Managing collections during the global pandemic

Archives: A year in lockdown
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Letter from the Keeper

Welcome to the latest edition of Discover. When I wrote my last welcome piece, little did I realise that it would be the only one published during 2020. As a result of the pandemic we closed services down on 21 March 2020 and staff began working from home. You can find out more about the variety of work staff were undertaking elsewhere in this magazine.

During the first lockdown, we continued to visit Kings’ Meadow Campus to undertake weekly building inspections. We then had a phased approach to re-opening services, which required a huge staff effort. I would like to thank staff for their resilience and readers for their patience, and hope that during 2021 we can return to normality.

Despite Covid-19, lots happened throughout 2020. On 1 January, management of the University’s Museum of Archaeology moved from Lakeside Arts to Manuscripts and Special Collections. This followed the retirement of Dame Janet Vitmayer and Vivienne Bennett OBE, supported by an Arts Council England (ACE) Project Grant. The resulting report advised that the management move would provide a variety of benefits including collaborative working on collections, exhibitions and programming. The Museum will stay in its current location on University Park and I would like to welcome Clare Pickersgill, the Museum Keeper, and Michelle Johnson, the Museum Administrator, to the staff.

The Museum received two ACE grants during 2020. The Emergency Fund has provided £13,500 for a Collections Manager, and for the development of a remote learning programme based on the Romans, whilst £61,160 from the Culture Recovery Fund will fund additional hours for the Collections Manager; digital equipment and development; a business review; and learning development.

We were also extremely pleased to be awarded an £89,500 grant from the ACE, Designation Development Fund for a project entitled ‘Unlocking the DH Lawrence Collection: cataloguing and digitisation for research and display’. This is the first time that the Designation fund has been opened up beyond museums. Although delayed by the lockdown the project will run for two years. Two Lawrence collections will be catalogued, all the Lawrence literary manuscripts, letters, typescripts, proofs and works of art will be digitised and new digital galleries created and an exhibition on the theme of editing DH Lawrence will be held in the Weston Gallery. Amy Bowler has been seconded as the Archive Cataloguer (and Rachael Orchard has returned to cover her substantive role) and we welcome back Jonny Davies as the Digitisation Assistant.

During the year we have made two additions to the Lawrence collection. The autograph manuscript of Lawrence’s essay, Pictures on the Wall was acquired from the USA with support from the ACE/V&A Purchase grant fund. The location of the manuscript was previously unknown and reveals many revisions and corrections in Lawrence’s hand. The acquisition of the typescript of Maurice Magnus, Dregs: A Foreign Legion Experience by an American, c.1918-1922, corrected by DH Lawrence, was supported by the ACE/V&A Purchase grant fund, the Friends of the National Libraries and a private donation. This can now be studied alongside the manuscript of Lawrence’s long introduction, the Memoir of Maurice Magnus, which he wrote to accompany Magnus’ book after the author’s tragic suicide.

In March, we heard that we had passed the first Archives Accreditation review and that the Accreditation Panel "...was pleased to see this strong review from a high performing service, which had been able to address a range of actions in the three years since the award. They particularly commended the progress on preservation of born-digital records, and the proactive collection development.”

This edition includes an interview with Linda Shaw. Linda has worked in Manuscripts and Special Collections for over 41 years, most recently as Senior Archivist (Collections). During my seven years I owe her an immense debt of gratitude for her advice, guidance and hard work. Above all, her knowledge of the collections will be impossible to replace. We would all like to pass on our thanks and best wishes for a well-earned retirement.

I have been editing Discover since the first issue in 2015. When we launched it we wanted to communicate with our researchers, supporters and exhibition visitors about the work we do, our amazing collections and new developments.

Discover is normally published three times a year, but Covid-19 forced us to cancel the last two issues of 2020. To make up for it we’ve got a bumper issue this time, focusing on some of the work achieved during the past year, including the implementation of our digital preservation system and the launch of our DH Lawrence project. We also take a look back at our lockdown diary, which regular readers of our blog will recognise.

Whilst there’s a certain pleasure to be found in working your way through a to-do list of behind-the-scenes jobs we were glad to return to King’s Meadow Campus in August. Re-uniting with the collections and welcoming researchers back to the reading room felt like the first steps on a long road back to normality. We will continue to operate under revised opening hours for the foreseeable future. These are subject to change so please check our website, and contact us before visiting. We hope to welcome you soon, and in the meantime I hope you enjoy reading this issue of Discover.

