The New Diocesan Archives, St Michael’s, Woodchurch

When the Diocesan Archives moved in 1998 from the Curial Offices to St Joseph’s School, Woodchurch Road, it was a move of expediency. Redevelopment of the Curial Offices meant that the Archives had hurriedly to find a temporary home. There was a warm welcome at St Joseph’s but the facilities were poor: no adequate amenities, and a climb of two long flights of stairs to get to the Archives, a big problem both for elderly visitors as well as for beleaguered archivists weighed down by heavy boxes of material. Seeking a more permanent home has been a high priority over the last few years.

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.

Our diocesan patrimony is not simply paper. There is a secure room for more fragile artefacts and vestments. Here is housed the chasuble which Canon Bill Briscoe used to celebrate Mass with the troops at the front during the Second World War. There is a large collection of photographs, many crying out for identification. There should be a rule that everyone writes the names of those portrayed on the back of any photograph passed on to the Archives.

The main room is laid out with desks for the archive team and plenty of table space for visiting researchers, with some computer and photocopying facilities. Here, too, is a collection of journals relating to local and national Catholic
history, and a small reference library of books relating to the history of Shropshire and Cheshire.

One of the great strengths of the Shrewsbury Archives, something sadly and surprisingly unusual in the dioceses of England and Wales is a strong team of helpers. This has enabled the unpacking and re-shelving of material to go on a pace as well as the ongoing process of listing and recording. The move has been an excellent and, at times, an exciting exercise introducing us to material we did not know we had. We also have a lot more space, and are always most grateful for the gift of material.