GRACE, PIETY & MEMORY

The Material Culture of British Catholics 1534-1850

Cover image: *Anne Frances Woollascot* (d.1751), professed in 1727 in Paris in the English Community of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady. Nicolas de Largillière (1656-1746), 1729, oil on canvas

Back cover image: Procession of the Blessed Sacrament in London, June 2024.

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Silver monstrance, Antwerp, 1680 (detail), Ushaw Collections.

Introduction

The Catholic Faith was outlawed across Britain for almost 300 years, yet Catholics continued to worship in secret. Throughout this period they retained and acquired clandestine objects that were essential for Catholic worship despite their prohibition under law, with grave implications for those discovered to be in possession. Today many of these items, preserved by public, private and church collections, sometimes still in use, remain as a vital part of Catholic heritage.

This booklet is offered as a short guide to understanding the challenges of caring for, documenting and interpreting this heritage. The fruit of two years' research by the British Catholic Material Culture Research Group, it presents case studies and proposes potential projects for 2029, the bicentenary of Catholic Emancipation.

The Research Group

The Catholic Material Culture Research Group was formed in 2022, under the auspices of the British Art Network, as a response to curators' concerns about the lack of understanding and consistent documentation of the art and material culture of Roman Catholics in Britain and in exile, one of Britain's most influential, feared and marginalised cultural minorities in the early modern period. We aimed to help non-specialist curators by offering resources for demystifying many-layered objects that are hard to understand and classify and considered how the owners and custodians of Catholic cultural heritage could be supported in the documentation, care and preservation of their collections. The Research Group aimed to reach a wider audience beyond established Catholic networks and academic specialists and to breathe vitality into objects made for sacred use now frozen in museums. By engaging with a variety of organisations, the group has built bridges between collections and researchers, museums and academics, secular institutions and the Catholic Church.

The impetus behind the group came from the success of two very successful events: a conference at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 2011 on Catholic Families in Britain: Patronage and Collecting, organised by Tessa Murdoch, and a more recent workshop (October 2022) at the British Museum hosted by Rachel King.

Sharing hidden histories

Our research covers the three centuries from the English Reformation (beginning c.1534) when Catholic belief and practice in Britain began to be outlawed, to the nineteenth century when restrictions were eventually lifted.

Unlike some other Christians, Catholics experience tangible objects as an essential part of their religious practice. Since, in Catholic belief, God can only be experienced by faith, substances and

Westminster Vestment, 1460-90, Ushaw Collections.

artefacts can represent a physical connection with God and become signs of grace, i.e. God's supernatural help. Artefacts such as images, books and garments can all be expressions of piety, an individual or collective reverence for God.

Artefacts that nurtured and expressed Catholic belief and identity threatened the religious, political and cultural status quo in early modern Britain, and so were forbidden and their custodians concealed them to avoid incrimination. Remnants of medieval art not destroyed during the Reformation were retained as 'heirlooms and objects of memory', hidden away to await better times.

But what can these objects, preserved for generations, often at great personal cost, say to today's audiences? With growing secularisation, religion remains a significant subject in British heritage collections. Religious illiteracy has critical implications for social cohesion in an increasingly divided Britain, but museums

can promote religious literacy and understanding in a culture where religion is often excluded. However, heritage professionals rarely have specialised knowledge to interpret religious artefacts adequately. Terminology and histories can be unfamiliar and the faith that created and cherished them may seem strange, even alienating.

The artistic culture of Britain's Catholic minorities from the early modern 'penal' period is under-researched and under-represented. Archival and literary studies have led the way and recent years have seen important research projects into lives and letters including *Who were the Nuns?*, a database of English Convents in exile 1600-1800 and *Monks in Motion*, a similar study of the English and Welsh Benedictines.

A rich seam

Catholic cultural heritage in Britain has great potential to reach wider and broader audiences. Our colleagues in heritage education are learning through practical experience how valuable such collections and stories can be for teaching. Schools have enhanced their curricula for history, art, religion, and PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education), by working with Catholic material culture and discovering that there is more to British Catholic history than Guy Fawkes and Henry VIII. For adults, too, well-interpreted objects and buildings can encourage engagement with serious questions around religious freedom and cultural minorities as well as the biggest mysteries of all: the questions of faith. British Catholic artefacts from the early modern period can be strange, charming, gruesome and inspiring. Above all, the best artistic expressions of Catholic faith are conspicuously beautiful, conceived as a physical manifestation of God's goodness and creative power.

There is a wealth of Catholic cultural heritage in Britain, but only a tiny fraction is on permanent public display. The final section of this booklet contains a list of historic houses, museums and church institutions with regular public openings or tours.

A note on definitions

'British Catholicism' is an inadequate term: the experience of Reformation and post-Reformation was different in England, Wales and Scotland, and the hierarchy of Catholic bishops in Scotland remains separate from that of England and Wales. Scottish Catholic history is particularly under-researched.

Some Anglicans consider themselves Catholic, but we have used the term here for ease to refer only to 'Roman' and other Catholics in communion with Rome.

