

Colchester, Friday 8 March 2024:

A few days after I visited and spoke to you on 2 December, I made a follow-up trip to Liège to observe the next stage of excavations. Once again, I was welcomed by the lead archaeologist, Guillaume Mora Dieu, who was accompanied this time by his colleague, Patricia Gillet. What I'd like to do today is: a) give an overview of the physical changes to the site and b) offer comment on what we can learn from these changes. Finally, I'll discuss some news that on the face of it might not seem directly related to this process, but which will hopefully be of interest to you.

The site at Liège that I was greeted by had changed quite considerably from the one that Moira, Diana, Pauline and I had witnessed when we visited last April. The extent of construction work had increased significantly, and the site more resembled a live building site, populated with machinery and employees. The primary changes that I witnessed were a) the demolition of the eighteenth-century schoolhouse and b) the creation of a vast crater, which will allow for the construction of the underground carpark. The first two slides show you the site as how it looked last spring. As you can see that whilst partially derelict, it was largely intact. The second image is the schoolhouse that dates from the time of Christina Dennett (this building probably housed dormitories). The third image is essentially the view that I was greeted with one enters the site. You can see the nineteenth-century Montefiore Institute, with cranes and other construction machinery visible. The next image though will give you some sense of the scale of the changes, and the depth to which construction has taken place. As you can see, the schoolhouse has been entirely demolished, and the area where the initial excavations took place, is now a vast crater in preparation for the construction of the car park. If you look at the size of the machinery piece in the next image, it will give you an idea of how deep the crater is. This aerial shot will give you some understanding of the site: the rue Saint Gilles is marked (and what is now the entrance); running parallel to the street was the church; I've also marked the demolished school

building as well as the site of the pits that Guillaume had previously excavated. As I say, this visit was rather different than our previous one: I had to wear protective clothing, a hard hat and construction boots. When we viewed the site, we did so alongside construction workers and working machinery, which made for a rather noisy but exciting environment.

Today, I won't be speaking in so much detail about the artifacts discovered, rather more so about how the excavations can inform our understanding of the site, and in turn the community's history. This is not to say that more items have not been uncovered (as an aside in the account books I found some mention of material items. For example, Lord Stourton donating 'eleven silver spoons' and Mother Bernard Plowden giving 'a dozen and a half pewter plates'). Guillaume showed me two large, and quite intact, coffee pots that he had uncovered. Even while I was there, more items were unearthed! Unfortunately, the working nature of the site did not make it conducive for photography, but I did manage to capture one or two images. The first slide shows some Dutch delft and a cockle shell[?], while the next shows a decorative fish from a saucer. This little video should, however, give you some sense of the work that has been undertaken. This video was taken in the cellars of the Montefiore Institute, the large nineteenth-century building to the rear of the site.

This area, to the rear of the property was previously believed to have been the area where the pensioners' quarters were located. This would have been at distance from where the convent was situated. However, Guillaume's understanding of this has changed, suggesting that the pensioners' quarters were in fact much closer to the community's dwellings. It is difficult to see from this image, but Guillaume believes that this shows the remains of a fourteenth-century cellar, proof that the community had inherited a site where life had gone on for centuries before. His reasons for reevaluating this understanding are based on the discovery of a series of walls, visible in the following images, which intersect the property. Returning to the aerial view, the large building to the property's rear is the location in which the boarders' quarters had been

located (a distance from the church and community' quarters). As I say, Guillaume has suggested the need to reevaluate this, relocating their accommodation adjacent to that of the community. And documentary sources, perhaps, seem to suggest that this was the case. If we return to the aerial shot for just a moment. As you can see the large nineteenth-century building is located at the furthest point from the church, bordering the site of the Benedictine Abbaye de la Paix. The wall that Guillaume has discovered (which he believes was from the pensioners' house) intersects the site, running perpendicularly across the site. I'll explain why this is significant, and how it affects our understanding of community life in this period in just a moment.

A good deal of information on this subject can be gleaned from administrative documents in the community's collection, such as the Benefactors' Book and account books. Much of the renovations had been prompted and/or facilitated by a fire that occurred in 1736, which destroyed a number of buildings. As I say, we can learn a reasonable amount regarding these additions from the various account books. From about 1750 we see numerous mentions of the building of 'out quarters'. These quarters were most probably for adult pensioners, and not schoolgirls. While its location is not expressly stated, Guillaume's suggestion that it was located nearer the community's own buildings may be validated by an entry in an account book. In 1761 Fr James Robinson bequeathed a sum of money for the repair of 'our House y^t joins to y^e [out]quarter'. Another entry suggests a 'caroline' being donated to pay for a 'covered walk in y^e Garden'.

My final point of call was a surprising one. Leaving the entrance to the site, we turned right and entered this building, a large nineteenth-century terraced house, quite typical of the French style for this period. This building currently serves as the site office. Guillaume and Patricia led me down a very narrow staircase into a small room and we were greeted by a seemingly unremarkable sight that can be seen in the next image. However, this sight turned out to be far

from unremarkable, a sight that I had thought I would never see. The wall that peeps its head out of the ground is, according to Guillaume, the west wall of the community church. The church would have run parallel to the rue Saint Giles, (there is mention in the Benefactors' Book for the erection of iron bars on the church windows in 1758, presumably for security as the church's north side ran alongside the rue) and while no clear depictions of it survive, we can begin to put a rough picture together of what it would have been like when the community left in 1794. A depiction of the church may, however, have been included in this portrait of Aloysia Joseph Wright in the background, where we can see what looks like broad, Baroque-style arches. The church that the community inherited, and substantially altered, from the Coquins had probably been Gothic in style, an account from the mid-sixteenth century stating that it resembled the church of the city's Norbertine Abbaye de Beauport, which you can see in the next slide, but was said to be 'double in size'. Thereafter the church was probably altered quite substantially giving it a more classical, Baroque appearance by the time of departure in 1794.

