



Quick Start Guide to Recording Convent Heritage

Prof Gillian O'Brien and Dr Danielle O'Donovan



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

This Quick Start Guide, published in 2025, is intended as a summary reference guide to recording the material heritage of convents. A fuller version of this guidance aimed at cultural heritage professionals will be published by the Heritage Council and will be available on the Heritage Council website later in 2025.

Contents

	PAGE
About this Guide	1
Introduction	2
Part One: Photography	4
Templates for Photo Record	32
Part Two: Oral History	35
Tips for recording oral histories within a convent community	36
Appendix 1: Archives and Archivists	37
Appendix 2: Preserving Archival Material and Other Objects	38
Appendix 3: Auctioneers	41



About this Guide

This is a guide to creating a record of the cultural heritage of convents in Ireland. It is designed for use by Sisters, lay staff or volunteers working with convent communities in Ireland.

We know that many convents are closing due to the dwindling number of Sisters and their orders. This guide describes some simple steps you can take to help preserve a historical record of convent buildings, artefacts, stories and the traditions of convent life.

Follow these simple steps to help record this important part of Irish heritage

This guide describes two simple steps you can take that will greatly enrich the historical record of convent heritage: photography and oral history.

Part one: Photography - How to create a simple, but valuable, visual record of convent life.

Part two: Oral History - How to create an audio record of the people associated with the convent.

The **Appendix** at the end of this guide contain advice on what to do with the heritage items in convents such as the heritage objects and archival material. It also contains information about the heritage professionals who can support you in this work as well as the relevant professional standards.

We hope you will find this guide easy to follow. We have indicated throughout where you can find the advice and support of heritage professionals. There are additional resources, including the relevant professional standards, listed towards the end.

We wish you well with your project.

Acknowledgements

This guide was written by Prof Gillian O'Brien and Dr. Danielle O'Donovan and is published by the Heritage Council. The Heritage Council and authors are grateful for the input of the Material Culture of Convents Project Advisory Group in the development of this guide and participants in the Material Heritage of Convents Seminar Morning, held in November 2024, for their feedback. Thanks are also due to the Sisters and other stakeholders who gave of their time and expertise as well as allowing Prof O'Brien, Dr. O'Donovan and their collaborator, Jessie Castle, to visit, record and photograph their convents.



Introduction

This Quick Start Guide has two aims: a) to raise awareness of the urgent necessity to record convents and land associated with female religious orders and, b) to suggest ways to record the material culture and architectural and landscape heritage of Irish convents.

Convent buildings and gardens are architecturally, artistically, socially, historically and culturally significant. Women commissioned and re-appropriated many important buildings and landscapes, creating sites of architectural and cultural value. And yet, even though the impact of the convent on Irish architecture, garden design and urban development is substantial, it is almost completely undocumented. It is imperative that the history of the buildings and landscapes, their material culture and the lives of the women who lived in the convents are recorded before it is too late. Alongside the individual stories that can be told there is also valuable generational memory of stories passed down through the decades and centuries which can be captured through oral histories.

In this guide to recording convents the aim is to make sure that the convents are recorded as they have been lived in by their community. This means seeing the rooms as they are furnished and decorated while lived in (or shortly after), and where possible, also sourcing any historic photographs of the convent over time which record changes in décor.

The recording of the convent could be, but does not have to be, undertaken by the Sisters themselves. Lay staff or volunteers could be involved with documenting the buildings, gardens and interiors.

Many of the convents in Ireland are of simple architectural design but all are of significance for a variety of social and historical reasons. Their location in a village, town or city had a huge impact on the surrounding area as schools, housing and service industries grew up around them.

The fixtures and fittings of convents – from the holy water fonts to the stained glass windows to the convent bell – all form part of a rich material culture which offers insights, not only into the convent, but also into the work of the skilled craftsmen and women who created them.

Convent gardens played a vital role in the life of those in the convent (particularly before Vatican II when most nuns lived a very enclosed life). The development of convent gardens are important in the history of landscape design in Ireland. These gardens had a variety of uses which altered over time. They were used for recreation, for education, to provide fruit and vegetables for the convents and flowers for the altar. In many cases a section of the garden was set aside for use as a burial ground.

In recording material culture there needs to be an awareness that different orders prioritised different things. It is also important to note that some objects in the convent may only have been used when there were guests. Indeed, some of the more valuable objects may have arrived there as gifts or donations and only have been used for special occasions or simply put on display, for example silver soup tureens or china tea sets. The everyday items which were used by the Sisters are much less likely to survive as they were worn out and replaced over time. Convents often have objects that were brought back from missions abroad and their significance in relation to the circulation of religious goods is worth noting.

