

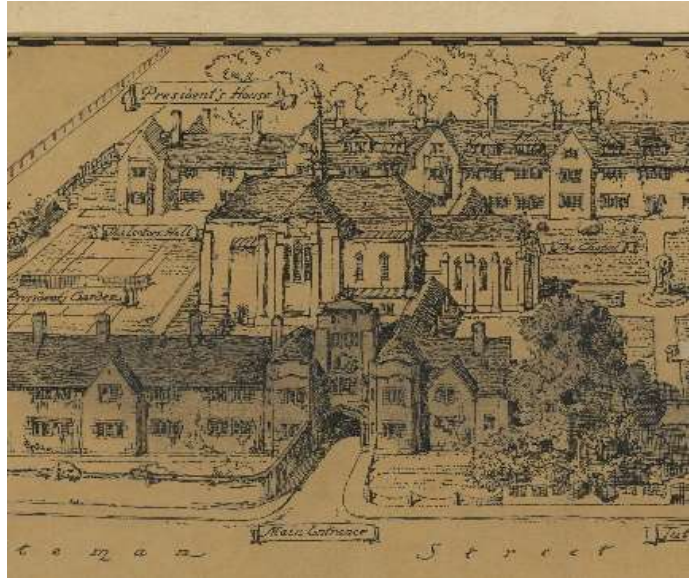


## Our Archives: Westminster, Cheshunt, and the URC History Society

*This blog post is based on an article about the treasures of the archives which our Archivist, Helen, was asked to write for the URC's magazine, Reform ([www.reform-magazine.co.uk](http://www.reform-magazine.co.uk)) in October 2023.*

Are you trying to find out about a great-grandfather who went to China as a Presbyterian missionary? Do you need to see correspondence between Charles Wesley and the Countess of Huntingdon? Are you interested in 10<sup>th</sup> century Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Arabic manuscripts? Well, look no further, for the archives at Westminster hold all these things!

An archive is – broadly speaking – a collection of historical records connected with a person, family, or organisation, which are culturally or historically significant. Unlike books in a library, archives are usually unique. They can be written documents – and most of ours are! – like letters, charters, or minutes of meetings; but archives can also be photographs, architectural drawings, audio recordings, advertising fliers, films... we have all these things in our collections. And there are often a few printed works and historical objects in an archive collection, too.



Detail of a sketch of Cheshunt College, Cambridge, by architect Percy Morley Horder (1912) from the Cheshunt College Archives

There are five separate archives collections at Westminster College (owned by three different organisations): the archives of Westminster College, Cheshunt College, the Presbyterian Church of England, the Churches of Christ, and the URC History Society. (And we also work closely with the archivist at Church House in London, who looks after the URC and Pilots Archives.)



WGL4/14/398 Mrs Gibson working on manuscripts at St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai (1896) from the Westminster College Archives

The Westminster College archive begins in 1844, when the Synod of the newly-formed Presbyterian Church in England founded a college in London to train ministers. After nearly sixty years in London, the college moved to Cambridge in 1899, at which point more papers were kept, and the archives get much more detailed. The majority of the collection consists of the records of the running of the college, together with the papers of its Principals and professors; but they also include a fascinating collection of material given to the college by its benefactors, Mrs Lewis (1843-1926) and Mrs Gibson (1843-1920).

Twin sisters and biblical scholars, these ladies travelled to Egypt nine times in the 1880s-1920s, to photograph, transcribe, and translate manuscripts at St Catherine's monastery – and they also purchased old manuscripts from booksellers in Cairo, which they later gave to the

college. These manuscripts are a wonderful selection of mostly theological texts in Syriac, Arabic, Coptic and Greek, dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The sisters' manuscripts are studied by academics from across Europe, Canada, the USA, Israel, and Australia, as well as the UK; so we're beginning a digitisation programme to make this collection more widely available to the international community of scholars. You can see these recently-photographed pages of a homily in Syriac, written in the eighth century, on our Digital Library webpage at <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/westminster/1>.

You might expect that the archives of Cheshunt College, as another theological college training people for ministry, would be similar: but as well as the material on the day-to-day administration of the college, they also contain a very different set of papers.

Beginning as Trevecca College, founded in Breconshire in 1768 by Selina Hastings, Countess of (1707-1791), the Cheshunt archives reflect the provenance of that college as a very personal creation.

At the heart of the archive is a collection of over 2,000 letters to the Countess, from the 1760s to the 1790s, discussing the preaching at her chapels, the creation of her college, the administration of her estates, her students, her finances, her theology, her health, and her spiritual welfare. These letters were sent to her by everyone from the housekeeper at her college to John and Charles Wesley, and it's one of the collections most heavily used by academic researchers.

This particular example (right) is one of the letters written to the Countess by Phillis Wheatley Peters (c.1753-1784), an early Black poet whose poems were sponsored for publication by the Countess.

