

Rare books and printed special collections at Bangor University



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Background

The Archives and Special Collection is a comparatively new 'function' of the Library and Archives Service of Bangor University. In the early days the Department of Manuscripts was responsible for the vast collections of manuscripts, estate collections and personal archival collections (Special Collections) held by the institution; whilst the library was responsible for the general stock, as well as hundreds of rare books and printed special collections. Initially, because of the need to make the rare printed material accessible in a better invigilated environment, and later because of user demand, the Department of Archives and Manuscripts gradually took responsibility for the rare books and printed special collections. Whilst printed material is still housed in the library spaces, the items are consulted in the archives reading room under stricter guidelines.

Special collections at Bangor University

At Bangor University the term 'special collections' is used to describe collections of non-print and print material that have characteristics that set them apart from other types of collections. An example of such a collection is the Owen Pritchard Collection, which was created by Dr Owen Pritchard between 1884 and 1920 and presented by him to the University College of North Wales (now Bangor University) in 1920. It is strong in works printed by the private presses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this stunning collection there are books printed for William Morris, including lectures on politics, and reprints of papers relating to the Arts and Crafts movement. *Love is enough, or the freeing of Pharamond*, published by Ellis and White in 1873, is the earliest English edition of Morris's morality play (originally published by Roberts of Boston).

In recent years the university has seen the development of Research Institutes and Centres. These are supported by the Library, Archives and Special Collections and help promote the collections (print and non-print) to a wider audience. They are also crucial in validating the importance of our collections on a national and international level. The most important Research Institutes and Centres in relation to the Archives and Special Collections are:

- The R. S. Thomas Study Centre was officially opened by R. S. Thomas in April 2000. The centre contains a substantial number of his manuscripts, including unpublished poetry and prose. The collection also contains material by Thomas's wife, M. E. (Elsi) Eldridge, including sketchbooks and her unpublished journals. The centre has copies of all of R. S. Thomas's published works, including rare editions and translations. In addition, it contains a comprehensive collection of reviews, critical books and articles and newspaper clippings, as well as video and audio material.
- The Stephen Colclough Centre for the History and Culture of the Book is an interdisciplinary centre for the advanced study of the past, present and future of the book as material artefact, and of the cultures that surround it. Working in collaboration with colleagues at Bangor and beyond, the centre's purpose is twofold: to enhance and broaden our understanding of the place of the book in cultural, social and economic practices, and to develop our understanding of the material book as cultural commodity, conveyer of knowledge, and object of desire.
- The Centre for Arthurian Studies highlights the wealth of expertise and long-standing tradition in researching and teaching the Arthurian legend at Bangor. The centre brings together Bangor's Arthurian collection as well as the former Flintshire Harries Arthurian collection, which arrived at Bangor in stages in 2014 and 2015. It is a hub for exchange and collaboration across several departments in the university, and has external partners.

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- The Institute for the Study of Welsh Estates (ISWE) is dedicated to promoting research into the history, impact and functioning of estates on a Wales-wide basis. ISWE seeks to advance outstanding research into the subject and to ensure that the knowledge we generate regarding Wales's past is accessible and contributes constructively to its future.

Promotion

Promoting various collections and centres has been a priority and has been achieved using both traditional and non-traditional methods. The Library and Archive Service is fortunate in that we work closely with the Universities Centre for Widening Access. The aim of this centre is to attract students who have little or no experience of higher education. Liaising with this centre has provided an opportunity for the Library and Archives Service to reach a wider audience, which has resulted in the service working with external bodies and inviting them in to use our varied spaces and introduce them to our collections. An example of this is the 'Cofis Bach' project.

Cofis Bach, a charity that provides free artistic opportunities for children and young people from Communities First areas of Caernarfon. In 2015 the service was approached regarding the possibility of its hosting the group's annual show. The children were invited to visit the library, given a tour, and introduced to the collections. Subsequently 'Tocyn i Ble?' (Ticket to Where?), an innovative mobile performance, was staged using the spaces in the main library.

Another innovative performance was 'Archifdaith'. Two artists, Cai Tomos and Marc Rees, choreographed a mobile performance that took the audience through the Pontio building (Bangor's Arts and Innovation Centre) and explored ways of promoting the remarkable collections in the university's possession through new and existing artistic media.

To celebrate the founding of the Centre for Arthurian Studies and to promote the university's Arthurian Special Collection, an interactive event for local schoolchildren was held at the main library in June 2015. This led to the Library and Archives Service being invited to join five hundred local school pupils and their teachers for a day of history, education, creativity and fun at Caernarfon Castle. On this occasion staff (dressed in medieval costume) took to the event information about the collections and the Centres.

This type of promotional work led to the Library and Archives Service being nominated for a prestigious award – The Times Higher Education Leadership and Management (THELMA) Awards. Bangor University was nominated in the 'Outstanding Library Team' category. We did not win, but were proud to be nominated.

Traditional promotional methods have included the opening up of the library's prestigious Shankland Reading Room for book launches, book-reading events and public lectures, as well as exhibitions and open days. University open days offer another opportunity to open up the collections, with talks and displays for prospective students and their families. Local secondary school pupils are encouraged to use the facilities, and talks that are useful for their studies are given on our collections. An ongoing programme of public exhibitions, often based on historic events, ensures a constant turnover of items from our collections, which thus receive the attention they deserve. This also highlights the breadth and depth of our collections.

Future developments

The collections and research centres attract both undergraduates and postgraduates to Bangor University and provide the institution with a unique selling point.

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Accessibility and the sharing of information about the collections are vital, and we shall be seeking to gather more information about the background of our printed collection and improving our webpages. We shall improve accessibility by enabling users to request rare books and archival material online as well as in the library and in the archives reading room.

There is still much work to be done to unite the archival and non-print collections. Logistically, the scattered locations of our printed collections make retrieval of items and daily inspections difficult. Funding opportunities are constantly being sought to enable the service to bring all collections together under one roof.

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