



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE  
OF ENGLAND AND WALES

## Patrimony Committee and Patrimony Sub-Committee

### **Guidelines for making a church Inventory of Objects of Artistic and Historic Interest**

*All churches should have an inventory of objects of artistic and historic interest and this booklet has been put together to address the need for practical and straightforward assistance with its compilation. The guidelines laid out here draw extensively on the talk given to the Historic Churches Committees Conference by Christine McGregor, Inventory Project Manager of St Paul's Cathedral, in February 2004. They also include details of guidelines put together by Scotland Yard and refer to Object ID. Further reading suggestions and contact details for the relevant organisations are given at the end.*

***'An inventory is indispensable. It gives you a clear picture of your property, enables you to set up preservation measures and provides complete information in the event of loss (due to theft, vandalism or disaster).'***

Quote from the Circular Letter issued by the Vatican Commission for Church Patrimony on the 'Necessary and Urgent need for inventories and catalogues' in December 1999.

#### **The Practical Purpose of an Inventory**

- It helps you to know where things are and find items quickly when they are needed
- You can provide a description of a lost or stolen item to insurers or the police
- It maximises your chances of tracing missing items
- It assists you in proving legal ownership if there is a dispute about title
- By knowing what you have got you gain credibility within the Parish, the Diocese, with the Charity Commissioners, with conservationists and the museum world, academics, potential donors and general public
- Good documentation can help answer enquiries from other churches, researchers and the general public efficiently
- Good documentation helps you to look after items in your care by allowing you to monitor sensitive items that may be prone to deterioration.
- Good documentation allows you to plan for restoration or conservation
- It ensures that vital information does not leave, or die with you!

#### **Beyond the Practical Purpose**

Putting together and keeping good documentation goes beyond practical application, it equates to responsible stewardship of property that belongs not to the parish or its priest but to the diocese. You are ensuring that items in your care are being safeguarded for future generations along with the information about them that gives them their cultural context: for example who made, who donated and who used a given object. Your inventory has a value for the history of patronage and the decorative arts beyond the everyday needs of an individual church.

Vatican documents are clear on this responsibility and the recent circular referred to above, demonstrates how canon law over the centuries has brought the church to this point. The same document lays out detailed recommendations for first making an inventory and then progressing towards the concept of a more analytical catalogue. In its conclusion, the circular states that 'The

Church in this field of inventory-cataloguing is called to renew her effort to protect her own patrimony, to regulate the access of this data, to give spiritual value to what has been gathered.'

### **Difference between an Inventory and a Catalogue**

An inventory is different from a catalogue. An inventory is a simple listing detailing what you have got and where it is located. Inventorying is not an opportunity to record everything there is to know about an item but rather to create the building blocks for future accountability.

A successful inventory project should not rely on specialist knowledge. Future research and study can follow if necessary but at the outset a pragmatic, practical approach to getting the job done is every bit as valuable as expertise.

### **Two Steps to Making the Inventory**

#### Step One – The Scope Statement

Before the Inventory is started a short 'statement' needs to be put together specifying what is to be included. It should guide the compiler to leave aside preconceptions such as 'because something is old it must included' or conversely 'any new items needn't be listed'. It helps to give examples of what to include and what to exclude so:

- Within furniture include pews but not stacking chairs
- Within Textiles include altar cloths but not everyday linen
- Within Vestments include specially embroidered albs but don't include servers' cassocks

It is a good idea to walk the course when drawing up the scope statement so that the specific location and contents inform it. Do make sure that you do not exclude, by accident, items stored in out of the way cupboards, the Presbytery or the Sacristy or indeed objects that are so much in everyday use or part of the fabric that they are 'taken for granted'.

Possible categories include – but are not limited to:

- Bells
- Church Plate (Chalices etc.)
- Furniture
- Stained Glass
- Lights and Light Fittings
- Liturgical Books
- Metalwork (candlesticks etc.)
- Monuments including plaques
- Musical Instruments including the organ
- Prints, Drawings and Paintings
- Sculpture
- Textiles and Embroideries
- Vases and Ornaments
- Vestments

From a stewardship point of view you also need to keep an eye on those items that potentially move into the scope of the Inventory. Once an everyday item or original furnishing passes out of every day use it takes on a historical interest so that we may want to preserve it and record the information about it.