The Papistes Packing away theyr Paltry under Edward VI - Woodcut (detail) from the 1563 edition of *Foxe's Acts and Monuments.*

Background

Historical background

These historic objects are defined by what they are not: until Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy in 1534, Christians in England, Wales and Scotland generally acknowledged the Pope in Rome as spiritual head. The Protestant Reformation began in Germany, reaching first England and Wales and then Scotland with the introduction of new forms of worship, the dissolution of the monasteries and with them the deliberate destruction of shrines, pilgrimage sites and religious artefacts. A distinct culture arose amongst those who remained true to the 'old religion', drawn as much from continental Europe as from the recent past of medieval Christendom.

The period covered by our research falls into three phases:

Memory (c.1534-1685)

Under Elizabeth I (1558-1603), Catholic practice was outlawed in England and Wales through proclamations and Acts of Parliament known as the Penal Laws or Recusancy Laws. Similar injunctions were imposed in Scotland after the Kirk was established in 1560. Possession of any overtly Catholic books, church plate, vestments, rosary beads or devotional items was banned and attracted harsh penalties. Anyone who failed to attend services at their local Anglican or (in Scotland) Presbyterian church was subjected to crippling fines, so few could afford to live the Catholic faith fully, unless under the protection of the wealthy families who remained Catholic. Some fled abroad. Much of the material culture of this invisible community originates in the context of private households as the centre of faith, or schools and religious houses in continental Europe. English, Welsh and Scottish seminaries abroad trained priests in the new spiritual and liturgical traditions of the Council of Trent. They were then sent home to minister to a

hidden and frightened flock, a mission that often ended in torture and a gruesome death.

Material culture from this period includes Pre-Reformation liturgical and devotional objects such as vestments, plate, books and images salvaged from the cultural vandalism of the Reformation, often recycled or re-purposed; liturgical and

Sir Henry and Lady Margaret Bedingfeld praying to the Virgin Mary, unknown artist, after 1661

devotional objects designed to go undetected (e.g. pewter chalices, portable altar stones), relics of new martyrs, products of British Catholic institutions abroad such as devotional books, and material from the royal Catholic chapels and Embassy chapels in London, which were uniquely exempt from wider restrictions and could therefore enjoy the best and fullest of Catholic art and practice.

Becoming British (c.1685-1778)

From 1685, the first Vicars Apostolic, priests with the status of bishops, were sent from Rome to minister to defined regions in England. Fear of the Pope and powerful Catholic nations such as Spain and then France remained widespread even with the 1707 union of England, Wales and Scotland and defeat of the 1715 and 1745 Jacobite rebellions. However, legislation was gradually loosened so that Catholics could worship in private chapels. English-speaking Catholic schools, seminaries and religious communities in Flanders, Northern France, Spain, Portugal and Rome ensured international influence, and many British Catholics were educated abroad.

Emancipation and Revival (c.1778-1850)

The Catholic Relief Act of 1778 marks a cultural, political and spiritual turning point for British Catholicism, despite giving rise to the anti-Catholic 1780 Gordon Riots, the largest and most serious episode of public disorder Britain has ever seen. From 1789, the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars drove religious communities, seminaries and schools and their collections back to Britain, while the secularisation of churches flooded the international art market with medieval art that inspired the Gothic Revivalist AWN Pugin (1812-1852) and later, the Pre-Raphaelite movement. From 1791, British Catholics were allowed to build churches for public worship for the first time since the Reformation.

Ireland had also been placed under the Penal Laws as it endured subjugation by Britain, to devastating effect. The parallel narrative of Irish Catholicism converges occasionally but crucially with British Catholicism, as in the successful campaign for Catholic Emancipation throughout Britain and Ireland in 1829, led by the Irish lawyer Daniel O'Connell.

The 1829 Catholic Relief Act marks the end of the penal period when many old treasures and 'objects of memory' could be brought back into full use. Interest in these, also driven by romantic antiquarianism, created a unique identity for British Catholics, particularly converts inspired by the Oxford Movement. The Catholic population grew rapidly, particularly in urban areas, thanks in part to mass migration of Irish Catholics during the Great Famine (1845-52) and new churches were built in response, as well as monasteries and convents. 1850 saw the Catholic Hierarchy re-established in England Wales, followed by Scotland in 1878, providing Britain with a formal diocesan structure with bishops and cathedrals for the first time in nearly three hundred years.

Curating Catholic Material Culture today

Over the years, the cultural heritage of British Catholics has been bought and sold as commodities for private collections or absorbed into museums, archives or public heritage sites under secular ownership for their artistic or cultural value rather than as sacred objects of memory and identity. Classified as British, European or Western art, they are rarely understood as the product of a religious minority.

Although Catholic material culture expresses religious faith, it tells accessible stories relating to familiar experience. Liturgy (public worship), devotion (private spiritual practice), doctrine (beliefs taught by the church) and grace (God's help) all need explaining, but these objects also speak of families, homes, friendship, schools, craftsmanship and global trade.

Why British Catholic Material Culture matters

Catholics in Britain today are a substantial minority

In 1600, one in five English citizens may have been Catholic or 'Church Papists' (Catholics keeping up appearances by attending Anglican church). In 1800, after 250 years of persecution, numbers were about one in eighty (1.25%). Migration, Catholic Emancipation and high-profile conversions brought this to 3.5% of the whole British population by 1851. By 2014, about 13.7% of the adult population of England and Wales had been baptised Catholic, of whom 8.3% identified as practising Catholics. Material culture, whether it be a church building, a famous work of art or a simple set of rosary beads passed through a family is an important expression of the unique identity of this growing minority community.