Hayley Cotterill,
Senior Archivist (Academic and Public Engagement)

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Keeper of Manuscripts and Special Collections

Editor’s letter
Unlocking the DH Lawrence Collection

It is exactly a hundred years since DH Lawrence’s novel Women in Love was first published, yet a century later the appeal of the controversial modernist writer remains unabated. Manuscripts and Special Collections holds one of the world’s largest collections of Lawrence’s literary manuscripts, as well as the correspondence of Lawrence and his contemporaries, original artworks and first editions. We also hold a wealth of supplementary material including photographs, newspaper cuttings, editorial papers, research papers and ephemera relating to the commemoration and study of one of England’s greatest writers.

Literary manuscripts provide a truly invaluable window into the mind and creative process of the author. This is especially true of a writer like DH Lawrence, who revisited and revised many of his works around an exhibition at Lakeside Arts curated by author. This is especially true of a writer like DH Lawrence, who revisited and revised many of his works around an exhibition at Lakeside Arts curated by. This is especially true of a writer like DH Lawrence, who revisited and revised many of his works around an exhibition at Lakeside Arts curated by.

The aim of the Cambridge edition was primarily to get back to Lawrence’s final version of each title before cuts and revisions imposed by censors and editors. The controversial and boundary pushing nature of Lawrence’s writing, born into an England only just shaking off the shackles of Victorian social and sexual propriety, meant that so much of the author’s chosen text was altered by publishers, keen to comply with the law by violating the Obscene Publications Act. Perhaps the most famous (or infamous!) example of this editorial expurgation is Lawrence’s final novel Women in Love, and related research papers of the late James T. Boulton (1924-2013), a former University of Nottingham academic and one of the foremost Cambridge editors. Work on the Cambridge edition started in the late 1960s with the aim of publishing every single extant letter written by Lawrence, and soon evolved into an ambitious project to publish a scholarly edition of Lawrence’s complete works, a three-volume biography, and a comprehensive bibliography of everything written by the author. The papers at Manuscripts and Special Collections document over 40 years of editorial work and painstaking academic research by the Cambridge team.

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Archives in lockdown

Like many people, staff in Manuscripts and Special Collections spent the first national lockdown working from home. Instead of having constant access to our archival and special collections we were suddenly faced with trying to do our jobs remotely. So how do you run an archive service whilst socially distanced from the collections? It turns out there is more than can be done than you might think.

This is a taster of just some of the tasks that have occupied our time.

Cataloguing

Cataloguing archives is normally dependent on having access to the items that you are working on. We weren’t able to take the collections home with us, so how do you describe something that you can’t see? Our answer was to focus our cataloguing efforts on enhancing existing descriptions and upgrading our online catalogue.

Our archival collections are catalogued using CALM - the most commonly used archive management software. One important job that we achieved in lockdown was testing and installing the latest upgrade to CALM. Moving to the new version enabled us to update the look and feel of our Manuscripts Online Catalogue and make it more responsive when viewed on different devices. The new version of the catalogue went live in June: https://mss-cat.nottingham.ac.uk/Calmview/.

We enhanced the descriptions of a number of collections during lockdown, one of which is the archive of the historic Archdeaconry of Nottingham (AN), one of the most extensive manuscript collections that we hold. The Archdeaconry court, an ecclesiastical court, had jurisdiction over almost the whole county of Nottingham. People were brought before the court for a wide variety of offences, including religious dissent, non-payment of church dues and superstitious practices. By the mid-eighteenth century, the court’s attention was focused on the problem of illegitimate births. A common penance, the act of contrition, and offenders could be excommunicated for non-compliance.

The majority of the Archdeaconry collection is already catalogued in great detail but we have a longstanding project to catalogue the penances. When we realised that lockdown was coming we copied hundreds of penances so that cataloguing work could continue at home.

Conservation

Conservation really is one of those tasks that it is impossible to do remotely. With no access to the original documents or books, all repair and repackaging work came to a halt, but this gave our two conservation staff time to do one of their favourite things - catch up on their paperwork.

