



BETH

BETH Bulletin 2025

No. 03

Christine Love-Lodgers, Esther Jeon
Hannie Riley and Jussi Hyvärinen

'New Wine in Old Bottles': How Two British Roman Catholic Seminary Libraries 'At Risk' Were Saved for New Sustainable Use

Jon Purcell

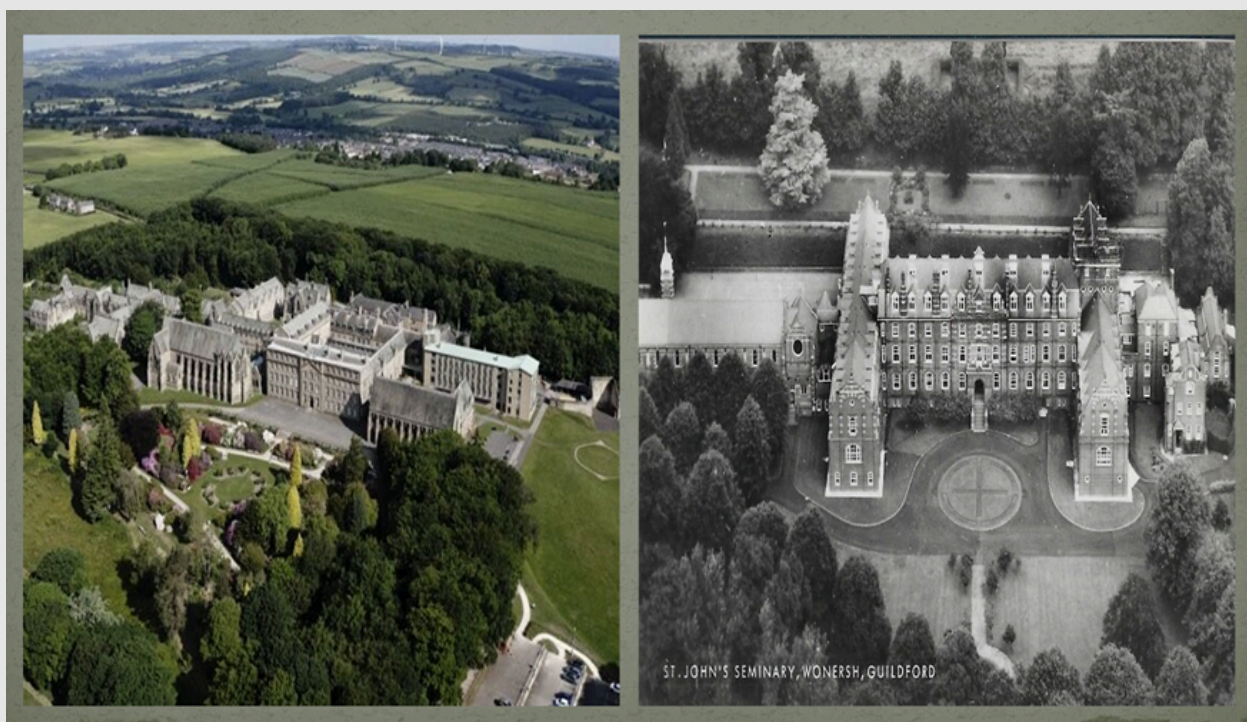
Liaison Officer for Methodist Archives, The Methodist Church of Britain, UK

The dictionary definition of the phrase 'New wine in old bottles' is 'an idea or approach that is presented as new and innovative but is ultimately repurposed from an established or longstanding method, system or organisation' (The Free Dictionary, "New wine in old bottles").

A simpler, modern-day description could be 'sustainable recycling', or 'finding a new and more sustainable use for old or historic libraries'. This paper examines the problem of orphaned seminary libraries built up over many generations which are deemed 'at risk' when their parent institutions close or cease to exist. Two 'at risk' British Roman Catholic Seminary libraries will serve to illustrate that, in certain circumstances, 'orphaned libraries' can survive sustainably in new and different ways.

The seminaries examined in this paper are St. Cuthbert's Seminary at Ushaw, Durham, in North-East England, and St. John's Seminary at Wonersh, in the South-East. My interest in this topic stems from my time as University Library Director at Durham University, where for eight years I was responsible for the library and archive collections at Ushaw College after the closure of the seminary. At Wonersh, I was an external library consultant asked to advise St. John's Seminary on ways in which the library could be saved and used elsewhere or in other guises.

