

# A HISTORY OF HOSANNA HOUSE

1974 - 2006



*Written by Peter Strode*



**HCPT** *The Pilgrimage Trust*

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## ***Introduction, by Brother Michael Strode***

The inspiration that led to Hosanna House came initially from the young pilgrims, with special needs, who had enjoyed the experience of our Easter Pilgrimage and who were seeking further help, and confirmation in their journey of Faith. This, I think, is one of the most appealing features of the Hosanna House story, and what a wonderful achievement it has proved to be, and such a joy for all of us, who are involved in the work of the Trust.

My first experience of a Hosanna House group came in 1975, under the leadership of Father Eric Flood. In his initial talk, after we had arrived, he impressed upon us that we had embarked on a community exercise, perhaps for the first time in our lives where the essential attitude was to put the interests of the group before anything else, 'to think group' placing one's own personal plans firmly in second place. If this was done, the group would be happy and fulfilled.

And so it proved to be, and what a worthwhile lesson to experience for the rest of one's life.

***Brother Michael Strode, 13/2/05***

*Hosanna House, situated in the village of Bartrès some three kilometres from the town of Lourdes in south western France, is a hostel where groups of people, many of them disabled, can stay and experience peace and renewal. It is owned and managed by HCPT - The Pilgrimage Trust, a charity registered in the UK.*

*This is an attempt to tell the story of how Hosanna House came to be, how it has developed, and to convey at least some of the thoughts and feelings which people who stay there have expressed.*

## **Lourdes – fundamental background to Hosanna House**

In order to understand the purpose of Hosanna House one has to start with a brief explanation of Lourdes, the well-known place of pilgrimage in France. The history of Lourdes with which we are concerned began in 1858, when Our Blessed Lady appeared to a young girl called Bernadette Soubirous, and, over the course of several apparitions, told her that she wanted people to come to Lourdes to pray and to do penance for sinners. The Church authorities of the time were initially sceptical, but investigated the claim thoroughly, and concluded that Bernadette had indeed seen our Lady and received a genuine message from her.

Since then millions of people have made pilgrimages to Lourdes. Some of them, a very few, have received physical healing but untold numbers have experienced help in one way or another, which has enabled them to live their lives in a more positive and spiritual way. Today hundreds of pilgrimages from all over Europe, and some from further afield, varying in size from a few individuals to several thousand people, visit Lourdes every year. It is impossible to over estimate the force for good that Lourdes represents in today's world.

## **HCPT and Lourdes**

In 1954 a young doctor, Michael Strode, was working at Chailey Heritage Craft School in Sussex, an establishment which was both a hospital and a school for children with long term disabilities. He had previously been to Lourdes, and thought it might be a good idea to take some of the boys from Chailey to visit Lourdes on a pilgrimage/holiday. The idea was greeted with enthusiasm by his colleague Peter Keevney, and no less a person than the Duke of Norfolk also promised his support. So it was that in the summer of 1954 Michael, Peter, two other adults and four boys from Chailey set out for Lourdes as a small part of a diocesan pilgrimage.

The venture was a great success and in 1955 Michael and Peter decided to repeat the holiday, this time travelling with the National Schools pilgrimage at Easter and taking a party of seven boys, a small enough group in a pilgrimage numbering about 2000. But it was not

too small to escape the attention of the pilgrimage leader, Bishop Bright, who was firmly of the opinion that Michael and Peter should expand their venture, and urged them to do so. This meant that funds would have to be appealed for, and in order to do this a charitable trust needed to be formed. So it was that the Handicapped Children's Pilgrimage Trust came into being in 1956, and the first HCPT pilgrimage took place in 1957. The Trustees must have been amazed at the success of their appeal for funds, because the 1957 pilgrimage consisted of no fewer than 43 children and 28 helpers – a huge increase on the numbers of 1956, which totalled only 13 people in all. From then on expansion, sometimes dramatic, was very much the 'name of the game' for HCPT.

A point of interest should be noted here. In Lourdes at that time it was the practice for sick or disabled pilgrims to stay in hospices built in the 19th century, while the helpers stayed in hotels. This was quite unacceptable to Michael Strode and Peter Keevney, who wanted the children to lead as normal a life as possible and therefore accommodated them in hotels, even if this meant breaking with tradition. It was of fundamental importance in abolishing the distinction between 'able bodied' and 'disabled', a distinction which has no place in the thinking of anyone involved with HCPT.

## **A new development**

To visit Lourdes on pilgrimage, especially one organised by HCPT, is indeed a joy. By 1964 many hundreds of able bodied and disabled people had come with us to Lourdes, and in this year a new development took place, small enough in itself, but with great and wonderful consequences. Donna Smith, a girl very disabled through cerebral palsy who had been to Lourdes with us at Easter, decided to ask her group chaplain, Father Austin Garvey, to organise a special retreat for disabled people. Fr Austin was happy to do so, and the first of a series of retreats took place that year at St Elizabeth's convent in Much Hadham in Hertfordshire. These retreats were repeated in 1965 and 1966 but in 1967 it was decided that, if possible, it would be preferable to hold the retreats in Lourdes.

Fr Austin made enquiries, and found that the Bellevue Convent, on the outskirts of Lourdes and run by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, would be happy to take his group. Reverend Mother agreed that she could accommodate a group of 30 people on the