Transcript for *The Holywell Bones*

Rebecca
Who did the bones, until recently displayed at the Holywell Shrine in Wales on loan from the Jesuits in Britain, belong to? What do these bones reveal and how has their likely identity been discovered?

To answer these questions, I, Rebecca Somerset, Archivist at the British Jesuit Archives, am joined for today's podcast by Professor Maurice Whitehead, Research Fellow & Director of Heritage Collections at the Venerable English College in Rome, Dr Jan Graffius, Stonyhurst College Collections curator and Dr Hannah Thomas, Special Collections Manager and Research Fellow for the Congregation of Jesus English Province at the Bar Convent in York. Between them they will set out the situation for Catholics in 17th Century Wales, describe the bones in question and reveal what was discovered about the likely identity of them.

2020 marked the 50th anniversary of the canonisation of the 40 English and Welsh martyrs in 1970. The Jesuits in Britain hold an extraordinary collection of relics, especially a significant collection of relics belonging to the 16th and 17th century English and Welsh martyrs. Whilst a large portion of this collection is cared for by Jan at Stonyhurst College, which was originally a Jesuit College, there is also a significant amount in the British Jesuit Archives, which I am greatly privileged to be caring for. Prompted by the canonisation anniversary Jan and I had planned to put on a physical exhibition of some of these relics. Originally most of the relics would have belonged to one collection and so in a way we were hoping to reunify some of this collection at least temporarily. However, as a result of the global Covid pandemic we realised that this would not be possible and so created an online exhibition instead.

The relics in this virtual exhibition highlight an extraordinary period of English and Welsh history, when men and women were persecuted and executed for their religious beliefs. Some of the relics in the exhibition really show the brutal nature of the penalties inflicted upon those who stayed loyal to their faith, while others tell personal stories of individual spiritual journeys of historic figures such as Thomas More. These relics have been treasured for centuries, valued for the powerful stories they tell, which have been passed from generation to generation.

The exhibition ends with the revelation of the highly likely identity of the Holywell bones. Their identity was made possible through Jan's careful examination of the bones themselves and historical resources, as well as through the invaluable external research and insights provided by Maurice and Hannah. We wanted to share some of this process with you and so asked Maurice and Hannah to join us in this podcast. Welcome to you all.

So, to begin the discussion I would like to invite Maurice to perhaps, as it were, set the scene by describing the 17th century Welsh Catholic landscape.

Maurice
Thank you Rebecca for this opportunity. The topic is fascinating. But there is so much yet to be done in terms of research.

In an edited volume, which was published in 2006 on advances in the understanding of the history of the Reformation across Europe, Alec Ryrie, Professor of History at Durham University, notes that, viewed within a British and Irish context, the history of the Reformation in Wales remains (quote) 'the most dramatically curtailed' of any part of the history of the Reformation in the British Isles, so a big marker there that tremendous amount yet to be done. Now, if such comparative lack of research is true of the history of the Reformation itself in Wales, it is even more true of the post-Reformation history, or the immediate post-Reformation history of Wales: and so much of the Catholic dimension of that history yet remains to be researched and written.

And I think that one of the biggest challenges facing us in understanding late sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century Wales and its Catholic past involves a question of geography. Just how we today conceptualise the principality at that time. Now, years ago, back in 1964, in a now-famous article entitled 'Rome and the Elizabethan Catholics - A Question of Geography', the late Professor John Bossy, of the University of York, traced the main routes of the early modern period linking England and Wales specifically with Rome and the routes used by Catholics during the penal period.

Sadly though all these years on there is still not yet a comparable article dealing with Wales and the rest of continental Europe and its links in this immediate post-Reformation period. And these links are really important to understand if we really want to get to a better comprehension of the strategic importance of the location of the shrine at Holywell.

I think, the first thing we need to do is to rid ourselves completely of the twenty-first century view that Wales, at least from a London-based perspective, lies at the end of the M4 corridor! When I teach this subject, the subject of early modern Catholicism in Wales with university students, the first thing I do to shake them out of such a view is to present them with a wonderful map of the British Isles by the late sixteenth-century Flemish cartographer, Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598) who died in 1598. In Ortelius' maps, the whole of the, if you can imagine in your mind, the whole of the British Isles laid out at 90 degrees to the normal north-south axis of modern maps: so imagine in your mind's eye you have got the whole of the south coast of England on the left of the map, with Land's End at the top of the map and Dover at the bottom, and then, on the far end, far right-hand side of the map you've got the Orkneys.

That leaves Ireland at the very top of map, in the middle, with Wales immediately below it. Only then, having been shaken out of our 21st-century view of things, does it suddenly become ever more obvious that the real 'motorway', in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century terms, is the sea: and that, far from being geographically peripheral, Wales is, in fact, for this period centrally positioned, at least in terms of post-Reformation Catholic activity, as it's in easy maritime reach of Ireland, France, Portugal, and Spain.

Then if you move in more closely and look at this unusual orientation of Ortelius's map, it becomes even clearer that there is a real 'corridor' running through the Welsh Marches, from Chepstow in the south up to Flintshire in the north, with Holywell lying almost at the northern extremity, tucked away in the corner at the top in the North but at the end of an accessible route which largely avoids the mountainous and difficult terrain of the rest of Wales. And then, if you go in further and look more closely within that 'corridor', you can, it doesn't take too much effort to discover dotted along the whole length of the 'corridor' from Chepstow up to Flintshire there are a host of Catholic safe houses: these form a south-north/north-south network, with very powerful families strategically placed at the southern end, in the shape of the Somerset family, the earls of Worcester, at Chepstow and Raglan Castles, and in the middle you have the Herbert family, the marquesses of Powis, at Powis Castle in the middle of the Marches, and then right in Flintshire itself, very close to Holywell, you have the Mostyn family at Talacre.