Material culture is central to Catholic theology and practice

In Catholic faith and practice, material things: objects, places, actions, are of sacred significance. The Catholic worldview is centred on the incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, in human flesh. Because of this union between the infinite and eternal God and the physical matter of humanity, ordinary material things and artefacts are inextricable from Catholic faith and worship. The celebration of the Mass provides the best instance of this, when bread and wine are offered and consecrated by a priest. Catholics believe that they become the living flesh and blood of Christ. In Baptism, water and oils become the agents of divine power. Because of this 'sacramental economy,' many other objects are also seen as sacred, such as relics of the saints which 'connect' those who venerate them with the presence of the saint in question. Material objects, whether as conduits for supernatural grace or things made sacred by association, can become infinitely more than their outward material appearance.

In the Catholic tradition, beauty itself is understood as a physical manifestation of God's creativity and goodness, and human creativity as a reflection of God's cosmic creative work.

Preserving what is holy

The concept of consecration, or reserving things for a sacred use, is key to the understanding of Catholic material culture. Objects such as rosary beads are blessed with holy water and a simple prayer; others, such as altars and churches, are dedicated with rites of great solemnity. Vessels used in the Mass such as the chalice and paten are also blessed before use. This act of blessing makes the object sacred, and to be handled with reverence and not to be put to a non-sacred use. While it is the case that a sacred building may be 'deconsecrated,' a consecrated/blessed object should not be sold but should, if possible, remain within the orbit of the Church. Relics of saints are a particularly important class of sacred object. Church Law forbids their sale in the strongest terms.

History and Eternity

Sacred objects, places and persons are part of a tradition that sees the work of God as a purposeful continuum, ordered to a fulfilment beyond time. Encountering sacred artefacts or entering sacred places can help to nurture an awareness of this 'eternal' perspective. For Catholics, material heritage witnesses both to a communal history and to the hope that they have in the divine promise and plan of salvation. The Catholic community in Britain has a particular 'take' on history, having preserved its faith under hostile circumstances for three centuries. Many historic artefacts come from these times and speak powerfully of faith and practice under persecution. Catholics are aware, too, of their common inheritance with the Saints, believing that all members of the Church, past, present and even future share a common bond in the Body of Christ; relics and items relating to the Saints are a strong witness to this bond.

Visit of the Relic of St Bernadette to HMP Wormwood Scrubs, October 2022.

Yet Catholic culture in Britain is not stuck in the past: new artefacts are created and new churches built. New saints are canonised, and new shrines are made for their relics. St George's Cathedral, Southwark has recently installed a colourful Latin-American style cross to house a relic of St Oscar Romero (canonised 2018), while the Birmingham Oratory has renovated an old chapel as a shrine for St John Henry Newman (canonised 2019), with a museum on the site displaying his personal effects.

There is a growing interest in traditional arts, liturgy and devotions among younger Catholics and there is a greater appreciation for the type and style of artefacts that were being discarded as outdated around the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

A shrine revived

Saint Chad (d.672) was the first bishop of Lichfield. His bones, housed in Lichfield Cathedral, were the focus of prayer and pilgrimage until the Reformation, when they were hastily removed and hidden. The relics were rediscovered centuries later in a private home and translated to the new Catholic cathedral of St Chad in Birmingham housed in a shrine designed by Augustus Pugin. At Lichfield's Anglican Cathedral, devotion to St Chad has grown since 1972 when a ledger stone and icon at the site of his original shrine gradually became the focus of prayer. In 2022, the Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham donated a piece of bone from Pugin's reliquary to Lichfield for the 1350th anniversary of Chad's death. A new shrine has been created for its veneration, a free-standing wooden altar with a golden corona of candles suspended above.

Risks and Opportunities

Whose heritage?

Ownership

Examples of British Catholic cultural heritage can be found in a variety of collections:

Roman Catholic institutions

- Cathedrals, parish churches and other diocesan churches
- Archives and repositories
- Schools, colleges, seminaries
- Religious orders and congregations
- Hospitals and care homes

Other Christian churches

- Anglican churches where pre-Reformation furnishings have been retained
- Churches that have acquired Catholic heritage more recently

Secular institutions

- Museums, libraries and archives
- Heritage charities and trusts
- Universities

Private ownership

- Inherited family collections (often held in trust)
- Private collections acquired recently
- Private chapels

Sacred or Secular?

As a modern institution, the museum is a product of the Enlightenment. A secular and neutral space, the museum has yet to resolve its purpose as a repository of cultural heritage for everyone whilst allowing room for the supernatural and many, sometimes opposing, beliefs. Are public exhibitions in secular institutions the best context for these objects, or are they more resonant in their original setting? Is it good to get them out of the ecclesiastical and private realm and into public spaces where they can be enjoyed by new audiences? For museums, the emphasis is on preservation and public display. Seen with the eyes of Catholic faith, consecrated artefacts and relics need to remain objects of veneration or active agents of salvation.

