Transcript for *The Significance of Relics*

This podcast is an interview with Dr Jan Graffius, the Stonyhurst College Collections curator, about relics. Over many discussions that I have had with her, her expertise, infectious enthusiasm, and passion for relics and the importance of understanding their significance has changed my own perspective on these remarkable artefacts. I'm privileged that as Archivist for the Jesuits in Britain Archives I am responsible for the care of a rather significant collection of relics and recently we jointly launched a virtual exhibition of some of these relics that belonged to some of the priests and lay people martyred for their Catholic faith in England and Wales in the 16th and 17th centuries, many of whom were canonised in 1970.

RS: Hi Jan. Thank you for agreeing to this interview. It's been fascinating talking with you these past weeks whilst we have been preparing for our joint virtual relic exhibition and in particularly hearing about your research into the Holywell bones, but in fact you have spoken with me previously on many occasions about relics and every time your passion, your knowledge and enthusiasm has been impressed on me. Anyway, I thought it might be interesting for others to also hear from you on this topic. I've got a whole list of questions, but perhaps let's start with where did your interest in relics come from? What provoked your fascination in this field? How long have you been researching relics?

JG: *Thanks Rebecca! It's sort of been a coming together of lifelong interests, really. At school, many (MANY) years ago, one of my favourite subjects was organic chemistry. And when I became a curator, that knowledge was fundamental to providing the right sort of conservation care to all sorts of objects. Anything that has once been alive, whether it is a taxidermy specimen, a leather book cover, woollen tapestry, silk brocade dress fabric, all these things have particular requirements for preservation. You need to avoid light, excess humidity, insect infestation, all those sorts of things. In a way, caring for these objects is a bit like keeping them in intensive care, trying to prolong life. I have to say the objects do not seem to be in the least bit grateful for our efforts, as they are constantly trying to return to the dust from which they came.*

As for my involvement with relics, that really started when I began working as curator at Stonyhurst College more than 20 years ago now. I was fascinated at this extraordinary collection of human remains, which carries so much significance for British and European history; objects with a powerful spiritual connection, and, perhaps of most interest for me, the compelling and poignant life and death stories of the human beings, whose remains I was curating.

The word that keeps coming back to me when I am talking or writing about relics is 'significance'. Relics matter. They mattered back in the 16th century and they matter now.

They tell us so much about mankind's universal history of repression and intolerance, of conscience and freedom of thought, of courage and betrayal, but ultimately, they tell us about love. The love of a human being for their maker, the love shown within beleaguered families and repressed communities, the love demonstrated by those who faithfully recorded the truth of the life and death of others, and the love shown by succeeding generations who have preserved the physical remains of those they revere, often at great peril to themselves, keeping the stories of these extraordinary men and women alive.

RS: Oh, that is a beautiful way of thinking about relics and when it is put like that it is hard to argue that relics are insignificant and I'm sure that we will be discussing this a little more later on, but sticking to learning a bit more about your personal experience, I wonder what aspect of caring for and researching relics do you enjoy most? And why?

JG: *I think every curator is at heart a storyteller. Museum curators are privileged to care for some of the most amazing artefacts- items of transcendental artistic beauty, of great financial value, of incredible historic importance. For me, the crucial common denominator is always the story behind the object. Who made this? Why? For whom? What moved and inspired these amazing creators? What does it tell us about the times in which the object originated? How has this object changed in importance through the centuries?*

In the end, for me, it always comes back to the human story.

When you are looking after the physical body parts of human beings, these questions take on a deeper meaning. Something prompted the man or woman, whose bones I see in front of me, to knowingly choose a path which led to a painful, ignominious death, rather than give up a belief they held so dearly. Who was this person? What do we know about them? What sort of society ordered things this way? And why? And what does this tell us about ourselves, now, in the 21st century?

The curator within me enjoys the scientific and practical challenge of preserving relics and the researcher within me finds a deep fascination in delving into history to find out the answers to the questions I have just posed. But ultimately it is the stories that fascinate me.

RS: Yes, I can understand that desire to uncover these stories, which is one of many reasons I became an Archivist as I found the stories I unearthed in records so compelling and thought it was important that these were preserved and made available for others to discover. We will come back to how you discover these stories later but for now I wonder what kind of skills do you think it takes to work with relics?

JG: *Well, you need an understanding of organic conservation principles. That sounds daunting but to put it more simply it means working out how to preserve objects which have* *once been alive. These artefacts are most comfortable in the sorts of conditions which they preferred when they were alive, if that doesn't sound too odd.*

So, technically speaking, curators need to maintain an environment where the temperature is between 18 and 20C, the light levels are below 150lux, the UV level is below 90, and the humidity is around 50-55% RH. Those things can all be managed and controlled via computers, sensors and machinery. Simply speaking, for the curator it means recreating the optimal conditions in which most living creatures are comfortable. Not too much heat or cold, not too much damp or dehydration, light levels that don't bombard us with UV radiation or confine us in darkness where insects can breed, providing a clean space where moths and other destructive insects are detected, discouraged and removed. A mixture of modern technology and old-fashioned good housekeeping.