Thanks to the community's financial records we can similarly trace the material evolution of the church, particularly throughout the eighteenth century. In 1753, for example, the Benefactors' book tells us that as sufficient funds had been sourced, the church had been repaired. A splendid new tabernacle was installed, 'with four hundred ounces of Silver', along with statues of St Helen and St James, and new altar rails. The church was painted in white, giving it no doubt a very bright and calm sense. The cost of these embellishments interestingly was born by a number of members of the community, as opposed to external benefactions.

In 1756, Fr James Robinson, the community's confessor, paid for the instalment of a new organ. Further embellishments were made to enhance the liturgical setting; in 1757 thanks to the Stourtons, silver was added to the tabernacle. In light of Christina Dennett's vision on the Sacred Heart, it is not surprising that additions to this particular devotion were added, with pictures added to the church, along with an altar in the cloister. In 1777 Fr John Howard

contributed a sizeable sum of money to ‘finish paying for ye Doxal’. A doxal (or a lettner as it is sometimes known), as I found out, is a sort of rood screen, which separated the high altar from the rest of the church, or in this case perhaps, from the community choir. or another suggestion is that it may have been installed to separate the ever-growing number of schoolgirls from the community and priest. The doxal may have been a large, or not so large, addition (it is impossible to know from the evidence that survives). The next image, which shows a Baroque doxal from the church of Saint Etienne du Mont in Paris, is used purely for illustrative purposes.

When I visited this small room, I asked Guillaume about their plans, and if further excavations of this area were on the table. He said that they would not be undertaking further excavations where the church was situated as this is now covered over by a series of houses, which are outside of the remit of their particular project. This is significant because the church is where we assume the community (and indeed a number of laity) are buried. Guillaume assured me that the burial site had not been disturbed during these excavations, as it was usual that the burial crypt be located at the east end, directly or adjacently below the altar and choir. The choir and high altar would have been located further down the street, somewhere in the vicinity that we can see if we return to the aerial photo once again.

Before concluding I’d like to share two pieces of news that might interest you. The first of which is an article that I am currently writing, and that will be published in *The Tablet* on 20 April. My piece will focus on the school in Liège, and the programme of modernization implemented by Christina Dennett, and will be pitched in the light of the ‘groundbreaking system of education for girls’. The second piece of news relates to a subject that I’d touched upon during I talk I gave to you in 2022. This relates to María Antonia de Paz y Figueroa, sometimes known as ‘Mama Antula’. On 11 February this year she was canonized. In 2022 I corresponded with an Argentinian historian, Alicia Franschina, who was heavily involved in

Antonia's cause, as I had found a connection between her, and the community. This holy woman lived through much of the eighteenth century in South America, her life split between modern-day Argentina and Uruguay. At the age of fifteen she took informal vows –private and temporary- of chastity and poverty 'before the altar', and dressed in the Jesuit cassock, becoming a *beata* of the Society of Jesus. However, she was faced with a dilemma when the Jesuits were suppressed in the 1770s. She decided to group together with fellow *beatas*, offering the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises to women. Later she embarked on what you might call 'active' missionary work, an unusual step for a woman. Soon she could boast that between 200 to 500 retreatants observed them every ten days. The former Jesuit, Fr John Thorpe, wrote to a family member in the convent at Liège, Mary Bernard Plowden. In a batch of letters from the 1780s, Thorpe brought news of 'the wonderful woman', as well as inclosing translations of Antonia's writings. Why do I think this to be very significant? Firstly, the person and the context. Antonia La Paz was pushing the accepted gender boundaries; she was not simply an assistant to male clergy, but rather she essentially acted as an independent missionary. Secondly, what is significant is the timing. Fr Thorpe was writing to Mary Bernard Plowden not years after Antonia had died, but right at the point where she was engaged in her work. This to me shows that the community was abreast of the developments within the Church, in spite of the huge geographical separation between Buenos Aires and Liège! Convents as we've often said were in no way insular institutions, closed off from the happenings from the outside world, and their inhabitants far from 'dead to the world' as they have been all too often mislabelled. But most importantly I think it is important for the questions of 'culture' and 'example'. Religious communities develop organically of course, and are very much dependent of the personalities, skills and charism of members from within the community, but 'external' influences and personalities are key to the ways in which communities evolve. Once again, this shows that the community did not exist in isolation, but rather, in spite of the geographical distance between

Liège and Argentina, was keeping abreast of news in the groundbreaking ways women were ministering to women within the Church. I'm working with Alicia on an article framed around 'knowledge on the peripheries', which will explore the ways in which the community received news of Mama Antula's work, and possibly how her example impacted on the community's own activities.

While on the face it, there may not be a link between this and what we have been discussing re. the excavations and the physical and material make-up of the priory, but upon reflection, I think that there is a real connection. What we've been discussing today is all about how the community interacted with what one might call 'the wider world'. The community unquestionably was removed from the wider world in both a physical and spiritual sense to a certain degree, but the extent of this removal was certainly total, and there certainly ways in which this division could be lessened, with contact and communication very much desired, not only between those geographically near (those borders and visitors to the community), but also in the case of Mama Antula, with those from afar.