

The significance of the William Salt Library as a collector's library

Summary

The William Salt Library has survived for 140 years from the Victorian era of specialised research collections as an independent body, through the intrinsic merit of its contents in relation to Staffordshire history and through serving the people of Staffordshire. Meanwhile most other similar libraries have either been sold and broken up, or donated to universities or other public bodies in whose hands they tend to lose identity. There are collections run by independent trusts in the USA, and these can be endowed and supported to an extent unthinkable in Britain, but the William Salt Library is perhaps the sole representative of the Victorian specialised collections of historical material remaining not in public or institutional hands.

Background

Private libraries have existed for thousands of years, and the English country house library burgeoned during the eighteenth century. The contents might include religious works, histories of people and peoples, and manuals relating to conduct. In the nineteenth century the general passion for collecting led to several specialised libraries that housed books, manuscripts and often artefacts amassed around the favoured theme of the owner.

Meanwhile institutional libraries were multiplying. The first evidence that Gray's Inn, for example, possessed a dedicated library room was in 1488 when six chained books were donated. The collection expanded in the seventeenth century, and developed subsequently into the very fine law library it is today. In the nineteenth century it was usual for the new societies and institutions to set up specialised reference libraries to assist their members in research and reading. In the horticultural world there was the Lindley Library, and the Institute of Civil Engineers and the Royal Institute of British Architects, amongst many others, developed fine collections based around their professional interests.

Another type of library was the lending library, usually paid for from public or charitable funds, and in which books, mostly of a general nature, were loaned to patrons, institutions, or other libraries. These evolved into the familiar public library, and also the school, college and university libraries.

Returning to the private libraries, various fates have befallen them since the high point roughly in the middle of the nineteenth century, and that includes the collector's libraries. Many of these have been sold, many have been gifted to or purchased by educational institutions, and a small handful has survived, almost invariably in trustees' hands.

Private collections that were sold

Innumerable private libraries were sold in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the selection below mentions only some of the specialised libraries of collectors to be dispersed in this way.

Sir Thomas Browne's library

Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682) established himself in Norwich as a physician and was able to begin a lifetime of collecting, building a private library, acquiring and reading an estimated 1,500 titles (a very considerable number for that date). He is a much cited source by the *Oxford English Dictionary* and he is given as the first source of over 800 English words. The library was sold after his son's death, and the 1711 *Sales Catalogue* shows the 'distinguished and divided' spheres of science, religion and the arts in the 17th century. It also records the omnivorous reading material and bibliophilia which Browne engaged upon over fifty-plus years.

William Forsyth's library

William Forsyth senior (1772?-1835) was the Royal gardener at Kensington Palace. One famous 19th century garden author wrote that 'Mr. W. Forsyth... had one of the most extensive private libraries of horticultural literature, perhaps ever collected, and he was most liberal in allowing it to be consulted'. The library had to be sold to provide an annuity for his wife. The sale was conducted by Sotheby's in November 1835, and raised £1,469-8-0d. The sale catalogue listed 2,568 books, 26 manuscripts and his herbarium.

Sir Thomas Phillipps's library

Thomas Phillipps (1792-1872) amassed arguably the largest collection a single individual has ever created. It consisted of 60,000 manuscripts and 40,000 printed books. He was particularly a manic collector of vellum charters and other antiquarian material. During his lifetime, Phillipps attempted to turn over his collection to the British nation and corresponded with the then-Chancellor of the Exchequer, Benjamin Disraeli, in order that it should be acquired for the British Museum. Negotiations proved unsuccessful, and, ultimately, the dispersal of his collection took over 100 years. From 1885 Phillipps's grandson Thomas FitzRoy Fenwick supervised sales for the next fifty years. Significant portions of the European material were sold to national collections in Berlin, Belgium, and Utrecht, as well as the sale of outstanding individual items to the Pierpont Morgan and Huntington libraries (see below). By 1946, what was known as the 'residue' was sold to London booksellers. The final portion of the collection was sold by Christie's in 2006.