As part of our upgrade to CALM we decided to make better use of the Conservation database within it, and use it as a place to store information about cleaning, conservation and preservation work carried out on documents and books over the past twenty years.

Work has been ongoing to transfer this historic conservation data from handwritten paper documentation sheets into a spreadsheet.

“It is important that we document conservation treatments on our collections, and this should be accessible forever so that in future we (or other conservators) can see what treatments have been carried out. This kind of information helps us in identifying what treatments are required, as we can then establish what chemicals and treatments are suitable to use. It is also useful to help assess how well a treatment has acted over time.

Once all the data is in a digital format on the spreadsheet it will be transferred onto CALM and will be beneficial in creating a better understanding of the collections and what has been done to them”.

- Emma Bonson, Preservation Assistant

Metadata

We digitise hundreds of items a year from our collections - sometimes a single page from a document or a book, at other times an entire multi-page document – and these images are stored in our digital asset management software, Portfolio. In order for staff to easily retrieve an image from amongst the thousands that we have, we then need to add descriptive metadata.

Put simply, metadata is data about data. Descriptive metadata relates to a piece of information such as a photograph, and gives information about it such as a title. We have a substantial backlog of digitised images that need metadata adding. Fortunately, this is a job can be done from home without needing access to the physical item.

Enhancing the metadata includes recording the reference of the item the image is from, as well as noting the type of document it is (e.g., letter, poem, map, etc.), and a description of the content. Perhaps the image shows a particular person, place, or building. Maybe there are animals in the image, or people wearing specific clothing. If we do this in enough detail, then for future projects we can search based on a keyword and find all of our digitised images that fit that keyword.

As well as being useful for staff this also benefits our customers. When images are added to our publicly accessible digital galleries, the descriptive metadata is there and ready for users to search.

This is a selection of just some of the jobs that staff are able to do from home. You can find out more by reading the ‘lockdown diary’ posts on the Manuscripts and Special Collections blog.

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Pictured, from top: Our staff’s home offices, occasionally complete with a feline assistant. Above: Example of an image in Portfolio with (left) descriptive metadata.
Healthcare, a history

Whether clapping on doorsteps or painting rainbows for home-school art lessons, many people have expressed gratitude for the National Health Service during this coronavirus pandemic. As a University with a Medical School (based at QMC in Nottingham) and a registered NHS place of deposit, we have shelves full of hospital archives, patient records, and medical books covering every specialty in great and gruesome detail.

For most of us, it’s hard to imagine what life or death would be like without the NHS. Before its creation in 1948, pain and discomfort from chronic conditions were accepted as part of everyday life, and illness was, for the most part, something to be dealt with at home.

We know about this informal, domestic healthcare because diaries and letters are full of details about the health of the writer, their friends, and family. Disease was commonplace and every fever brought the fear that it would develop into something serious. Recipes for tonics and cure-alls were swapped as often as recipes for something to be enjoyed. This self-medication became a way of life.

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Childbirth was routinely a domestic affair until well into the twentieth century, when even the local doctor might be sent for, but he would have little, if any, specialist training in maternity cases (which wouldn’t be compulsory until 1886), and certainly less experience of women’s lives and not ones automatically reserved wouldn’t cure them, either.

Pregnancy and birth were considered normal aspects of women’s lives and not ones automatically requiring medical intervention. Local midwives relied on years of experience rather than any formal training to assist mothers-to-be with labour, and passed down skills through informal apprenticeships. Midwives were licensed, but through the church, and our earliest record dates from 1612. One likely explanation is that lay people can perform baptisms in an emergency, and with infant mortality rates so high, this responsibility might fall to the midwife. If a birth was complicated, the local doctor might be sent for, but he would have little, if any, specialist training in maternity cases (which wouldn’t be compulsory until 1886), and certainly less experience delivering babies than a popular midwife.

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common contagious diseases such as smallpox, measles or diphtheria were turned away; and the hospital did not admit pregnant women or children at all. Isolation (or fever) hospitals and workhouse infirmaries went some way to provide treatment for people who could otherwise fall through the cracks, but healthcare wasn’t always available for people who needed it.