You also need, I think, a degree of empathy with the concept of sacrifice for principles. I don't think you need to be a Catholic, or even a Christian, but you do need to engage with the unique circumstances in which these men and women died, and you need to be able to convey that to your audience. Whatever your personal views, you must be able to treat these relics with respect. Of course, ethically speaking, that goes for all collections involving human remains, and rightly so.

You need patience. And good eyesight. Nowadays, for me, that means magnification lenses, sadly! This is slow work. One of the most painstaking tasks I have undertaken was to remove dust and mildew from a fragile pair of nearly thirty-year-old rubber flip-flops worn by a Jesuit priest who was brutally murdered in El Salvador in 1989. The flip-flops were caked with dirt, from the garden where he was killed, and heavily stained with blood and other human remains. It was crucial not to disturb the soil, bloodstains or fragments of desiccated flesh, but equally crucial to remove the accumulated dust and mould, which would eventually destroy the fabric of the shoes.

Which brings me to the last point. You cannot be squeamish. Some of the relics in this exhibition exhibit clear signs of violence from the inhuman nature of the form of execution visited by the government on those it regarded as traitors. I work with bones, shreds of skin, nerves, nails, teeth, hair, bits of brain, lungs, viscera and heart, an eyeball, and with the stains of blood and other bodily fluids. It requires an odd mixture of detachment and engagement. Through it all, though, I find the human body a fascinating and wonderful construction.

There is a poem, called 'The Visitor' written by a Canadian human rights journalist and poet, Carolyn Forche, which I have framed on my wall at home. She was writing about the atrocities carried out by the death squads in El Salvador in the 1970s and 80s- a place which has a deep and lasting significance for me, and where I have done some of the most challenging work of my life. The last line of her poem resonates deeply with me 'There is nothing one man will not do to another.' Sometimes I find that my work gets to me, and then it's necessary to walk away for a while.

RS: That is something I haven't really thought about before. It is easy when you do not work that closely with such material to be detached and just focus on the stories that others, such as yourself, tell about them without having to really think about the gruesome acts being perpetrated on the person. But of course, it's true that they are witness to horrid things being done by one or more persons to another. And I know from my own experience of cataloguing personal papers that it is easy to become really engaged and personally involved and even a bit protective about the person, in the sense that you do feel you know that person through what the records they have left behind reveals, which is of course often only a curated selection, but this must be even more poignant when you are dealing with their bodily remains. At times quite challenging I imagine.

So, going back to the aspect of discovering their stories, something which you said is where your interest in caring for relics comes from, I wonder whether you could explain how you even start trying to discover the relics identification and or provenance? What resources are useful for studying relics?

JG: *You start with the object. Examine the bones/relics and see what you can tell from their appearance, their condition, any attached fabric or other material, or any documentation. From this you should be able to try and supply a date for the bones. Examine them to see how they have been treated- have they been buried (is there evidence of staining due to immersion in soil for example)? Or boiled (ie are they completely clean of skin, muscle or sinew?)*

Are they ancient (they look fragile, honeycombed, powdery?) or more modern - intact, with skin or sinews still attached?) What were the circumstances in which they were found? Were they found with other artefacts/papers/manuscripts which might provide a clue as to their history? What is the background of the house/property/estate in which they were found? Who lived there and what were their stories?

If there is no reliable secondary information, such as provenance (in other words definitive information on the links in the chain of ownership of the relic as it passed from one person to another) then you need to examine traditional or sometimes eve oral sources of information. Such things could include later historical comments along the lines of 'this is believed to have originally belonged to Katharine of Aragon or Mary, Queen of Scots.' These stories often contain a grain of truth, even if these grains have perhaps been considerably embroidered with the passage of time. If you can embroider a grain.

Relics should always be, in theory at least, accompanied by an official paper trail, which provides attested information as to whose relic it is, where it was found, whose hands it has passed through, and whether it has sufficient official credibility for the relic to be allowed to be permitted public display. This paper trail is known as approbation and it should accompany the relic and should be sealed with an official seal of a local bishop or religious superior. But given the volatile nature of the religious upheavals in England and Wales during the Reformation, and the scattered status of many medieval relics rescued from destruction during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, not to mention the frantic and clandestine gathering of those 16th and 17th century relics snatched from execution sites *under the very noses of governmental authorities, it is not surprising that there are many thousands of relics which have been separated from their official approbations.*

RS: Yes, indeed, although we do have many relics in the Archives collection which have approbations there are probably just as many that don't.

JG: *Yes, it's a result of the history of the way in which these things were collected or created.*

Because English Catholicism was so severely repressed in the 16th and 17th centuries, most of the surviving relics that we have today are only with us because they were smuggled across the Channel to English and Welsh institutions in exile in the Spanish Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Poland. Many English and Welsh relics undoubtedly lie unidentified in colleges, universities, archives and collections across Europe. Many official approbations were separated from their relics during these journeys, and they sit unrecognised in archives and libraries across Europe.

