The Shrewsbury Diocesan Archives

Introduction

Church Law requires that each diocese should maintain a central archive to care for the bishop’s official papers: letters to Rome, to other bishops, to priests and parishes. Such material forms a focus for the history of the community which forms a diocese, the people and organisations which make a diocese what it is. Over the years other material is deposited: papers relating to individual priests perhaps, schools and religious orders, diocesan societies. The strength of any archive rests in what people deposit in it.

The main task of a diocesan archives must be to gather and to preserve material relating to all aspects of the diocese and its current life, history and personnel, as well to encourage and support the work of those preparing parish histories, and generally promoting interest in our diocesan roots with workshops, exhibitions and talks. Our archives should be seen as custodian of our collective memory and identity; it has an important educational role. Our annual History Day offers a good example of the overlapping tasks of this work.

When the Shrewsbury diocese was created in 1850 it united three very disparate areas each with its own traditions and history: Shropshire, formally part of the Midland District; Cheshire belonging to the Lancashire District – in turn, a part of the old Northern District from 1688 until its reorganisation in 1840; and North Wales which had previously been part of the Western District and remaining part of our diocese until the creation of the Welsh Vicariate in 1895. For archives before the restoration of the hierarchy, then, we have to look elsewhere; some material relating to the older Catholic missions in Shropshire, like Shrewsbury itself, can be found in the Archdiocesan Archives in Birmingham; Cheshire holdings can be found amongst the Liverpool diocesan papers deposited in the Lancashire County Record Office in Preston (still partly uncatalogued) or even in the old Northern District Archives now part of the Leeds Diocesan Archives at Hinsley Hall in Leeds.
For this reason, there is little in our Archives from before 1850, and sadly often large gaps after this date. There has been no consistent collecting policy: material has generally been preserved on an *ad hoc* basis. Edmund Slaughter bishop’s secretary from 1868 to 1871, then in Birkenhead gathered material with the intention of producing a history of the diocese in 1887, but delayed until the two manuscript volumes completed until 1892 after he arrived as rector in Plowden. For these he compiled a series of brief parish histories for parishes in the two counties of Cheshire and Shropshire; although questionnaires were sent out to the parishes in North Wales there is no evidence that a third volume for that area was ever finished. Mgr Slaughter, cousin to the new Vicar Apostolic for Wales, Francis Mostyn, moved to Wrecsam and became his secretary when the Welsh Vicariate was created in 1895. These two volumes are one of the treasures of the archives and contain an important series of late nineteenth century photographs of our churches.

When Bishop Moriarty took over as sixth bishop of the diocese in 1934 he gathered the archives in The Council House in Shrewsbury, but his sensitivities as a historian and antiquarian were often undermined by the delicate circumspection he felt was required by his office as bishop: hence the wholesale destruction of letters considered in any way to show his clergy in a bad light and the loss of much personal material. Bishop Moriarty gathered a major collection of books, now sadly scattered (the older books are in the Talbot Library, Preston, and what remains is divided between Hawkstone, the Curial Offices, and the Archives, including runs of the Catholic Records Society volumes, Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society, Shropshire Archaeological Society, the Henry Bradshaw Society, etc. – copies of Ormerod’s *History of Cheshire*, Earwaker’s *East Cheshire*, Cranage on *The Churches of Shropshire* and other works of local historical interest were thankfully preserved for the Archives.

Canon Maurice Abbott, bishop’s secretary from 1957 to 1965, and subsequently continuing to act as diocesan archivist, did much to put the archives on a sound footing. He had earlier marked the centenary of the diocese by producing a diocesan history developed from Mgr Slaughter’s work (*Diocese of Shrewsbury 1851-1951: Centenary Record*, 1951) but, as he later admitted, he was given no access to bishops’ correspondence lodged in the Council House when he wrote this. A second,
revised edition was published in 1987. Canon Abbott also published a series of brief biographies of the priests who have served the diocese since its beginnings in 1850 (To Preserve Their Memory, 1996). Both volumes provide vital tools for any future work on the history of the diocese. By the mid 80s the archives were moved from the Council House in Shrewsbury to the Curial Offices in Birkenhead. At this time early account books and diocesan financial papers formerly held by Mgr H R Kelly, and a collection of papers gathered by Mgr Rees relating to the post-war programme of school building were added to the collection. It is really only at this point that we can begin properly to talk of a diocesan archive. Canon John Marmion, taking over as Archivist in the late 1980s, assisted by a small team of helpers continued Canon Abbott’s work, supervising a temporary move in 1998 to rather unsatisfactory rooms on the top floor of St Joseph’s Primary School, Woodchurch Lane, Birkenhead, instituting in 1996 the first of our Diocesan History Days, as well as editing a series of essays on aspects of the history of the diocese to mark the millennium (Shrewsbury: Millennium Essays for a Catholic Diocese, Downside, 2000).

In the summer of 2008 part of St Michael’s School in Woodchurch was made available and an extensive building programme was started to fashion two rooms into an independent office for the Diocesan Archive. Necessary security was added, disabled toilet facilities, and a small kitchen area for the use of the archive team and visiting researchers. Two large rooms have been adapted for the Archives which now has a completely independent entrance from the school, allowing the Archives to be accessed during school holidays. One room filled with metal shelving, and with suitable window blinds to keep important material shielded from the sun, houses the main collections – the archive of the bishop and curial departments, parish archives, and material relating to religious orders and lay societies in the diocese.