Despite the simplicity of the buildings, particularly those built in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, many of the convents contained very beautiful internal finishes, in the halls and corridors and most notably within the chapels. Where the convents are still in use, these features have often been preserved. As a rule, convent buildings are meticulously maintained, and therefore many of the historic internal finishes have survived in excellent condition. As well as architectural details, the surviving interior items include stained glass, carved woodwork, plasterwork, archival material and light fittings.

Prof Gillian O'Brien

Dr Danielle O'Donovan



Part One: Photography

How to create a simple, but valuable, visual record of convent life.

Photographs are an effective way to create a visual record of convent life. The most important thing to keep in mind here is that any images and the information about those images must be kept together. Without this, photographs very quickly lose their value. Follow the steps below to ensure your images will be of sufficient quality and suitably preserved so that they contribute to the historical record into the future.

1. Take the photographs > Refer to 'What to photograph' below.
2. Record details on sheet > Refer to 'Template photo Record Sheet' on page 32.
3. Download photographs to computer.
4. Bulk rename the image files to include name of Order/Convent/Location/Image number.
5. Add the image file names to the recording sheets.
6. Record location and method of digital image storage.

Need help? An accredited professional can help you to catalogue your photographs correctly to ensure that the specific information above is permanently linked to each digital photograph that is created. This will form the basis of a catalogue of photographs. Ideally, the professional will comply with one of these international standards for ISAD (G), ISAAR, SPECTRUM, MSPI (or equivalent).

What to photograph

What follows is an illustrated list of photographs that we recommend you take to ensure a comprehensive visual record of your convent.

Buildings

Take photographs of the building from all angles. Stand in the middle of the front, back and sides of the building and try to take a "straight on view" of each, capturing the whole length and height of the building if possible.



Distinctive External Features

Include photographs of the main door of the convent, any foundation stones, plaques, bells etc.



Gardens

Take photos that include as much of the garden as possible. Views from upstairs windows work well. Also photograph statues, grottoes or other significant features.



Cemeteries

Many convents set aside a section of the garden for use as a burial ground. Convent graveyards have a unique identity that relates to the way in which the order commemorated Sisters – some chose to use a bespoke grave marker such as a cast iron cross as a congregation and graveyards associated with those orders have a uniform appearance. Other graveyards are unique to the convent, with simple stone or metal grave markers.

Photograph the cemetery as a whole, but also photograph some individual grave markers along with any decorative ironwork and plaques.

Where grave markers are removed, it is important to save examples of the markers in the archive, as they constitute part of the material heritage of the convent.



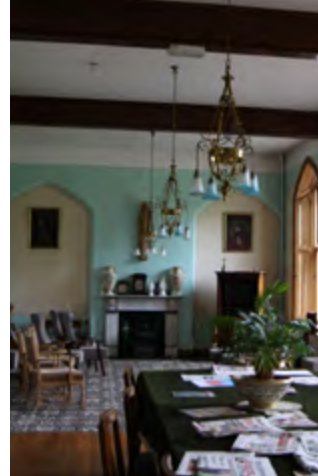
Staircases

As well as taking photographs of the staircase as a whole (in so far as that is possible) also include photographs of the detail – the newel posts, handrails, the ‘tread ends’ of the steps and balusters etc.



Community Spaces

Take photographs of all the important community spaces including the parlour, community room, prayer room and dining room. Take photographs from different angles so the whole room can be seen by looking at a few photographs – from the middle of each wall or the corners.



Corridors

Although corridors might not seem important, things like the wooden wainscoting that runs along the wall, the door openings and floor finishes can often make corridors unique. Take photographs along corridors and of any details - like water stoups.



Cells

Include photographs of the interior of the rooms – each wall if possible, and also of the door and the frame above as many had windows above the door to allow light and air in and out – often illuminating otherwise largely enclosed corridors. Also include photographs of bathrooms where possible.



Kitchens and Pantries

Most convent kitchens have changed over time. They may not have their original ranges or cupboards - though where these exist, it is very important to record them. Even modernised kitchens are interesting, often for their sheer scale, and should be recorded.

Kitchens often have many additional rooms, such as pantries and sculleries. Some convents have cold rooms or refrigerated rooms which also should be photographed where they survive.



