

LIBRARY REPORT

For the period January to March 2020

Context for this Report

The RAS physical premises have been closed since Tuesday 17 March, due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. This means that the Society's Reading Room service has been suspended, as has work with its physical collections. In the meantime, the Librarian and Archivist have been working from home, answering enquiries, cataloguing and promoting digital collections, and attempting to maintain our audience engagement as far as possible.

We hope to be able to resume activities at Stephenson Way as soon as government advice makes this feasible. However, this report outlines some activities that we can continue to pursue in the coming weeks while we are unable to access the building or physical collections. This includes the preparation and addition of extant digital collections to the Digital Library; enhancing existing collections information already online; the preparation of record retention schedules and collections policy documentation; the management of our social media content (especially the Society's blog); and ongoing work to respond to research enquiries.

Prior to the closure, usage patterns in the first three months of the year had been within normal ranges.

Digitization

We received several enquiries regarding digitization in the early part of this year, and look forward to advancing these projects when possible. As part of ongoing projects with the Tod and Persian manuscript collections, we digitized Tod 145 and Persian 38.

Digital Library

Between January and March, the Digital Library had 2,122 visits from 1,652 users. This is an increase of about one-third from the same period last year. The Digital Library assumes extra significance while the Society is closed, and we saw a slight increase in traffic to the Digital Library after the Society shut its doors in mid-March. But even after we re-open, it will have added importance, as travel restrictions will make it more difficult for many people to access our physical collections. Maintaining and improving the Digital Library therefore becomes a priority, and we have made efforts to add new content during the past month. We suggest that continuing to add new content over the coming months will be an important task.

We recently added the rest of the Society's Palm Leaf Manuscripts to the Digital Library. This means almost 400 PLMs from our South Asian collections are available online. This corresponds to about 20% of our entire manuscript collection.

We also added a collection of several dozen photographs from Indonesia, dating from the 1940s, and containing topographical and architectural views as well as social and political scenes.

About 60% of the visitors to the Digital Library came from the USA, UK, India, China, and Japan. The most popular collections were Palm Leaf Manuscripts, the Manning Archive, Malay manuscripts, the Juki Shahnamah, and our Nineveh excavation video.

We have several high-quality collections, that were digitized within the past twelve months, which might now be prioritized for adding to the Digital Library.

RAS Archives

The Archivist has spent most of the last few months working to sort the A.C. Graham Papers ready for listing and cataloguing. This has involved appraising each document, in the 16 boxes of material, and assigning the series to which each belongs, prior to creating an order for each series. This work was halted by the shutting of the Society premises, with just a small amount of material left for sorting.

This has meant only a few catalogues have been added to Archives Hub, but these include the Papers of Francis Buchanan-Hamilton – 15 large handwritten bound volumes, all of which needed cleaning prior to cataloguing. The Papers for the International Congress of Orientalists were also added, marking the completion of catalogues for Allied Societies. Additions were also made to the catalogues of Henry Miers Elliot and Edward Walter Hutchinson.

Since working from home, the archivist has been listing and cataloguing the Papers for the Gibb Memorial Trust. The cataloguing is now finished, and the full listing is available on Archives Hub. She has also been working on improving administrative documents and carrying out research to draft further retention schedules and increase her understanding of the Graham Archive.

The Oral History Project is, obviously, on pause. However, the necessary forms are now ready to send, and all interviewers have received training in using the recording equipment.

The blog continues to be popular and our Twitter followers are approaching 7500. During the shutdown, the Archivist has tried to increase the output on social media.

Nancy Charley

Collections Open Evening

Regrettably, it was impossible to hold the planned RAS Collections Evening on 17 March due to the coronavirus pandemic. We hope to be able to hold the event later this year.

Hippisley Collection

The catalogue compiled by the University of Shandong's International Sinology Research Center is complete and under revision prior to publication. We will receive hard copies once it is printed. We also received metadata with which to enhance our own records.

Users and enquiries

Visitor and enquiry numbers between January and March were within a normal range.

Cataloguing

We added 316 records to the online catalogue between January and March, including several collections of glass slides.

Volunteers

The Society's volunteer programme has, obviously, been suspended. We look forward to being able to gradually, sensibly and cautiously return to working with our volunteers whenever that might be possible. This will need to be a slow and conservative process.

Volunteering has been a mutually beneficial activity for the Society, staff, and for volunteers themselves. Given the previous extent of volunteering across heritage institutions nationwide, we expect that public heritage bodies will provide advice about volunteering once the "lockdown" has ended, and such guidance will inform our own practice.

Our volunteers continued to give enthusiastic commitment during the first months of this year. Ian Scholey completed the list of letters in a book of correspondence from the beginnings of the Society. He then agreed to carry out some research in order to identify some print blocks. These were discovered to be a complete set of the original blocks for Edward Walter Hutchinson's *Adventurers in Siam in the Seventeenth Century*, printed in 1940. The set was repackaged, catalogued and put with Hutchinson's other archival material. Ian then started listing the letters in a second early book of correspondence.

Ian Herbertson continued with auditing the artworks. Emmanuel Buenaventura finished listing the papers of Dennis Duncanson, received training in Archives Hub and was continuing with the cataloguing. Lily Colgan, working with the papers of the West brothers, was also cataloguing on Archives Hub.

Imogen Holmes began her internship at the Society under Sussex University's MA in History of Art and Museum Curation. She researched, packaged and catalogued our large remaining

collections of glass slides, notably those belonging to Dame Freya Stark. She added five collections of glass slides to the catalogue and curated a display for the Collections Open Evening (unfortunately postponed).

Roger Parsons continued his dedicated efforts to catalogue our oversized books, while we also received several visits from our NADFAS conservation team to carry out book repairs.

Reprographic services

We received several reproduction orders between January and March, charging over £315 for photographs from manuscripts and archives.

Loans to exhibitions

All loans to exhibitions (apart from long-term loans such as the Parsi Shipbuilders) had returned to the Society before the lockdown.

We returned Raffles Java 7 from the British Museum, and the Tod astrological Panchanga from the Design Museum. The next leg of that exhibition, at the Tekniska Museum in Stockholm, Sweden, has been postponed, with the possibility of revised dates.

We received communications about planned exhibitions and events organized around the 2021 commemoration of the bicentenary of Sir Richard Burton's birth. We hope to be able to support these activities, and to showcase the Society's Burton collections.

Publications

An edited version of the Librarian's paper, delivered at the Society last June, was published in the *Sino-Platonic Papers* series: "Systems of Religion and Morality in the Collections of the Royal Asiatic Society" (no. 298, Feb. 2020).

Edward Weech
Librarian