

RMJ, 2023.

If you are somebody who truly seeks solitude, silence and invisibility then you will understand the great privilege it is that when a hermit is in residence in *Benedict's Wood* all the gateways and paths into it are hung with a notice asking wanderers kindly to respect the hermit's presence – to pass by another route.

A kettle and a two-ring electric hob make cooking one's own meals simple. Food can be ordered by note or email and delivered to the main Sheldon porch for carefully timed collection. Even the portaloo can be carried across dewy morning fields of sheep to the corner of the animal barn for emptying. In the wood, by the quiet stream, I was able to pass many days neither seeing anyone nor being seen.



For this to be possible there must be a genuine realisation by the Community of the reality of impact that a hermit's presence may have in the wider world. Protection of an anchorage is an absolute affirmation of faith in the real power of contemplative prayer and meditation.

The rule of St Francis for his hermitages appoints 'Marthas' to guard the hermit 'Marys' so that *no one can speak with them, nor may any person enter into the hermitage where they live.*¹ The purpose of enclosure is not to reject and escape the rest of the world but to enable a deeper and more deliberate listening, watchfulness and heightened state of inner vigilance. A hermit seeks to become a vehicle or channel for a total love-response to the world that is not limited by bodily encounter.

¹ Saint Francis Rule for Hermitages, see: https://digitalcollections.franciscantradition.org/document/bx4700-f6f722-1999/francis_of_assisi_early_documents_-_the_saint/1999-00-00?pageNo=62.

Our bodies interact with each other at one point in time and space,² but a hermit seeks to give her³ whole time and attention – body-mind and spirit – to developing a *disciplined heart, unheralded Wisdom, an unpublished understanding, a hidden life, masked ideals, unseen meditation, the longing for what is Divine, an outpouring of love, a depth of silence.*⁴ Shielding a hermitage bears witness to an appreciation of the genuine value of her aspiration. Protecting a freedom from day to day interactions – which are of course life-giving-ly constitutive of community practice and essential in ‘normal life’ – endorses and facilitates an alternative lifestyle seeking a different kind of communion with the rest of Humanity and the wider cosmos. It is a communion rooted in a proposed single-minded devotion to God in imitation of Christ’s self-emptying.⁵

Of course this doesn’t mean that one spends all one’s time seated in the lotus position waiting on God. A daily domestic rhythm of food preparation and cooking, cleaning and clothes washing, study, ‘communing with Nature’ and ‘performing one’s daily ablutions’ in the open air outside the hut connect you with a normal human pattern of life. The hut is well equipped to meet one’s basic needs and – I can confidently assert – does not leak in a raging storm. I tied a cord between two trees to dry my clothing and I was never bothered by rodents, keeping all food items in large plastic containers provided by the community.



I borrowed books from the library when the rest of the community and visitors were in chapel and I completed two very specific pieces of work: the final editing of an article and the last cuts of a wood block carving – both of which I had been working on for months. I was able to walk a delightfully round about route to the Art Shed where – alone and in silence – I made several prints from the block and then painted the wood itself back in the hut. Plenty of sheep, squirrels, woodland birds and trees kept me peaceful company as I worked, and I could wash my brushes and receptacles in the lovely stream. At the end of my stay in the hut I submitted the final version of the article from

² Notwithstanding that every interaction could be said to reach beyond and behind its immediate context in its ultimate impact and thus is always unique and significant.

³ Or his...

⁴ Selections from a list taken from John Climacus, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Step 3

⁵ Philippians chapter 2: 5-8, *kenosis of Christ*.

the Sheldon office. Having closure on these two activities helped me to leave the hut when the time came.



Saint Clare of Assisi called her contemplative sisters *co-workers* with God.⁶ Sarah Coakley characterizes the contemplative spiritual practitioner as *a symbolic microcosm of the world she inhabits (and transforms)*.⁷ Perhaps whenever we set aside substantial time to – as Clare put it – *gaze, consider and contemplate* – it is as if we open an ‘inner portal’ to the vast activity of the holy Spirit unconstrained by categories of space and time. Even when we are least self-consciously aware of being available to God, in our quiet and unremarkable being and practice, maybe right then and there the Spirit’s presence and prayer in and through us somehow really makes us channels of God’s Peace in the world – more swiftly and subtly, purely and precisely than perhaps even our most determined and humanitarian personal interventions can ever achieve? I can suggest this only because of the confidence we have that the Spirit’s Wisdom and activity is a very *breath of the power of God – holy, manifold, subtle, beneficent, humane, overseeing all, more mobile than any motion – Who, although She is but One can do all things*.⁸

If you should ever feel so led, I hope you will have the courage and opportunity to venture a taste of the hermit life in *Benedict’s Wood*. My own experience there moved me to joyful tears. There is only one other time in my life⁹ when I have been able to spend two weeks alone without directly bodily seeing or hearing, being seen or heard by any other person – and that was when I was renting rooms-cum-hermitage-of-sorts on the outskirts of a town in the foothills of the Himalaya. I thank God for all our sakes that I now know intentional contemplative solitude may be practiced, at least for short periods of time, a little closer to home.

[Further details on Sheldon’s website](#)

⁶ Clare of Assisi, 2nd Letter to Agnes of Prague, 19-22.

⁷ Sarah Coakley, *Essays on Power and Submissions* (Blackwell 2002, p. xix).

⁸ From *Wisdom of Solomon* chapter 7:22-27.

⁹ As far as I can recall. . .



“The flow of the river is ceaseless and its water is never the same. The bubbles that float in the pools, now vanishing, now forming, are not of long duration; so in the world are human beings and their dwellings...”

(Kamo no Chomei, *An Account of my Hut*, 12th to 13th century Japanese hermit)