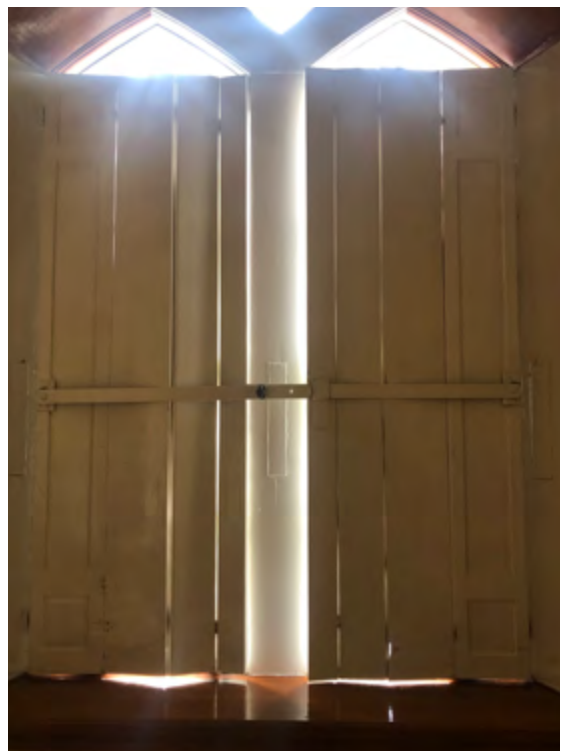
Internal Doors

There is often a huge range of different door styles within convents. Take photographs of each of the different types that survive.



Doors and Window Details

Door handles, locks, keys, window latches, shutters etc. often survive in original condition in convents. Examples of these should be photographed.



Internal Details

Every convent has internal fixtures and fittings that may seem mundane to those who live there but which help tell the story of community life. Some examples include dumb waiters, convent bells, cupboards with sections allocated to each sister and individual cutlery holders etc. The in/out boards that exist in most convents should also be photographed.



Pictures, Paintings and Statues

Statues, pictures and paintings can often make their way to the archive when convents close, but it is important to take photographs of these in their original context – this might be a founder portrait over the fire or in the hall, or a religious statue on a plinth in a community space.



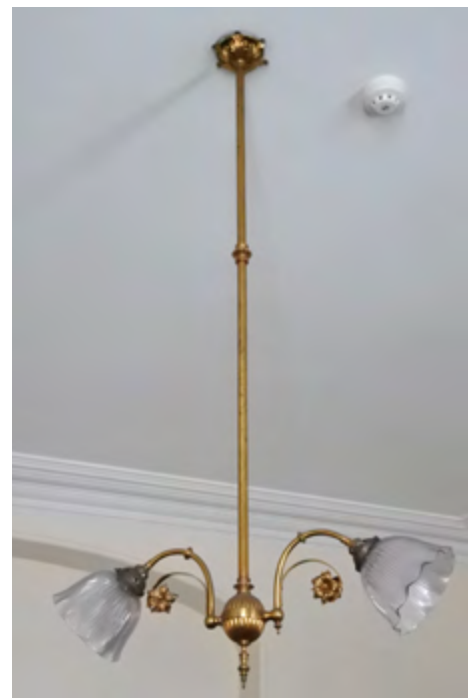
Fireplaces

There is a range of fireplaces in many convents, from those in the parlours and the community rooms to the smaller fireplaces in the cells. Examples of each kind should be photographed where possible.