By the twentieth century, contributory funds for workers provided basic healthcare cover, and for an additional fee many schemes extended a more restricted cover to the worker’s family. In some respects, this just called more attention to the vulnerability of large swathes of the population. Patients whose illnesses turned out to be more severe or who suffered complications could suddenly find their claims denied. Minutes from one hospital committee meeting show a cancer patient’s insurance declined to pay for their emergency admission to hospital, stating it was due to the existing illness (which was not covered), rather than a proper emergency (which was covered). The committee’s discussion wasn’t around the clinical merits of the argument: it was to decide how soon after the patient’s death the hospital could send the family the bill.

Campaigners used the disparity of access as proof the NHS, with a principal of universal coverage, was necessary but it wasn’t until WWII that there was the political impetus to act.

In April 2020 we were due to open our exhibition, Florence Nightingale Comes Home, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Nightingale’s birth. Sadly, due to the ongoing impact of Covid-19 it has not been possible to re-open our exhibition gallery. We still hope that we might be able to welcome visitors to the Nightingale exhibition at some point in 2021 but in the meantime, there is an online version for visitors to enjoy: nottingham.ac.uk/manuscriptsandspecialcollections/exhibitions/online/florence-nightingale

Visitors can take a sneak-peek at three of the exhibition boards, enjoy a guided tour of the exhibition gallery, turn the pages of our virtual Crimean War scrapbook and explore a digital gallery of Crimean War photographs.

Florence Nightingale Comes Home is curated by Manuscripts and Special Collections and the Nightingale Comes Home project team, and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Turn the pages of our virtual Crimean War scrapbook and explore a digital gallery of Crimean War photographs.
You’ve worked on so many projects but which ones stand out?
I’ve mainly been involved in archive cataloguing projects – including many of our family and estate collections, D.H. Lawrence, our water collections and the University’s own records. The project that probably stands out the most was the conversion of our old typescript catalogues into electronic format, resulting in much of the data you can now see on our online catalogue. The reason it stands out for me is because it took a number of years to complete as we had to do it in various stages and it was really several projects in one. It also involved collaborating with other archives regionally and nationally. Nowadays we all take our online catalogues for granted and we have systems which enable anything we catalogue one day to appear on the online catalogue the next, but standardising catalogues created in the 1940s and 1950s to fit into a computer system which they were never intended for, sometimes had its challenges.

What do you most enjoy about the work that you do?
I enjoy most aspects of my job and there’s a lot of variety as we have such a range of different collections. But I think what I enjoy the most is going out to look at potential acquisitions and talking with people about their papers. I’ve met lots of really interesting people who, in transferring their records to us, have enabled us to develop our resources in the way that we have. It’s also a great honour to be trusted with valuable personal papers which could represent someone’s life’s work, or have a deep sentimental significance to them. I’ve also visited a lot of different places over the years, offices of course, but also private homes. On one occasion I remember having to wrestle my bag from the jaws of the family’s dog! I’ve also ‘rescued’ collections from factories, almost derelict warehouses, water towers and pumping stations. It’s always really thrilling to open boxes or filing cabinets and not know what you’re going to find!

What is your favourite collection, or item from a collection, held here in Manuscripts and Special Collections?
That’s a hard question as we have so many wonderful collections and items. I really love the accounts in our estate collections such as Manvers, Middleton and Newcastle – they are so full of social history and I think they are a really underused resource. I can still remember the absolute thrill I felt in my first week in Manuscripts when I came across the accounts for the building of Wollaton Hall in the 1580s in the Middleton Collection (HCC/9044). It has so much detail – houses, churches, and in one corner a group of smartly-dressed people, who appear to be having a conversation. And I can’t leave out diaries. Early on in my career I was lucky enough to work on the papers of Edward Mason Wrench, a doctor in Baslow, Derbyshire who kept diaries from 1856 to 1912. I had to read all 58 diaries in order to catalogue them and for months I was totally obsessed with his medical work and his patients, his considerable contributions to his local community, and his issues in bringing up his children to his very exacting standards.