So what I'm saying is that I am convinced that, approaching Wales from continental Europe in that period, the clandestine way into the Principality, or, more precisely, into the corridor formed by the Welsh Marches, was via the port of Chepstow, and we have to remember, and we don't remember this too much, but we need to remember, that Chepstow at that time was the pre-eminent port in Wales for the importation of wine: Chepstow enjoyed important maritime links with ports in continental Europe including Seville, Lisbon, Bilbao, St Jean de Luz, and La Rochelle.

So placing that knowledge in the context of Catholicism and the development of post-Reformation English and Welsh Catholicism particularly in Iberia, it's important to remember that the mouth of the Guadalquivir river leading up to Seville, was, the port of Sanlucar de Barrameda, which from the late 1580s, was the main English and Welsh gateway into Iberia. There in Sanlucar the pre-Reformation English Hospice of St George, an English Hospice of St George, founded during the reign of Henry VIII, was closely linked to the English Colleges founded, the first one founded at Valladolid in 1589 for the training of future priests for England and Wales, and also to the much closer English College at Seville, founded by Robert Persons SJ in 1592. And then, of couse, a little bit later, at Lisbon, there was another English College founded in 1622. So, far from being remote places these Colleges in Iberia had important maritime links and those maritime links take us back, or can take us back into Wales. We always think of people coming through Dover, and that wasn't always the case. And we've got to do a lot lot more research to understand better what was actually going on. So what I'm saying essentially is we have a route for Welsh and English Catholics which largely evaded the normal observation of English government spies in the Chanel ports and which ran all the way from Sanlucar de Barrameda in southern Spain, northwards, via Chepstow, through the Welsh Marches, and up to Holywell. We have a sort of natural route there which needs more exploration.

The potential for Chepstow having been used clandestinely for the transporting of English and Welsh seminarians to the English colleges in Iberia, and then their transportation back home as ordained priests, and potential for the importation of religious books and artefacts from continental Europe was enormous. Particularly because totally unrelated to the history of Catholicism in Wales, there was, anyway, huge resistance to the power of the Crown in the south Welsh ports. Resistance expressed via the Exchequer in London. the Exchequer was trying to levy taxes on imports coming in to the southern Welsh ports, including Chepstow and the right of control over the port was claimed as a historic privilege by the Somerset family, the earls of Worcester – and none of this background, this mercantile, sort of legal background, has yet been looked at through the lens of post-Reformation Welsh Catholicism. There's a lot still to do. I think this resistance was all part of a much bigger resistance, allowing clandestine activity, protecting Catholic interest, in the Wales of Elizabeth I and of James I.

Rebecca

Thank you Maurice! It's really fascinating, and not having see Ortellius' map before, which we will share a link to in the show notes so that people can look at this themselves, I had not appreciated before the importance that Wales played with its connections to the continent for Catholics in this time period. The way you have explained this it makes great sense. Now having set out the geographic situation, could you perhaps tell us a bit about some of the prominent Catholics in Wales at the time. You've already referred to the Somerset family.

Maurice

Yes. I think we have to begin with them really in the sense of power. I think the real powerhouse lies in Edward Somerset, fourth earl of Worcester, who was born about 1550 and, we don't know his exact date of birth, and he died in 1628. He's an incredibly important man, who's really been overlooked by a lot of historians. his involvement personally with the Jesuits came at a very early stage in their history in an English and Welsh context. And it came soon after the arrival of the first Jesuits in England – Edmund Campion and Robert Persons – in 1580.

To understand what is going on here you've really got to look closely at Edward Somerset. And superficially, and reality, he's a pillar of the Elizabeth and later of the Jacobean establishment: he succeeded his father to, as earl of Worcester in February 1589 and rapidly gained power. By December 1590 he became a member of the council of the Marches of Wales. Now just imagine this, that puts him in a position as holding great sway in this 'corridor' that I've already talked about running from Chepstow up to Flintshire. He is one of the Council keeping a very close eye on what goes on here and he's secretly a Catholic. Or not so secretly because Elizabeth actually knows he's a Catholic but turns a blind eye. He went on to be elected to the knight of the Garter in 1593 and, then in April 1601, Elizabeth I herself appointed Worcester as her master of the horse, so a top position in the royal household. He was made then a privy councillor in June 1601 and then made earl marshal of England, so the most senior earl in the

kingdom, in December 1601. And then it gets even better. In July 1602, he became lord lieutenant of Monmouthshire and Glamorganshire – adding those powers to his existing powers I've already talked about in terms of maritime sway. He was already Admiral of the Severn, enjoying complete control over all shipping in the Bristol Channel and all the ports in the Severn Estuary, in addition to having his own family titles as Lord of Raglan, Lord of Chepstow and Lord of Gower, the Gower peninsula. He owned Chepstow Castle, which was one of the residences of the Somerset family, and the very gates of the castle, there's an image which I think can be on the website, the very gates of the castle on the River Wye, could easily be reached by water and so Somerset is 'King of South Wales' in all but name by the time of the death of Elizabeth I.

And then it goes on and on. Under James I as earl marshal of England, he was responsible for organising the coronation of James I in July 1603, of organising the baptism of Princess Mary in 1605, and that unique ceremony creating Prince Henry the prince of Wales during the parliamentary session of 1610. And during this period, the early part of James' reign, he became master of the horse for life in January 1604. So an almighty amount of power in this one man.

If the testimony of the Elizabethan court commentator, David Lloyd, is to be believed, Elizabeth I had herself once remarked that the Earl of Worcester (quote) "reconciled what she believed irreconcilable, a stiff papist to a good subject".

So here we have Edward Somerset fashioning himself impeccably as a politique at court taking the oath of allegiance to the royal supremacy, attending sermons at court, placed on a commission for expelling the Jesuits in September 1604 whilst privately supporting them. Just before the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 he was sent from London back home to his Welsh seat at Raglan, after the famous Whitsun Riots in the Welsh Marches, this had involved Catholics, and he summoned his county neighbours, including the bishop of Hereford, to urge them to greater efforts in suppressing Catholic recusancy and establishing "true religion" – that is the Established Church. Later in 1605 he was employed as an interrogator of the gunpowder plotters in the Tower. And he went on during the reign of James I he was very friendly with Anne of Denmark, who was of course secretly Catholic herself, he escorted her to the waters of Bath in 1613, he was made lord privy seal soon after and appointed a judge of requests in 1621. And his last significant public appearance was in 1626 as lord great chamberlain at the coronation of Charles I. And he died at his London House, Worcester House in the Strand, in 1628 and then was taken back to south Wales and buried in the Somerset family vault at Raglan parish church, close to the castle at Raglan.