Private collections now in institutional hands

The creation and expansion of universities prompted the gifting of private libraries to them. A prominent recent example is the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, a gift from the Beinecke family in 1963. Some other examples from history are mentioned below.

Duke Humphrey's library

Humphrey of Lancaster, Duke of Gloucester (1390–1447), was the fourth and youngest son of Henry IV . Duke Humphrey was a patron and protector of Oxford, donating more than 280 valuable manuscripts to the University. This collection is now subsumed into the Bodleian Library at Oxford University.

George III's library

George William Frederick (1738–1820) was King of Great Britain from 1760, as George III. His personal collection is considered one of the most significant of the Enlightenment, containing

books printed mainly in Britain, Europe and North America from the mid 15th to the early 19th centuries. It consisted of 65,000 volumes of printed books, with 19,000 pamphlets. The collection was kept at Buckingham Palace. It was generally open to scholars, and even former adversaries such as the American revolutionary John Adams were admitted. In 1823, as a consequence of George IV deciding to make alterations to Buckingham Palace the library was offered as a gift to the British nation. It is now housed in the six-storey glass King's Library Tower in the new British Library.

Bibliotheca Lindesiana

James Ludovic Lindsay, 26th Earl of Crawford and 9th Earl of Balcarres (1847-1913) and his eldest son built up their library to such an extent that was one the most impressive private collections in Britain at the time, both for its size and for the rarity of some of the materials it contained. By 1861 the catalogue was 250 pages long, divided into: Theology, Jurisprudence, Science and Arts, Belles Lettres, History, Genealogy, Archaeology, Biography, Literary History, Bibliography and Encyclopaedias; and finally a Museum. The Earl issued a catalogue of the library in 1910: *Catalogue of the Printed Books Preserved at Haigh Hall, Wigan*, in 4 volumes. The manuscript collections (including Chinese and Japanese printed books) were sold in 1901 to Enriqueta Rylands for the John Rylands Library (see below). Other parts of the collections have since been donated to or deposited in national or university libraries, including the National Library of Scotland. In 1946 the deposited collections were distributed to the British Museum, Cambridge University Library, and the John Rylands Library.

John Rylands Library

John Rylands (1801-1888) was the owner of the largest textile manufacturing concern in the United Kingdom, and Manchester's first multi-millionaire. His widow, Enriqueta, who inherited the bulk of his wealth, founded the John Rylands Library in memory of her husband. In 1889 the architect Basil Champneys designed a striking gothic building in Deansgate, Manchester, which took ten years to build and was opened to public readers in 1900. Collections she purchased for it included Earl Spencer's Althorp Library in 1892, and Lord Crawford's manuscripts in 1901 (see above). The Library became part of The University of Manchester in 1972 and currently holds the Special Collections of the University of Manchester Library. It is now part of the third largest academic library in the United Kingdom, and the Deansgate building houses over 250,000 printed volumes, and well over a million manuscripts and archival items.

Borthwick Institute

William Borthwick of Bridlington left money in his will to endow an institute, to be known as The Borthwick Institute for Archives, opened in 1953 in the centre of York, specialising in the study of ecclesiastical history, in particular that of the Province of York. Ten years later it became part of the newly-established University of York. It acts as the diocesan record office for Yorkshire and its archive of probate records (wills, inventories and associated records) is the largest in England outside London. During the summer of 2004 the Institute moved to a purpose built archive repository as an extension to the J.B.Morell Library on the campus at Heslington. The new building was made possible due to a grant of £4.4 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Jeremiah Colman's library

Jeremiah James Colman (1830–1898) built up the family business of producing mustard, starch and laundry blue into a significant national company. In 1878 Colman turned his energies to his library. His first bibliophilic coup came with the death of a well-known and respected Norwich bibliophile, William Enfield, who had amassed an unrivalled collection of books on Norwich and Norfolk. Colman instructed his agents to cream off the best of the collection. He went on to buy many books and other items relating to Norwich and Norfolk from other collectors' libraries when they were sold, and his son Russell James Colman continued to add to the collection when he inherited it. The collection was donated to the City of Norwich in 1954. It was transferred to a specially designed room in the new Central Library in 1963. The 5,000 volumes that survived a fire in 1994 were transferred to the Norfolk Heritage Centre in 2001.

