

The Westminster Diocesan Archives

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In 1817, a Catholic priest from Lancashire, Fr Robert Gradwell, was sent out to Rome to act as Agent to the English Bishops and to re-open the Venerable English College, the seminary that had been closed during the French occupation. His letters and journals are now kept at the Westminster Diocesan Archive and it is clear, by thumbing through them, that he was particularly interested in archiving. A passage from one of his letters will strike a cord with anybody who works with archives: 'when I first came to the College,' he wrote, 'I found a great cartload of dusty and rotting papers on the library floor. The greater part were rubbish but several were very valuable...I selected all the valuable papers and carried them carefully to my own room, where I filled three drawers with them...Unfortunately two of my drawers did not lock. A superannuated servant had used these valuable papers as waste paper before I found out.'

My purpose this afternoon is to share with you something of my hopes and frustrations as Archivist of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Westminster. I'm not here to argue that Westminster is any sort of model – in fact, at first sight, it shares some similarities Gradwell's description of the English College archive nearly 200 years ago: plenty of 'dusty and rotting papers,' some of which are very valuable, some less so. What I hope to do in this brief presentation is to describe the nature of the Archive, its importance and challenges, and to explain how we've begun to organize the collection.

In some ways, the title 'Diocesan Archive' when used for Westminster is rather misleading. Most diocesan archives, as you would expect, deal with the personages, events and institutions within a particular diocese: the papers of the

bishops, the history of individual parishes and schools, the documents of Catholic societies and the workings of diocesan administration. They can be particularly useful for local historians and genealogists. In the case of the Westminster Archive, one could be forgiven in thinking that most of the papers concerned the Catholic community in that diocese, which covers the London Boroughs north of the Thames and west of Waltham Forest and Newham, the districts of Staines and Sunbury-on-Thames and the County of Hertfordshire. Since the diocese was only erected by Pope Pius IX in 1850, one might also think that there would be very little in the Archive from before the mid-nineteenth century.

However, the Westminster collection contains much that is not, strictly speaking, 'diocesan.' Even the extensive papers of our Archbishops concern many national and international issues. This is because the Archbishops of Westminster have all (so far) been Cardinals, appointed by the Pope and with a role in Rome, and leaders of the English and Welsh Bishops (for example, as Presidents of the Bishops' Conference) in addition to being bishops of a large, predominantly urban area. In their files you're just as likely to find correspondence with the Prime Minister or the Pope as you are with Parish Priests.

The papers of past Archbishops, no matter how important, are only one part of the Diocesan Archive. A handful of documents actually date from the period before the Reformation. They include the reports of fifteenth century heresy trials from the diocese of Norwich and a Middle English miscellany of texts produced by a fifteenth century Carthusian, including advice for confessors and even a recipe for making ink. It's unclear exactly how they ended up with us, but most probably had been in Catholic hands for many centuries, perhaps ever since the religious revolutions of the sixteenth century.

The bulk of our early papers, however, date from the period between the accession of Elizabeth I (1558) and the Restoration of the Catholic Hierarchy in 1850. The most important documents are bound in fifty handsome volumes. These chiefly concern the secular clergy and the work of the Vicars Apostolic and the Bishops' Agents in Rome. All in all there are some 9,000 items relating to this period, making the Westminster Archive one of the richest sources for the Catholic history of the country in the early modern period.

These are supplemented by independent archival collections, such as the archive of the 'Old Brotherhood' (originally the Chapter of Secular Clergy that governed the English Catholic Church between 1631 and 1685, when there was no active bishop in the country) and of the historic seminary of St Edmund's College, Ware, which claims descent from the English College, Douai (founded 1568). These usefully supplement our early modern collections and are often consulted by researchers. In addition to these are a random selection of archives of 'other' Catholic organizations, such as the Catholic Evidence Guild, the Catholic Police Guild, the Newman Association and the Catholic Union of Great Britain (an influential association of laity who promote Catholic interests, especially in matters arising from Government action and proposed legislation).

It is not an exaggeration, therefore, to say that the Westminster Archive is of national and international importance; in some ways, the Roman Catholic equivalent to Lambeth Palace. This is reflected in the number of visitors a year: last year (2006) saw 137 visits - not insubstantial for a private archive which is only open two afternoons a week. The researchers included the inevitable stream of family historians who come to consult our small selection of sacramental registers and, I'm pleased to say, priests pursuing historical studies, but also many doctoral students and academics not only from this country but from institutions of higher education in Europe and the United States. Many of the

users have studies themes that go beyond the traditional confines of English Catholic history – including emigration to Canada and theatre at the Court of Henrietta Maria.