At the beginning of the scope statement consider an opening section which might read along the lines of:

- This document has been prepared to specify:*
- i) The overall purpose and scope of the Inventory*
  - ii) The types of objects that are suitable for inclusion*

*The Inventory purpose is to accurately and securely record items within the defined scope for accountability and good stewardship of these items in our care.*

*The Inventory scope encompasses all sacred, devotional and liturgical items along with all original furnishings and fittings and any non-secular or secular items of historic or artistic interest. Items selected for entry in the Inventory are not restricted to particular periods or dates.*

### Step Two – The Inventory Itself

Once the Scope Statement has been put together the inventorying starts. Each object should have a record entry for which the following checklist provides a model – although some of the headings will not be applicable for every entry

- Object Type or Name – what is it? (Chalice, Cope, Sanctuary Lamp)
- Attach photographs (of which more later)
- Short Description:
  1. What is the object made of?
  2. What are its dimensions and weight? (Specify which unit of measurements is being used e.g. Cm/in. and to which dimension the measurement refers e.g. height, width, depth.)
  3. Include information on colour, shape, marks or distinguishing features and condition.
  4. Consider including brief note on context, significance, donor/provenance and usage where known.
- Title – Does the object have a title by which it is known and may be identified? Does it have a subject?
- Date or Period – When was the object made?
- Maker – Do you know who made the object? An individual, a company?
- Location – Make a record of where the item is normally kept. Record fixed items on a plan
- Record the compiler's name and date.

#### **Our Lady and St Thomas of Canterbury - Harrow on the Hill Inventory Record - Example**

<b>Object:</b>	Stool
<b>Photo no.(s):</b>	26(whole item) 27(Detail: quatrefoil flower)
<b>Description:</b>	Wooden stool, four legs, rectangular seat, with bevelled edges and slot in centre for carrying. Decoratively carved stretchers with three quatrefoil flowers on each side
	In original use.
<b>Dimensions:</b>	60cm (h) x 41cm (w) x 30cm (d)
<b>Location:</b>	Sacristy
<b>Compiler:</b>	A. Volunteer
<b>Date:</b>	01 February 2004



## Photographs

Photographs are of vital importance in identifying objects:

- Take overall views and close-ups of inscriptions, markings, any damage or repair
- Try to include a scale (e.g. ruler) or an object of known size in the image
- Choose a plain background where possible e.g. a white sheet
- Take photographs of fixed items such as stained glass or monuments
- Number photographs and record this information on the inventory record

## The Format of the Inventory

You will need to decide the format for your Inventory. Will it be solely paper based or held in a computer? The advantage of a paper based system is that there are very few start up costs, it requires no IT skills, it is portable and readily accessed. The limitations are that the information is not so readily updateable and cannot be sorted or listed by different criteria e.g. by object type or location.

## Security and Access

The completed Inventory will contain valuable and potentially sensitive information and should not be available on open access. Two copies should be made and one lodged off-site in a secure location. The copy remaining in the parish should also be stored securely and consideration given to who has access to it. For example all persons consulting the Inventory could be required to sign an appropriate authorisation form recording their name, office, or address and date of consultation, this could be kept alongside the Inventory.

## The importance of completing the Inventory

A complete list containing minimum information about all items, perhaps in the first instance just enough to identify each item and its location, is of far more use than a more detailed, but unfinished, record.

## Where to Go for Further Advice

Both the Object ID Checklist [www.object-id.com](http://www.object-id.com) and the Metropolitan Police [www.met.police.uk/crimeprevention/art.htm](http://www.met.police.uk/crimeprevention/art.htm) websites are good sources of information although the suggested descriptive headings here include theirs. The Object ID standard can be downloaded for use from the latter website.

Within the heritage sector there is **mda** at [www.mla.gov.uk](http://www.mla.gov.uk) a charity which provides collections management advice and support, primarily to museums. However, **mda** also supports organisations with collections in the wider sense, although most of the advice would perhaps be more appropriate for Cathedrals with large and complex collections rather than at parish church level.

## Further Reading

Religious Objects, Preservation and Care – published by the Centre de Conservation du Quebec in cooperation with the Fondation du patrimoine religieux du Quebec. Copies available from Father Allen Morris, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1PL and email [Morrisa@cbcew.org.uk](mailto:Morrisa@cbcew.org.uk)

Some Notes and Guidance for those responsible for listed buildings under the Government Exemption Scheme – Patrimony Sub-Committee of the Catholic Bishops' Conference for England and Wales – Copies available from Tricia Brooking, Secretary to the Patrimony Committee, 23 Horseguards Drive, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 1XL.