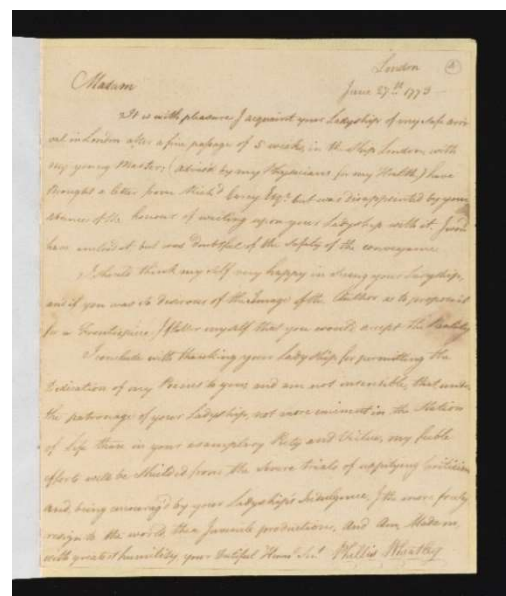
Sitting along these two College archives are the collections of the URC History Society. This society was formed in 1972, incorporating the Congregational Historical Society, founded in 1899, and the Presbyterian Historical Society, founded in 1913; and was later joined by the Churches Of Christ Historical Society, founded 1979. The Presbyterian Historical Society itself was formed when the Law and Historical Documents Committee reported to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of England, in 1911, there was "abundant evidence of a lively and public-spirited interest" in the Church's history – and the URCHS collections include several of its key series of documents.



WGL9/20 Part of a homily by Amphilochius of Iconium, in Syriac (723 CE), from the Westminster College Archives



C9/14/3 Invitation to opening of Cheshunt College in Hertfordshire (1792) from the Cheshunt College Archives



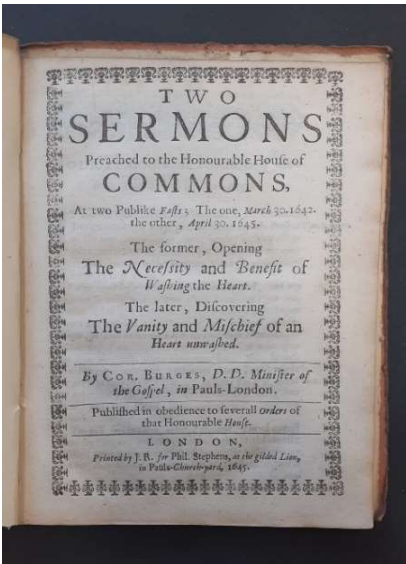
A3/5/4 Letter from Phillis Wheatley to the Countess of Huntingdon (1773) from the Cheshunt Archives



Call sent to Revd JM Gibson by the congregation in Montreal (1864) from the URCHS archives

One of the most popular series in today's archive is a set of biographical files for Presbyterian ministers and missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, known as 'Fasti files', which contain letters, photographs, and other personal material invaluable for family history researchers. These files were painstakingly put together by members of the Presbyterian Historical Society, who wrote to ministers in the early twentieth century and asked them to complete an autobiographical questionnaire, for posterity – we know this because some of the original questionnaires survive, too. Writing now, at a time when it's more common to email or text a friend, we can appreciate these letters from yesterday often contain a wealth of detail which perhaps is not captured in the same way today.

Similar changes in the way churches have moved into the digital age are preserved when we look at ministerial calls to pastorate. The URCHS archives contain calls from as recently as the 1950s which were written on paper, signed by every member of the congregation, and then folded or rolled into a presentation scroll – a bit of a contrast to how calls are sent today!



HS/SWC/2/11/12 Two Sermons by Cornelius Burgess (1645) from URCHS Carruthers Collection

The URCHS collections also include three hundred years of the changing fashions of ministers' preaching: from the sermons of Thomas Whittaker in the 1680s, imprisoned in York Castle and writing sermons for his congregation in Leeds, to the sermons preached by Kenneth Slack at City Temple in the 1970s. Most of these are handwritten sermons; but another of the URCHS collections comprises printed 'Fast sermons' from the 1640s, preached on days of fasting and penitence. These have the most intriguing titles: who could resist sermons on 'The Necessity and Benefit of Washing the Heart' or 'The Vanity and Mischief of an Heart Unwashed', preached by Cornelius Burgess in 1642?

The URC History Society also holds the archives of two Churches. These are two of our antecedent denominations in the URC: the Presbyterian Church of England, and the Churches of Christ. (Records of individual churches are held at the local County Records Office, but denominational records of the Church at national level are held here.)

The Presbyterian Church in England and the Association of Churches of Christ were both formed in the 1840s, and although the majority of records in both collections date from later in the denominational history, the archives include material ranging from home and foreign missions committee minutes from both Churches from the 1850s, to photograph albums from the Presbyterian Fellowship of Youth conferences in the 1930s, to the Churches of Christ Crusades of Christian Witness in the 1960s, to the minutes of the committees working on the 1972 Union whose fiftieth anniversary we recently celebrated – there are photographs and even a film of that uniting Assembly and service at Westminster Abbey.



PCE/IDR/JCP/32 Photograph of the formation of the URC, by Revd. Charles Meachin (1972) from URCHS Presbyterian Church of England Archives

Our archives exist to keep the heritage of our Church alive for this and future generations. We loan material for museum exhibitions, and collaborate on academic projects, and help about 130 researchers every year. Enquiries come from within the church and outside it, from the UK and from abroad, from people looking to find sometimes very personal histories or much broader, academic ones. All of our archives and special collections – from 7<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts to yesterday's sermons – are open to all ministers and members of the URC, and to the public, without charge.

Helen Weller, Archivist  
Winter 2023

If you would like to read more about some of our treasures, visit the archivist's blogs at <https://www.westminster.cam.ac.uk/news-events>.

And if you would like to ask about visiting the archives for your research, contact the archivist on [hw374\[at\]westminster.cam.ac.uk](mailto:hw374[at]westminster.cam.ac.uk)

With thanks to *Reform Magazine* [www.reform-magazine.co.uk](http://www.reform-magazine.co.uk)



A little more unusual - locks of hair, from the URCHS Churches of Christ Archives



...and where Special Collections meet Archives  
Collections: C19th volumes from Westminster's Elias Library of Hymnology