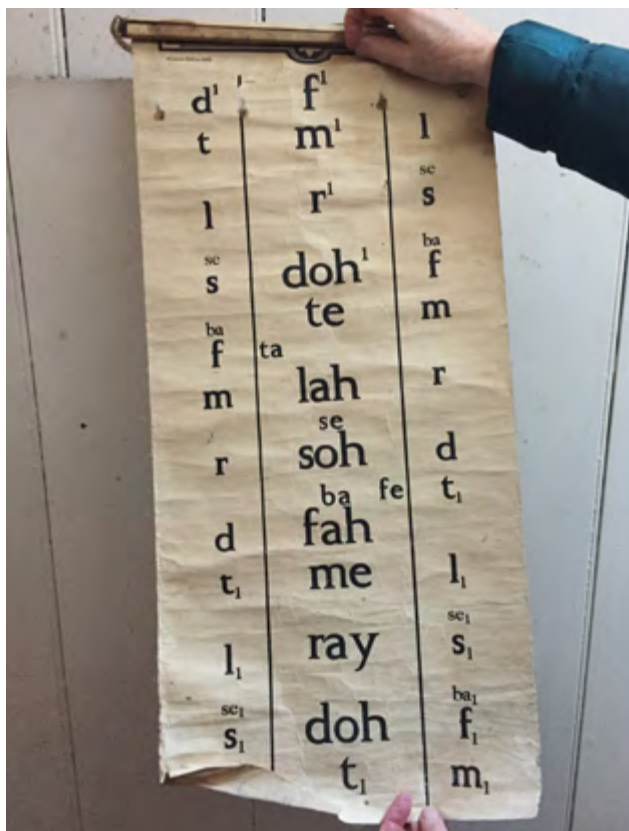
Light Fixtures

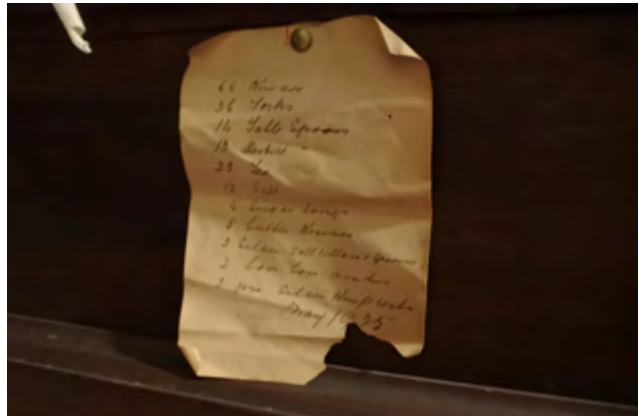
Convents often have unique, bespoke light fixtures. Frequently they survive in much better condition than in historic houses or industrial buildings. Convents often have spare shades or light fittings and fixtures. Some of these may be preserved in their original packaging and these should also be recorded.



Miscellaneous

Over the next two pages there are images of a range of items found in convents. These include election beads, lace samples, cutlery, luggage, keys, clocks, holy water fonts, shelves of books etc. These are simple representative examples of objects found in convents which help tell the story of life in the convent. There may be many others not represented here.





Chapels

Chapels deserve to be recorded in detail. As with other rooms, taking a photograph of each wall while standing with your back to the opposite wall is a great way of taking an 'overall view'. Photographs should also be taken from each corner. Up to the ceiling and down at the floor are also important angles.



Chapel Details

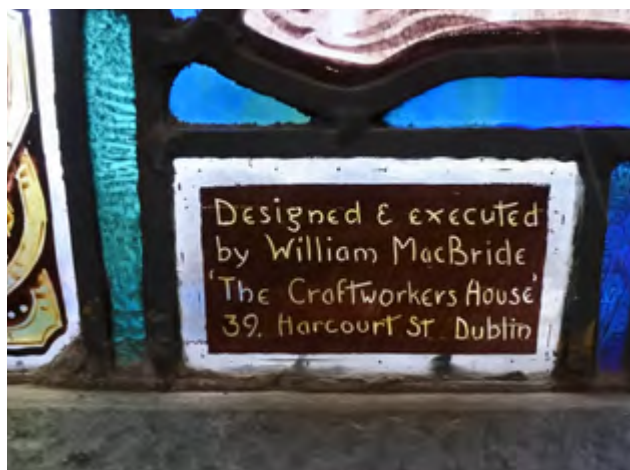
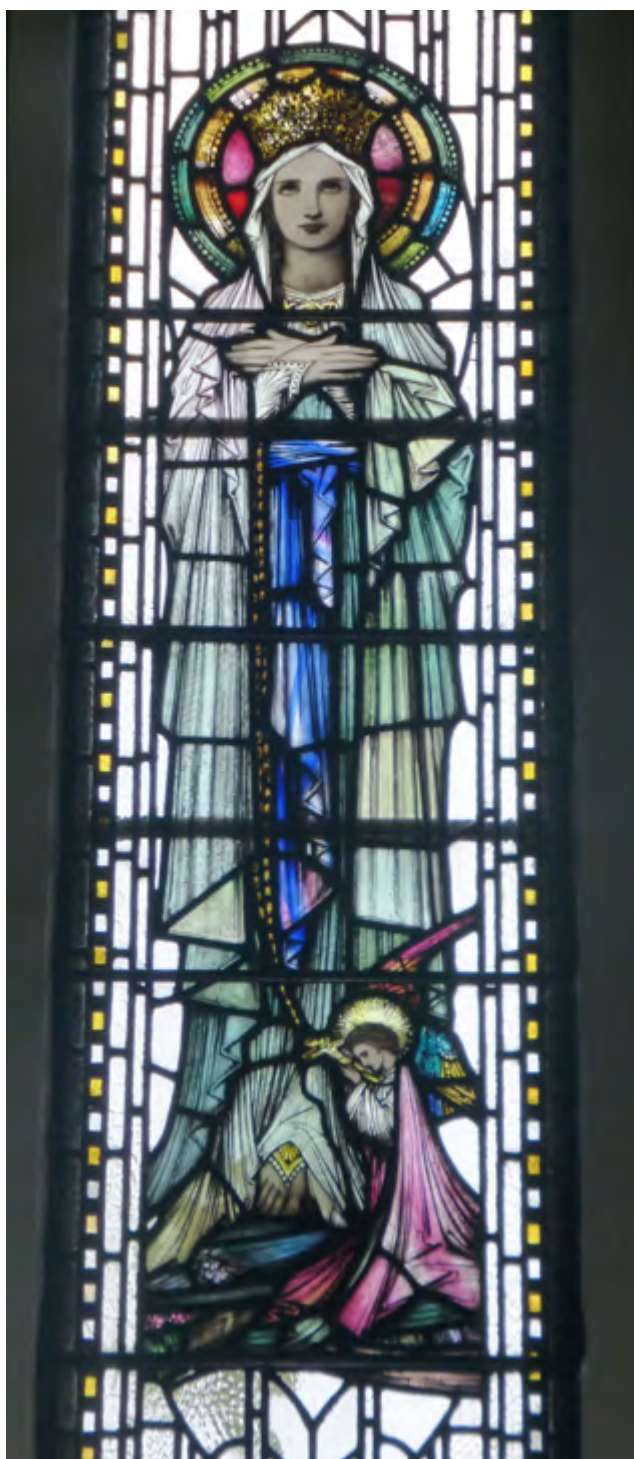
Take photographs of individual details. On things like altar frontals you can sometimes find the name of the maker on one of the short sides.