So you asked the question about power and I think the almighty power resides right down to 1628 with Edward Somerset. He is controlling everything but you will never find his fingerprints that is done in a Catholic context. He always works through agents. And so he has

this sort of double life, this public life which is impeccably conformist, supporting the establishment and a secret life without fingerprints where he is actually supporting the Catholic cause, particularly in south Wales through the Marches, where he has all this power as a member of the Council of the Welsh Marches.

Rebecca
Edward Somerset was clearly a significant player in Wales at the time, and interesting to see how you say he was invisibly promoting Catholicism whilst gaining roles with important political powers. You've mentioned that he supported Jesuits, secretly supported Jesuits. So, what was the situation for Jesuits in Wales at the time?

Maurice
Well, very surprising really in the sense that we talk about the mission of 1580 and often forget that there is a very early mission to Wales. I mean as early as 1595, so only 15 years after the arrival of Campion and Persons, already Edward Somerset is giving protection to the first Welsh Jesuit at Raglan Castle in south Wales. And this person, this first Welsh Jesuit, is Robert Jones, a fascinating character, an almost exact contemporary of William Shakespeare, born about 1564 and died 1615. And Jones secures this patronage from the earl of Worcester through initial patronage which he gains from a prominent recusant family of the gentry in the southern Welsh Marches, a man called William Morgan of Llantarnam. Now Morgan had married Lady Frances Somerset, Edward's daughter, and Robert Jones, the Jesuit, was responsible for Lady Frances's conversion to Catholicism, and became her domestic chaplain. Now we've talked a lot about the 'corridor' already and we've not talked about the specifics. Here we've got Robert Jones born in the 'corridor' in the diocese of St Asaph in the north of Wales, either at Chirk or Oswestry, we don't quite know which of these two places, but both of these towns lie in the Welsh Marches 'corridor'. We don't know much about his early education, but in 1581 as a young man he arrived at the English College in Rheims, this was the College of Douai, which was temporarily transported to, or removed to Rheims because of the wars in the Low Countries at that time, and in 1582 he was sent on from Rheims to Rome to the Venerable English College. He wasn't there that long because he clearly became attracted by the Society of Jesus. At that time you will recall the Venerable English College was under the administration of the English Jesuits. And clearly Jones became attracted to the spirituality and the life of the Jesuits and in 1583, just after two years of arriving in Rome he entered the Jesuit noviciate in Rome, there wasn't an English noviciate to enter at that time, so he went to the Jesuit noviciate in Rome and completed his philosophical and theological training at the Jesuit-run Collegio Romano (which is today the Gregorian University) and he was ordained sometime in the early 1590s. The evidence suggests that he was a very able scholar, initially he was appointed to the philosophical faculty at the Collegio Romano but the pressures or the demands of the mission back home were great and there was clearly a job to be done in Wales, which was not yet covered by Jesuit missionary activities. So in 1594, Claudio Acquaviva, who was then the superior general of the Society of Jesus in Rome, sent Jones back

to the fledgling English and Welsh mission. The mission wasn't to become a full Province of the Society of Jesus until 1623. So, by the beginning of 1595, Jones was clearly, from the Record Society, back in London. Little is known about his activities during the 1590s, except that we know he is at Raglan from 1595. He seems to be operating as a missioner, clandestinely, up and down this 'corridor' I keep talking about from Chepstow northwards up to Holywell with periodic visits to London. And somewhere outside London, we don't know where, possibly in Wales, he was professed of the four vows as a fully fledged Jesuit in October 1603.

Now by that time, this is the time of the death of Elizabeth I and the accession of James, already Jones had established an important network of Catholic missionary endeavour which involved a sort of co-operative work, it wasn't just a Jesuit activity, it was involving the Welsh gentry, the Welsh secular clergy and Jesuits and all with the help, the initial help, of the Somerset and the Morgan families in south Wales and so from a base in Monmouthshire – probably Raglan Castle itself, where Jones is known to have been in residence for extended periods – the network extended northwards through the Welsh Marches over the border into England. So what we have if we sort of map it out and you can do this from, not from Catholic sources, but from government report on what's going on. Contemporary government reports claimed that Jones himself was frequenting important families such as the Lacon family of Kinlet, north-east of Ludlow in Shropshire, the Draycotts of Painsley, near Cheadle in Staffordshire, the Morgans of Llantarnam, we've already mentioned, south-west of Raglan, and the Griffiths family at a place called the Cwm near Monmouth, just twelve miles north of Raglan – and we know, again from government records, that Jones was celebrating mass weekly at a very secluded place called the Darren, which was a house on the Monmouthshire/Herefordshire border, just north of the Griffiths family house at the Cwm. All of these families were well connected, interlinked, intermarried and holding important positions. So for example Sir Francis Lacon of Kinlet, already mentioned this Lacon family, he, for example, was Sheriff of Shropshire in 1612. So, what you've got here is the Jesuits working with significant members of the gentry and aristocracy and fostering Catholicism along with the secular clergy and really things started to rapidly bear fruit.

We know from the records that as early as 1604 Robert Jones was sending students from Shropshire, from Worcestershire, Herefordshire, and Monmouthshire, again all in this 'corridor', to the English colleges at Valladolid and Douai. And in the year of the Gunpowder Plot 1605 Sir Herbert Croft, who was the high sheriff of Herefordshire, warned the government in London that there was every danger that recusants in the Welsh Marches under Jesuit influence might take up arms against the king – and he accused "Jones the Jesuit, the firebrand of all" of being the prime instigator of all this.

