
Making treasures pay? Benefits of the library treasures volume considered

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The past decade has seen the publication of numerous treasures books relating to the holdings of libraries of various sizes across several sectors, with more in progress at the time of writing. These glossy tomes are not cheap to produce. Apart from up-front payment of publication costs, to be recouped through sales, there is the cost of photography and staff time: selecting items to be featured, identifying and liaising with contributors, writing, editing and proof-reading. Why do it? Are we on a bandwagon, keeping pace with each other because the time has come when not to have produced a treasures volume may suggest a library's paucity of rare, valuable or significant items? If the aim is to stake a claim about status and holdings, how meaningful will treasures volumes be when we all have them? How much do they really demonstrate now, when in a sense they are a leveller: if a treasures volume features, say, one hundred items, a library with 101 appropriate candidates can produce one just as well as a library with ten thousand items from which to choose.

While only time will test the long-term value of the treasures volume in raising a library's profile, creating such a book can be a positive enterprise in numerous other ways. This article is based on the treasures volume produced by Senate House Library, University of London, in November 2012.¹ It reflects on benefits Senate House Library has enjoyed by undertaking the project, in the hope that the sharing of one library's experience may encourage others.

DESCRIPTION

The bulk of *Senate House Library, University of London* consists of a five-thousand word history

of the library, followed by four-hundred-word descriptions of sixty individual manuscripts and printed books, lavishly illustrated. Emphasis is on rare items, with highlights ranging from obviously valuable mediaeval manuscripts to cheap textbooks whose sheer survival over centuries has given them value. The motivation behind the work, as with all treasures volumes, was to raise the profile of the library: particularly relevant for an institution which is topographically overshadowed by the British Library, and whose very existence was threatened after it lost a considerable proportion of its HEFCE funding in 2008. Other advantages emerged during the process.

LIBRARY HISTORY

Few non-legal-deposit libraries can boast monograph histories. Whereas libraries are well covered in some broader institutional histories, such as those of Durham and University College, London, Negley Harte's *The University of London 1836–1986*, the university's primary history, is reticent about its library². Previous published histories of the library had been limited to J. H. P. Pafford's summary in the now outdated directory *The libraries of London*, three columns in the *International dictionary of library histories*, and an article showing the mentality of the sub-set of specific collectors whose collections acquired by the library included fifteenth-century books³. The treasures volume gave us the library's longest-ranging and broadest history to date; and it gave us a history in a book that could be found by typing the library's name into online catalogues.

As an official history, a five-thousand word account is too short to be truly comprehensive. The history in *Senate House Library, University of London* was written to contextualise and unite the sixty discrete highlighted items. This created an emphasis on the acquisition of stellar collections, which are only a part, albeit an important one, of the entire library. Moreover, because treasures volumes target general readers, and aspects of pure librarianship are not considered appealing to this audience, the history ignored facts which are of significance primarily or exclusively to librarians, such as complaints about the library's earliest catalogue; Senate House Library's role as a founding member of what is now Research Libraries UK (RLUK); the beginnings of computerisation; the masterminding of the move into a new periodicals wing overnight. These features, described before I realised the implications of the word limit and subsequently discarded, formed the basis of a conference paper and more detailed

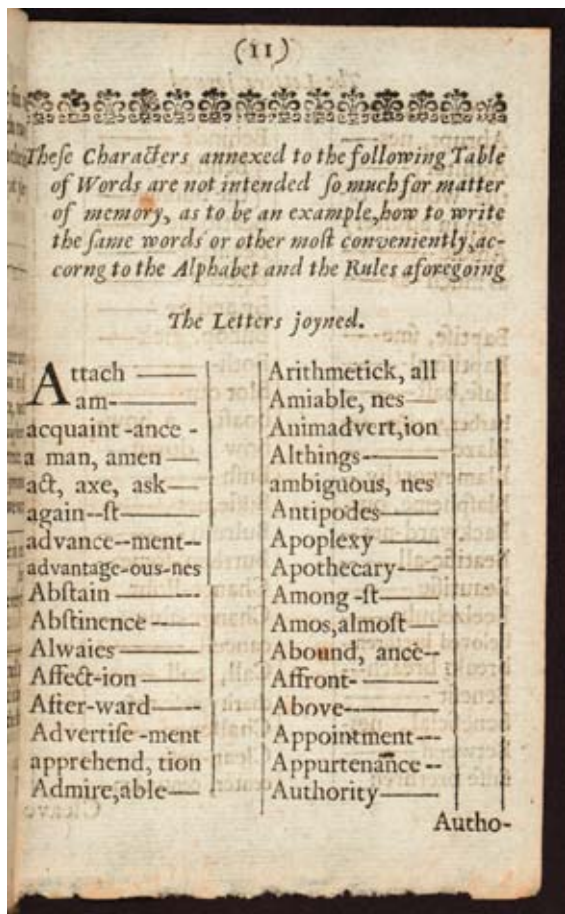
article⁴, and plans for a monograph history of the library germinated. Thus we turned the lacunae to our advantage.

