

RELIGIOUS ARCHIVES AND THE SISTERS OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

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Prefaced by a brief history of their Australian order, the first two qualified archivists appointed by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, tell of the challenges they faced when appointed in 1986-7, ranging from an inherited century's worth of records, to damp, limited accommodation, and administrative change. Also described are collections of related material, types of research use, and efforts to control the records and produce finding aids. The authors end with their observations of and ideas about religious archives work in Australia.

The Institute of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St. Benedict, a group of religious women, was founded in Sydney in 1857 by Archbishop Polding with the help of Sister Scholastica Gibbons, a Sister of Charity, for the purpose of caring for destitute women. Their first convent and women's refuge was in the old Debtor's Prison at Carters' Barracks in Pitt Street on the present site of Central Railway Station. This refuge had been set up with the help of three Sisters of Charity but the sudden death of two of the Sisters left Sister Scholastica Gibbons alone in her task. It was then that Archbishop Polding was urged to found a new religious institute, the first group of religious sisters founded in Australia. Originally, they were called the Sisters of the Good Shepherd but the name was changed to Sisters of the Good Samaritan in 1866 to avoid confusion with another congregation of the same name already existing in Europe. The Good Samaritan Rule was based on the Benedictine Rule but was adapted to Australian conditions so that the Sisters could undertake active works of charity.

As Sydney expanded, the work of the Sisters was extended. In 1859, they were asked to take charge of the Roman Catholic section of the Orphan School at Parramatta which was funded by the Government. They, also, taught in the denominational schools at Sussex Street, St Mary's Cathedral, Waterloo, Kent Street and Pitt Street. When

Polding arrived in Australia, he attempted to lessen the illiteracy and lawlessness in the colony by setting up primary schools for the education of Catholic children. After the Public Instruction Act of 1880, when denominational schools were deprived of Government support, Archbishop Vaughan, Polding's successor, established a separate Catholic school system in Australia and education became an important priority.

Gradually the Sisters moved into the suburbs and into the country districts of New South Wales. Local Superiors were appointed to each branch house. Day and boarding schools, both primary and secondary, were set up at places such as Balmain, Five Dock, Wollongong, Windsor, Braidwood and Queanbeyan. In 1890, a foundation was made in Port Pirie, South Australia. In 1900, north Queensland became the centre of their labours and in 1904, the first Convents of the Good Samaritan were set up in Victoria. In 1948, shortly after the end of World War II, the Sisters went to Japan, first to Nagasaki, the scene of the atomic bomb blast and then to Sasebo, Nara and Tokyo. The first foundation in Western Australia was made in 1986. Recent foundations have extended their work to the Philippines and to Kiribati in the Pacific.

In 1876, Mother Scholastica Gibbons who had helped to guide the Sisters of the Good Samaritan for the first twenty years, resigned and returned to her own congregation, the Sisters of Charity. The first elections were held and Mother Magdalen Adamson was chosen as the first superior general with a general council to assist her. The minutes of the general council date from 1876. *The first printed rules appeared in 1878 and later underwent minor changes. Between 1902 and 1911 a book of constitutions was compiled in accordance with canonical regulations. The constitutions provided for an elected Superior General and four elected Council members. A General Secretary and a General Econome/Bursar to deal with matters of finance were appointed to assist in the general administration. Provision was made for the future division into three provinces — New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria/South Australia and this took effect in 1921. The Provincial Superiors were accountable to the Superior General and her Council. Appointments were made by the Superior General after consultation with the Provincial Superiors. In 1928, New South Wales was further divided into City and Country provinces. The foundation in Japan in 1948 added another region which became a separate province in 1981. The foundations in Western Australia in 1986 were incorporated into a Southern province with Victoria and South Australia. At the General Chapter of 1987, some modifications were made to the administrative structure by way of experimentation. The role of the local superior was replaced by the co-responsibility of

*The first hand-written Rules date back to 1857.

the community members. Provincial Superiors were replaced by Provincial Counsellors with a somewhat different role and local convents were grouped into areas.

Up to 1987, the administrative structure of the Institute of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan was as the diagram on p. 209. A new model of government has been in operation since that date.