But despite very close and intense surveillance and vigilance after the Gunpowder Plot, Robert Jones eluded capture. He was considered the most likely candidate to succeed Henry Garnet

as superior of the English and Welsh Jesuit mission after Garnet's execution in 1606, but being a modest man he asked to be excused. His missionary work went on. He received into the Catholic Church Lady Frances Morgan's sisters and her brother, Henry Somerset, the earl of Worcester's son and heir. And so by 1609 the Somersets and the Morgans were the principal Catholics under Robert Jones's spiritual direction.

Rebecca

It is clear that Jones had a significant role in helping to keep the Catholic faith alive in Wales, the country of his birth, and that he brought the Jesuit mission to the country. And also it's been really interesting to see the use of the corridor that you had set out when you first were giving an explanation of the geographic situation of Wales. And perhaps you could set out for our listeners how the Jesuit mission, started to a certain extent with Jones' arrival, how that developed from this initial start?

Maurice

Yes. Those early foundations were incredibly important. I've already said that it wasn't until 1623 that things were sufficiently in a state to organise the creation of an English Province, formally an English Province of the Society of Jesus.

In 1623, the Society of Jesus centrally in Rome created a new English Jesuit Province which covered the whole of England and the whole of Wales. For administrative purposes this was a very unusual Province in the sense that you had already Jesuits in England and Wales, but the Province extended territorially also into other Provinces in the sense that there was the College at St Omer, and there was a College at Liege, they were all part of the Province so it's a rather strange territorial area.

Within England and Wales itself this missionary territory for administrative purposes was subdivided into 'Colleges' and 'Residences'. And I just need to explain to those listeners unfamiliar with these terms what this means. A 'College' don't think of it initially in the educational sense. A 'College' was a subdivision of a Province, of the English Province of this time, which had sound financial endowment. and the idea was that eventually such an area might produce a physical building called a College when change to religious conditions might allow. But that would always be a future event. And a 'Residence' was something lesser than a 'College', it was a district, a subdivision of the Province, which had very precarious financial arrangements. So, the Province was divided up into different districts, different subdivisions.

If you look closely at what actually happens there it's absolutely fascinating to see the extent to which all that I've already talked about is recognised and saluted from Rome, from the Superior General.

The main one was based on London, the College of St Ignatius Loyola. The second largest one was the College of St Francis Xavier and this covered the whole of Wales and the English counties of Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and Somerset. And about, shortly after 1623, the headquarters of this new 'College' was created at the Cwm, this house that I've already talked about formerly belonging to the Griffiths family on the Herefordshire/Monmouthshire border – on land originally belonging to the earls of Worcester, the Somerset family.

So Robert Jones who had pioneered all of this, really was the father of this 'College'. He was already dead when it was initiated, but he had already set out this missionary territory.
So in a nutshell, by the time the English and Welsh Jesuits were properly set up as a working Province in 1623, they already had a very robust set of links which stretched effectively from southern Spain right up to tip of north Wales, with the ancient shrine of Holywell conveniently tucked away almost at the northern most extremity of the 'corridor' from Chepstow and very conveniently close to the home of the powerful Catholic Mostyn family at Talacre.

Rebecca
Thank you, Maurice. And indeed the recognition of the prominent importance of Wales to the Jesuit mission is very obvious now that you point out that it was named after Francis Xavier, one of the co-founders of the Jesuits, and really it's something that hadn't actually occurred to me before this and it again shows what you've been saying about there being a lot of potential research still to be done in this area.

Maurice
Yes, and I think it is fascinating in the sense that we need to remember that we talked about Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier. They had just been canonised, 1622, and this is 1623. And it is all very very rapid and you know the two new Saints designated to London and to Wales. I don't think it could be any more strongly stated than that from Rome. You know, these are the two key areas for future missionary activity. And ok the other parts of England are important as well but these are key to the whole future of the mission. I think that's the message we need to remember.

Rebecca
Yes, definitely. And that's what I've taken from what you've been saying just now, along with the fact that the Welsh Catholic and Welsh Jesuit history is an area where we need more research to be done.

Now Maurice concluded his background of the Jesuits in Wales with the mention of St Winefride's shrine at Holywell and its convenient location at the northern most tip of the corridor he has been speaking about, which brings us nicely to the topic of this podcast which are some bones that were found there. Towards the end of 2020, Jan, you collected the box containing the two skulls and various bones from the Holywell Shrine to examine these further. Could you describe your first impressions and observations?

Jan

Thank you Rebecca, it was very exciting to be able to collect the bones from Holywell Shrine, where they had been on loan for over a decade. In fact I managed to arrive literally 24 hours before Wales went into lockdown, so it was nip and tuck!

I should maybe say a few words about Holywell, and its importance for the Jesuits and for recusants in the 17th century. Holywell is the town in which an ancient and very famous shrine in North Wales is still to be found. St Winefride's Well has been a centre of constant Catholic pilgrimage since at least the 12th century. Miraculous healing powers have long been attributed to the gushing spring, which was reputed to have appeared on the site where Winefride was decapitated. She was a 7th century Welsh Celtic, from a local chieftain's family- the story tells that her hand was sought in marriage by Caradoc, a local non-Christian, and when Winefride refused him as she had a vocation to be a nun, Caradoc cut her head off. Her head was miraculously restored to her body, and she went on to found an abbey, but the spring which appeared quickly developed a reputation for curative powers, and the pilgrims began to arrive. The current well has a stunningly beautiful 15th century cloister set around the star-shaped pool, which was commissioned by Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII, who also built a chapel over the well. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, despite the Reformation and the official suppression of the shrines in England and Wales, Holywell continued to attract pilgrims who arrived openly, sometimes in large groups. This gathering place for Catholics made it a logical centre for undergound missionary priests to set up residence, and the town housed two groups of priests- Jesuits and seculars. These were based at two inns, the Star and the Cross Keys, from the 1640s. Inns were the perfect place to hide in plain sight. There were lots of visitors and guests, coming and going, and not too many questions were asked about disguised priests and their activities. The local authorities were happy to turn a blind eye as long as the pilgrims brought income to the town, and the priests were discreet in their missionary work.