English Relics on tour across the USA

In 2016, relics of Reformation martyrs St Thomas More (a jawbone) and St John Fisher (a ring) travelled from the museum at Stonyhurst College to the USA. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops approved this 24-day tour under the banner 'Free to Serve'. Stonyhurst's curator Jan Graffius accompanied the relics, which she had transferred to bulletproof reliquaries originally designed for remains of very recent martyrs in El Salvador. In each of the sixteen cities, they were typically greeted by people of all ages who filled the churches and queued down the streets.

A duty of care

Although the Pontifical Council for Culture (now absorbed into the Dicastery for Culture and Education) has repeatedly emphasised the importance of archives and cultural heritage ('patrimony') in the mission of the Catholic church, and the pastoral duty of the clergy in caring for them, there are no official standards or protocols for their care, documentation and disposal. Catholic Canon Law regarding material culture is very minimal. However, Canon 1283 does require churches to maintain inventories, but they are kept and maintained only sporadically, and just one English Diocese (Leeds) has a complete inventory of its patrimony.

Outside the secular heritage sector, custodians of patrimony are usually clergy, members of religious orders or lay volunteers who rarely have specialist knowledge to understand the cultural value of the objects in their care, or to ensure adequate standards of conservation. It is rarely possible to work to professional standards because of lack of funding. Following the Second Vatican Council

Learning from the Netherlands

In 2012, the government-funded Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht published its *Guidelines on Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects*, a thoroughly researched and tested framework for assessing religious artefacts for transfer or disposal. It has been designed in consultation with representatives from many Christian denominations in response to the upsurge in church closures in the Netherlands. Whilst the situation in the UK is somewhat different, and it is unlikely that there would be government funding for such an initiative, the guidance from the Netherlands could provide a useful template for a good practice guide for British collections.

(1962-65), churches were re-ordered to suit a revised liturgy often with little thought being given to their historic fittings. Many parishes, religious communities and families replaced, disposed of or even destroyed the consecrated objects and furnishings they no longer wanted, including relics of the saints, a process that continues today. Private chapels outside the formal diocesan system are at particular risk, as are the collections of dwindling religious communities, who sometimes sell or otherwise dispose of culturally important and spiritually significant historic artefacts, particularly when an institution closes or relocates.

The Cisalpine Club salver

In July 2024, Bonham's offered for auction an important George IV silver salver inscribed with the names of 91 members of the Cisalpine Club, an association campaigning for Catholic Emancipation and other Catholic causes. It was being sold by a Catholic family. Members of the Catholic Material Culture research group suggested the British Museum consider it for acquisition. The Museum was successful in its bid, and within days of the sale, a full catalogue entry was available online with each of the 91 names, a valuable record of leading members of the English Catholic community at the time.

Near misses

Recently there have been several cases where important British Catholic heritage sold on the open market has almost been lost to private collections and brought into the public domain thanks to word-of-mouth knowledge and successful last-minute auction bids.

Amalgamation and professionalisation

In recent decades, collections of Catholic material culture have become more professionally managed. Specialist curators, archivists, or librarians have been appointed rather than relying solely on members of religious communities for custodianship. Institutions such as St Mary's College, Oscott, Campion Hall, Oxford, the English College in Rome, Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, the Bar Convent, York, Downside Abbey, Somerset, Douai Abbey Archives near Reading and Ushaw College (now known as Ushaw Historic House, Chapels & Gardens) in County Durham all care for Catholic cultural heritage providing valuable research and public access/understanding. Ushaw was the first among them to gain formal Museum Accreditation.

Defining, documenting and understanding Catholic Material Culture

Hiding in plain sight

Early modern artefacts of Catholic significance often fall between many different collecting disciplines: they may have been archaeological finds or classed as fine or decorative art, social history, folklore or even, in the case of global expressions of Catholicism, ethnography.

The cultural heritage of a hidden minority is inevitably difficult to define and detect, and often remains undocumented in private or church collections. The spiritual dimension of many objects means that boundaries between legend and fact can become blurred and opinions on the value and status of an artefact may vary considerably depending on an individual's or institution's

Home from Sea

Historic letters in the Ushaw archive referred to a chalice from the English College in Douai donated to the Royal Navy in the 1940s. At the request of Ushaw's curator Claire Marsland, the Navy searched a store in Plymouth and recognised the chalice by the Douai College crest on its base. The Royal Navy has now returned the chalice to Ushaw on loan and it joined the rest of the existing English College Douai silver for an exhibition, 'Faith in Exile' at Ushaw in 2018.

Combining Catalogues

www.catholic-heritage.net brings together catalogues of twelve archives and libraries within the Catholic Church in Britain and Ireland. The catalogues all use the same system, CALM, so that their collections can all be searched through a single portal.

theological standpoint and public duty. Good, consistent documentation is therefore essential: a story told about an object can only add value to it if the information we have is correct.

Because of the prevalence of myth and disinformation around Catholicism, it has been common to class some types of object as 'Roman Catholic' where there is no strong evidence for this, perhaps because of their imagery, because they reference the Virgin or other saints, or use Latin inscriptions, such as early modern gold 'posy' rings with Latin inscriptions.