I was appointed Diocesan Archivist at Easter 2005 and, like all but one of my predecessors and the majority of other diocesan archivists, I am a Catholic priest. This situation has its obvious limitations, of course, most notably in the fact that priest archivists will normally lack archival qualifications. I have no professional training beyond a degree in Modern History, and my previous archival experience courtesy of a summer job in the Department of Manuscripts at the British Library. I also spent two years as archivist of the Venerable English College, Rome (which goes back to 1362), although this was a seminary ‘house job’ and took a definite second place alongside my training for the Priesthood.

The other limitation with priest archivists is that we tend to work on a very part-time basis, since our main concern is pastoral work - funerals and feast-days can often prevent the archives from opening. I currently manage to spend two afternoons a week in the Archive, which allows me to deal with correspondence and supervise researchers, although there is little opportunity to personally catalogue or organize the collection.

But, despite the increasing professional expectations for archives and the shortage of priests in this country, I think it right and fitting that many dioceses still appoint priests as archivists. After all, most of the documents in the Archive were produced by priests for priests and so it helps if a priest has an involvement in the Archive and can readily understand the purpose and provenance of many of the documents. A priest archivist is also highly appropriate given that a Diocesan Archive fits into the structure and mission of the Church. It’s not merely a collection of historic ‘dead’ documents that requires cataloguing and

conservation, as required by the Church's Canon Law (*cf* Canon 491 §2), but, according to a Vatican document of 1997, it is a 'place of memory' that records the 'path followed by the Church through the centuries in the various contexts which constitute her very structure...Indeed historical sources trace the Church's action in an uninterrupted path of continuity. This begins with Christ's message, goes through the writings of the first apostolic communities and all the Church communities which follow up to our present day.'

However, this is certainly not to suggest that Church archives should be the preserve of the clergy. As soon as I was appointed Archivist, I realized that I needed a great deal of professional advice and assistance so that the Westminster Archive could meet even basic national standards.

In my first year, I asked Dr Norman James of the National Archives to visit and share his expertise. This was useful in identifying goals - in the long-term, proper cataloguing and possible re-location; in the short-term, basic steps such as installing fire and security alarms and introducing retention and collection policies. An advisory committee was founded to give further advice, consisting of a small group of custodians, experts, users and a senior representative from the diocese.

An unexpected blessing came last year when we entered into an arrangement with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, who were themselves looking for a part-time archivist and records management officer. We decided to advertise for a newly-qualified archivist on a two year contract who would spend three days a week at the Westminster Archive, situated near Kensington High Street, and two days with the Bishops' Conference at Eccleston Square, near Victoria. And so, in September 2006, we welcomed our new Project Archivist, Tamara Thornhill. I continued acting as a sort of archives manager,

mostly dealing with correspondence and administration and supervising researchers, while Tamara started to systematically go through the archives, identifying exactly what we had and investigating provenance.

Despite the richness of its collection, the Westminster Archive faces many challenges. Perhaps like many Catholic archives in the past, it also saw itself as a private collection, of interest only to Catholics, and consequently few links were made with the wider archival community.

I well remember walking around the Archive once I had been given the keys by my predecessor. It was like a rather Aladdin's Cave. The death mask of Arthur Cardinal Hinsley could be found alongside audio cassettes that had once belonged to Cardinal Hume; a well-preserved uniform of the Palatine Guard (a now extinct regiment in the 'Papal Army') alongside out-patient records of St Andrew's Hospital, Dollis Hill; the remains of a flower carried to Tyburn by one of the English Martyrs, Blessed Thomas Maxfield, alongside honorary degrees given to the Archbishops of Westminster.

Things had literally been deposited in the Archive and twenty years later still remained unsorted in cardboard boxes. On some shelves, it was very obvious that a drawer of a filing cabinet had simply been emptied and dumped with us. On my arrival there was no general system and frequent inconsistencies. I recently looked through some of the boxes relating to Francis Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster between 1903 and 1935, which I thought was one of the better organized parts of the collection. To my horror, I soon realized that many items actually dated from the time of his successor, Cardinal Hinsley, and that things had been placed in the 'Bourne Papers' simply because they had been transferred to the Archives some time after his death. Thus, there was a whole series of boxes containing eighteenth and nineteenth century wills, clearly

labeled with a Cardinal Bourne reference number.