I spent a happy few months about five years ago, trying to track down one of the most prestigious relics which once belonged to St Omers College, which was the direct predecessor of Stonyhurst College. In the early 17th century our college had a relic of the Bed of Our Lady. This was a real crowd-puller, if you will, a very prestigious relic indeed, regularly displayed in processions through the beautiful town of Saint-Omer. We lost sight of it in 1762 when the school, along with all other Jesuits, was hastily expelled from France and took shelter in Bruges. I have found a good deal of 17th century paperwork relating to the relic in Bruges, Ghent and Brussels. But, as yet no sign of the relic itself.

So, to answer your question, if you are trying to track down English and Welsh relics, you need a good understanding of the scattered, exiled nature of English and Welsh Catholics in the 16th and 17th centuries. The best places to start looking are often not in Britain, but in Europe.

RS: That's interesting. I'm guessing that, in non-Covid times of course, and with an unlimited budget there would be many who would be happy to undertake such research which involves so much travelling! And it is a sort of treasure hunting isn't it?! And who doesn't love doing that. And underlies what you said was one of the skills needed-patience and I would suggest a dogged determination to keep looking, leaving no stone unturned so to speak in the hope that new information is discovered.

Perhaps, related to this, and I imagine that the answer is yes, but has technology changed since you have begun working with relics that facilitate your research?

JG: *Yes, there are some hugely exciting scientific advances in this area of research- perhaps the most obvious would be the Oxford Relics Project, which brings together the latest* *technology such as osteology, AMS radiocarbon dating, isotope analysis and Ancient DNA analysis to the discipline of researching ancient relics.*

But I am probably more old-school myself. I rely on longstanding practices- observation, experience, archival research- to aid me in my work. And in many cases, I find myself working in parts of the world where cutting edge technology is not available. Indeed in some places I have been glad of a decent supply of electrical lighting.

RS: Ah, this might be a good time to ask you to perhaps expand on where researching has led you. You have already alluded to your work with Romero when you mentioned the painstaking cleaning of flip flops.

JG: *I have been hugely fortunate to have had access to the extraordinary collections of relics held by the British Jesuit Province in London under your care Rebecca and at Stonyhurst. There aren't many people working with relics from a professional curatorial point of view, and this rare breadth of experience with the Province's collections has taken me to some extraordinary places. And there are positive sides of being known as the woman who deals with body parts*

One of the most important projects I have undertaken in my professional life has undoubtedly been to work with the relics and possessions of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador. Romero was murdered in 1980 while saying mass in the Chapel of the hospice where he lived. He was killed on the orders of his government because he spoke up for the poor of El Salvador, who were suffering terribly as a result of the civil war of the 1970s. His bloodstained vestments and the contents of his tiny bungalow were preserved by the Sisters who run the hospice. But El Salvador is a tropical country, and the unforgiving environmental conditions, along with the needs of the Sisters to prioritise their resources to look after the terminally ill in their care when it came to allocating resources, risked causing considerable damage to the clothes, books and contents of Romero's small house, or the "casita" as it is known. And so in 2007 I first went to El Salvador on what I thought would be a one-off visit. Fourteen years later I am still closely engaged with these extraordinarily powerful objects. The bloodstained chasuble pierced by a single high-velocity bullet which killed the Archbishop as he stood at the altar. His black woollen trousers stained with the salt crystals of a profuse sweat caused when he saw the gunman raise his rifle and target him in his sights at the door of his own church. And other examples of the cruelty and savagery of that civil war- the infamous murderous spree of the death squads in the University of Central America in 1989, targeting theology books belonging to the Jesuits they had just massacred, the books riddled with machine gun fire and dragged through the blood of the murdered priests. A single white bloodstained shoe belonging to Celina, who was fifteen years old, who hid with her mother, the Jesuits' housekeeper, that night; they were murdered in each others'arms. The deaths squads wanted to leave no witnesses.

Often when I am asked why I think relics are relevant, I remember the things I have seen and the people who have shared their stories with me in El Salvador. These things matter. Because they testify to the truth of what happened, of a time when poor people's lives were *expendable, and when the govt perpetrating such atrocities thought it could get away with covering up the facts. So the evidence in Desecrated books, a child's bloody shoe, blood-caked flip-flops- these things bear witness to events and will not be swept away out of sight: they matter.*

RS: Oh gosh! Indeed, so important that these are preserved, cared for and explained for future generations. This should not be forgotten, and I imagine this has made a profound impression on you.

JG: *Indeed yes.*

On a less dramatic note, my engagement with relics drew me to undertake a PhD, which I completed last year. The subject was the relics of our college, then based at Saint-Omer in northern France, from 1593 to the late 17th century, and their significance (there's that word again) for the spiritual, cultural and educational formation of the boys who attended our school at that time. When I started the degree, I thought I had a clear idea as to the outcome; it was intended to be a straightforward analysis of these remarkable relics which have survived and the way they enhanced the spiritual lives of these exiled children of English and Welsh Catholics in the 17th century. I knew it would be a slog, as I was working full-time as Curator, but didn't quite anticipate that the PhD marathon would also incorporate hurdles, cross-country, 100 metre sprints and, for good measure, what occasionally felt like the long jump.

