

Catholic Archives

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I'm here today to speak on Catholic archives. For this, I shall draw on what I've learnt from 20 years membership of the Catholic Archives Society, for about half of which I have been the honorary secretary. I shall try to give an overview of what Catholic archives in the United Kingdom consist of, who looks after them, some of their problems, and the role of the society I represent. I'm aware there are quite a lot of CAS members here so apologies in advance to anyone who doesn't hear anything new.

Catholic archives are very extensive. When I went to my first CAS conference in the 1980s I was amazed at the number of organisations that had representatives there. I was already aware that the Catholic church in the UK had a network of parishes and dioceses, schools, hospitals and societies and male and female religious and monastic communities and I should have realised that they would be creating archives. However, the numbers and range really were a surprise.

I'll begin this overview with dioceses and attempt to summarise what the archives are and how they are looked after, then do the same for religious and monastic orders and then try to cover the Catholic community's other archive creating bodies. There are 22 Catholic dioceses in England and Wales, eight in Scotland and four in Northern Ireland. There is also a bishopric of the forces. I am most familiar with the archives of the English and Welsh dioceses so what I am saying here relates to them. This is not to imply in any way that the archives of other parts of the United Kingdom are not equally extensive or worthy of attention. In Scotland for example there is a central archive, the Scottish Catholic Archives in Edinburgh, in which there are diocesan archives, other administrative records and private and family papers; the archives of the Scots Colleges abroad are managed from there and the archivists also advise local religious orders. I have their descriptive leaflet here.

Returning to England and Wales: the dioceses here were formed at various dates after 1850. To summarise very briefly the ecclesiastical organisation for Catholics in England and Wales who didn't conform to the Elizabethan religious settlement, for the next 20 years or so they were without any formal administrative structure. Then in 1581 the Pope appointed Cardinal Allen to be Prefect of the English Mission. He lived in Europe but in the later 16th century and early 17th century, archpriests resident in England were put in authority over the English Catholic clergy. Then, from later in the 17th to the mid 19th century, the English Mission was divided into Districts administered by Vicars Apostolic. In 1850, the English hierarchy was restored and a structure of Catholic dioceses and bishops re-established. Additionally, by the mid 19th century, a pattern of parishes was developing.

All the English and Welsh dioceses have or have had diocesan archivists. I use the past tense here because some dioceses are at present without archivists due to the death of the person in post. However, there is no reason to suppose they will not be replaced. There is an Association of Diocesan Archivists, a sub-group of the Catholic Archives Society, which meets annually to discuss matters of mutual interest. Their secretary is here today.

Most diocesan archivists are priests. They have to combine this role with other duties, usually the care of a parish and the time they can allow for the archives varies. Some work as archivists several days each week, others rely greatly on the help of lay people, who may be employees or volunteers. Some use help from pre-archive course students. Westminster, as you will hear later, has a professionally trained archivist on a finite contract. I have here the information leaflet of the Archdiocese of Birmingham archives where there are enviable search and strong rooms, a priest diocesan archivist who is there four days a week and a trio of volunteers, one of whom deals solely with genealogical enquiries.

Accommodation for diocesan archives varies greatly. Some have purpose built or purposely adapted accommodation, others are not so fortunate. Whatever the accommodation, many diocesan archivists would like more space and say lack of space limits what they can do.

The contents vary. The archives of a diocese will be whatever is produced by the diocesan administration and related bodies that is considered should be preserved. Generally speaking, diocesan archives are for this sort of diocesan material and are not repositories for Catholic archives from a particular area. However, this cannot be a hard and fast rule, especially given the difficulties of finding suitable storage for many Catholic archives, and I'm sure all the diocesan archivists here could give examples of collections they hold that are not strictly diocesan.

There are a lot of archives to be stored – Nottingham, for example has nearly 300 metres of shelving in use. In the older dioceses the archives will include surviving records of the districts and earlier administrative bodies that I have mentioned already; most if not all dioceses will have archives from the 18th century if not before.

There will also be a secret or closed archive, to which only the bishop of a diocese has access. Secret in this context means private and not secret in a more usual 21st century use of the term. It is not to hide secrets but is where information is held that legitimately should not be made available. Files on living clergy are the most obvious example but there could also be records of matters confided only to the bishop which it would be a breach of trust to allow to become public.

Dioceses have varying arrangements for the care of parish records. All diocesan archivists are concerned about their continuing secure preservation. Some actively collect them, some would if they had more space, some have arranged to transfer the registers to the appropriate local authority record office while in others the diocesan archivist carries out regular surveys to ensure they are being taken proper care of within the parishes. In Wales, at least one diocese has transferred its older archives to the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth.

Moving to religious and monastic orders: here too the archives are older and more extensive that might be thought at first. Religious houses for English men and women flourished in Catholic Europe during the period they could not exist in England and there are still religious communities in England that are direct descendents of these 17th century foundations. For many of them, the French Revolution prompted their return to this country, where by the late 18th century conditions for Catholics had

improved. Their archives cover their time in both Europe and England and the one I am most familiar with has significant archives relating to 17th and 18th century Flanders.