I am not sure of the current status of the Well, but I do urge a visit there when it's possible. It's a beautiful place with an ancient history of faith and miracles- in fact it is often referred to as the Lourdes of Wales.

Back to the bones- which I will describe more fully in a few minutes- they consist of two skulls, three leg bones and a variety of smaller bones. These were discovered in the attic of the Jesuit priest's house in Holywell in 1878 and were taken first to the Jesuit seminary at St Beuno's nearby, and then in the early 21st century they were sent on loan to the shrine of St Winefride's Well at Holywell. The bones were originally found wrapped in an ancient white linen jacket, which was described at the time as being a baby's or a child's. They were in a wooden box, which has since been lost, and apparently there was a mummified mouse in one of the skulls, which has also been removed and lost at some point.

I had seen the bones before, of course, as Stonyhurst has, over the last twenty years, lent various artefacts to Holywell from our own extensive collections. On each visit to the Well, I would find some time to go and have a look at the bones, as they intrigued me.

The prevailing theory then was that one of the skulls was that of John Plessington, a Catholic priest, who was martyred in Chester in July 1679, during the furore raised by Titus Oates and

his fictitious plot. As we will shortly hear from Hannah the Oats plot claimed falsely that Jesuits were plotting King Charles II and put his Catholic convert brother James on the throne.

It was widely believed and the result was that many Catholic priests were hunted down and executed, and huge numbers of Catholic laypeople were arrested and imprisoned for complicity in a non-existent plot.

Plessington is a plausible candidate, as he was based in Holywell from around 1665 – 1670, before moving to Puddington, near Chester, where he was arrested in 1679.
The question that always lurked at the back of my mind, though, was 'There are two skulls. If one is Plessington's whose is the other?'

Moreover, there is a strong tradition that Plessington's body is still buried in the 11th century St Nicholas's Church near Puddington. If the bones had been given a decent burial, why would a Catholic seek to exhume some of them and hide them? They were in no danger of desecration, and although the church was Anglican, it had been a Catholic church for over 500 years by the time of Plessington's execution. So the Plessington theory just didn't feel right to me.

Trying to solve the puzzle, you have to start with the evidence provided by the bones themselves.

They comprise an intact skull and jawbone, and a cranium which has been pierced through the top of the skull which is missing the front part from below the eye sockets, and also missing the mandible, or jawbone.

There are three long leg bones- two thigh bones and one shin bone. There is half of a pelvis, and part of a coccyx, as well as some vertebra and a number of rib bones and other small bones.

The bones are discoloured, and almost entirely clean of any tissue, muscle, skin, hair etc.
From my extensive experience in dealing with relics of all sorts, it's evident that the discolouration has arisen from prolonged contact with soil, in other words they had been buried long enough for the soft tissue to decay into the earth.

One of the skulls has a jagged hole in the top of the cranium. Examining the hole it is clear that this piercing has been effected from the inside of the skull using some force. This would be in keeping with the impalement of a severed head on a spike, as was common for those convicted of treason in the 16th and 17th centuries. Only men were treated in this way; the fate for women convicted of treason was burning alive. So, we know that at least one skull was that of a man.

The second skull is almost intact and has suffered no impalement. It appears to be the contemporary of the impaled skull, as the discolouration of the two is identical as the wear of the bones and other indications also suggest so I came to the (perhaps obvious!) conclusion that they were buried together.

Further examination shows that some of the bones- one femur, the pelvis and the coccyx – demonstrate clear signs of having been sheared through with a sharp knife. The coccyx is literally sliced in half. This evidence of knife cutting indicates that the body, or bodies, was dismembered after death. This fits with the theory that the bones belonged to individuals who suffered the ritual form of execution known as hanging, drawing and quartering, the last stage of which was the literal quartering of the body, which cut the decapitated corpse into four parts.

There are plenty of examples which show that this quartering was sometimes taken further, and that the corpse was cut into smaller pieces- contemporary descriptions of these gruesome executions often mention the ferocity with which various priests' bodies were cut up. So, these leg bones also show evidence of burial in the soil, and it is safe to assume that they came from the same individuals whose skulls were preserved along with them.

The leg bones in 1878 were recorded as having been found wrapped in a linen garment which has survived. It was described at the time as a child's jacket or shirt. But recent research with costume historians indicates that it is, in fact a woman's bodice. It is made from linen, not costly silk and has no expensively embroidered detail, or sequins or buttons. This indicates that it belonged to somebody from a working background, rather than gentry or nobility. The linen is of good quality, and the scalloped edging marks it out as a festive, perhaps a Sunday-wear piece of clothing. The diamond shaped hemmed gaps along the sleeves were designed so that the coloured sleeves of an underlying dress or petticoat could be pulled through the gaps and puffed up as a decorative feature. So expert opinion indicates that it belonged to a woman from a well-to-do farming or shopkeeping background, or an upper servant dated from 1640 or thereabouts.

1640 was the year that the Jesuit house at Holywell, the Star Inn, was built as a pilgrim hotel and a behind-the-scenes secret Jesuit mission centre. So, it is feasible to speculate that the bodice belonged to a trusted Catholic woman maybe working front- of-house at the inn while doubling up as a secret housekeeper for the small number of Jesuits who occupied the upper rooms at the Star and kept themselves out of public view.

There is no evidence of staining on the bodice from the bones, which indicates that the bones were already clean and dry by the time they were wrapped.