The research took me to so many fascinating places – Rome, Lucca, Saint-Omer, Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, Ghent, Paris, London, York and Durham. Of course, the richest primary academic resources were to be found in the collections, historic libraries and archive at Stonyhurst. As I began to read myself in, it became clear very quickly that this was a much more diverse, significant and fascinating project than I had anticipated. All PhD candidates are warned sternly against 'mission creep' but I couldn't ignore the revelations which were completely reshaping my original thesis plan of what these relics were and how they were used.

In short, the project developed from an examination into the use of relics at St Omers, and within the St Omers Sodality, or a particularly enclosed prayer group, in particular, into a survey of the spiritual, cultural and educational formation offered at St Omers, including drama, music, architecture, garden design, pyrotechnics, public processions and performances involving salvaged vestments and manuscripts, alongside the unique St Omers college curriculum devised in the early 17th century by a revolutionary educational visionary, Fr Giles Schondonch SJ who died in 1617. He is, as you may have gathered, something of a hero of mine.

RS: Ah, yes you have mentioned him to me before. He was a Rector in the early 17th century at St Omers, wasn't he? Yes.

JG: *Digging deeper into the Stonyhurst archives I uncovered an extraordinary manuscript whose significance had lain unidentified for hundreds of years. At the amazing historic library and archive in Saint-Omer itself I found a little-known chronicle describing the daily events in that town from 1600 to about 1630, written in beautifully clear Flemish/French by Jean Hendricq, who had the blessed gifts of acute observation coupled with a love of garrulous narrative and clearly legible handwriting. This is an amazing combination. And reading this was a truly wonderful relief after trudging through endless dry, formal Latin texts written in crabbed and blotted 17th century hands. Hendricq's descriptions of the trials of the early St Omers College (the local townspeople deeply resented the influx of penniless foreign child refugees crossing the Channel- and how familiar does that sound?) to the ultimate triumph of Fr Schondonch's canny public relations programme where he managed to build his school and fill it in the teeth of much opposition of the burghers and businesspeople of the town. These manuscripts are worth their weight in gold.*

For me the best bit of my research was translating Hendricq's description of an eight day celebration of the canonisation of Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier in Saint-Omer in 1622. This involved the construction of forty-foot painted wicker statues of the two saints which were set up in the town square. The statues were joined by fuses to two equally massive wicker statues representing Heresy and Ignorance, which were stuffed full of fireworks and gunpowder. At the given signal, the fuses were lit and fire leapt from the mouths of the saints along the fuse resulting in the explosive destruction of their enemies, and causing most of the townspeople to be deafened for a good two days thereafter. I was delighted to discover that St Omers College took the leading role in all of these public performances because of the pupils' renowned musical and dramatic skills, and their decorous, well-drilled discipline. I was also delighted to find a 17th century predecessor to Wicker Man and the Burning Man Festival. There's nothing new under the sun.

I spent a happy summer in 2015 chasing relics around the Low Countries. Most of the St Omers relics were confiscated in 1773, when the Jesuit Order was suppressed. The paperwork was scattered and is now to be found tucked away, often unrecognised or properly identified, in the state archives of various Belgian cities I visited, but the physical relics themselves were not so easy to track down. Many of them I imagine were farmed out to churches but once the paperwork is gone they are difficult to identify. My target was the renowned St Omers relic of the Bed of Our Lady. As yet undiscovered, but I'm certain that I will find it one day.

RS: This definitely shows, like you said, that you need lots and lots of patience when working with relics! And determination not to give up. If anyone listening happens to have a relic that might be the Bed of Our Lady sitting in a cupboard, please do get in touch with Jan. I think she'd be very pleased.

JG: *I would be so happy.*

The result of all this was my final thesis, somewhat laboriously entitled 'Bullworks against the Furie of Heresie: Relics, Material Culture and the Spiritual, Educational and Cultural Formation of the Sodality of St Omers English Jesuit College 1593-1650'. And if you can actually get your way through the first page and retain the will to live, I congratulate you. For me, at least, it was a great project, involving research covering 1500 years of relics and remains, stories of smuggling and betrayal, heroism and martyrdom, dramatic performances, fireworks and pyrotechnics, music, procession, and beautifully planted gardens where 17th century English and Welsh boys, far from home, could wander and contemplate and absorb the carefully choreographed floral Catholic symbolism.