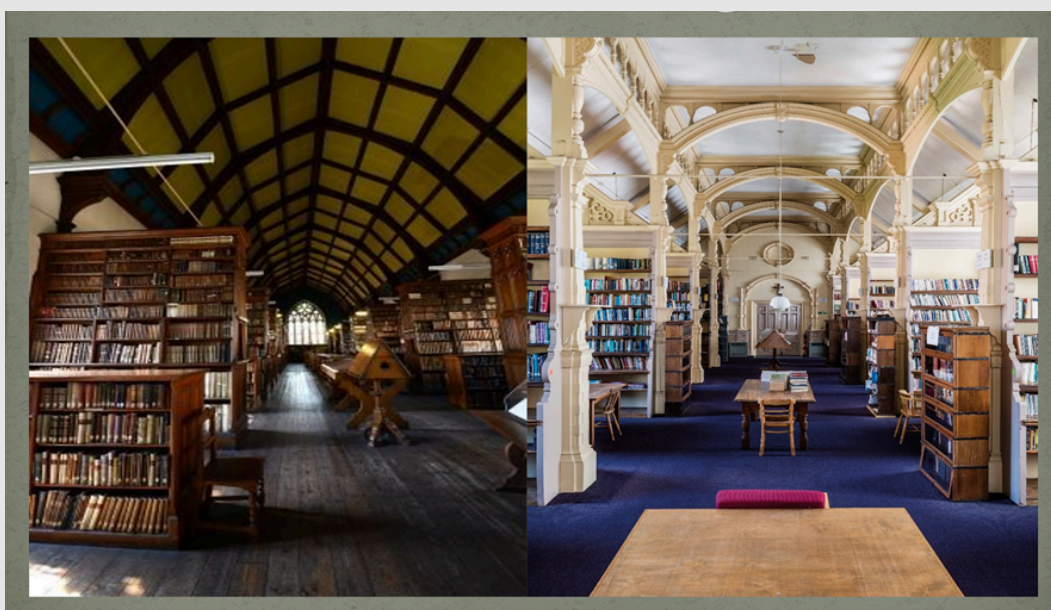
It is perhaps helpful to know a little about the context in which nineteenth-century Catholic seminaries were established in England. Queen Elizabeth I (1558 – 1603) prohibited public worship of the Roman Catholic faith in England, Wales and Ireland, effectively driving it underground until the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1828. This act allowed for a rebirth of British Catholicism and an urgent need for British-trained priests. In 1809, Ushaw became the first post-Reformation Catholic Seminary to be established in Britain since the sixteenth century, and others soon followed. In the present day, both the Ushaw and Womersley Seminaries have closed due to the decrease in vocational priests in training, thus placing their libraries at risk of being sold, dispersed, or disappearing into history.



[Image 1] St Cuthbert's Seminary Library (left) and St John's Seminary (right),
(photo provided by Jon Purcell)

The pictures above depict the Ushaw seminary on the left and the Womersley seminary on the right. Both seminaries were designed and built in the nineteenth century as self-contained, sustainable communities, with their historic libraries containing valuable collections of national and international significance. Seminary libraries played a vital part in the formational training of Catholic priests. Mgr. Philip Hallet, Principal of Womersley, described the role of the seminary library in 1938 as follows: 'At Womersley the chapel and the Library stand at different ends of the building. The one the source of spiritual strength, the other the storehouse of knowledge. The one the centre of worship, the other the centre of intellectual activity. Here are the chief treasures the seminary possesses' (Southwark Record, Dec. 1938).

Unfortunately, in the years since this quote was written, Catholic seminaries in Britain have become an endangered species and many have had to close their doors. Reasons for this include secularisation and the decline of Western Christianity, with fewer men coming forward to be trained as priests. This has resulted in seminary consolidation and a growing perception that seminary preparation for ordained ministry may be an unduly restrictive and inappropriate method of training priests. Falling student numbers resulted in the closure of the Ushaw seminary in 2011 and the Womersley seminary in 2022, and both were faced with important decisions concerning the future of their seminary libraries. Namely, whether the libraries would be able to survive either in situ or be incorporated into another institution, be dispersed, or even sold. The fact that both libraries have survived makes them interesting and worthwhile examples to consider.



