

## Church treasures - Heritage for sale



Moves by two Catholic cash-strapped religious communities to sell off valuable collections of ancient artefacts, some of them unique, in their care have led to growing concern among conservationists about the protection of the Church's sacred history

Earlier this month The Tablet reported the decision of a group of Benedictine monks to sell a large collection of antique books, chalices and other sacred items from its former home of St Augustine's Abbey in Ramsgate, Kent.

Housed in the monastery designed by Edward Pugin next to the abbey church creation of his father, Augustus, the collection included items such as a recusant-period chalice, a rare fifteenth-century manuscript, altar crosses and even an exorcism kit.

Hundreds of antique books were also sold from the abbey's library during two auctions in November and January, raising around £130,000 for the monks who moved to the formerly Franciscan-run Chilworth Friary, near Guildford in Surrey, last year. Another sale of sacred church plate – which is understood to have been deconsecrated – was due to take place on Thursday and is expected to raise a further £80,000.

Meanwhile at Ince Blundell Hall, near Liverpool, nuns of the Augustinian Canonesses of Mercy, who run the building as a nursing home, have sought permission from the local council to remove 67 Roman and Greek embedded marbles with a view to selling them. The marbles, which were collected

by the eighteenth-century connoisseur Henry Blundell – a former owner of the estate – once formed part of one of the largest collections of classical sculptures in Britain.

Opponents of the sales claim the communities made their decisions without seeking effective, impartial advice and that their purpose is purely financial. Critics of the St Augustine's auction – including the Pugin Society – complain that the monks made their decision without widespread consultation with conservation experts.

Similar charges have been levelled at the nuns of Ince Blundell, with conservationists, including the Dilettante Society, calling for the wider collection – most of which was donated by the nuns to the Museum of Liverpool after they moved into the estate in 1959 – to be brought back together in its historic home.

Sources close to both religious communities deny they have taken the decision to sell their collections without consultation, and say they have gone to great lengths to seek consent from both secular and religious authorities to go ahead with their sale. Indeed the nuns of Ince Blundell say they want to remove the marbles in order to conserve them – but English Heritage has opposed their relocation.

The sales are nevertheless seen as part of a wider phenomenon within the Church, where increasing numbers of religious communities are selling buildings and valuable antique artefacts in their charge, often when they disband or are forced to move to smaller homes. These sales raise much-needed funds for the communities' basic running costs and charitable works, as well as paying for the care of elderly monks and nuns.

A prime example was the sale in 2008 of the listed Stanbrook Abbey in Worcestershire – another Edward Pugin building – which raised £3.7 million from the premises, and £90,000 from artefacts, towards the Benedictine nuns' smaller new eco-convent in North Yorkshire.

Other religious communities are still located in listed buildings of national historic importance across England and Wales, a number of which contain significant collections of antique books, furniture and sacred items. Canon law regarding the sale of items by religious communities is complex, but The Tablet understands that they have no legal responsibility to consult conservation experts at the bishops' conference before choosing to put their historic collections on the market. Planning consent is, however, sometimes required from local authorities to remove these artefacts – as is the case with

the proposed Ince Blundell sale.

Sophie Andreae, of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales patrimony committee, which advises on the conservation and protection of the Church's historic buildings and heritage in the two countries, fears religious communities are not always getting the best impartial advice when considering the future of their historic collections and are "not giving sufficient account to the wider importance of these in the context of the Catholic heritage of this country".

"It's very sad that religious orders feel that they have to sell these items," she said. "Many of [the items in their charge] are very important pieces. It is a matter of real concern that religious orders are deciding to sell things without seeking the advice of the [bishops' conference's] patrimony committee."

Not only the Church, said Ms Andreae, but other bodies concerned with heritage, including national museums, have a growing interest in, and appreciation of, the importance of these collections, tied to a recognition of the "enormous contribution that religious orders have made to Catholic life in the last 200 years. Moveable objects are obviously more vulnerable [than buildings]".

The bishops' conference's patrimony committee does intervene where it can to protect the Church's heritage and it can offer guidance before any sales are made. In 2007 the committee helped rescue a silver gilt and rock crystal reliquary made in 1551 during the reign of Edward VI, which had been put up for sale by Poor Clares when they moved to Herefordshire from their former home at Clare Abbey in Darlington.

"They thought it was a salt [dispenser], and thus a secular item," said Ms Andreae. "I was alerted about the sale and went to the monastery. The reliquary had been given to the Poor Clares in the early eighteenth century by a descendant of Sir Anthony Browne of Cowdray, a prominent Catholic figure at the Tudor court. The Browne family had been closely involved with the establishment of the Poor Clares' convent in Rouen where the nuns remained in exile from around 1644 until returning to England and settling in Darlington in the years following the French Revolution.

"In the archives of the Poor Clares we found a letter from an eighteenth-century reverend mother of the Poor Clares who had written that the reliquary should not be disposed of," said Ms Andreae. When she showed this to the current reverend mother, "she decided it should be withdrawn from the sale". It is

now on show in the Sacred Silver Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London where it is on permanent loan.

In 2006, the patrimony committee, which is staffed entirely by volunteers, published the book *A Glimpse of Heaven: Catholic churches of England and Wales*, to raise awareness of the countries' Catholic heritage. Douai Abbey, in Berkshire, already provides a repository for the archives of religious communities, while it is also hoped that Ushaw College in Durham, which the northern bishops hope will become the new home for Durham University's Centre for Catholic Studies, will eventually become a repository for historical church artefacts in future years.

Action is also being taken by Catholics on an ad hoc basis to safeguard some of what is being lost. The Benedictine monks of St Michael's Abbey, Farnborough, in Hampshire, for example, are currently leading a search for benefactors to help protect some of the St Augustine's Abbey collection. St Michael's abbot, Dom Cuthbert Brogan, said his monks had been contacted by people "expressing distress and disappointment that sacred vessels should be offered for sale in open auction". Abbot Brogan said that the Farnborough monks are not in a position to rescue the collection themselves.

Meanwhile, secular conservation groups have also voiced concern. James Jago, vice-chairman of the Pugin Society, described the sale of the St Augustine's Abbey collection as "regrettable", but concedes that there is "little formal necessity for communities of that nature to consult widely", before selling historic items, saying: "It's very much up to the good will of the community itself as to whether they choose to consult with outside bodies about these things."

The temptation for religious communities to sell artefacts is understandable when the figures from the St Augustine's Abbey sale are looked at more closely. Just one of the books auctioned, Flavio Biondo's *Italy Illuminated* – written between 1448 and 1458 – sold for £12,000, while one of the chalices on offer is described as being a "fine and rare Charles I recusant silver-gilt chalice".

Once sold these items face an uncertain future, with fears that some may be melted down for their gold or silver as prices for precious metals have soared – gold alone reaching £1,000 an ounce.

A current case for concern is the future of St Michael's Convent and the adjacent Church of the Sacred Heart in Waterlooville, near Portsmouth, which the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity are trying to sell because they are too large for them to maintain. However concerns have been raised about the future of

the Grade II-listed buildings and their contents if they are sold off. The church was built in the 1920s and has a rare design that includes three naves. The money raised from the sale will go into a central fund that will be used to support the order's charitable work.

Sam Adams - The Tablet