RS: As you know I'm actually really looking forward to reading your thesis in due course as what you have uncovered sounds intriguing and you've mentioned several things to me over the years and I would love to learn more as the more I have heard from you the more I'm beginning to understand the significance of understanding the relics and their context. As Archivist for the Jesuits in Britain Archives I am privileged to be caring for a rather significant, as I have learned from you, relic collection and also within our manuscript collection we have resources that help reveal some of the provenance of these. Until meeting you I have to admit that I did not grasp, and therefore did not value, what relics had to offer. Having heard you speak on relics has, I have to say, therefore changed my outlook on them and I now fully appreciate the need to care and study them. Maybe you could outline to our listeners why it is important to preserve relics and discover their past? And what role do they play in the 21st Century?

JG: *Well I've already touched on my work in El Salvador, and I have often been asked why on earth do I go to all these lengths to conserve the relics of St Oscar Romero and the murdered Jesuits and their co-workers. I mean, El Salvador is a beautiful country. It's not exactly a safe place, the work is often harrowing, and the conditions can be somewhat challenging. I was drawn into it initially through my respect and admiration for Oscar Romero and those other brave men and women who stood up to injustice and state-sponsored violence and paid the ultimate price for their witness. But through working with their blood-stained clothes and simple personal possessions, I came to realise that these things represent an inconvenient truth, which repeated governments and their supporters sought to suppress and deny. That these people lived and protested and spoke up for the truth and they cannot be airbrushed out of history. The relics I was working to preserve are important factual evidence of the fact that Romero and many others were murdered for speaking out against repression and injustice.*

And I don't just mean the governing classes in El Salvador, I'm thinking particularly of the involvement of the United States in the Central American civil war and related atrocities. We've seen and heard enough recently of 'fake news' and 'fake truth' and so on, and how hard it can be to counter those political and media voices seeking to deny what is actually happening. I don't want to get too deep into politics, although I think I just have, but I find it *interesting that throughout history relics have been used as evidence to highlight state repression, from the early Roman days of the Christians being martyred in the Colosseum to, well to the present. And they have an important evidence role as well as being valued for their spiritual and religious significance.*

RS: Yes indeed. This exact issue was raised in a recent webinar talk I attended where it was suggested that the collection and preservation of the 17th Century relics cannot have been non political. And that this was done to make sure that others overseas could see evidence of how in this case Catholics were being treated in England at that time.

JG: *Exactly. They were politically hugely significant. They also though provide an important gathering point, where people can come to draw comfort and encouragement by being in close proximity to those who inspire them and who spoke up for them. Going back to El Salvador, the little house in the Hospitalito where Romero lived and worked for the last few years of his life is also a pilgrimage site, where Salvadorans, and many from all over the world, come daily to visit his house, see his meagre and simple possessions and understand a bit more about this man by being in the place where he lived. There is a power that you find in people's homes and places surrounded by these objects that they used in their daily life. The Sala de los Martires in the University of Central America contains some very poignant and powerful relics of the murdered Jesuits, and Celina and her mother Elba Julia, and also of the countless victims of the savagery of that civil war. These are displayed simply, with explanatory labels and panels, but most powerfully, they are interpreted and explained by undergraduate volunteers from the university, all of whom were born after the peace accord was signed in 1992. These young people draw on their own family experiences – everyone was affected by the violence – and weave these accounts into the story of the objects and relics in the museum. And so the relics have their own voice, and that voices is enhanced by the narratives and experiences of the past, interpreted by young people who represent the future. It's a very powerful combination.*

Now obviously, Romero was alive in relatively recent times, and there is plenty of film footage and recordings of his voice, which have their own power and impact. The relics of more historical figures don't have these benefits. Their stories were initially memorised by witnesses and members of their faith community, and later turned into printed 'lives', which are now studied by historians and theologians, who added further records from state documents, trial proceedings and so on, and these are all used to be interpreted by the church to provide inspiration and examples for the followers of these men and women in the Catholic faith. The relics of those who lived centuries ago, or even millennia ago, perform therefore a different role for those who come into contact with them. They can provide a powerful and immediate connection with a saint or martyr, who we have long heard about, and they can make that person seem more real and human, not just a pious image on a prayer card, or a plaster statue in church. For instance, at Stonyhurst we care for two hats which belonged to St Thomas More. These are secondary relics, if you want to be technical, *but they are very relatable and human objects. One is a simple brown felt hat with the brow turned up to keep the rain off Thomas More's face. The other was lovingly, and not terribly expertly, embroidered by a family member as a gift, intended to keep Thomas More's head warm on cold winter nights. I have seen the faces of school children visiting the museum at Stonyhurst where these hats are kept, and there is a sense of wonder at being close to a hat worn by Thomas More, a man who knew Henry VIII and Katharine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn, and all the famous names they know from their history classes. It's a 'wow' moment. It makes an instant connection with history.*

Also, children understand about hats, in a way that is easier to grasp perhaps than bones, despite the fact, as I tell the pupils when they are looking very nervously at a skull, to remember that they all have skulls and bones and it's nothing they need to be scared about.

RS: Ah would you mind perhaps explaining the difference of a secondary relic?