Finding a common language

With so much British Catholic material culture undocumented, there is very little information available for making the comparisons that would help curators and researchers understand and identify objects. For collections held outside a professionally managed and accredited museum, library or archive, there is no standard for documentation. However, even in institutions that use recognised documentation standards such as Spectrum, there is no agreed terminology. Dispersed groups of objects, such as sets of vestments or a divided relic, or the work of a single maker, can only be identified with consistent biographical, provenance and other data. Stylistic comparisons are particularly useful in the case of Recusant liturgical silver, which was usually unmarked to avoid detection.

Complex object histories

Objects can change their meaning and purpose over time, and this can be a challenge when it comes to documentation. Boundaries between sacred and secular cannot always be clearly defined: everyday things can become sacred by association. Altar plate may have been deconsecrated and modified for domestic use, or vice versa. Something may pass into secular use unrecognised: a magnificent piece of Baroque silversmith's work, now at Ushaw, was once put on sale as a watch-stand, until identified as a monstrance [see illustration on page 4]. Sometimes the deception is deliberate: travelling altar stones were typically made from ordinary roof-slates to avoid detection.

Conservation-led enquiry

Some of the most successful recent projects have been occasioned by remedial conservation. Essential repairs to the roof at Oxburgh Hall led to the National Trust's discovery of fragments of a late

Learning from Jewish Heritage

Judaica Index is an online resource created by the Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe. It presents over 200 Jewish ritual objects, searchable in 15 languages by name or keyword. Examples of the wide variety of objects used in Jewish ritual, both at home and in the synagogue, are taken from various periods and traditions. Objects can be searched by theme, such as 'food', 'death', 'marriage' or object type ('cups', 'amulets', 'clothing and accessories') and each is presented with brief tombstone data, a bibliography and in some cases a video demonstrating its use. The examples have been drawn from a range of public and private collections around the world.

The 'Morton Frontal'

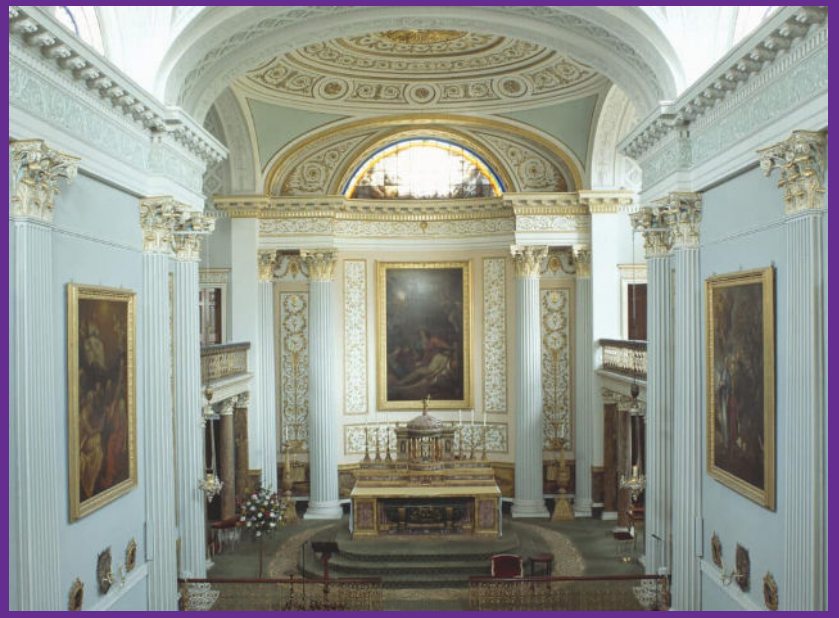
This altar frontal from Sawston Hall, home of the Catholic Huddleston family, was acquired for The Auckland Project's new Faith Museum in 2014. Despite its rectangular format, it was initially given the title 'Morton Cope', based on the assumption that the hanging had been remade from fragments of a semi-circular cope belonging to Archbishop John Morton (d.1500). Detailed research and analysis have since shown that the fragments belonged to one or more chasubles and a cope, only one of which has evidence for a Morton provenance. It therefore requires complex, multi-layered documentation to reflect these different object histories.

medieval psalter and rare early Tudor church music. Similar building work at Coughton Court has provided an opportunity to conserve, research and re-interpret the Ely Cloth (c.1596), a large hanging painted with the coats of arms of Catholic gentry interned from 1588 to 1594. Technical analysis aims to clarify the date, making and historic display of the cloth and documentary research is being carried out on its provenance and cultural meaning. The National Trust is considering how the cloth can be re-presented to visitors as a domestic object that affirms faith and expresses Catholic identity and community.

Understanding lived experience

Much can be learned about the history and meaning of liturgical and devotional objects by considering how it felt – both physically and spiritually – to use them. How would they have looked in their original liturgical setting? What would the priest have seen, and what would be visible to the congregation? Do signs of wear and tear give clues to their use? Contemporary accounts in letters and spiritual journals, manuals and inventories are a valuable tool for understanding the practical and spiritual experience of the time. The experience of Catholics practising the faith today, particularly those familiar with past traditions, can transform our understanding of historic objects. For example, the Fathers of the London Oratory are regularly consulted by their neighbours at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

The Arundell Family Chapel



Studying objects with experts from different academic disciplines and personal backgrounds has proved particularly fruitful for this Research Group. In April 2024 over thirty people met at Wardour Castle to study the exceptional collection and furnishings of the eighteenth-century private chapel and the outstanding 'works of piety for a Protestant country' exported from Rome by Fr John Thorpe in the 1770s. Experts in historic silver, textiles, furniture, sculpture, architecture, literature, theology and liturgy studied the objects alongside historic house curators and members of the Arundell family and local Catholic parish. Combining our expertise as historians, conservation specialists and praying Catholics, we were able to shed light on the complex and subtle symbolism of the *pietra dura* altar in the context of the chapel's dedication to All Saints.