The 19th century was marked by a vast increase in the numbers of religious orders in England and throughout the British Isles. Some were founded here by English men and women while others came to this country from mainland Europe and Ireland. They were both contemplative and active, running schools, hospitals and other types of educational and social care. Other religious orders came from France in the early 20th century. All have archives.

The second Vatican Council recommended that religious orders looked again at their roots and one result was that they became increasingly aware of their history and archives. Anniversaries such as centenaries or sesqui-centenaries of arrival in England or of the foundation of schools and colleges and, more poignantly, the wish to preserve a record of their work in the face of closures and shrinking numbers have all contributed to the desire to have the archives carefully ordered, preserved and available for use. Additionally, many religious orders regard their founders or foundresses as among the Church's holy people and would like this to be recognised by the universal church. Archives can be both evidential and supporting records in the prolonged and complicated process of putting forward someone's Cause for Canonisation.

When I was preparing this talk, several archivists of religious orders generously provided me with details of what they do. Although these vary with the size of the Order and the amount of time an archivist has available, they are all valuable tasks. They include work such as cataloguing, conservation and preservation, answering queries, processing transfers of semi-current records, supervising researchers, promoting the archives, giving advice about archives to houses in the same Order, especially to any facing closure, finding the whereabouts of related material and developing contacts with local and national archive and heritage bodies. Additionally, the archivist of a religious community is often expected to be its historian and chronicler. This may involve researching the Order's foundations, writing histories, maintaining Annals and encouraging others to do the same, making

audio recordings of older members, recording details of past and present members and finding and arranging for the maintenance of where they are buried.

What is in these archives? There are personal files on members, other administrative records such as title deeds, annals, constitutions, financial papers, correspondence and records of the Order's development and work in the local community. This may have been and continue to be schools and colleges, industrial schools, special schools for the blind and deaf, hospitals, homes for the elderly, children's homes and orphanages, pastoral work in parishes and centres for the homeless. Additionally, members from this country working overseas will also generate records. One respondent reminded me that her Order today has members from England working in Ethiopia, Fiji, Haiti and Kenya and until 50 years ago had people in China. Others have records of work in India and Africa.

How are they stored? As with diocesan archives, this varies but there is a general lack of storage space. Some religious houses have very well equipped strongrooms, others make do with a variety of cupboards and filing cabinets and most are probably somewhere in between. Nevertheless, the need to be aware of BS5454 and to seek professional advice in preparing and maintaining an archive store is taken seriously.

What can they be used for? Internal administrative enquiries, genealogy, spirituality, local and national history, especially social and women's history are some examples. As you probably know, there is a very active History of Women Religious in Britain and Ireland research group. From the larger, better equipped archives there is some willingness to be included in the wider archive picture and to be involved in local history projects, the archive awareness campaign and London Open House.

Dioceses and religious orders are the largest creators of Catholic archives but there are also smaller groups that hold significant amounts of material. One of these is the seminaries, of which there are now four in England. There used to be more. All have both an historic archive and modern administrative papers. These will cover not only all aspects of training for the priesthood but also the related financial and business management of a large organisation. Of the four, one, Oscott College near Birmingham, has deposited its archives in Birmingham Diocesan Archives, where

they are being catalogued and a programme for the management of current and semi-current records and their regular transfer to the diocesan archives is under discussion.

Then there are the English Colleges abroad. These seminaries were very important to Catholic life in penal times and two, the Colleges in Rome and Valladolid, are still fully involved in priest training for England and Wales. As with the other English institutions abroad, the Colleges hold not only records of their primary purpose and of local English Catholic communities but also have significant material for their geographical areas. The Valladolid archives, for example, are especially important to Valladolid city and to the Province of Castile, as they survived intact from both the Peninsular Wars and the Spanish Civil War. The Valladolid honorary archivist, who is here, goes there regularly from England and a modern catalogue should be completed by the end of this year. At the English College in Rome, a state of the art strongroom has just been opened and recataloguing the archives is in progress. Eventually, it is hoped, there will be a published catalogue of the archives of all seven English continental colleges.

There are also numerous Catholic lay societies to consider. They may have or have had many branches and a regional, national or international basis and they have no obvious home. Some have deposited their archives with an obliging diocesan archivist but many are too widely dispersed throughout the country to make this a realistic option. Some have deposited their archives with relevant institutions, for example the Women's Library has the archives of what was once the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society. The late Robin Gard worked energetically to locate the archives of these societies but no one has continued his work. Many of the societies have members, often present or former secretaries, with a box or boxes of records in their study or garage, who are anxious that their archives should be properly ordered and suitable secure storage found for them. At present, this is difficult to achieve and these are, I consider, the Catholic archives whose future is most uncertain.

Additionally, there are Catholic archives in local authority or other record offices. These, especially in the north west, may hold extensive material relating to Catholic families, which, while not necessarily fully catalogued, is in safe custody.

You may be thinking that this is all very interesting but the Roman Catholic church is only one of a number of denominations represented here. Many local record authority offices are official repositories for Church of England records – why shouldn't Catholic records go there in the same way as those do or as the records of smaller Christian denominations do. Are Catholic archives being thought of as something separate and distinct, differentiated in some obscure way from the wider body of archives?