So, gathering the evidence together and summing up, we have a collection of bones belonging to two men which were deliberately hidden in a long-standing Jesuit mission house in Holywell. The bones show clear evidence of the form of ritual execution known as hanging, drawing and quartering, which was reserved for traitors to the Crown, and is particularly associated with the penalties carried out on Catholic priests in England and Wales between 1540 and 1680. The bones appear to have been buried for a period of years, and then exhumed and carried to a safe place suitable for relics of executed Catholic priests. The risks involved in the possession and moving of these bones in the 17th or 18th century would suggest that they were not moved a great distance. On their clandestine arrival at the Jesuit house known as the Star Inn, the bones were wrapped in an unused white linen bodice and then hidden away in a safe place in the attics. The choice of this white linen garment suggests a degree of care and respect. White linen was the fabric used for centuries as shrouds for wrapping the dead. It was the

cloth donated by Joseph of Arimathea to cover the body of the dead Christ. And it would have been seen as an entirely appropriate covering for the bones of two men who would have been regarded as martyrs.

So bearing all this in mind, the inescapable conclusion I have reached is that these bones belonged to two executed Catholic priests, who were regarded as martyrs.

This much can be deduced from looking at the evidence provided by the bones, and the bodice and their location on discovery. To move further from this point requires forensic research of a historical and archival kind, rather than a literal kind. So, in the search for an identity I needed to talk to experts in Welsh Catholic history of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Rebecca
Right, it's fascinating how much can be learned from careful examination of some bones and the conclusions you've drawn Jan they make perfect sense to me. I understand that it was you, Hannah, who initially suggested that these bones might belong to Philip Evans and John Lloyd. And I wonder if you could tell us a bit about what made you suggest these two men in particular? What made you think that these bones might belong to them?

Hannah
Thank you Rebecca. Yeah, so when Jan initially contacted me to say they had discovered bones belonging to 2 men at a known Catholic house in Holywell, my first thought was that they could potentially be the relics of Phillip Evans and John Lloyd. Partly because they alone of the various Welsh Catholic martyrs have always been remembered as a pair. They were executed together on the same day and share a feast in the current Church calendar on that same day as well. And fairly unusually for the other martyrs the circumstances of their arrests and eventual executions has been very well preserved and very well remembered within the Catholic community, and particularly cherished by the various generations of Welsh Catholics and they are usually referred to together as 'the Cardiff martyrs'.

And I think, interestingly, this is more to do with the context of that particular point in time, so the winter of 1678 and the so called Popish Plot - the men are actually only linked together from their time as prisoners together in Cardiff Castle onwards, rather than their lives before that point.

So prior to their arrest in 1678, Philip Evans was a young man in his 30s. He had only recently professed as a Jesuit, following his education at St Omer and his Jesuit training at Watten and Liège (so that's that robust network we heard about from Maurice earlier, you can see the network in action), he arrived in Wales to begin his life as a missioner in 1675, so only 3 years prior to his arrest; whereas John Lloyd was a slightly older man. He was a secular priest who had attended the English College at Valladolid and he'd been working as a missioner in Wales since the 1650s so for quite a long time. So, both different parts of the network of Catholic missionary endeavour we heard about earlier.

I think it's quite hard for us in 2021 to get an idea of exactly the type of impact that the Popish Plot has on contemporaries and the pervasive level of worry and anti-Catholic paranoia that it creates, but I think essentially there's the combination of the fears of a Catholic plot to rid

the country of Anglican influence, coupled with the Exclusion Crisis which creates a panic that a Catholic King was going to be put on the throne, these two elements would work together and they sort of whipped up this intense hatred and fear of the hidden Catholic threat that I think hadn't really been seen since the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot 70 years earlier in 1605. I think, for me, the best way to get some sense of the climate that these men are arrested in and the atmosphere at the time is along the lines of the anti-Muslim rhetoric that we saw created by the popular press in the aftermath of 9/11, so that real sense of fear and panic and complete that took over every aspect of life and this underlying need, that there was a need to find and remove a hidden threat sort of before they find you. So, I think it is quite hard to understand how all encompassing that was. And the plot is particularly impactful in places like Wales. So, we just heard from Maurice how vitally important Wales is to the Catholic mission overall and in places like Wales where the Catholic community had been able to flourish over the previous generations under the protection of people like the Somerset families and the other influential families. And men like John Lloyd had been able to go about their business as priests for decades, and I mentioned that John Lloyd had been working in Wales since the early 1650s, so that is a very long time where he's working fairly undisturbed, undetected by authorities, ministering to a large but discrete Catholic population.

And in Wales in particular, the plot also takes on a very personal angle and becomes filtered through grudges about land and politics. And the two main people involved in that are Henry Somerset, who is the third Marquis of Worcester, later the first Duke of Beaufort and who is the great grandson of Edward Somerset we heard about earlier, which shows I think to some degree the huge influence and power that this family are still having on the Welsh Catholic community several generations later. So, he's sort of on one side of this discussion and on the other side, his sort of sworn enemy is John Arnold, who is a local MP. He is Justice of the Peace and he is desperate to regain some of the power that he feels that he should have in his county and he is also a particularly vehement anti-Catholic. So the plot gives Arnold the excuse he has been looking for to move against Worcester. And he offers an additional bounty of £200 for anybody who can find Jesuits in a more general sense but also specifically to capture Philip Evans. Because he's aware that Philip Evans is part of the Jesuit community at the Cwm and he's aware that the Somerset family are inextricably bound up with them, so he sees this as a way to reveal the Somerset's kind of hidden power. So just to put it in context that £200 is the equivalent of about £23 or 24,000 in today's money, so it's a huge amount of money and that is on top of the £20 that the government promised for the capture of any Jesuits. So, there is this kind of general sense of urgency to find these men with the hidden incentives, the added incentives sorry to find them as well.