CONTRIBUTORS

Several contributors were drawn from library staff, colleges and the School of Advanced Study of the University of London. Others came from further afield, including one scholar from Germany and four from the United States of America. Some were hitherto unknown to me, and as far as I knew had no connection with Senate House Library and no vested interest or reason to cooperate. Yet they did. Several who could not oblige personally recommended others who could, and wished the project well.

Gaining the goodwill of contributors strengthened library advocacy. Becoming aware of the goodwill generated by the library was a heart-warming, energising experience. A few contributors or potential contributors suggested that I myself write the pieces I proposed to them. The single-author approach favoured in some recent treasures volumes is straightforward and guarantees the uniformity which must otherwise be imposed editorially⁵, but had we followed it we should not only have sacrificed fresh insights and expertise, but should also have lost the opportunity to ensure a high level of warmth and cooperation.

In some cases contributors increased their own knowledge of the wealth of library holdings, which they could then disseminate. Occasionally research for the volume provided a stepping-stone for contributors to raise the library profile further and demonstrate that our special collections are of academic value, not merely museum objects. In addition to being the sole extant copy of a text, Robert Stileman's manual *Short-hand shortned, or, The art of short-writing* (1673) is the unique representative of a particular system of shorthand: a form still largely unknown, as the manuscript shorthand symbols which would have provided the key to the method were not normally inserted in the spaces left for them in printed editions. They do, however, appear in the Senate House Library copy. Four hundred words could not suffice to explain and contextualise the system; but the author was able to publish a longer piece elsewhere.



Robert Stileman, *Short-Hand Shortned, or, The Art of Short-Writing* (London: R. Stileman, 1673)

INSIGHTS

I had expected the treasures book to be a coffee-table volume with superficial content. Not so! The amount of new research in the volume, an extremely significant benefit, included:

Debunking old myths

According to the printed catalogue of the Sterling Library, our main named special collection of English literature, the more elaborate of our two manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* (SL.V.17) had belonged to the antiquary Sir Roger Twysden⁶. The contributor pointed out that in fact the book dealers W. H. Robinson Ltd bought the volume in about 1937 from the recusant Giffard family of Chillington Park, Staffordshire.

A typescript of Thomas Carlyle’s annotations on Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* had suggested that the copy had been given to Carlyle by his niece, Mary Aitken. The contributing Carlyle expert noted the impossibility of this, Mary Aitken having been a child of eight at the time. The relevant published volume of Carlyle’s letters, which post-dates the gift of the Sterling Library

to Senate House by almost half a century, clarifies the source of Carlyle’s loan.⁷

Correcting other misinformation

One of the incunables featured, Bernardus de Granollachs’s *Lunarium ab anno 1491 ad annum 1550* (ISTC ig00340700), still appeared as unique in the Incunabula Short Title Catalogue when I wrote about our incunabula in 2009. The incunabulist writing about the book noted that our copy, albeit the only complete one known, is one of two: a second copy, missing the penultimate leaf, had long been in the Sorbonne but had been wrongly identified until the printed catalogue appeared in 1995⁸. On the basis of its imprints, our copy of the *Flora Graeca* had long been assumed to be the first edition⁹. Brent Elliott, examining it for the treasures volume, proved by the watermarks that it was in fact one of about forty copies of a reprint issued by Henry Bohn in 1845–6.



Bernardus de Granollachs, *Lunarium ab anno 1491 ad annum 1550* ([Lyons: Johannes Siber, 1491])

Providing new information

One of the treasures was an anonymous children’s book from 1893, *Halt!*, chosen as the only recorded copy in an institutional library. The contributor, an expert in children’s literature, identified the anonymous illustrator as Arthur G. Walker (1861–1939), better known as a sculptor and painter.

The contributor of an entry on the apparently unique chapbook *Love and honour, or, The Adven-*

tures of *Serinda, a beautiful slave*, an oriental tale of kidnap and rescue printed in 1805, identified an earlier version of the story, *The adventures of Gen. Hutchinson and Serinda, the fair Georgian*, in the British Library, and listed differences – a practical contribution to reception studies.