JG: *Yes. I'm sorry. I should have clarified that. Relics are divided into different classes. I often say that the Catholic Church is nothing if not relentlessly logical at times. So a first class relic is a piece of the body or hair, physical body of the Saint or martyr. A second class relic is a possession of that person, so the hat of St Thomas More for instance. And there is a third class relic which is something that has touched a first class relic. But let's not get into that.*

RS: Right. Thank you. And perhaps delving deeper into this how should relics be treated?

RS: *First and foremost, with respect. Whatever your individual beliefs or creed, human remains deserve to be treated with care and dignity.*

I mean, as a museum curator, you are trained to treat all of the objects in your care with the utmost professionality, whether they are priceless paintings or ephemeral bus tickets. But relics have an additional significance because of their spiritual and human impact.

One of the most extraordinary things about caring for relics, I find, is witnessing the effect they can have on people who have a profound reverence for a particular saint. I have seen visitors dissolve into tears at being so close to a relic of someone they have a particular close affection or devotion for. I have seen people take off their wedding rings to touch them onto the glass of a reliquary. I remember once somebody brought a fairly new baby to be put on the Perspex box that surrounds Thomas More's hat because the baby was called Thomas More.

I have learned that sometimes also people just need to sit in silence and be present with relics. They are not 'museum objects' in the strict sense; for many, many people they have their own powerful inspiration and message.

RS: This was certainly on our mind wasn't it when we were creating the exhibition. And it is something that I have been aware of when thinking about what to do with the relic collection in my care at the Jesuits in Britain Archives, especially again in how we could and should display these for others to visit and spend time with them if they so wanted to do.

As you know all too well since you have helped us with this, we at the Jesuits in Britain Archives have begun listing and photographing the relic collection in our care. We have already discussed the need for most of these relics to be cleaned-and those included in the exhibition have been cleaned by you in preparation for this and the photographs that you took show how much they have benefited from this! I wonder if you could share some of your thoughts about what further study could be done with the collection as a whole or individually and what research you think we could encourage others to carry out perhaps?

JG: *Yes, I greatly admire the work you have set in motion at the British Jesuit Archives, and look forward to seeing these relics from the exhibition, and the many others in your care, on display, with their stories.*

There is so much research still to be done. As I said earlier, there are clues and documents and relics once owned by British Jesuits scattered all over Europe, currently unidentified. Very exciting prospect! If anyone listening is looking for a new research project and perhaps would like to explore the relics, and the travel opportunities this might entail, please get in touch!

RS: Moving on, we have alluded to the relic exhibition, which has prompted this interview, so perhaps we should now move directly to our first joint virtual exhibition, *How bleedeth burning love*, which we launched online on 1 March 2021. As to be expected with any exhibition this involved a lot of work on your part beforehand. I wonder whether you could explain why you selected those particular relics to be shown? And what criteria you used to narrow down the selection?

JG: *Well, it wasn't easy! The British Jesuit Province has such an amazing, diverse collection of relics that it was a hard task to choose. I know that there are more in the exhibition than there should probably have been, and it is asking a lot of people to listen to the whole thing in one go! But I wanted to try and create a sort of wide variety of stories and experiences.*

So, the first criterion was the fact that 2020 was the 50th anniversary of the canonisation of the English and Welsh Martyrs. The exhibition, as you know Rebecca, was originally intended to be a traditional display of relics which would have been housed first at the Jesuit Archives in London and then at Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, where I work. Covid sadly put paid to that plan, so you had the very good decision to do a virtual exhibition. This required all sorts of new skills, such as managing microphones and stuff, which explains perhaps why the

2020 anniversary exhibition is actually taking place in 2021. Anyway, the 40 Martyrs were the starting point.

I decided to include a number of martyrs who were not canonised in 1970, or who have not yet been canonised at all, such as Blessed Edward Oldcorne and Thomas Percy, because their relics and stories are so fascinating and powerful.

I tried also to have a wide variety of relics, such as handwritten poems, hats, a gold crucifix, a cameo ring, embroidered vestments and fragments of clothing etc, as well as human remains, to demonstrate the breadth of the concept of a relic.

The overwhelming majority of the relics in the exhibition are those of priests, which reflects the savagery of the treatment reserved for Catholic priests, and Jesuits in particular. It is important that their stories and voices are heard, such as David Lewis, known in South Wales as the Father of the Poor, who worked quietly and tirelessly for more than thirty years in the mid 17th century to alleviate poverty and bring spiritual comfort to his congregation. But I also wanted the choice of relics to reflect the largely unsung lay Catholics, men and women, whose courage and creativity allowed the priests to carry out their spiritual tasks. The piece of Edmund Campion's cloak tells the story of those young men, such as George Gilbert, who volunteered to guide the disguised Jesuit priest from house to house, at great personal risk.