Publishing Collections

Catalogues of private collections are rarely made public. Although the cost of cataloguing and publication is a consideration, the most important is security: for many churches, chapels and religious houses, publishing a catalogue of their collections would be seen as an open invitation to thieves. However, published catalogues need not contain information that could compromise security: *Fabric of Resistance*, a virtual exhibition of fifteen vestments, presents items from private collections with information about their provenance and whereabouts discreetly omitted.

These Walls Have Spoken

St John's Seminary, Wonersh, closed its doors in 2021, marking the occasion with an illustrated book. *These Walls Have Spoken* celebrates the 130-year history of St John's and includes a detailed section on the seminary's extraordinary collection of artefacts. This was based on a formal inventory of over 600 objects made by architectural historian James Crowley before the seminary closed, that also enabled the entire collection to be transferred safely to new homes.

Display and Interpretation

Telling new stories

In the few institutions presenting formal interpretation of Catholic material culture, the narrative often remains focused on persecution, conspiracies, elite households and (particularly in Scotland) the Jacobite movement. Through new research, many appealing, resonant and more nuanced narratives are now emerging that would generate interest among new audiences.

These include:

- Recycling, repurposing, making do; family and heirlooms; literature, storytelling and memory
- The role of women (laywomen and religious) in preserving, commissioning, making, and re-making artefacts and memory
- Non-elite objects: everyday faith and tactile piety
- Crafts and leisure activities as spirituality
- Catholics as craftsmen, artists and cultural entrepreneurs
- The wider household and family networks
- Education: boys' colleges and seminaries; girls' schools
- Internationalism: European and global cultures
- Music and performance
- The role of Catholics in early modern science and industry
- The Grand Tour and role of British Catholics in the art and antique trade from Italy
- Faith, spirituality, worship

Living Heritage

The Bar Convent is the oldest living convent in Britain, founded in 1686. Located in the centre of York, the convent's exhibition spaces, café and chapel are now open to the public daily. Although the café is popular, the challenge has been to encourage visitors further over the threshold, shifting perceptions of the building and its purpose. York is a popular destination for 'history hunters' and the Bar Convent, marketed as 'York's best kept secret since 1686', has worked hard to attract this audience with pop-up exhibitions and a bold, carefully targeted marketing programme.

In 2023, *Hide & Seek: The Aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot* centred on a single, powerfully resonant relic, Fr Edward Oldcorne's crucifix, the only known item to have survived of the thousands seized during the raids on Catholic houses following the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605. Marketing focused on Oldcorne's connection to the 1605 gunpowder plotters and the exhibition was timed to coincide with October half term, 'Bonfire Night' and the York History Festival.

Oxburgh Hall's immersive Gatehouse Experience

At the National Trust's Oxburgh Hall in Norfolk, the story of a raid in 1590 is brought to life by two volunteers, who tell a dramatic story in the spaces where it happened. The storytellers, trained by the National Theatre, use replicas as props to represent the characters in the story, and visitors are encouraged to handle these for a tactile experience. The pre-booked audience is invited to participate in activities to help them enter the minds of those involved on both sides of the story: the Catholic Bedingfeld family and their concealed priest, and the pursuivants charged with discovering him.

Learning from today's British Catholics

Today the Catholic population in the UK, often representing a broad number of nationalities and languages, has few opportunities to engage with Catholic history and culture, but there is a strong sense of collective heritage and an urgent need for cultural institutions in the public sector to engage with these audiences. In national and regional museums, early modern and contemporary Catholic objects and stories are often presented as examples of Christian culture in general, without distinguishing them from objects and stories originating in other Christian denominations. This fails to recognise Catholics as a religious minority and means that the unique worldview and experience of British Catholicism, with its roots in tradition, persecution and immigration, is under-represented. This could be easily remedied by taking the time to work with local Catholic communities and learn from their experience.

Jesuit Collections

In 2021, the British Jesuit Archives and Stonyhurst College Collections collaborated to create a web resource, Jesuit Collections, as a platform for virtual exhibitions. This was partly a response to the Covid-19 restrictions, when alternatives had to be found for planned exhibitions, but it has also enabled these exceptional objects to be enjoyed for the first time by a wide international audience.

The 2021 exhibition *How Bleedeth Burning Love* presents relics belonging to some of the forty Catholic priests and laypeople martyred in England and Wales in the 16th and 17th centuries and canonised by Pope Paul VI in 1970. *Hot, Holy Ladies* (2022) looked at some of the exceptional textiles made by Helena Wintour and brought her and her story to life through videos and a dramatised documentary.

There is also a tendency, particularly when presenting historic objects, for museum interpretation to use the past tense when speaking of Christian beliefs, as though such beliefs no longer exist. Seeking advice and engagement from those with a strong understanding of Catholic experience can acknowledge the fact that they remain part of a living tradition.