So, John Lloyd was arrested in November 1678 and taken to Cardiff Castle, and a month later in December of the same year Philip Evans was eventually captured and joined him. And they were held in a room called the 'Stavell Oged' or the Harrowing Chamber, which gives you some sense of the environment that they were kept in. By oral tradition it's a small dark cell, no day light, underground, not a very pleasant place to be in at all. But despite, having achieved his goal and having arrested Philip Evans and the additional capture of John Lloyd, in order to secure a conviction, and for the case to be successful, Arnold and the other men involved, needed to obtain proof of Mass being celebrated or proof that these men were priests, but this is quite difficult to obtain as the people who could give that evidence would also be implicating themselves in having attended the Mass so therefore they would have committed

a crime themselves of being a Catholic. So, it's quite difficult for them to persuade people to give that evidence that was necessary so Evans and Lloyd are held together in jail for quite a long time, it's nearly 4 months until they are actually convicted, and then another long period after that time before the sentence is finally confirmed that they will be executed, which is in July 1679. So nearly 7 months that they are held together in jail for 7 months. Gradually, they get an increasing amount of freedom as that time goes on and it seems that there is never going to be any conclusion to the imprisonment 53:45 Delete and during that period because they are in jail they are easier to find 53:59 So during that whole period despite the fact that they were in prison and they were under this pending sentence of execution they were actually easier to locate so if the Catholic community needed to visit a priest for the various sacraments or for spiritual guidance they could go and visit these priest that had been arrested, so as a result of that they become very well known and very beloved in the Catholic community, and these freedoms kind of gradually get better and better to the point Philip Evans was allegedly playing a game of tennis when the news of his execution eventually came, so on 21 July, he was told that he would be executed the following day, so seven months later, and he said, he thanked the person who had brought the news and he said 'well, that means I've got time to finish my game of tennis', so he went back to his game of tennis, which gives you some sense of the kind of, the relaxed sort of atmosphere they'd gradually come into. So, these men had built up a really large loyal following, even after their arrest and they were loved and well known within the Catholic community.

So, following their executions on 22 July 1679, burial is not an option for them because they are convicted traitors, so they are forbidden from being buried in hallowed ground, and the usual custom in this case was to display a severed head on the town gate as a warning to others to not follow the same path of behaviour. But tradition says with these two men that this only happened to Philip Evans in this case, because the men were so widely beloved (even by the people who were carrying out the sentences) that they wanted to be saved from the further humiliation of having their remains displayed, but John Arnold's vendetta was so focused on proving his case against the Jesuits that he 56:02Delete gap56:05 insisted that Evans's head be displayed which matches the details on the skulls that Jan was talking about, where one skull has the whole in the cranium that suggests it has been displayed on a spike where the other one doesn't. So those details start to match with the oral traditions surrounding these men. This is often the case because burial is not an option with these martyrs. Often you'd get secret Catholics kind of attending the executions, who would manage to secret away relics to be stored and kept safely until they eventually arrive at places like Stonyhurst generations later.

Additionally, in this case because the Popish plot had been so damaging in Wales it ha actually removed the usual kind of network of Catholic safehouses so places where relics might have been safely kept, in Herefordshire, Monmouthshire and Glamorgan, such as the Cwm. By this point the Somerset family have lost their houses in Wales. They have Badminton House in Gloucestershire following the Civil War. Lots of other families have lost land and the focus on Catholics is so intense in South Wales that it is not safe to store the relics in their own houses. So, in that case, places in Wales that were left relatively undisturbed by the plot, such as Holywell, became then a natural destination to keep these precious relics safe. And I think again that we are revisiting that earlier point of reconfiguring our understanding of geography that we heard about from Maurice earlier, so Holywell seems very far removed from Cardiff,

but if you think about it in terms of the Welsh Catholic network and this network of safe houses and places that precious items can be kept safe then it all points towards a natural storage place. And the circumstances surrounding Evans and Lloyd, their deaths suggest a hasty burial following a later removal, the parts that can be saved to a safe place, which, I think, also matches the evidence found by Jan on the skulls of that, evidence of a burial in earth and then a safe careful wrapping in precious materials to preserve the relics for future generations. So I think all these things together coupled with the information that we have from the story of the men themselves points to the, it is very likely that these are the relics of John Lloyd and Philip Evans, and that they have been carefully cared for by generations of the Welsh Catholic community.

Rebecca
Thank you, Hannah. You have set out the situation so clearly for our listeners. The contemporary comparison of 9/11 is very helpful in beginning to understand the situation at the time following the Popish Plot and your argument for why these bones are those of Evans and Lloyds is clear and makes a great deal of sense. As an Archivist I was particularly interested in the fact that you mention oral sources that tell us these things. I suspect that these oral traditions have been written down-is that right and if so where can these be found?

Hannah
Yes, I think, when I was researching this as part of my kind of work on the Jesuits in Wales, one of the things that is quite difficult is the testimonies tend to be fairly well known within a parish environment, so in Cardiff for example Philip Evans and John Lloyd are well remembered, there is a plaque on the wall where we think the execution took place, there is a stained glass window in the Cathedral, that kind of thing. But pinning that down to actual sources and then plugging that back into the wider network of the Jesuits as a whole is quite difficult. So with Wales there is a Victorian gentleman called John Hopsin Matthews writes a bundle of notes, called the 'Cardiff records', which is in the typical, I think you mentioned Morris' volume earlier, it's a similar passion project, just bringing together lots of his own interest and in that he interviews people who are quite elderly, I think it is in the late 1890s he is doing this, so they are quite elderly and they've inherited memories from previous generations of the Catholic families and the Catholic traditions and stories. So he records some in there and then you get some little snippets which then leads to other records in other places which haven't previously been connected with that story. So you have got David Lewis, who was another Jesuit martyr, who is very connected with Abergavenny, so the Abergavenny records are very well kept within their own rights but they are not necessarily linked with the Cardiff records, so it's a bit of a trail of breadcrumbs sometimes I think if you find one bit which leads to another bit which leads to another bit and eventually the wider story starts to be pieced together and you get a better sense of the overall network and the impact this has.

Rebecca
Yes, this sounds familiar. As that seems to be the case often with archival research where you have to follow one trail and then another, with little clues scattered here and there from which you have to try and make connections. Thank you

Jan, returning to you. What did you think when you heard Hannah's suggestion? What further research were you able to do and how did this support her theory?

Jan

Well, as soon as Hannah suggested Evans and Lloyd I was so excited! It made perfect sense, and I found it quite moving that two men who had been so close in their last months, were kept together after death. And additionally, for Stonyhurst, the identification of Philip Evans was hugely significant as he was one of our pupils in the 17th century, and is one of the 21 known alumni of our College who died for their faith as Catholic priests. That made it feel very personal!