In 1901, notice was given of the resumption of the Pitt Street Convent, the schools and the Women's Refuge to make way for the building of Central Railway Station. Before the demolition, boxes of documents were removed and later stored at the new Mother House at Glebe Point. This was originally Toxteth Park, the home of Sir George Allen, built in 1829-1831, with additions made about 1880 by his son, Sir George Wigram Allen. It was probably not until about 1939 that systematic methods of keeping records began with the introduction of the convent and school returns which were to be sent each year to the Mother House at Glebe. When Sister Peter Cleary, who had a background of experience in the Commonwealth Public Service, was appointed General Secretary in 1948 she began the task of classifying, arranging and boxing the documents which had accumulated. Successive general secretaries carried on the work commenced by her. In addition to the general records, each branch house had its own box to which were assigned correspondence, photographs, newspaper cuttings, audio tapes and ephemera which concerned it.

The Australian Bicentennial celebration had many side effects and was, probably, a contributing factor in the appointment of archivists to the Good Samaritan Archives. With the 1980s came increasing demands from families seeking information for the 'family tree'. In addition, schools founded in the 1880s were planning to celebrate centenaries and wanted lists of Sisters who had taught in the schools, historical information and photographs for publications. This demand still continues. As the number of public enquiries for information increased, it became impossible for the General Secretary to deal with them as well as carry out her other duties.

The first official appointment of an archivist to the General Administration of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan was made in 1986. A second archivist was appointed in 1987 and both archivists completed the Graduate Diploma in Information Management-Archives Administration. While the work of answering enquiries was initially their main function they gradually assumed other areas of responsibility and free access to the main body of archives. Since the enquiries come, by mail and phone, from all over Australia, the archivists are also the researchers. Individuals are welcome to come in person to research but their numbers are comparatively few. Formal permission from the Superior General or her representative is required to search documents of a confidential nature but, since administrators

and archivists work in the same building there are few formalities involved in seeking such a permission.

The first tasks we set ourselves were:

- to research our history
- to determine the administrative structure of the congregation and so identify the possible sources of our archives
- to survey the records, identify the main series and devise systems of naming or numbering them and of describing their location
- to write a policy statement
- to make inventories of box items and prepare an index to box contents
- to develop a chronology showing the opening and closing dates of convents and the ministries associated with them — schools, orphanages, etc.
- to prepare separate collections of records which require special methods of conservation such as photographs, audio and video tapes, film slides and newspaper cuttings
- to prepare a disposal schedule and implement it.

Important areas of the archives were found to be concerned with:

- The History of the Institute
- Development of Rules and Constitutions
- Registers of Members and Personnel cards
- Programs of Religious Formation
- The General Chapter: the legislative body which meets every six years
- Provincial Chapters
- The Superior General: elected by the General Chapter
- The Corporate Body: comprising the Superior General and her Council also called the Trustees of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan
- The General Econome or Bursar: responsible for financial matters
- Provincial/Regional Superiors/Counsellors
- Provincial Bursars
- Local Superiors
- Branch/Houses/Areas
- Ministries: Education, Social Welfare, and Parish Ministries.

There were also a number of Special Collections:

- Photographs and slides
- Newspaper cuttings
- 16 mm films (gradually being copied onto video tapes)
- Audio tapes
- Video tapes
- Maps and plans, and
- Microfilm.

The main external connections which generate correspondence are:

- The Holy See
- The Diocesan Bishops
- The Catholic Education Area Offices
- Catholic Welfare Agencies, and
- The Major Superiors — an organisation of Superiors General of Religious Orders
- The Benedictine Union.

The total shelf space at present available is 215 metres. In addition, there are fourteen filing cabinets. Because of the limited archival accommodation, we have restricted new acquisitions to the archives of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan and other related material and have tried, as far as possible, to avoid items which are merely of general historical interest.

Originally, all documents — correspondence, photographs, newspaper cuttings, audio tapes and ephemera — were filed together in a box labelled with the geographical name of the branch house from which they originated. Documents which concerned the covenant were often not separated from those which belonged to the institutions for which the Sisters were responsible — schools, orphanages, etc. Beginning with the photographs we decided to make the distinction. Each photograph was put in a Mylar pocket labelled with the name of the convent from which it had originated. Each convent was given a code number and by adding a decimal to the number, we were able to arrange the photographic collection so that the provenance was clear. For example:

Place	Institution	Code Number	Dates
Manly	Convent	210.0	1880-
	Industrial School/ Orphanage	210.1	1881-1910
	Primary School	210.2	1881-
	High School	210.3	1930-

A Disposal Schedule has been prepared but not yet fully implemented. The General Chapter elects the Superior General for a period of six years which may be extended to twelve. The Provincial Superiors/Counsellors are appointed for a period of three years which is generally extended to six years. Thus there are usually major changes of administration every six years and this period has been selected for the regular appraisal of records. The year 1993 will see the first big influx of documents from the records of the General Administration since the archivists were appointed. In general, documents of administrative, legal, financial and historical value originating in the provincial archives are to be kept permanently in the office of origin but one copy of each of such documents is to be sent to the General Archives. The General Econome/Bursar is responsible for appraising and disposing of all documents which concern the general finances.