Sadly, there are no relics in the British Province of the amazing women martyrs, Margaret Clitheroe or Anne Line, but at Stonyhurst there are examples of embroidered vestments made by anonymous recusant women supporting the sacramental work of the priests who said mass for their communities. I wanted to highlight the generosity of people like Jane Wiseman who provided the beautiful gold and enamelled reliquary to house the Thorn from the Crown of Thorns, donated to the Jesuits by Elizabeth Percy. And I wanted to highlight the dedication and skill of the unknown women from Durham who decorated a wooden box with beautiful beaded flowers and quotations from the Psalms to make a fit container for the human shoulder contained inside.

Those Catholics who risked imprisonment, if not worse, to rescue bloodsoaked clothes or body fragments from the place of execution are represented by the extraordinary Dona Luisa de Carvajal, a relation of the Spanish royal family living in London in the early 17th century, whose self-appointed task as relic-rescuer and preserver of the remains of some of the English martyrs of Tyburn is described in her fascinating and eye-wateringly frank letters.

I wanted also to reflect the frequent human stories of conflict and betrayal that we encounter time and again in the stories of the martyrs. Edmund Arrowsmith left standing in the snow as a child as his parents were arrested for being recusants, until he was taken in by a kindly neighbour. His parents having to farm him out to be brought up elsewhere as they were too poor to keep him at home, as a result of the repeated fines imposed upon them for practising their religion. Dorothy and William James, domestic servants, whose startlingly vengeful testimony led to the execution of three priests, all of whom they knew well, one of whom, David Lewis, they had served for a number of years. In that case, the corrupting temptation of a hefty financial reward provides the key to their behaviour. Or the story of Thomas Whitbread whose love of choral music moved him to sing during his captivity in *prison, providing comfort not only for himself but for many of his fellow prisoners, Catholic and Protestant, who could hear his voice from their cells.*

So hopefully you will see that the relics in this exhibition were chosen to try and illuminate as wide a variety of human experiences as possible.

RS: Well, I am of course biased but I think you certainly achieved a wonderful breadth and created a narrative worth following through the exhibition showing the significance of these relics and the stories they tell. I wonder, given your own vast research of relics, whether the relics of the 40 English and Welsh martyrs are different to others? And if so, how?

JG: *I think that part of the particular resonance and connection is that these saints come from places familiar to us: London, Lancaster, York, Cardiff and so on. And they have names familiar for centuries- Thomas, Edward, Anne, Margaret, Philip, John. I always find it amusing at confirmations to hear the names of saints selected as patrons by the young people- some of them definitely chosen in an attempt to take the bishop by surprise. There is St Elvis who was either Welsh or Irish, and the ever-popular Saxon princess Sexburga of Kent.*

It is easy to imagine saints as being remote, from faraway places and distant times. But the 40 men and women who were canonised, these lived in our own towns, cities and villages. Their friends and families gathered a lot of their history and memories, so their stories can often really resonate with us.

I think also that these stories resonate, and pose challenging questions, because the deaths of these men and women were brought about by their own government, at a time when toleration for conscience and belief outside the accepted, legal norm, was unthinkable. The 16th and 17th centuries in England and Wales were marked by what we would now regard as unbelievable cruelty and intolerance, inflicted in the name of religion. Let's not forget that executions for holding to a personal, non state-sanctioned faith were ordered by Henry VIII for both Catholics and Protestants who failed, or refused, to walk his particular tightrope of allegiance and belief, and the Protestants burned in the reign of Mary Tudor, as well as the Catholics regarded as traitors by the government of Elizabeth I, James I (and VI), Charles I and Charles II. These relics tell awkward and powerful truths about our own national past, which still marks our politics, our collective sense of self and the practice of personal religion now, in the 21st century. I have mentioned El Salvador more than once, but the parallels between two states, four hundred years and half a world apart, who both systematically suppressed and killed their own citizens for failing to toe the government line, these parallels are glaring.

So, are these relics different from others? In some cases, no, they are exactly the same small fragments of bone and hair that you find associated with medieval saints. But they can be startling, with a power to make us look twice. The faded red and gilt spangled hat almost certainly made by Thomas More's beloved daughter, Meg, to keep her father's head warm on cold evenings. My personal favourite, the eyeball of Edward Oldcorne, set in a silver case *that has engraved eyelashes surrounding the relic. And the amazing Thorn relic, believed to be from the Crown of Thorns, with nearly two thousand years of history from Jerusalem to Constantinople, to Paris, to Scotland, England and the Spanish Netherlands, encased in gold and crystal, embellished with pearls, enamel and turquoise, which once belonged to the romantically doomed Mary, Queen of Scots and given by her to Thomas Percy, Earl of Northumberland.*

RS: The exhibition ends with a detective story where you reveal that you have perhaps finally laid to rest as much as we can without DNA testing the question about the identity of the bones found at Holywell, which is subject of a future podcast, which we are planning to do with Dr Hannah Thomas and Prof Maurice Whitehead. And I wonder that as in this case where there is no apparent identifications of relic, whether you enjoy this kind of mystery of could be this person or that and the challenge that this poses as I think I would prefer to know a definite answer that this is without doubt the relic of so-and-so.

