

## Text of Telegraph article - Christopher Howse - 29 June 2024

Something strange happened in 2022 when archaeologists dug at the site of a convent in Liège where English nuns had lived from 1656 until driven out in 1794. One find was a gold ring from the late 17th century. It bore a double-barred cross, the emblem of these Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre from their 15th-century foundation.

When the archaeologist in charge showed the find to two visiting Canonesses, Sister Moira O'Sullivan, the Prioress, and Sister Diana Impey, they held out their hands to show the selfsame emblems on their ring-fingers. It was a case of archaeology coming to life.

These nuns, known as the English Sepulchrines, set up shop in Liège because of the familiar difficulties of being a Catholic in England after the Reformation. Priests were subject to execution, and it was impossible to live a convent life without Mass.

The English nuns not only survived abroad but their community grew. They also provided English girls with the education that the law forbade in England. The nuns were in a way self-ruling in the world within their voluntary enclosure.

They included formidable women such as Susan Hawley (1622-1706), who began the exile community in 1642, and Mary Christina Dennett (1730-1781), a prioress admired by the people of Liège.

The excavations at Liège unearthed many fragments of Chinese porcelain coffee and tea cups. Cormac Begadon, an historian at Durham University, who has studied the account books of the Liège convent, links this with an "Enlightenment" habit of taking coffee in small groups, even in religious communities.

I'd guess too that running a school entailed offering visitors these beverages, as expected in the polite society into which the nuns were sending the girls. Similarly the girls put on plays at school – Arthur Murphy's *The Grecian Daughter* was staged after their move to England.

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That great dividing point came at midnight on May 29 1794, when the canonesses attended Mass in their chapel, and before light, 49 sisters, two priests, two servants and 10 schoolgirls set off to escape the French revolutionary Terror. The key was turned and they never again saw the convent, which many had not left for years.

Trouble had been brewing since the 1789 Revolution, and during upheavals in the new Republic of Liège troops were billeted in the convent speakhouse or parlour outside the women-only cloister. They demanded 12 quarts of beer, two loaves and a bottle of gin a day.

When the nuns had to flee, their foresight and planning permitted the community to stick together and even enjoy a stream of new members through the hard years of the 1790s. An example of planning was the commissioning from a local carpenter of several hundred wooden trunks to transport their belongings, library and archives.

They fled by coal-boat down the Meuse to Rotterdam and then in a ship called the Smallbridge for an expensive five-day passage to Gravesend. Their troubles were not quite so bad as those of

other communities of nuns, Benedictines or Poor Clares, who were imprisoned before escaping to England.

Here the Sepulchrines found a place for a convent and school through the generosity of the laity. Lord Stourton lent a big house. Michael McEvoy, the brother of a nun, gave £4,000 to acquire New Hall in Essex, where they stayed until leaving the school to lay administration in 2003.

Dr Begadon sees the nuns' transition from Liège to New Hall as a triumph of continuity over rupture.