Stained Glass

Photograph all the stained glass and the inscriptions on windows that have them. The name of the company that created the stained glass is often to be found in a bottom corner of a window.

Also photograph any information about who may have donated money for the windows.



Ceiling Details

Take photographs of ceilings in both convent and chapel. Pay particular attention to those with decorative plasterwork or elaborate paintwork.



Woodwork and Metalwork

There may be intricate woodwork and metalwork in the convent – often on pews, doors, staircases and floors. Take photographs of the details.



Mosaics

Mosaics must be one of the most beautiful surviving features of Irish convents. Take photographs of those on the floor and on walls - general overall views and any special details.



Floor and Wall Tiles

Take photographs of the tiles on walls and floors in both the convent and the chapel. Make sure to note what rooms/chapel they are in and whether they are wall or floor tiles.



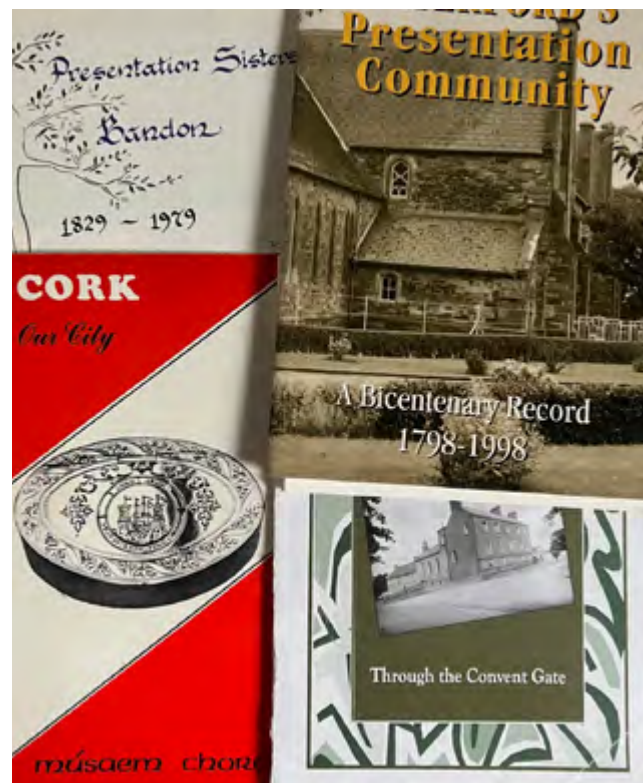
Other Rooms

Many convents have a sacristy which often stored vestments and altar linens kept in linen cupboards with notebooks recording sacred items, feasts and dates on which particular linens and/or sacred vessels were to be used, register of visiting priests, etc. The sacristy and the vestments, altar linens and sacred vessels should be photographed. It is also worth photographing the fitted furniture which stored all the items. Offices and administration spaces should be photographed. The Superior's room and the Bursar's office should be recorded. Most convents had a room used for laundry. The laundry room should be photographed alongside any objects such as clothes horses.