JG: *Absolutely, and the entire church process surrounding relics exists to verify them based on the need for certainty and the avoidance of doubt or falsity. From a curatorial point of view, I would say that the need to know, or the desire to know, is based on the academic principles of unravelling woolly accretions, stories that get passed on over time, to get as close as possible to the reality of the historic truth.*

I personally found the process of working with the Holywell bones to be profoundly exciting and fulfilling.

I am very fortunate to be able to call on the expertise of academics who have considerably more experience in the field of 17th century Welsh Catholic missions. You mentioned Dr Hannah Thomas and Prof Maurice Whitehead, and sharing my curatorial and forensic insights into these extraordinary bones with them, produced a convincing, evidence-based explanation for the identities of the bones. This is covered in the exhibition, and I hope listeners will log on and hear more details. And, of course, as you say we have another podcast coming soon, in which we will sit down with Hannah and Maurice and discuss the fascinating story in much greater detail.

RS: Yes, I have to say I'm looking forward to further discussions about this with yourself, Hannah and Maurice as soon as we can arrange it. As this was such an exciting and interesting development during the exhibition planning. I remember how excited you were when the new hypothesis was put forward and was then demonstrated to be a very likely case. But this is for another day.

I wonder whether, as someone who has studied relics for a long time, you have a favourite overall relic? And Favourite among those exhibited? And why?

JG: *Well yes, as I kind of hinted a few minutes ago I have to say I have a great fondness for all of the relics in my care. But undoubtedly my favourite is the right eye of Edward Oldcorne.*

It's a startling object, the eyeball is now darkened and shrivelled, and is encased in a small circular silver receptacle, with a glass window shaped like an eye, and with eyelashes and wrinkles and the bags under the eyes engraved into the silver. For me it speaks very powerfully of the cruelty and inhumanity of those who persecuted their fellow countrymen for reasons of religion and conscience. Eyes are deeply vulnerable and sensitive, and to see one treated like this is thought provoking and startling. It produces a strong reaction in almost everyone who sees it.

I am also drawn to what we know about Edward Oldcorne himself. He worked quietly in Worcestershire, arriving in 1588, a few weeks after the Spanish Armada, which was not the best time for a Catholic priest to be landing in England. He ministered to the local Catholics in his care, relieving poverty, preaching, administering the sacraments. He survived there for nearly sixteen years, which is very rare in a time when priests were actively sought out for arrest and execution, and with significant cash rewards for those who discovered them. In 1606 he was caught up in the in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot. Although innocent of the Plot, he was nonetheless captured and as a Catholic priest- he was tortured, convicted of treason and executed.

Someone cared enough about this man, and his work, to risk the penalties inflicted on relic-collectors, to retrieve this eyeball, which had become detached when Oldcorne's head was boiled, the last part of the gruesome hanging, drawing and quartering process. And the care continued with the provision of this little silver and glass relic container, with its inscription on the back which identifies it in Latin as the right eyeball of Edward Oldcorne, not the left, very precise that appeals to the curator in me. It was very quickly smuggled out of England, it was an object too dangerous to keep there with its associations not only with a Jesuit but with somebody who was accused of involvement in the Gunpowder Plot, and came to the English Jesuit college of St Omers, as I've said before the direct ancestor of Stonyhurst, where it was valued and venerated in memory of a very brave and also very gentle man.

RS: It is indeed a remarkable relic and in a very visually, it has great visual impact, the reliquary that it sits in. And it certainly is one that people are unlikely to forget! What do you hope the outcome of the exhibition is?

JG: *I hope listeners find it interesting. I hope that it reveals a side of British history which is not particularly well known. I hope that it helps us to reflect on the current persecution world wide of all manner of fellow human beings for the sake of conscience and faith, all faiths.*

RS: Finally, if you don't mind, what would you tell someone just starting out researching relics?

JG: *If you are just starting out researching relics, I hope that this exhibition is helpful, and that it confirms the great significance of these important remains. I wish you the best of luck, and I am happy to help if I can.*

RS: Thank you Jan! I have really enjoyed talking about relics and hearing about their significance today. There are no doubt many other questions I could, and perhaps should have asked, and perhaps another time. Thank you.

JG: *Thank you too Rebecca. It's been great fun.*

RS: The relic exhibition that is discussed in this podcast is available to view at www.jesuitcollections.org.uk.

If you'd like to find out more about the Jesuits in Britain Archives you can visit www.jesuit.org.uk.

For more information on the Stonyhurst College Collections visit the Stonyhurst College website at www.stonyhurst.ac.uk and under the 'facilities, access & events' heading you will find the 'historic collections, archives & museums'. The contact details for Dr Jan Graffius can also be found there.

You can also follow the Stonyhurst College Collections on Twitter @StonyArchivum and the Jesuits in Britain Archives are also on Twitter @JesuitArchives.

There are also some articles on Thinking Faith www.thinkingfaith.org that might be of interest to listeners including one entitled 'Telling Romero's story' by Dr Jan Graffius.

Thank you for listening.