



Stonyhurst yields its mystical treasures

Jonathan Luxmoore

Through the wide windows of a rambling but stately greystone building, the northern Lancashire countryside sweeps toward the Irish Sea in a maze of fields and woodlands. Inside, spring sunlight plays over shelves and glass cases, containing faded books and ancient artifacts amassed over four centuries.

When Stonyhurst College was founded at Saint-Omer in the Spanish Netherlands by the recusant Jesuit Fr Robert Persons in 1593, persecuted Catholic priests faced a

mandatory death sentence if caught ministering in England.

More than four centuries later, Stonyhurst, the world's oldest Jesuit school, houses a remarkable collection of relics relating to the country's many martyrs.

"Many things were being destroyed in Reformation England, so when Catholic boys came abroad to the school, they'd bring vestments, manuscripts and precious objects for safe keeping," explained Jan Graffius, the collection's curator.

"This makes us part of the story

and means we know what it was like to be targeted," she said. "At a time when people know little about the struggles of the past, these relics provide a graphic reminder of what Catholics faced in upholding their faith."

Under a nearby glass cover lie two time-worn hats once sported by St Thomas More (1478-1535), the English chancellor beheaded for refusing to accept his Church's break with Rome. There's also a red velvet Book of Hours carried by Mary Queen of Scots to her execution at Fotheringay Castle in 1587. Upstairs, a lavish Florentine cloak worn by King Henry VIII during his 1520 meeting with the French king at the Field of the Cloth of Gold is displayed alongside the rope which bound St Edmund Campion, the Jesuit who was hanged, drawn and quartered for high treason at Tyburn in 1581.

In 1794, when the school was forced to flee the French Revolution, its collection was already extensive. It was lucky to have the current site donated by a former student, Thomas Weld, father of Cardinal Thomas Weld (1773-1837).

The Stonyhurst Collection, now being opened to visitors, has continued expanding.

Its earliest exhibits include a piece of jawbone, documented to early medieval times, said to come from St Stephen. Its most recent relic is a piece of the bloodied vestment worn by St Oscar Romero of El Salvador when he was assassinated on 24th March 1980, while celebrating Mass.

"The idea is to provide an accessible public resource with a narrative tracing back 2,000 years," Graffius said. "These objects tell their own stories, and people engaging with them can feel uncomfortable, even revolted. But no-one remains indifferent and everyone has questions to ask," she added.

England's Catholic Church was effectively outlawed under Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603), who implemented her father's break with Rome while officially seeking a Protestant compromise, or "middle way".

Persecution was stepped up after Pope Pius V declared the Queen excommunicated and deposed in 1570 and following the 1588 rout of the Spanish Armada invasion fleet. It intensified following the failed 1605 Gunpowder Plot by Catholic militants against King James I, although Masses continued to be secretly celebrated at great personal risk by un-

dercover Jesuit priests.

Choking off Catholic education was seen as key to stifling adherence to the traditional faith. It survived, but at a high price.

In all, 23 Stonyhurst pupils were executed between 1610 and 1680; three have been canonised as martyrs and a dozen beatified.

The school's Arundel Library includes works connected with the rebel Jacobite cause, as well as verses by the St Robert Southwell (1561-1595) and holographs by the 19th-century poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who trained as a priest at Stonyhurst.

The Stonyhurst Collection also contains some macabre items: a piece of the battered skull of the 12th-century martyr St Thomas Becket, preserved after his Canterbury shrine was smashed in 1539; the shoulder blade of a priest executed at Durham in 1590, still bearing knife slashes; and the eyeball of a beatified Jesuit, Fr Edward Oldcorne, brutally killed at Worcester for alleged complicity in the Gunpowder Plot.

Although religious restrictions began to be eased in England after the 1829 Catholic Relief Act, Catholic persecution victims were publicly commemorated only after the canonisation of 40 English and Welsh martyrs by St Paul VI in 1970. The keeping of relics, stamped out with the Reformation, has been

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Beyond the window, the Ribbles Valley undulates toward Clitheroe over a landscape used by the visiting J.R.R. Tolkien as a setting for his monumental *Lord of The Rings* trilogy as the latest generation of Stonyhurst pupils returns from afternoon activities.

Having had barely a dozen pupils when it relocated here, the school quickly became one of England's best, and now welcomes men and women students from around the world.

While a third of its students are non-Catholic, all must attend services in the college's six churches and chapels and subscribe to the Jesuit ethos of prayer and service. That ethos has produced outstanding alumni, including seven Catholic archbishops, assorted government leaders, artists, missionaries, war heroes and revolutionaries.

Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the sleuth Sherlock Holmes, studied here, as did Joseph Plunkett, executed for his part in Ireland's 1916 Easter Rising, and Thomas Meagher, an Irish-born American Civil War general and later governor of Montana.

So did Daniel Carroll, a signatory of the US Articles of Confederation and the US Constitution, and his brother John Carroll, founder of Georgetown University and the first

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much less common here than in continental Europe.

Where they survive, they provide a tangible link with past martyrs and faith witnesses and can be a challenging but valuable asset for the prayer life of Catholics, Graffius said.

"For young people especially, without much awareness of history, they can also be a good teaching resource, evoking youngsters like themselves who made difficult choices and decisions," she said.

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American Catholic bishop, along with Oscar-winning actor Charles Laughton and George Walker, great-grandfather of US President George W. Bush.

Yet it's the collection of relics that lends the most poignancy.

"A centre like this should be viewed as a cultural resource, an expression of everyone's search for God," Graffius said.

"Faith is a lifelong journey, which requires us to open up and ask profound questions – to follow hearts and consciences without fearing the consequences. Objects like these show us how previous generations approached this vital task."

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