Books and Libraries

It is impossible for archives to take in the entire contents of convent libraries which often are now comprised of modern books on theology, spirituality, etc. and often multiples of particular books. However, the shelves should be photographed and where possible a list of contents created. Where there are inscriptions or dedications on flyleaves these should be photographed. There may be rare books in convents – some of financial value but many of cultural value such as pamphlets about the convent, school or local area. These should be saved.



Historic Photographs, Postcards etc.

There are many kinds of historic convent images. The rarest types of images are candid photos of convent life, such as images of the community room or garden in use, or images of holiday houses or trips to the coast. These are wonderful, captured moments of life in the convent and even if the Sisters in these images are no longer identifiable, they should be preserved.

It is important to ask members of the community to try to identify any Sisters or events in historic images. Transfer photographs to an archival quality album with detailed captions. Keep the list of captions with the album (as far as possible, captions should include the dates, locations and names of the individuals pictured or any other significant details).

Many convents have collections of historic images of the convent, including postcards, that should all go to the archive.



Templates for Photo Record

Below you will find templates that you can print out / photocopy as needed.

Name of Convent	
Order	
Date of Foundation	
Date of Convent Building	
Date of Recording	
Address of Building	
Current Use	

External Photographs

	Photograph	Notes	Image file name(s)
Entire Building			
	In its immediate setting		
	Building in wider context		
	All sides of convent		
Distinctive external features			
	Windows		
	Doors		
	Decorative features		
	Plaques		
	Other		
Garden			
	Overview		
	Pathways		
	Outbuildings		
	Vegetable Garden		
	Orchard		
	Cemetery		
	Gravemarkers		

Internal Photographs

	Photograph	Notes	Image file name(s)
Rooms/ Corridors			
	Entrance hall		
	Staircase		
	Parlour		
	Community Room		
	Chapel		
	Prayer Room		
	Invalids' Room		
	Sample of Cells		
	Corridors		
Features			
	Staircase newel post		
	Staircase handrail		
	Staircase balusters		
	Fireplaces		
	Ceiling details		
	Woodcarving		
	Metalwork		
	Stained glass		
	Door hardware		
	Inscriptions		
	Light fixtures		
	Plasterwork		
	Tiling – floor and walls		

Part Two: Oral History

How to create an audio record of memories of the Convent.

Recorded oral history is an effective way of creating an audio record of memories of convent life. The guide below introduces how to gather oral histories and how to ensure your oral histories are of sufficient quality and suitably preserved so that they contribute to the historical record for posterity.

Need help? Additional information, resources and guides relating to the collection of Oral History can be found at the Oral History Network Ireland website: oralhistorynetworkireland.ie

Sisters' relationships with convents

Convents are homes. Sisters who have lived in a convent for many years have a fond relationship with the building, and with the other Sisters in the community, and the local community. This is often the place where they have carried out their ministry. Other Sisters have very strong attachments to the convents where they undertook their formation. Alongside the individual stories of convent life and formation, there is also valuable generational memory of stories passed down through the decades and centuries.

All of this history and human experience can be captured through oral histories. The process of recording oral histories has become much simpler in recent years with the advent of digital recording equipment, whether that be as simple as a voice memo on a mobile phone or a recording made with a digital dictaphone.

A 'walkalong'

One of the most effective methods of recording stories about life in the convent is by doing a 'walkalong'. This involves recording a conversation during an informal walking tour of the convent with a resident sister. These walkalongs are intended to be natural and spontaneous, they don't require preparation such as learning building dates, architects' names and other details, they are about the lived experience of the building.

Visual prompts

Alongside your questions you could use visual prompts to help guide the conversations, especially for groups. You could use historic photographs or an object closely associated with the convent or the convent itself.

Conversations

The most effective method for recording memories of convent life is through a focussed conversation where themes and some general questions are agreed in advance.

Begin the recording by stating the names of the participants, your name, the date, the location and the number of the session (you might visit a group/individual more than once).

Tips for recording oral histories within a convent community

Preparing questions

Do:

- ▶ Check mobile phones are switched off, laptop sound is off, and any radios or TVs are switched off.
- ▶ Aim for open questions by asking what, where, when, why, how and who?
- ▶ Ask questions which invite description, opinions and feelings: 'How did you feel about that?'; 'What was this room used for?'; 'What can you tell me about the changes in the convent over xx period?'
- ▶ Follow theme(s) in chronological order. Most people remember events and associated feelings or opinions in the order they happened. The conversation may prompt participants to recall an event or person or to explore a theme outside of the chronology.
- ▶ Take brief notes as the conversation proceeds. These will help if you later produce a written transcription.
- ▶ Be attentive and listen carefully – you may think of new questions to ask during the conversation. Allow conversation to flow naturally and let people be themselves.