When branch houses or related institutions are closed, archival documents are to be sent to the General Archives. When our nursing home at Glebe was closed recently, records for temporary retention were accessioned and their disposal dates noted. Since most schools are now under the control of Catholic Education Offices, school principals are considered to be responsible for maintaining their own archives in the future, but the General Archives has many items of historical interest to the schools in which the Sisters have taught in the past and these are frequently in demand for publications and special occasions.

The computer has been an important management tool. With it we have prepared invaluable finding aids such as:

- an index to the box list, showing in alphabetical order the title and the location
- lists of photographs which have originated from a particular convent/school
- alphabetical lists of inmates of orphanages and homes
- lists of Sisters arranged according to the date of profession
- lists of Sisters who have taught in a particular school.

In general, current records are dealt with by the general and provincial secretaries but the archivists have found it necessary to assume responsibility for ensuring that personal records of Sisters and their annual appointments are kept up to date. They have also been involved in determining the computer language which would be most convenient for the retrieval of data.

A major headache for the archivists has been suspected dampness in the main archives room. Since this room is the one most central to the administrative staff, it would have caused great inconvenience to store records elsewhere even if another room were available. However, work undertaken on the cellars underneath Toxteth House seems to have solved the problem. A well was dug to which all storm waters could be channelled and a pump installed to remove them automatically. Electric fans which work on a time basis keep the cellars well ventilated.

Because of limited space, the reference library housed in the archives work room has been subjected to some culling. Only those books considered to be relevant to the main purpose of the General Archives have been retained. The rest have been distributed to other libraries.

Originally, there was a collection of old and rare books — a few from the 18th century and many from the libraries of the early convents. Some of the old books, apparently not connected with the work of the congregation, have been donated to the St Mary's Cathedral Archives which was considered a more suitable repository. Others, such as prayer books and spiritual reading books have been retained as a

sample of the spirituality of earlier years. Theses presented by Sisters of the Good Samaritan for higher degrees are retained in the library.

There are two show-cases. One of these contains memorabilia connected with the early founding members, e.g. Archbishop Polding's mitre, office-book and ciborium and other items of historical interest. The other show-case contains a display of small items which is changed from time to time. Samples of the religious habits worn in times past are preserved and often loaned for special celebrations.

Preparatory work for publications such as the recent (1988) Resource Book for the Good Samaritans, 1857-1924, *A Living Stream*, by proof reading, selecting photographs, printing and binding involved the archivists. Although the process was time consuming, this most recent version of our history has provided us with a valuable resource.

We are frequently asked what has been the value of doing the Diploma course in Information Management — Archives Administration. Though not fully appreciated at the time, the amount of information given by the course was enormous. Only gradually could it be absorbed and adapted to suit the individual's circumstances and conditions of work. Its immediate value was to bring us into personal contact with other archivists at ASA meetings, conferences and seminars even though their circumstances and interests are, sometimes very different from ours. The *Church Archivists' Society Newsletter*, published by Brother Leo Ansell, CFC, and only recently discontinued because of his retirement, did help to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The new publication *Practical Archivist* distributed by Anne Cook and Jo Birkl seems to fulfill the same need for the small archives.