Keep the Faith Secret

Ushaw is the only former Catholic seminary in the UK to reinvent itself into a heritage attraction. It was the Catholic seminary for the Northern Dioceses until 2011 and opened to the public as a visitor attraction in 2015. Ushaw now welcomes over 100,000 visitors a year, engaging the public with the history of Catholicism in England. As part of its schools programme, the former seminary at Ushaw offers a day of activities for Key Stage 2 pupils called 'Keep the Faith Secret'. The day's activities are designed to support the primary curriculum for PSHE/citizenship and history as well as RE. Pupils investigate objects including secret chalices and a printing plate from an illegal prayer book. They take part in practical activities including drama and are encouraged to think about risk, sacrifice and 'whether intolerance really has been banished to the past'.

Towards 2029

These are just some examples of the innovative projects and practical solutions that are now taking place in the field of British Catholic heritage, both in the cultural sector and in churches. There is much more to be done to ensure a consistent, responsible and engaging approach to curating and celebrating Catholic material culture in Britain. With the anniversary of the 1829 Act now just four years away, it seems an opportune time to prioritise some activities so that 2029 sees clear and permanent improvements and a series of suitably celebratory events.

Clear guidelines for disposal, display and interpretation and the use and handling of consecrated objects and relics are all urgently needed. Museum and archive professionals have expressed a strong desire to build a standard thesaurus and standardise data sets and inventories so that data and object histories can be more easily shared.

This Research Group has proved to be a useful neutral space where curators, custodians and researchers can come together to discuss best practice. We have built up positive relationships with the Patrimony Committee of the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales and the Scottish Catholic Heritage Collections Trust (part of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland) and we are very grateful to them for their help and advice to date and for being so supportive of our aims. We hope to continue to be able to work more closely with them both, and also with those within religious orders, dioceses and other Catholic organisations who are already closely involved in this area of work. The group might continue to act as an informal advisory group with a public face that bridges the gap between the museum, academy and Church. It could help facilitate a series of regular seminars presenting recent work in the research, documentation and display of Catholic material culture.

Marking a Milestone in British Catholic History

The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 was the culmination of a fifty-year process that gradually restored civil and political rights to Catholics in Britain and Ireland. This important moment in the history of religious freedom remains relatively unknown, even within the Catholic community, but its bicentenary, coming up in 2029, deserves to be celebrated.

The Act was just one of a series of reforms around 1830 that include the abolition of slavery in 1833 and the 1832 parliamentary Reform Act; the school curriculum and public discourse tend to focus more on these. A bicentenary celebration of the Catholic Emancipation Act could represent a wider period of cultural change as well as celebrating the role of Catholics in British history and reflecting a resurgence of interest in Catholic culture in Britain today.

Opportunities for 2029

The 1929 centenary of the 1829 Act was marked by the Catholic Church with a significant celebration: the beatification in Rome of twenty-nine Reformation-era Martyrs of England and Wales. The seminary at St Edmund's College, Ware, held an exhibition of historic artefacts. The centenary also saw the establishment of the Society of Catholic Artists, then named The Guild of Catholic Artists and Craftsmen. Its first President, Glyn Philpot, was joined by such distinguished artists as Frank Brangwyn and Graham Sutherland.

2029 is now only four years away. Some plans to mark the bicentenary are already underway in the heritage sector, but to the best of our knowledge nothing has yet been announced for a wider public celebration.

Terrors of Emancipation - or- a Bugabo for old Women and Children. Hand-coloured etching by Charles Williams, published by John Chappell, 1829

A National Resource

Whilst it has become traditional to celebrate major historical anniversaries with a 'blockbuster' exhibition in a national museum, this is not the best solution for celebrating the art and culture of British Catholics between the Reformation and Emancipation. In the current climate, it would be difficult to cover costs or invite potential visitors to travel from all over Britain. Catholic collections are usually found in relatively remote locations away from major cities, and many of the objects and stories to be celebrated are much better experienced and resonate more loudly in their home setting, whether it is a church, a country house or a museum.

Our hope therefore is to create a single national umbrella to inspire, promote and possibly fund a series of events at venues all over Britain. These could include publications, conferences,

displays, exhibitions, festivals, talks, tours, concerts and performances, even pilgrimage and prayer. This would be particularly valuable in attracting international visitors to Britain. It could offer a web resource that would gradually fill with content up to and during 2029, such as:

Information:

- Links to sources of information and advice
- blog entries presenting notable objects and stories, particularly new research
- media information and press releases about the bicentenary

Digital mapping: possibilities range from a simple gazetteer or interactive map to a downloadable app providing a Catholic Heritage Trail across Britain. It could include:

- listings for events
- digital exhibitions sharing a single accessible space
- information about real exhibitions
- a series of themed heritage trails highlighting sites and objects of interest
- promotion of pilgrimage routes connected to early modern Catholic history.

Comparable projects include:

- RA 250 (2018)
  Museums around the UK were invited to programme displays and events to celebrate 250 years since the foundation of the Royal Academy of Arts. RA 250 brought these together into a single website and supported some of the events with small grants.

