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Never fall for first impressions when it comes to a Catholic monk

In my working life, I always thought that I do not measure a person by my first impressions. That presumption was tested by a meeting with Fr Michael, a Sussex Monk. One morning my work brought me to a re-wiring project in a historic building. The location was the Carthusian Monastery, called St Hugh's at Cowfold in West Sussex. Why was I involved? I work as an Architect with West Sussex County Council specialising in historic buildings. On this autumnal morning I was knocking on the formidable entrance door of this venerable Catholic Monastery. Behind the door was a fit looking man in patched clean denim working overalls, who turned out to be the Abbot.



Anybody who has read the book called "The Name of the Rose", by Umberto Eco, will have a visual perception of this massive stone French style cloistered monastery. My feet echoed in the vaulted cloisters. Central to the main courtyard was the Community Chapel, which stands like a modest Cathedral.

Then I was introduced to Fr Michael, a dapper 80 year old monk. We undertook the normal pleasant introductions. Where were the electricians to discuss the re-wiring? I was looking for young burley men in appropriate attire to start the meaningful business. That was not to be. The Abbot informed me that Fr Michael had been given the task by him to complete the re-wiring of the Monastery on his own. After my surprise we discussed the programme of works and how it would affect the historic fabric of the building. I discovered that the work would take up to two years for the 80 year old monk. Fr Michael then modestly informed me that he had undertaken the previous re-wiring 50 years ago.

I left the Monastery with humility for these contemplative Monks and with a smile on my face, realising that Fr Michael would be in his 80's when light would continue to shine upon these holy men in the future, as they pray for all of us in their isolated cells in Sussex.