NEW PERSPECTIVES



Henry and Augustus Mayhew, *The Greatest Plague in Life*, ill. by George Cruikshank (London: David Bogue, 1847)

The treasures volume assisted our presentation of items within special collections in the following ways:

- It publicised rarity, hitherto sometimes unknown even to many staff, and especially relevant as library focus moves towards ‘unique and distinctive’ collections¹⁰. For example, previously only the library’s expert on periodicals had been aware of the scarcity of the Healthy & Artistic Dress Union’s short-lived periodical *Aglaia* (1893–94), unnoticed in Brake and Demoor’s *Dictionary of nineteenth-century journalism in Great Britain and Ireland*.¹¹
- It codified information otherwise buried in catalogue records or the minds of individual members of staff. A researcher had drawn staff attention some years earlier to the fact that the Senate House Library copy of Claudius Hollyband’s *The Italian Schoole-*

Maister (1597) was in an early, ‘scurrilous state’. A sheet had been reset, as evinced not only by insignificant typographical changes between our copy and others, but also by a radically altered dialogue. A request for a scrivener leads to the answer in the Early English Books Online (EEBO) text: ‘See here the house and shop of M. X: a verie skilfull man in his trade: let vs see if he be at home: they say that he is gon forth: but he will be here anon.’ The scurrilous state reads: ‘many of the[m] are so rude, grosse, clownish, ignorant, that you would wonder: but aboue all one, which is called M. N: a rich vilaine, without learning, ciuilitie, humanitie & courtesie, whose face sheweth that he is always shiting [...]’.¹²

We had noted the difference in our own catalogue and in the English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC), and had used the book for teaching purposes. But its value for demonstrating amusingly the difference between bibliographical states and for pointing out more widely the potential uniqueness of different copies of a title in the hand-press period was heightened by the raising of its profile – particularly relevant for a library which supports an academic body offering an M.A. and M.Res. in the History of the Book.

- It enabled us to see familiar material in new ways. I enjoy displaying Mrs Sherwood’s sixteen-page evangelical tract *Comfort in death* next to Shakespeare’s First Folio in order to stress that the unprepossessing booklet, one of just two known copies as opposed to more than two hundred of the Shakespeare folio, is by far the rarer item. People have tended to talk about it in the context of evangelicalism. The contributor broadened perspectives by placing it in the context of memorialisation.
- It exposed the sheer fun of some of our books. As an example of Victorian part publication we selected Henry and Augustus Mayhew’s *The greatest plague in life, or, The adventures of a lady in search of a good servant* (1847), ours being the only copy on COPAC (unlike the parts of better-known Dickens novels). Re-issued several times in the nineteenth century, the book passed into obscurity in the twentieth. Its narrator laments having been driven from her home:

‘through a pack of ungrateful, good-for-nothing things called servants, who really do not know when they are well off ... [I]f they had been my own children

I could not have looked after them more than I did – continually instructing them, and even sometimes condescending to do part of their work for them myself, out of mere kindness, just to show them how; and never allowing a set of fellows from those dreadful barracks in Alb-ny Str-t to come running after them.’¹³

‘That woman had issues!’ exclaimed somebody on a guided tour, demonstrating modern engagement with a text from a bygone age.

THE FUTURE

The benefits of the treasures volume after publication will emerge more clearly with time. An immediate benefit was to use several of the items featured in the book for a major six-month exhibition, with captions adapted from the volume text. Curating exhibitions is time-consuming, but in this case required minimal additional effort and thereby went some way to recouping the hidden expense of the volume. Staff from central university departments as diverse as Finance, Estates, and the International Programmes unit attended guided tours of the exhibition intended to instil a sense of wider institutional pride in the University Library and, through it, in the university as a whole.

The volume provided further promotional material. A reshaping of entries provided text, again with minimal effort, for fortnightly blog posts which replaced our ‘Book of the month’. Some of the photographs could be re-used as social stationery.

Seen altruistically, libraries as communal organisations may be regarded as having a role of giving. Producing a treasures volume with multiple authors, some eminent, others commencing their careers, gave less experienced contributors an additional publication, in addition to allowing all academics involved to show their ability to appeal to an audience beyond the academic community (‘knowledge transfer’) for the Research Excellence Framework exercise¹⁴. The volume permitted us to show living donors our appreciation of their gifts in a tangible way. And we hope that it may give pleasure to those who read it, now and for years to come¹⁵.

This article reflects the views of its author, which are not necessarily those of the institution.

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