The answer lies partly in the volume of Catholic archives and their complexity and international nature. I have touched on this already but even after nearly 20 years of active involvement, I know I can't summarise this adequately. To make matters more difficult, there is no obvious physical location for some of these archives. The head of a religious order may be on perfectly good terms with the bishops of all the dioceses where the order has houses but nevertheless he or she is independent and not under their authority. Any lay Catholic institution or society may have or have had branches throughout the country and be independent of any parish or diocesan administration. Some of the organisations concerned have a chain of responsibility leading outside the British Isles and there are already examples of orders transferring all their archives to a headquarters in Rome or to a daughter-house in the United States or possibly elsewhere. It is a complicated mixture.

What other problems face Catholic archives today? I have already mentioned the lack of a place for the deposit of small archives or archives whose continuing secure preservation is under threat and this is probably the most serious problem. In part, this is being addressed by the Douai Abbey Archive for Religious Orders project, details of which I have here. This is a plan to collect the archives of closed monastic and religious communities into a new purpose built repository at Douai Abbey near Reading. An Appeal for funds was launched just before last Christmas and is going well. However, this initiative, welcome though it is, cannot alone solve the problem. The most difficult questions I have to answer as Catholic Archives Society secretary are the ones about future storage, as there is no satisfactory answer that I can give. One possible partial solution would be for communities to group their archives together but this has yet to be discussed. It needs someone to set the ball rolling.

Another difficulty is that many Catholic archivists, especially in religious orders, come into archive work after they have finished one or even two careers. They have to go through a vast learning curve to become familiar with the archives and may already have other jobs within their community. Many work in relative isolation and have limited professional contacts, while interesting their fellow priests, bothers and sisters in the archives can be an uphill task. However conscientious and interested in they are, they are not usually in a position to develop close links with the wider world of archives. Some take one of the archive courses, others do distance learning, others regret they haven't been offered these opportunities and there is an ongoing demand for simple training. With one exception, all the Catholic Archives Society training days have been oversubscribed.

Many of the problems will be the same as those facing all specialist repositories. In common with most small and specialist repositories, it can be very difficult to persuade people, particularly those responsible for money or personnel, that archives can be exciting, interesting and informative and so are worth preserving. The demands of public access can also be a source of difficulty. Catholic archives are private and, in the case of religious orders, are thought of as family archives. While many archivists welcome researchers, there is no automatic right of access. Opening hours for Catholic archives may be limited and the archivists may have little time to answer enquiries. Some standardisation of practice, for example a widely used set of search room rules, would be welcome.

So how does the Catholic Archives Society fit in to this? It is an advisory body that aims to bring together for advice and support people who are looking after Catholic archives, plus anyone from the wider archival or academic world who sympathises this aim. It tries to do this by providing information and advice, by arranging meetings and training opportunities and by an active publications programme. It is not an archive repository, it does not have any archives other than its own and it does not collect archives. It began in 1979 when a number of people met to discuss the care and management of the Catholic archives for which some of them were responsible. The archive profession was well represented and, as it became clear

there was a demand for even the most basic advice and a willingness to give it, a society was formally established.

Today there is an annual conference and a journal, plus a news Bulletin that comes out once or twice yearly. There are also training days, leaflets giving basic advice, occasional papers with more detailed advice on particular topics, a presence on the Catholic history web-site and visits to European countries to look at archives there. Currently there are about 230 members, the majority of whom are non-archivists looking after archives. It is an independent body, with no constitutional links with any other organisation and no funding other than what comes from members' subscriptions and the sale of publications.

The Society now has over 25 years experience of promoting best practice in the care and management of the Church's archives and in communicating the variety, problems and strengths of Catholic archives to the formal administration of both the Catholic church in the UK and the archive profession. It is a forum where anyone who has been asked to 'take on the archives' can get advice and learn from what others are doing. The thrice yearly mailings provide an opportunity to inform members of meetings, training events and wider initiatives in the worlds of both religious archives and archives in general. I do therefore urge that one result of this conference is that use is made of this network and that all organisations and individuals concerned with the future of religious archives communicate and work together as far as possible.

The Society is run by volunteers and many members have been hugely generous with their time, both in giving advice and in encouraging each other. But like most voluntary organisations it is facing a shortage of people with time to become involved. Although the situation is not yet critical, shortage of active members is beginning to make it difficult to sustain what have been core activities. There are opportunities available for anyone with time to help and any such approaches would be very much welcomed. I would welcome your views on how we can attract young professionals who could offer fresh ideas. Unlike at the beginning, there are now very few professional archivists involved, which means that there is possibly a lack of communication of information on professional issues. As I said earlier, lone

unqualified archivists, which is what many CAS members are, can lack advice and support and I think one of the main roles of the Society should be to draw attention to the experience and help the archive profession can offer.

So, I have tried to summarise what Catholic archives are and how they are being cared for. I have also touched on the main problems and the attempts to solve them. In the context of this Conference, what can we do together? In the course of this talk I have mentioned a few areas of possible development or collaboration and you may have further ideas. It would be good to talk about them. Thank you.