

Volunteering at Downside

Surprising discoveries among the Archives

Margaret Nuth

In 2014, Downside Abbey, the Benedictine Monastery at Stratton on the Fosse was granted Lottery Funding for some much needed work on its Library building. Much of the contents had to be moved and the opportunity was also taken for other material within the Monastery to be sorted and catalogued. Owen Dicker and I, neither of us Catholic, started work as volunteers in the Archives that summer.

The Abbey was founded on the present site in 1816. The monks, forced from their home in Northern France during the French Revolution, brought to this Abbey books, vestments, medieval manuscripts and many other irreplaceable items. As the Mother House for the Benedictines in this country, the Abbey has become the repository for material from other religious houses. Additionally, some Catholic families have lodged private collections there and the personal effects of the monks have all been retained.

It became apparent that the Library was not the only part the Abbey that was crammed full. Papers had been stored in cupboards, attics and empty rooms; in shoe boxes, shirt boxes, in all manner of containers. Often thick with dust and tied with ancient string they were full of surprises. Our job, under supervision, was to sort, list and summarise the contents. We worked in a high-ceilinged old dormitory room surrounded by boxes and shelves. Eccentric heating and draughty windows added to the ambience.

We were enormously fortunate in the Project Archivist, Dr Tim Hopkinson-Ball. He consistently found papers of interest to us starting with those of Dom Ethelbert Horne F.S.A., the first President of BACAS. Dom Ethelbert's life as a monk and parish priest has been detailed elsewhere (*see the BACAS website*) but he was also a very distinguished archaeologist. His extensive papers include reports, correspondence and newspaper cuttings on the excavations at Glastonbury from 1926 to 1952. Papers on the Keynsham excavation in the 1920s include photographs and drawings of the site. In the same box were records of the excavation at Camerton. With Arthur Bulleid and Harold St George Gray he worked during WW2 for the Council for the Care of Churches. The correspondence, however, concerns many other archaeological sites such as round barrows and medieval bridges. His glass photographic plates are a collection in their own right.

He was the mentor of Bill Wedlake, the first Chairman of BACAS and in his effects is a small portrait of himself that belonged to Bill. It was donated to Downside after Bill's death in 1989 by the Secretary, Peter Greening (*Figure 1*). Other records include those of the Downside School Archaeology Club with photographs of their excavation at Stratton that predated the first BACAS dig there. Seventeen boxes of flints, apparently from France and found in an attic space, kept Owen busy for quite a while!



Papers such as the records of the martyrdom of St Oliver Plunkett and other Catholics at the time of the Popish Plot gave us an insight into the depth and enduring strength of their faith. Documents from the early years of Elizabeth I indicate just how fragile was the establishment of Protestantism. Signatures from history as varied as those of the Duke of Norfolk, John Masfield, Prince Rupert of the Rhine and Hilaire Belloc leap out of the papers. Most poignant were the records and diaries of those monks who became Chaplains to the Forces in both World Wars.

Our time at Downside has now ended but volunteers are still needed and a further Lottery Grant has been applied for. For information on volunteering to research in the Archives and Library, or to arrange a visit, contact the Project Activity Manager on SParsons@downside.co.uk

Figure 1
The portrait of Dom Ethelbert Horne which he gave to Bill Wedlake. Reproduced here by kind permission of the Downside Abbey Trustees.