My next move was to refer back to the archived accounts of the lives, the trial and the deaths of Evans and Lloyd to see if I could find information to test the theory. It was common in executions of more than one priest to hold one back and force him to watch the agonies suffered by the first victim in the hope that it might prompt him to recant his religion in return for his life. This would be a much-desired propaganda coup, as it was widely regarded that executing priests simply made more martyrs.

So the first execution was that of Philip Evans and it seems to have been protracted to inflict the utmost pain, in the hopes of horrifying John Lloyd into recanting. When this failed, it was commented that the frustration of the authorities was taken out on Lloyd who was effectively butchered alive, 'with particular ferocity'. The accounts of the deaths of both Evans and Lloyd could equally explain the savage knife cuts on the bones, and the impalement of one head on a spike.

But why just one head? The Jesuits had been singled out for especially harsh treatment in England and Wales since the 1580s, when they began sending missionaries. The government regarded them as 'elite shock troops' if you like, trained intensively in counter-Reformation theology, and highly skilled in debate and preaching. They were feared and hated in equal measure. And when, as we have heard from Hannah, the fabricated Oates Plot burst onto the public scene, the fact that it was supposed to be a Jesuit plot made the government all the more frantic to hunt down Jesuits, and public hysteria was whipped up to an extraordinary degree. People began seeing Jesuits everywhere, and reporting them to the authorities. As Hannah has pointed out, fear stalked the streets, and usually reasonable and tolerant people seemed to take leave of their senses, and believed the most outlandish things of their neighbours and friends.

Hannah's account of the active involvement of John Arnold in hunting down Jesuits in this tense and febrile atmosphere, and the extraordinary amount of money he was prepared to offer for the capture of Evans, explains to me the savagery of Evans' execution, and, as she has said, the reason why his head particularly was singled out for impalement, a very public humiliation.

On a less graphic note, I think that reading contemporary accounts of both men brought me into a closer understanding of their characters. Evans was a musician, a fine Welsh harpist and an excellent tennis player. Lloyd was older than Evans, and seems to have been a steadying influence in the very trying circumstances of their last months. I learned that Evans was betrayed by a former servant for the substantial bounty money offered by John Arnold, and that it was many months before anyone could be found to give witness evidence against John Lloyd as Hannah has said. Both men supported and upheld each other in what can only

be described as the unimaginably difficult and stressful last few months of their lives, and of course, the witnesses to their deaths described their calm, stoic acceptance of a hideous end. They were remarkable individuals, and made a remarkable, strong team.

I think what I would like to take away from this is a good appreciation of these men as more than the collected evidence of their bones, but as human beings with interests, talents, wit and courage.

Rebecca
Indeed. Jan, thank you. Your concluding words are so important. It is so easy when we have focussed so much on studying the bones to try and reveal their identity to then think that the story is over with being able to put names to these bones, but in fact this is only the start as there is so much more to be learnt about the individuals to whom they belonged as a person, which is where what Hannah said about these two men is of interest and where what Maurice has set out regarding the prominent geographic Welsh situation and providing some background about the early Jesuit mission there is useful in providing a more rounded picture.

Jan
I would just like to convey my intense appreciation of Maurice and Hannah's expertise and assistance. It's been a remarkable period of exploration and very exciting, and I think that the three of us have brought three very different elements to create a rounded story and I'm very grateful to both of them for their co-operation.

Rebecca
Indeed, Jan. I fully agree, and I hope our listeners value this too.

Hannah, I believe that your PhD, which analysed the Welsh Jesuit missionary library of the College of St Francis Xavier, which we've been hearing about today is due to be published by Brill, hopefully next year, in 2022.

Hannah
Yes, hopefully that will be coming out next year. It might be slightly delayed as a result of the last year or so with access to Archives. So, essentially it pulls together a lot of what we were just talking about in that these networks lead to the Jesuits having access to a large library of Catholic research material and spiritual material which is gradually filtered in through the continent along those essential corridors Maurice was talking about and these networks and it's one library in a network of libraries the Jesuits use to further their spiritual work in Wales and in England as well. So, hopefully more to come on that in the near future.

Maurice
I just hope that perhaps in some small way that today's podcast will help stimulate future scholarship on this. There is such a wealth of material, I think, out there if one only knows where to look. And, I think, well, I know, that there is material in the Simancas archives in Spain relating to Wales. I know that definitely. I had a doctoral student look at some material not directly relating to what we've been talking about today but slightly tangential to that. I know that there is material there relating to the Earls of Worcester, so what I'm saying is that

there's a whole story to unpack there and there's certainly a doctoral project and a whole lot more to be done in the future better to understand all that we've been talking about today.

Hannah
Yes. Definitely. The more people that can look into it the better.

Rebecca
Yes hopefully this podcast, and in due course Hannah's book, will help to increase study of this area. I think I speak for all of us when I say that we would be willing to offer support and access to our collections that relate to such, so if anyone is listening and wants to explore this please do get in touch. Our contact details will be in the show notes.

For anyone listening who has not already seen them or for those wishing to go back to see them again, the Holywell bones are featured in the online exhibition at www.jesuitcollections.org.uk and if you go to the index tab you will find them in the final section 'A detective story'.
You might also like to listen to our first podcast in which I interview Jan about her experience of researching and caring for relics. This can be found on the exhibition page under the heading 'Extras'.

If you want to keep up-to-date with new content or future exhibitions then please consider signing up to our mailing list, which can be found at the bottom of the exhibition page.
Contact details for our speakers and images relating to this topic will be available on the website too. And your feedback is always welcome so do drop us a line to let us know what you made of this podcast.

And that just leaves me to thank Maurice, Jan and Hannah for sharing their insights into what the Welsh Catholic experience in 17th century was, the remarkable lives of Saints Philip Evans and John Lloyd and of course what the Holywell bones have revealed. Thank you! And thank you for listening.