Many of those who work in church archives do so in a voluntary capacity even though fully qualified in Archives Administration and their priorities differ at times from those of the professional archivist. It is important for them to be able to interact with those of similar interests, to exchange ideas and to offer help and encouragement to each other. Although the ASA offers the possibility of a Special Interest Group for Church Archivists, not all are convinced that this is the best course to take. Would this step exclude those who are interested in Church Archives but are not members of the ASA? The Association of Catholic Archives of Victoria founded in 1981 fulfills an important function in that State and provides occasions where personal contact can be made with other members. However, it seems desirable, also, to maintain links with archivists of other religious bodies on a local, State and national basis. A project, recently initiated, highlights the advantage to be derived from this. It is suggested that, using basic information provided by archives and other bodies, a central database be set up to provide a service for those seeking information about relatives who were inmates of Catholic homes for children in New

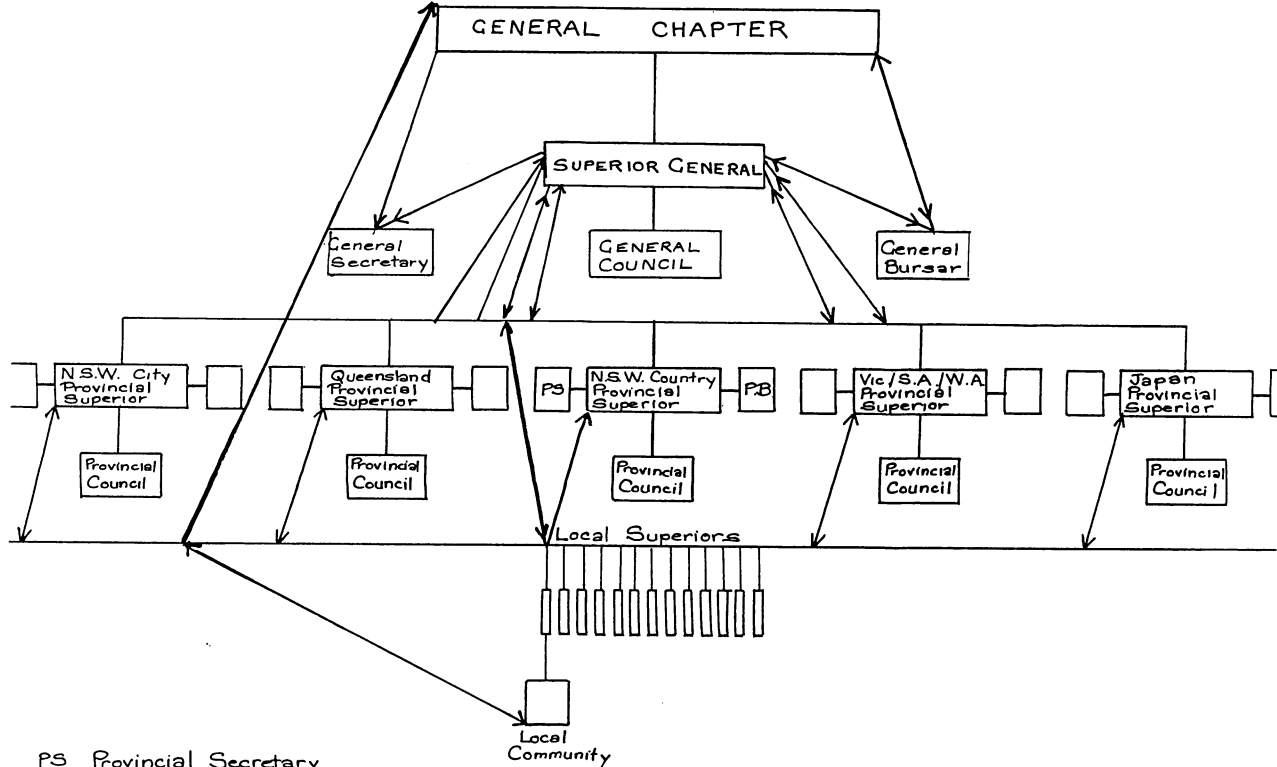
South Wales, during this century. Since families of orphaned children were often sent to separate homes, perhaps, of different denominations, we can see the advantage of wider links when seeking to reunite scattered families.

The stories of the work of ministers, priests, doctors, nurses, nuns, brothers and lay people found in church archives show that often they were the pioneers in many fields of endeavour. Religious orders which have the responsibility for the personal papers of all their members have a rich treasury of the lives of men and women who by their efforts in the fields of education and social welfare have shaped the history of Australia in so many ways. Brother Ansell in his *Register of Church Archives* (second edition) published in 1985, did a great service in listing the repositories of church archives in Australia. That list has, no doubt, increased in the past few years. It should be of concern to the ASA that the value of church archives to researchers and historians is appreciated by its members as an important part of the national heritage.



Toxteth House, 1901. Current entrance to the archives is at the far right, ground floor.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE TILL 1987



PS Provincial Secretary
 PB Provincial Bursar