Don't:

- ▶ Ask questions which will produce only 'yes' or 'no' answers, such as 'do you remember...?'
- ▶ Ask leading questions, ambiguous questions or make statements which do not encourage answers.
- ▶ Prepare a script – your questions are only guidelines and should not restrict the conversation.
- ▶ Interrupt when participants are talking.
- ▶ Add your own comments or opinions.
- ▶ Argue with participants; history is subjective.
- ▶ Rush participants to get to the conclusion of a story, even if conversation has veered away from the question.

Permission

When preparing it is vital to consider the following so that your oral-history recordings will comply with General Data Protection Regulation. This should be done even if the recordings are being done entirely within the community. As the recordings will be stored in an archive it is important that all interviewees must:

- ▶ Understand why these memories are being recorded.
- ▶ Understand how recorded memories will be used in the future.
- ▶ Understand how and where recorded memories will be stored and accessed in the future.
- ▶ Agree in writing to participate in an interview. Before recording, all participants must consider what might be discussed for themselves and living third parties who have not given consent.
- ▶ What 'personal, identifying data' might be revealed.

Appendix 1: Archives and Archivists

We recommend seeking out the services of a professional archivist who can help you to preserve the cultural heritage of your convent using the relevant professional standards.

Association for Church Archives of Ireland

www.churcharchives.ie

Further information on archivist and archivists standards can be found here:

www.araireland.ie/guidelines

You may also find this Heritage Council Guide to digitisation projects useful:

www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/Digitisation-Guide-for-CHG-25.pdf

Appendix 2: Preserving Convent Collections

Annals, account books, building records, constitutions all find their way to archives but there are other paper records and objects that should be considered for preservation. Very often objects such as engraved silver platters and chalices are also retained.

The vow of poverty taken by Religious Sisters has an impact on the kind of material cultural heritage held by convents. Religious Sisters confined themselves to a minimum of possessions, and high value items tend to relate to the apparatus and fittings of the chapel. This does not mean, however, that convent collections of material cultural heritage are not important and unique. Religious life is conveyed in multiple items still held in convents, which can often be overlooked as convents are disbanded and emptied. The focus of collection and preservation tends to be on relics, chalices and patens, statuary and paintings. These items are indeed important and are significant to the convent and are frequently inscribed and dated.

This discussion of convent material culture is arranged thematically here for clarity.

Entering the convent

Aspirants to most religious congregations in Ireland were given a list of items that they had to bring with them to the convent. This list often included numbered or monogrammed cutlery, a writing slope, blankets, pillows, underwear, shoes, serviettes, tea towels, dusters, dressing gown, shawl, linen aprons, strip of carpet, slippers and bed sheets.

This assemblage of everyday items reveals a lot about the simplicity of convent life and any future researchers or exhibition curators will wish to display this kind of material. At least one representative set should be preserved in congregational archives along with a suitcase and trunk that these items were packed into, which often also survive.

Dowry items and gifts

Amongst many convent furnishings are items that formed part of Sisters' dowries. These can be as large as sideboards or hall chairs, and as small as tea sets or jewellery. A selection of these items is worthy of preservation, especially if they are of unique character or can be associated with the Sister who brought them. Again, these items cast light on an aspect of convent life now largely forgotten that should be preserved for those who wish to learn about convent life in the future.

Habits

In many convent communities, habits were worn until they fell apart and when the decision was made to abandon wearing the habit the full assemblage of the habit was not preserved. Where possible, orders should try to preserve at least one full habit, postulant's dress, novice's veil etc.

Evidence of leisure time

When communicating the richness of life in a community to future generations it will be important to show how the Sisters spent their leisure time. There can be a tendency to disperse items like gramophones and their records, pianos and their music, harmoniums and other evidence of music and leisure. A representative selection of these items from at least one convent should be preserved in the archive.

Furniture

Some items of convent furniture are unique and tell us about everyday life. Refectory tables often have drawers under each place setting where cutlery was kept. Benches and pews can line walls where students or guests had to wait. Beds fitted to have draft excluding curtains in cells without fireplaces rarely survive, but where they do, at least one should be kept. These items can be bespoke and of considerable character. Consideration should be made before these are sent to auction – although we know that space in archives is at a premium.