You’re retiring shortly – what will you miss most, and what won’t you miss?
I definitely won’t miss trying to manage a very full email inbox, a problem I certainly didn’t have way back at the beginning of my career. But there’s lots of things I’ll miss so much. I’ll definitely miss being part of a wonderful team and I’ll miss my talented and dedicated colleagues. I’ll also miss the contact I’ve really enjoyed with our donors and depositors, with our volunteers and student placements and with our readers - it’s been great helping people with their research and to sometimes witness their own personal ‘Middleton account’ moments! I’ll also really miss all the collections work and the thrill of being able to handle original manuscripts, each with their own personal history. But it’s been a huge privilege to have been involved for so long in caring for the wonderful collections at Nottingham and playing a part in ensuring they are accessible now and in the future. I’ve been so lucky to have had such an interesting and rewarding job – and all because I chose that Medieval Latin and Palaeography course over 40 years ago!
New accessions and cataloguing

Despite the many challenges posed by 2020 we were still able to take in new additions to the collections and continue with cataloguing work. Below is a taster of just some of the things that we have been working on. Our work during lockdown on the archive of the University itself will be covered in the next issue of Discover.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging
Following the successful completion of our MRI project, as reported on in previous editions of Discover, we remain keen to acquire further collections relating to Magnetic Resonance Imaging. We were therefore delighted to receive a collection of papers from the British and Irish Chapter of the International Society for Magnetic Resonance in Medicine (MS 1023). The ISMRM is a non-profit scientific association, which promotes communication and research on magnetic resonance in medicine and biology. Many of Nottingham’s MRI scientists past and present have been members of the ISMRM, and the current Chair of the British and Irish Chapter is Professor Penny Gowland from the Sir Peter Mansfield Institute for Biomedical Physics and Engineering.

Papers of University of Nottingham staff
Professor Martin Binks, Professor of Entrepreneurial Development in the Haydn Green Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship here at the University, has donated papers relating to his work for the Wilson Committee in the late 1970s and 1980s (MS 1027). The purpose of this Committee, chaired by Sir Harold Wilson, was to review the role and functioning of financial institutions in the United Kingdom, and their value to the economy. Professor Binks provided information on small businesses, particularly relating to their financial status and investments. The papers provide detailed information about small firms from a range of industries including engineering and textiles, chiefly in the Nottingham area. They include completed questionnaires from individual firms surveyed, transcripts of recorded interviews and background information about the companies. The Committee’s report was published in 1980.

Records from individuals
We recently acquired the collection of Matt Marks (MMM), musician, composer and performer who sadly died in 2019. Matt Marks studied Creative Arts at Nottingham Trent University, Composition at the University of Nottingham (1996) and Musical Theatre Writing at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, where he received the Frederic Loewe ASCAP award for Musical Theatre. He collaborated with numerous theatre groups, and worked with New Perspectives, Roundabout, and playwright and director Stephen Lowe, whose archives are also held by Manuscripts and Special Collections. The collection contains files, music manuscripts, artwork, audio-visual material and photographs. Marks’ friends and collaborators have offered to help with cataloguing the collection, which documents the achievements of a large section of the local arts/theatre/music scene.

A retired University academic has donated a fascinating collection (MS 1025) of letters, papers and photographs relating to China and Tibet in the 1930s. These belonged to Edward Alfred Stewardson (1904-1973), who in 1935 was appointed Professor of Physics at the National Central University in Nanking (Nanjing) as a result of an Anglo-Chinese Cultural Agreement. The collection includes letters to his parents and photographs taken in countries such as Korea, Vietnam and China. Stewardson married Winifred Muriel Jones in Shanghai in 1936 and two years later the couple went on an expedition into Eastern Tibet. A typed volume of letters documenting the Tibetan life and customs observed during this expedition, with accompanying maps, is also present in the collection. Following the outbreak of the Second World War, Stewardson was appointed head of Physics at Lethbridge University College, becoming the first Professor of Physics in 1946. He went on to have a long and fruitful career at Leicester working on soft X-ray spectroscopy and atomic physics.

Special Collections
We have made important additions to the East Midlands Special Collection. We have acquired two novels by JM Barrie published in 1888, at the beginning of his literary career. They are connected to Nottingham by the stints of journalism Barrie completed at the Nottingham Journal, from 1883 to 1884. Here Barrie wrote daily lead articles and Monday columns under the pseudonym Hippomenes, along with Thursday essays attributed to ‘A Modern Peripatetic’. His articles can be viewed in the print issues of this newspaper, held in the East Midlands Special Collection. They document the author’s striving to find his literary voice through journalism.