The Archive holdings

Our Archives has a considerable collection of printed and manuscript material relating to diocesan administration. We have an almost complete run of the Catholic Directory from 1840 (with an odd earlier volume for 1814) and of our Diocesan Year Book from its first publication as the Catholic Family Almanac for the dioceses of Liverpool and Shrewsbury in 1898, bound copies of pastoral letters and
letters to the clergy. There are bound volumes of Pastoral Letters from 1851 onwards, papers relating to the Diocesan Synods, and Ad Clerum letters (circular letters from the bishop to his clergy). Eighteen boxes house bishops’ papers and miscellaneous correspondence, together with additional communications with Rome and papers relating to local and national Catholic issues. We have a run of the sixteen letter books from July 1882 to December 1927, and further copies of letters taking us to 1948, very frail now, often illegible and in need of serious conservation work. For long we have had only a handful of papers relating to the period of our first bishop, Bishop Brown (1851-1881). Canon Marmion has done sterling work in collecting copies form various archives of over a hundred of his letters (All Hallows’ College, Dublin, has another 94 relating to church students and other matters of which we now at least have a record). There is miscellaneous correspondence both with Rome and with priests within the diocese over more local questions. There are considerable collections of financial papers; papers concerning education and schools; papers relating to the building of our churches. We have also papers relating to Convents and Religious Communities in the diocese and a series of papers relating to our seminaries.

**Parish History**

A parish, too, should possess its own archive: a living history which preserves the memory of people and activities which allow us to be rooted in a particular community so that we can celebrate where we belong and where we are going. With changing personal such collections are more vulnerable and, for safety, much of this material, if it can be preserved, ends up in the diocesan archives, although, sadly, much is lost over the years. Some take more pains in preserving documents than others.

This material is of uneven quality, ranging from a handful of important letters from Augustus Welby Pugin to Bishop Brown about the Cathedral in Shrewsbury, copies of which are to be included in forthcoming *Collected Letters of A. W. Pugin*, to newsletters, press cuttings and ephemera. We have for instance, a set of Parish Notice Books covering a period of over a hundred years handed over from St Laurence’s, Birkenhead. A recent cursory glance through a box of bank statements
from a Birkenhead parish turned up an Edmund Kirby design for a building, previously unrecorded in the published calendar of Kirby’s architectural drawings.

A growing collection of parish histories enables us to form a richer picture of the life of the diocese over the years and will one day help us to write a more complete history of our diocese. The diocesan archive team is always happy to help people explore the local history of their parish and community.

Journals and Published material

The Archives has a run of The Catholic Voice going back to 1993, but, sadly, only one odd copy from before that date. The Archive possesses runs of journals related to local Catholic history: Recusant History, North West Catholic History, Midland Catholic History, Catholic Ancestor, Catholic Archives, and others. We also have links with these organizations. We have a full set of Michael Gandy’s valuable series, Catholic Missions and Registers 1700-1880 (volume 2 for Cheshire and 5 covering the Shropshire missions). Early Catholic Shropshire registers were published in Shropshire Roman Catholic Registers (1913).

Family History

A decision made some years ago by the bishop determined that our precious historic parish registers of births, marriages, and deaths, should be lodged not in the Diocesan Archives, but in the local County Record Offices (Cheshire & Shropshire). For reasons of confidentiality the Bishops of England & Wales impose a closure period such registers of 100 years. This means that those pursuing their family histories, something which makes its own rich contribution to the life of our diocesan and parish communities, are more readily available for researches. We thus benefit from close relationships with the County Archive Service. They also advise on matters of conservation and are available to give advice on concerns which come up from time to time. Registers deposited in the Cheshire Record Office can now be accessed on-line at FindMyPast.

Conclusion
In the end, the Diocesan Archives reveal a wonderful serendipity: lives of people, accounts of places and organisations which form a changing kaleidoscope of the life of the people of God in a particular area. Sometimes there is plenty of material on one subject, sometimes very little. To know where we are going we need to understand where we have come from. The diocesan archive provides a place where parishioners, guided by the diocesan archive team, may research their past and help one another towards a better understanding of where we stand today. In times of change for the diocese, it is particularly important to discover anew our roots, and learn how our forebears dealt with the huge challenges of the past, just as we must face the challenges of the present. This is what true growth is about.

**DIOCESAN ARCHIVIST**

The Diocesan Archivist is the Revd Fr Peter Phillips, BA, MTh, PhD, DD and can be contacted via the Diocesan Curial Offices, or directly at St Mary of the Angels, Chester Rd., Childer Thornton, Ellesmere Port, CH66 1QJ (0151 327 6158) ([pwphillips3@btinternet.com](mailto:pwphillips3@btinternet.com)). The archive team has links with the other Diocesan Archives across the country so that resources and information may be shared and is an active member of The Catholic Archives Society which promotes and advises on the listing, management and preservation of records.

**DIOCESAN HISTORY DAY**

The Archives team runs an annual History Day. The next of these study days will be held on Saturday October 6\(^{th}\) from 10.30 until 4.00 in the Stanley Hall at St Mary of the Angels, Chester Rd., Childer Thornton, Ellesmere Port, CH66 1QJ. Enquiries 0151 327 6158.
Links to the following please

FindMyPast  www.FindMyPast.co.uk
Cheshire Record Office  http://archives.cheshire.gov.uk/
Shrewsbury Record Office  archives@shropshire-cc.gov.uk
Catholic Archive Society  http://www.catholicarchivesociety.org/
Catholic Family History  http://www.catholic-history.org.uk