Private collections maintaining independence

The variety of independently-run collections is broad – from those specialising in medical history or a county's history, to those relying on the sheer mass of material on a wide range of subjects. All such collections remaining independent for long periods of time have been placed in the hands of trustees. Each collection has its own way of raising funds, usually in large part through serving the public or having subscribers.

The London Library

The London Library was founded in 1841 by Thomas Carlyle and other authors. His founding vision was for an institution which would allow subscribers to enjoy the riches of a national library in their own homes. The object in forming the Library in 1841 was to provide 'the Metropolis of Great Britain with a Library from which books are taken out to be read at home'. It was not designed to compete with circulating libraries or those of a special or professional character so the purchase of novels and of technical or professional works was avoided. Over the ensuing 170 years, The London Library's collection grew to more than one million volumes covering 2,000 subjects. It remains a lending library of non-specialist books. The Library has a Royal Charter and is governed by trustees, of whom all but the Chairman and Treasurer are elected by members. It is funded by subscription from its members.

The William Salt Library

William Salt (1808-1863), a member of the Salt banking family from Stafford, was its representative in London. He assiduously acquired Staffordshire material from booksellers and sale rooms, and the core of the Library is the huge collection of printed books, pamphlets, manuscripts, drawings, watercolours, and transcripts built up during his lifetime. Salt left all his collections to his wife. Five years later she had them catalogued for sale. This caused dismay to the genealogists and historians of Staffordshire. Mrs Salt eventually agreed to donate the books and manuscripts to the people of Staffordshire. Trustees accepted the collection, and the library opened in 1872. It moved to its present location, a house of 1735 and a Grade II* listed building in Eastgate Street in 1918. The Library continues to collect and preserve printed books, printed ephemera, pamphlets and illustrative material relating to Staffordshire. Since the founding of the County Record Office it has been seen as complementary to that service, and indeed the County Archivist is also the William Salt Librarian.

Huntington Library, California

Henry Edwards Huntington (1850–1927) was an American railroad magnate and collector of art. During his lifetime, he amassed the core of one of the finest research libraries in the world, established a splendid art collection, and created an array of botanical gardens. His acquisitions included the archives from Stowe House, Buckinghamshire, at the sale of 1924. Some half a million papers range from minor sales receipts to property deeds, personal letters, and diaries. Huntington was one of the country's most prominent collectors of rare books and manuscripts. He founded the Huntington Library as private, nonprofit educational trust in 1919. In 1920 the library building was completed to house his collection.

Pierpont Morgan's library

The Morgan Library & Museum began as the private library of financier Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913), one of the preeminent collectors and cultural benefactors in the United States. As early as 1890 Morgan had begun to assemble a collection of illuminated, literary, and historical manuscripts, early printed books, and old master drawings and prints. Mr. Morgan's library, as it was known in his lifetime, was built between 1902 and 1906 adjacent to his New York residence at Madison Avenue and 36th Street. In 1924 J. P. Morgan, Jr. gave his father's extraordinary library to the public. The library is maintained through active fundraising including subscriptions from its membership and fellows.

The Wellcome Library

Henry Solomon Wellcome (1853-1936) was an American who became a successful pharmaceutical salesman in Britain. After 1895 much of Wellcome's energy was directed towards developing his collections. His main interests were the history of medicine, including ancillary subjects such as alchemy, witchcraft, anthropology and ethnography. Wellcome bequeathed the bulk of his estate to a body of trustees who formed the Wellcome Trust. Their primary duty was to use the income generated by the company to support ongoing biomedical research, but they were also charged with fostering the study of medical history through the care and maintenance of the collections. The collection continued to grow and is now housed in a modern building on Euston Road.