The new acquisitions, Auid Licht Idyll and When a Man’s Single, mark Barrie’s development and hint towards success. Both draw on his affinity for provincial social circles, particularly from his native Scottish town Kirriemuir and Nottingham, where he first staked his claim to a self-reliant life away from home. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, When a Man’s Single is ‘a humorous transcription of his experiences as a journalist, particularly in the Nottingham office’.

In the Suggestions Nightingale turned her attention to workhouse infirmaries. She was determined that the sick poor should be treated the same as the rest of the community, and given the same standard of nursing. Both reports show Nightingale’s fundamental understanding of nursing and public health as a common good for all society.

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Organising. Nurses for the Sick Poor in Workhouse Infirmaries, published as part of the Report of the Committee appointed to consider the Cubic Space of Metropolitan Workhouses, with papers submitted to the Committee. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty (London 1867).

After Nightingale’s campaign to improve the management of army hospitals during the Crimea War, she laid the foundation of professional nursing with the establishment of her nursing school at St Thomas’ Hospital in London. It was the first secular nursing school in the world (now part of King’s College London). In the Suggestions Nightingale turned her attention to workhouse infirmaries. She was determined that the sick poor should be treated the same as the rest of the community, and given the same standard of nursing. Both reports show Nightingale’s fundamental understanding of nursing and public health as a common good for all society.

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Digital preservation in action

2020 has been a challenging year in many ways, but it has been a year of great progress for digital preservation of our collections, as we have procured and implemented a digital preservation system (Preservica) to help us actively manage our digital collections. This system will allow us to ensure these collections can be safely preserved and accessed by future generations of researchers.

We have been acquiring digital collections for many years, often arriving in the form of CDs, DVDs and 3.5 inch floppy disks, hidden in boxes amongst paper records. We have also created digital content ourselves through our image digitisation programme and projects to digitise audiovisual collections such as VHS tapes.

We know that digital content faces several risks to its long-term preservation including hardware and software obsolescence, hardware failure and accidental damage. However, one of the biggest risks to digital content is “benign neglect”. We are used to storing paper records away in a cupboard and being able to easily return to, and use, those records decades later. If we use the same approach to manage our digital content, we risk it becoming inaccessible within a few short years due to the pace of technological change, with the fragility of some digital formats rapidly rendering hardware and software out of date and unsupported by current platforms.

Digital files held on physical media carriers such as floppy disks are recognised to be at greater risk of loss due to the fragility or obsolescence of the physical media carrier itself. Over the past year we have been concentrating our efforts on transferring digital files held on CDs, DVDs and 3.5-inch floppy disks into our online digital preservation system, and this work will continue over the next year. Once files have been transferred from a disk and uploaded into our preservation system, we are able to link them to our collection management system. This means that, once catalogued, researchers will be able to access these digital files in our reading room without needing to retrieve or find equipment to playback multiple physical disks.

Even when we can read a disk, we may still struggle to make sense of the digital files on it. Many files were created in early word processing or publishing software formats that have fallen out of use today.

Uploading this content into our digital preservation system allows us to analyse and report on risks to continuing access. Preservica includes built-in viewers for playing back digital content and includes out of the box ability to migrate files to more user-friendly file formats for our researchers to easily access today. Of course, we always preserve the original files as deposited with us.

Collecting new types of digital content

As well as helping us to manage and preserve our existing digital collections and expand our ability to collect digital content in the future, Preservica also gives us tools to collect new types of uniquely digital content, in particular emails and websites.

We have been looking at ways to collect digital content that reflects life on campus such as that created by the Student Union and student societies. Now for the first time, we can collect web-based content such as webpages, for example the University’s home page, and blogs, including the Vice Chancellor’s and the Registrar’s.

Along with the rest of the archive sector, we are very aware of the importance of documenting work related to the pandemic for the benefit of future generations. We have been able to make a start on capturing key digital content, such as blogs and press releases, to document the University community’s response to these challenging and difficult times and we are continuing to seek other relevant digital content.

Suggestions for online content published by members of the University which ought to be captured for posterity would be very welcome: mss-library@nottingham.ac.uk

We have written several blog posts about our work with digital collections to date, including a blog giving tips on how to preserve your own personal digital content including that created on social media, Go to https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/manuscripts to find out more.