Another key problem, which we're in the process of addressing, is to decide what exactly the Westminster Diocesan Archives is for. I've already mentioned that the Archives many items that are not strictly speaking 'diocesan' - both a valuable collection of documents dating from the period before Catholic dioceses were re-established (in 1850) and a rather miscellaneous selection of records of 'other' institutions. In fact, it could be said that the Westminster Archives is the nearest thing the Catholic Church in England and Wales has to a 'central, national archive.' We don't advertise ourselves as such but this is how we are seen - in much the same way that the Archbishop of Westminster is often mistaken as the Catholic Primate in the English and Welsh Hierarchy. We are often the first port of call for those who want to find a home for 'orphan records' with us. In May the Advisory Committee will be discussing and formulating a new Collections Policy.

The identity of the Westminster Archive within the Diocese itself also needs to be resolved. We call ourselves the 'diocesan archive' and yet, in addition to the 'Secret Archive' required by Canon Law and kept at Archbishop's House, there is a separate archive for Westminster Cathedral, the Diocesan Property Office and the Diocesan Chancery and Tribunal (which deal respectively with marriage dispensations and annulments). And that's not to mention the countless departments and individual parishes which maintain their own 'archives,' I suspect to varying levels of success. Curiously, our weakest point in being a 'diocesan' archive is that we have few easily accessible documents relating to the 216 parishes and 223 schools in the diocese. Over the coming months and years we hope to build-up and streamline the diocesan side of the Archive, especially by working alongside diocesan administration and the parishes. Part of this process, of course, involves reminding people about the importance, purpose

and needs of archives, for such things can easily be forgotten by over-burdened, multi-tasking priests and officials.

Records Management will also need to be looked at because one of our main problems is that, in the past, Archbishop's House has archived everything. For example, the papers of Cardinal Hume, who was Archbishop between 1976 and 1999, amount to over a thousand boxes. Every letter he received has been carefully filed, together with a copy of any reply that was sent. It made an efficient system for his office, but there was no Retentions Policy. Thus, there are copies of journals which can easily be found in libraries and several boxes of 'regrets' - that is invitations to various events (such as the opening of a parish fete) and the corresponding letter explaining why His Eminence could not attend. That's not to mention the hundreds of rather eccentric letters that a person in high position will inevitably receive. A Diocesan Retentions Policy would save much work and effort for future archivists.

Thanks to Tamara, our new Project Archivist, much progress has been already been made and the contents of the storeroom are slowly becoming more ordered and manageable. Since, prior to her appointment, about 60% of the Archive was not boxed or listed, many new discoveries have been made. Box lists are being created in an electronic searchable format, although we are not yet in a position to use a system like CALM; search room procedures have been implemented; a reprographics service has been set up; and an accessions register started. We've also started to use volunteers to help with item listing and transcriptions.

The Archive is also beginning to be rationalized. Defunct financial records have been shredded. We are slowly transferring the Chancery and Tribunal records (mostly dealing with marriage cases) to separate locations, which will free up a lot of space. Papers relating to Westminster Cathedral are likewise being

transferred to the Cathedral archives, which has recently started employing an enthusiastic part-time archivist. This is creating some much-needed space.

The public profile has been raised through articles, involvement in Conferences and through a Westminster Archive blog, which is an easy means of putting news and information on the web. We are tentatively starting to organize school visits – I say ‘tentatively’ because our facilities and space are severely limited – and I would eventually like to organize ‘History Days’ for the Diocese, with a range of speakers and visits.

We still have a very long way to go. Our basic aim at the moment is to find out what we have in our storeroom, and this will continue over the coming months. The challenges of cataloguing, digitalization, conservation and re-location all lie happily in the future. The system that we now use at Westminster certainly works for us – that is, to have a part-time priest ‘archives manager,’ a professional archivist and a team of volunteers, and hope this will continue into the long-term future. The assistance of the wider Archives community has also been invaluable, especially through the Advisory Committee. To echo Margaret Harcourt-Williams’ point, standardization of policy, sharing of good practice and increased co-operation amongst Catholic Archivists would also be most welcome. With these goals in mind, it is my hope that the Westminster Archive will grow in its function as custodian, conservator, collector and promoter of the *Memoria Ecclesiae*, the memory of the Church and of the Catholic contribution to the history of this country.