- 2027: European Year of the Normans.
  The Normandy Region is planning an international celebration, in partnership with the DCMS in Britain and culture and tourism bodies in Sicily, Ireland and the Channel Islands to mark the birth of William the Conqueror 1027. Events will include a cultural itinerary connecting Norman sites across Europe.
- NG200: The National Gallery's bicentenary celebrations in 2024 included a major regional component that brought the National Gallery's collections to towns and cities around the United Kingdom.

A permanent memorial?

2029 could be seen as an opportunity to celebrate British Catholic heritage with a lasting project of permanent benefit that speaks to the present age. It would be good to see new commissions of art, music, creative writing and architecture by some of the many talented British Catholics working today, but there is also a pressing need to support the care, documentation and display of British Catholic material culture.

In 1946, the Government established the National Land Fund as 'a thank-offering for victory and a war-memorial which many would think finer than any work of art in stone of bronze'. This eventually became the National Heritage Memorial Fund and remains a valuable source of grant funding for major heritage acquisitions. Perhaps, in a similarly forward-thinking act of thanksgiving, a fund might be established by private donors, trusts and public funds, to save important Catholic objects from sale or disposal and find suitable homes for them. Just as the former National Art Collections Fund (now the Art Fund) has extended its work to offer training and support for curators, so this new bicentenary fund might also enable mentoring, training and

knowledge transfer for curators, archivists and custodians of historic collections and encourage cataloguing and publications.

A way forward

The British Art Network's original two-year funding for the present Research Group has now come to an end, but we would like to be able to move positively towards 2029 and develop further projects.

If you would be interested in helping or getting involved, we would love to hear from you. Please contact us in one of the ways listed at the back of this booklet.

2029 is just the beginning!

Further Reading

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Links to Resources

COLLECTIONS AND VIRTUAL EXHIBITIONS

Campion Hall

Jesuit Collections

The Portable Antiquities Scheme

Scottish Catholic Heritage Collections Trust

Remembering the Reformation, University of Cambridge Library, 2017

Fabric of Resistance - Online Exhibition, Ushaw

ORGANISATIONS

Catholic Archives Society

Catholic Record Society

English Catholic History Association

Scottish Catholic Historical Association

Religion, Collections and Heritage Group

Durham University Centre for Catholic Studies

University of York Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture

PLACES TO VISIT

HISTORIC CATHOLIC CHURCHES:

Catholic Churches in England and Wales

MUSEUMS, ARCHIVE COLLECTIONS AND HISTORIC HOUSES OPEN TO THE PUBLIC:

LONDON & SOUTH EAST ENGLAND

Arundel Castle, West Sussex

British Museum, London

Hampton Court Palace, Surrey

Mapledurham House, Berks
Stonor Park, Oxfordshire
Tower of London
Victoria & Albert Museum

SOUTH WEST ENGLAND
Arundells, Salisbury
Buckfast Abbey, Devon
Downside Abbey, Somerset
Lulworth Castle and Chapel, Dorset

EAST ANGLIA
Ingatestone Hall, Essex
Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk

MIDLANDS
Lyveden New Bield, Northamptonshire
Rushton Triangular Lodge, Northamptonshire
Baddesley Clinton, Warwickshire
Coughton Court, Warwickshire
Harvington Hall, Worcestershire
Moseley Old Hall, Wolverhampton

NORTH WEST ENGLAND
Lyme Park, Cheshire
Speke Hall, Liverpool
Rufford Old Hall, Lancashire
Stonyhurst College, Lancashire
Towneley Hall, Lancashire
Sizergh Castle, Cumbria

NORTH EAST ENGLAND
Burton Constable, East Yorkshire
Bar Convent, York
Bowes Museum, Durham
Ushaw Historic House, Chapels & Gardens

SCOTLAND
National Museums Scotland, Edinburgh
St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, Glasgow
Traquair House, Peeblesshire

WALES
Cardiff Castle
National Museums Wales
Abergavenny Museum & Castle, Monmouthshire
Powis Castle, Powys

Biographies

Amina Wright has three decades' experience as a curator of historic art collections and exhibitions, specialising in Old Masters and eighteenth-century British art. At the time of this project, she was Senior Curator at the new Faith Museum in Bishop Auckland, which presents an intangible, indefinable yet universal subject through the artefacts it has inspired.

Dr Tessa Murdoch FSA: Tessa Murdoch's interest in the art of British Catholics dates from her 2005 Secret Catholicism display in the V&A's Sacred Silver and Stained Glass Galleries. In 2011 she hosted the V&A conference *Catholic Family Patronage and Collecting* and continued her research in 2014 as V&A Exchange Fellow at the Yale Center for British Art. She has published numerous articles on Catholic Material Culture.

Claire Marsland: As Curator of Ushaw College and a PhD candidate at Durham University, Claire Marsland specialises in Catholic material culture. She is interested in opening access to Catholic collections and promoting best practice: a council member of the Catholic Archives Society, she co-wrote a publication on the care of religious artefacts and has assisted on the project *Material Culture Under Penalty* which resulted in the online exhibition *Fabric of Resistance*.

James Crowley is an architectural historian and heritage consultant working exclusively with Catholic places of worship and material culture. He also serves as Historic Churches Committee Secretary for the Catholic Dioceses in both Wales and the Northwest of England. In 2022 he completed the first comprehensive inventory for Westminster Cathedral and in 2023 co-wrote a publication on the treasures of St John's Seminary, Wonersh.

Where to find us:

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