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The art of anatomy

LAURA MERcer, POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHER IN CLASSICS AND ARCHAEOLOGY

The Nottingham Medico Chirurgical Society is one of the oldest medical book societies in the country, so it is unsurprising that its library contains many works of scientific value. Yet the importance of this collection extends far beyond the medical community. There are many beautiful (if slightly macabre at times) illustrations hidden throughout these works, illustrations that are of artistic value. A volunteer project, run by Manuscripts and Special Collections, aims to catalogue highlights from the illustrations and uncover more about them, such as their illustrators, printing techniques and significance. As a PhD student I was attracted by the opportunity to apply my research skills to a new area and investigate the histories and stories behind these images.

Already this project has uncovered some familiar names not usually associated with the medical field. Thomas Willis’ book Cerebri Anatome (1664) has a surprising illustrator: Sir Christopher Wren. Best known for his later work as an architect, Wren spent his earlier years studying subjects including astronomy, mathematics and medicine. According to his son, Wren was slightly bitter about leaving the field. Thomas Willis' Dr Willis's Practice of Physick (1684), Med Chi Collection, Os WZ250.W51


“The human brain” by Christopher Wren, in Thomas Willis, Dr Willis’s Practice of Physick (1684), Med Chi Collection, Os WZ250.W51, barcode 6200619713.

Lithographic drawing of dissection of a human body, showing the thoracic aorta and the intercostal arteries, with the intercostal veins  by Joseph Maclise, in Richard Quain, The anatomy of the arteries of the human body with its applications to pathology and operative surgery... (1840-1844), Med Chi Collection, Over.X WQ168 QUA, barcode 6001885176.


A highlight of this project for me is the wide range of works covered and the challenge of dealing with a new subject area and illustration style in each book. Sometimes a great assortment of topics can be found in a single volume. The Works of Ambrose Parry (1691) contains images ranging from animals, to skeletons with props, to “monsters” (people with deformities). There are also multiple surgical scenes, such as one depicting the restoration of a dislocated thigh, with the figures wearing contemporary clothing and operating a pulley system.

Other works contain illustrations demonstrating how to carry out procedures and the instruments required. Brothers Charles and John Bell both illustrated their own works, Illustrations of the Great Operations of Surgery (1821) and The Principles of Surgery (1806), to educate the reader on the techniques needed. Of note is Charles Bell’s drawing of a skull with multiple fractures to demonstrate the circumstances of using each tool.

A highlight of the collection is The Anatomy of the Arteries of the Human Body: with its Applications to Pathology and Operative Surgery (1841-4) by Richard Quain, illustrated by Joseph Maclise. This work contains chromolithographs of dissections to showcase the arteries inside a body. Fabric bindings, metal pins and hooks, and blocks used to position the corpse are included in the illustrations as are the surgical tools in the background.

Also to be found in the collection are books on skin conditions. A notable example is the Atlas of Skin Diseases published by the New Sydenham Society, which contains watercolours by Edwin Burgess, who served as both the illustrator and lithographer for this work. The first seven plates were copied from Ferdinand Ritter von Hebra’s Atlas der Hautkrankheiten (1856), including one of a woman diagnosed with Ichthyosis Hystrix (Epidermal Nevus) with brown papules covering her back, neck and arms. Burgess designed the remaining plates, which were drawn from life and said to be life-size.

While several of these images could be considered gruesome, they effectively capture the emotional distress caused to the patients by their condition. As John Hutchinson (the society secretary) writes in the preface, the plates are “not only illustrations of typical varieties of disease, but faithful portraits of individual patients.”

The Nottingham Medico Chirurgical Society, commonly known as Nottingham Med-Chi, was founded in 1828. The Med-Chi Library contains approximately 700 volumes. The majority of these have been catalogued electronically and the entries can be viewed on NUsearch the University of Nottingham’s library catalogue, https://nusearch.nottingham.ac.uk. To browse the Collection, enter the collection reference MCH in the search box. Manuscripts and Special Collections also holds the administrative archive of the Med-Chi Society, collection reference MCH.
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Parchment, Paper and Pixels
Highlights from Manuscripts and Special Collections at the University of Nottingham

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