[Image 2] St Cuthbert's Seminary Library (left) and St John's Seminary (right), (photo provided by Jon Purcell)

St. Cuthbert's Seminary at Ushaw was the first post-Reformation Roman Catholic Seminary to be established in Britain in 1809, and during its lifetime trained hundreds of priests. By 2011, however, there were only a very small number of students in training. Durham University, five miles away, was asked to take responsibility for the college library and archive, while the remaining college buildings were transformed over time into a Catholic heritage centre, historic house, and visitor attraction. Under the management of Durham University Library, the seminary library was recatalogued to full international MARC standards and incorporated into the Durham University Library's online catalogue, in effect making the library's historic and rare special collection universally accessible for international scholarship. The books once used by seminary students now receive an increasing number of inter-library loan requests from British and international libraries, and are thus still in use! A key factor for the Ushaw Seminary Library's survival in its original institutional setting was undoubtedly its link with Durham University and its incorporation into the Durham Residential Research Library ("Durham Collections Fellowships"), comprised of three significant research libraries, including those of Ushaw College, Durham Cathedral, and Durham University Special Collections. The once 'at-risk' library is now used by students and visiting researchers from all over the world, its undergraduate collections are actively sought to satisfy UK and international inter-library loans, and the library itself forms part of the visitor attraction enterprise now operating in the former seminary.

St. John's College, Womersley, was founded in 1889 and closed in 2021 with eighteen students upon a decision to sell the Seminary. A Patrimony Committee was established to find new homes for anything that could be recycled or found new uses for, including the seminary's library, archive, vestments, furniture, and art. Whilst the College buildings were sold for conversion into apartments, the seminary library found a new lease of life thousands of miles away when a former Womersley student, now Principal of St Joseph's Seminary in Macau (a former Portuguese colony and now part of China), sought permission for all 30,000 volumes of the Womersley library to be packed, shipped, and installed in St Joseph's Seminary. Thus, through this relocation, a very significant English language Catholic library has been given a sustainable future and retained its purpose of facilitating and underpinning Catholic teaching, learning, and research, while once again being involved in the formational training of Catholic priests.



[Image 3] St. John's Seminary Library being unpacked and reshelved in St. Joseph's Seminary Library, Macau, China (photo provided by Jon Jon Purcell)

This paper will conclude by delineating the sustainability success factors as demonstrated by the examples examined in this paper. These should be of constructive use for other theological libraries at risk from institutional closure. Key success factors include:

- Seeking partnership opportunities with suitable universities or other cognate institutions where the library is regarded as an asset rather than a liability, and would be of use and value
- Being positive: tell a good story, capitalise on the strengths of library collections, and their value for teaching, learning, and research, as well as for public engagement and external grant opportunities
- Investing time and effort in a clear vision and strategy, planning, networking, influencing, and promoting in order to seize opportunities and build networks
- Making good use of champions or influencers who share the vision and can facilitate positive engagement with other potential institutions or users

- Emphasising the availability of external funding applications for conservation, retrospective cataloguing, public engagement, digitisation, access, and so on, the fact that various grant and funding opportunities are available will be useful in discussions with potential collaborators
- Capitalising on opportunities and events to enact positive interventions to safeguard libraries at risk

It is worth remembering that whilst not all orphaned libraries can be saved, there is hope and potential for many of them. There are various options available for these libraries, which may work in some contexts and situations, such as university or other institutional partnerships. Success in one context can often breed further success or be adapted for other institutions. The Ushaw 'Heritage site/Visitor Experience' model has been adopted by other British Catholic institutions. In this way, the orphaned seminary library can be part of a new, interesting, and sustainable future facilitated by the Catholic 'Heritage Tourism and Visitor Experience' framework.

Bibliography

- Durham Collection Fellowship. n.d. "Welcome to Durham Collections Fellowships." Accessed May 31, 2025. <https://durhamcollections.org.uk/>.
- The Free Dictionary. n.d. "New Wine in Old Bottles." Accessed March 25, 2025. <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/new+wine+in+old+bottles>.
- Soutwark Record*. December, 1938.