The Todhunter Collection

When John Louis Benedict Todhunter (OBE) died on the 20th July 1980 the executors of his will wrote to the Vice-Chancellor’s office at the University of East Anglia to inform them that provision had been made in his will to leave his “albums of Church notes and photographs” to the University. The matter was duly brought to the attention of Prof. Andrew Martindale, then Dean of the School of Fine Arts and Music, who subsequently arranged to visit Mrs Patricia Todhunter, John’s widow, at her home in Suffolk in order to inspect the collection. What Prof. Martindale discovered upon his arrival at Gillingham Hall, Beccles was a “remarkable” collection that consisted of eighty-five fastidiously compiled volumes of photographs and notes. The value of John Todhunter’s work as an historical document was immediately apparent to Prof. Martindale who promptly recommended to the University authorities that the gift be gratefully received and relocated to the School’s photographic collection in the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (where it is still housed today).

John Todhunter started to document English Parish churches whilst an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge in May 1924. After university, John trained as a barrister, and subsequently secured the position as legal advisor to the Ministry of Education in London. Over a period of fifty-one years (the last entry is dated November 1977) he visited, photographed and made detailed notes on two thousand one hundred and three churches from all over England, with a particular focus on those local to his home in East Anglia. Every church he surveyed for his project is represented in the folders by half-a-dozen or so exterior and interior photographs taken by Todhunter himself. The subject matter and format of these images are consistent throughout the volumes and are accompanied by a neat, hand-written account of the church that includes information about the building’s history (often gleaned from pamphlets and guidebooks he collected from them) as well as a description of their architectural features.

Interior view of St Mary Coslany taken by John Todhunter in 1943 © The Todhunter Collection. Department of Art History and World Art Studies, Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, UEA
TODHUNTER’S LIFELONG COMMITMENT to the documentation of parish churches made him an invaluable member and advisor to various local historical societies and church committees that shared his concern for their preservation and repair. However, as his wife later suggested in a newspaper article about her husband’s bequest, his zeal for conservation only partially accounted for his embarking upon and continuing such a mammoth undertaking. For her, the numerous volumes should also be considered as devotional documents, records of the pilgrimages made by a Roman Catholic layman committed to ecumenism through education.

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Notes on St Mary Coslany handwritten by John Todhunter, January 1943  
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