There is a suggested list on the following page, but we may have missed items which you think should be included. Attics are often an amazing treasure trove where everyday items no longer in use, along with trunks, beds and other ephemera that is 'past its sell by date' have been stored.

Other things to consider

The everyday items which were used by the Sisters are much less likely to survive as they were worn out and replaced over time. These simple items, where they survive, are integral to convent life but seem so ubiquitous that Sisters tend not to think of collecting them. You may wish to consider collecting or retaining items that relate to the following: celebrations, music, retreats, schools, staff, superiors or vocations.

Possible Items for Collection		
Call bell lists	In and out lists	Convent Stamps
Instructions for everyday activities	Dinner services for special occasions	Bells
Bookstands	Easter Clappers	Prayer Timers
Film & Slides	Photographs	Photograph negatives
Obituaries	Library Lists	Maps and Plans
Press Cuttings	Rules & Customs	Theses
Wills	Visitor Books	Full habit
Postulant's dress	Novice's veil	Numbered or monogrammed cutlery
Writing slope	Fountain Pen	Grave marker
Gramophone	Instruments	Catalogues
Records, Tapes, CDs	Trousseau list	Trunks
Dowry items	Medal-making equipment	Holy medal
Necrology lists	Relics & Reliquaries	Recruitment brochures & ads
Altar bread machines	Kitchen equipment	Items with 'cash's labels'
Preprinted material – e.g. notebooks & ledgers	Printing tools, stamps etc.	Sheet music
Personal prayer books	Post box	Sewing boxes
Leatherwork items & equipment	Baskets of memorial cards & intentions	Aprons & cloaks for different types of work (& orders)
Nun dolls	Size sheets for rings	Framed vows
Fundraising posters	Illuminated addresses	

Religious Dress - details		
Domino	Veil	Bandeau
Habit	Cincture	Rosary bead clip
Black headed pins	Postulant's dress and cape	Novice's veil

Appendix 3: Auctioneers

At some point it might be necessary to hire an auctioneer to assist in the disposal of some of the contents of a convent. **Remember that you are the client and while you may take advice from the auctioneer you have the final say.** Below are some guidelines that may be of assistance.

Before engaging an auctioneer

- ▶ Make sure that you own all the objects that you are proposing to sell.
- ▶ Decide where the funds from the auction will go.
- ▶ Decide if staff/Sisters/family members of Sisters/volunteers might be allowed to purchase some of the items before going to auction (or allowed to take pieces of specific sentimental importance).
- ▶ Decide where you want the auction to take place – you may want it to take place in the convent, or you may prefer it to take place at the auctioneer’s premises. Bear in mind that there will be viewings too where prospective buyers can see the lots and that may influence your decision.

Dealing with the Auctioneers

- ▶ Make sure to meet with the auctioneer before you employ them. Ensure that there is a constant contact point both in the auctioneer’s firm and from the religious order.
- ▶ Make sure you know what you will be paying the auctioneer for – get a detailed outline of all costs.
- ▶ The auctioneer will take photographs of all the items to be auctioned for the auction catalogue. Ensure that they do not post any of these photographs on their website or social media without your permission.
- ▶ Make sure to check that all photographs are of items to be auctioned before the catalogue is finalised. If anything has been missed make sure photographs are then taken. If you wish to withdraw an item before the auction you can do so.

Viewing

- ▶ It is usual for there to be days when potential purchasers can view the auctions lots, though many auctions now take place online.

The Auction

- ▶ The reserve for many auction lots will be set low (in part to attract interest). However, you may wish to set reserve prices for some items.
- ▶ If there are items that you know are of significant value you might want to dispose of them by some other means rather than an auction, where you can control the sale price.
- ▶ If the viewing and auction are being held in the convent make sure that the auctioneers provide signage so people are guided to the correct room(s). The auctioneers will also need to provide staff for these days.

After the Auction

- ▶ Buyers have a limited time period to arrange collection of the items they have purchased.
- ▶ It is up to the auctioneer to arrange collection of the lots.
- ▶ Keep a record of all the items auctioned (and the prices they sold for). Include this record and a copy of all the photographs in your archives. The record of items auctioned will also be required by the Charity Regulator.



Áras na hOidhreachta, Lána an Teampaill, Cill Chainnigh, Éire R95 X264
Áras na hOidhreachta, Church Lane, Kilkenny, Ireland R95 X264

Tel: +353 56 777 0 777 | **Email:** mail@heritagecouncil.ie

www.heritagecouncil.ie



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council