

ST GABRIEL'S HALL

In 1920 the Sisters of the Cross and Passion founded St Gabriel's Hall. Otherwise known as the Passionist Sisters, the order was founded in Manchester in 1851. At the time, Manchester was a hub of the industrial revolution known as 'Cottonopolis' as a result of its many cotton and silk mills.

In 1851 the majority of Manchester's population was desperately poor, and a number were Irish Catholic immigrants escaping the Potato Famine. Further to this, Catholics in Britain had, at least in historical terms, only just regained full civic and political rights that had been denied to them since the Reformation with the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829. As a result, many Catholics in Manchester faced strong, and at times violent, anti-Catholicism.

Despite such hostility, Elizabeth Prout, later Mother Mary Joseph of Jesus, founded the Sisters of the Cross and Passion. She did this aged just 29 and as the youngest, and first, English Catholic woman to found a Catholic order in 19th century England.

She and her fellow sisters were remarkable for their feminism. For most, Victorian England was a harsh and cruel place to live especially for young, unmarried, uneducated, women. The sisters worked tirelessly to care for all of the poor and needy, but in particular women.

Mother Mary Joseph also accepted that sisters would have to earn their living, which enabled working-class women to enter Religious Life without a patron. This was radical for the Catholic Church at the time.

In 1920, the Passionist Sisters furthered their work supporting women by founding this Hall. Until the turn of the 20th century, in almost all higher education institutions, women were only granted an honorary degree.

The first female graduates from the University of Manchester graduated in 1887. The very first university to admit women was University College London, whose first female graduates graduated only six years earlier in 1881. The University of Manchester was thus very much a pioneering university in terms of women's rights.

Higher education remained a privilege of the upper and middle classes though stigma remained a significant barrier to entry. Even in 1920, most 'respectable' families considered it scandalous for a young, unmarried woman to leave the family home to attend university. By establishing a sorority hall, the Sisters of the Cross and Passion enabled many women to attend university without scandal and thus offered them a revolutionary opportunity.

We continue to learn more, and record more, of the incredible history of this Hall. This year, a former resident at St Gabriel's and a final year history student will be completing her dissertation on the bombing of St Gabriel's Hall during the Blitz as part of a wider study of Manchester institutions run by Catholic orders that were bombed during World War Two. We are also pleased to announce that last year the University of Manchester established the

university Collections to curate important art and historic artefacts related to the University including halls of residence and which we hope to contribute to and would welcome Alumnae contributions.

I am proud to say that the legacy of courageous Gablings continues today in this Hall. We continue the charitable works of previous generations. We have celebrated diversity and hosted a number of societies. We all recognise that we are a part of a fire-brand tradition and we are very pleased that we can celebrate this community today alongside women who carried the torch before us. Thank you.

Helen Kilburn, Senior Tutor

helen.kilburn@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk