

LIBRARY REPORT

For the period September to December 2020

Context for this Report

The Reading Room opened to readers one day per week by appointment, except during the month of November when the government imposed a new “lockdown”. The Librarian and Archivist worked mainly onsite at the RAS premises, with some home working.

The onsite Reading Room service saw limited demand. It seems likely that many readers – especially overseas travelers – have postponed their visits until after the pandemic has passed and vaccines are widely available. However, we continued to see significant demand for our remote enquiry service, while demand for reprographics increased substantially. Our digital collections also continued to see increased growth. Volunteering has continued to be suspended, in the main, though some volunteers have been able to do some work from home.

The Society’s new Archivist, Emma Jones, started in early October. Emma has been able to complete a comprehensive induction despite the challenges represented by the pandemic.

Digitization

Despite the disruption caused by the November lockdown, the Internet Archive completed the digitization of the Hodgson manuscripts requested by the Byoma Kusuma Buddhadharma Sangha foundation. The newly digitized manuscripts are now available to view on the Internet Archive.

Digital Library

Between September and December, the Digital Library received 4,000 visits from over 2,500 users, with over 15,000 page views. This is double the traffic for the same period last year. We saw a significant increase in traffic from Indonesia and Malaysia, which accounted for 30% of site visits. A further 25% of visits came from the USA and UK, and 10% from India. The most popular collections were Malay manuscripts, the Manning Archive, and the Gulistan manuscript.

In total, the Digital Library received 10,700 visits in 2020 from 7,800 users, who viewed 40,000 pages. This is an increase of almost 100% compared to 2019 (23,700 page views from 4,400 visitors).

The Society’s Palm Leaf Manuscript collection on the Internet Archive also received around 20,000 visits over the course of 2020, the majority from India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

Acquisitions

Michael Willis has donated several recent works on India and Tibet to the Library.

Collections Open Evening

The Society successfully held a Collections Evening via Zoom in late November. This event had been postponed from March, and it featured the full original lineup, including Sonetra Seng, who presented from Cambodia. We suggest holding another virtual Collections Evening during the Spring.

Users and enquiries

Ten researchers visited the Reading Room to use collections between September and December. Additionally, we responded to 91 remote enquiries about the collections. The most popular collections were RAS Archives, Indian art, and Persian manuscripts.

Cataloguing

We added 106 new records to the online library catalogue.

Volunteers

In October, Jung Min began an internship at the Society as part of the Korean Government Long-Term Fellowship for Overseas Study. She has been working in the Library for three days each week. Jung has been compiling records of early Western sources on Korea, building upon the bibliographic resources developed by Brother Anthony of Taizé, the outgoing President of RAS Korea. Jung completed an index not only of all the articles in the Journal of RAS Korea, but also a complete index of all the Society's lectures, and all of the events and walking tours which it has held. This comprises an unparalleled reference tool.

Otherwise, our volunteer programme continues to be largely suspended. Lily Colgan and Emmanuel Buenaventura have continued to do some archives cataloguing from home, working from materials they had compiled before the first lockdown. Our other volunteers – including our NADFAS team – are primed to return when conditions allow.

Yin Nyein Aye, SOAS Alphawood MA scholar, completed a four-week remote internship funded by the Alphawood programme. Yin catalogued several unidentified C19th Burmese manuscripts on Buddhist scriptures, monastery administration, and astrology. These have been digitized and are available on the Internet Archive.

Reprographic services

2403 copies were provided from RAS collections. 320 were made by users, and the rest were provided by staff. This included over 1800 photographs of an early Latin-Chinese manuscript dictionary. We charged £672 for these services.

Visits and conferences

All group visits and meetings at the Society were suspended until further notice.

Loans to exhibitions

We received a loan request for an 1836 letter from Thomas Weeding, regarding the shipment of a large cargo of silk from China to Britain, which is to be included in an exhibition on Anglo-Chinese cultural exchange at the Brunei Gallery curated by Iris Yau.

In early December, the Director couriered the James Tod astronomical Panchanga to the Tekniska Museum in Stockholm, prior to its inclusion in the “Moving to Mars” exhibition. The Museum delayed the opening of this exhibition from Christmas Day to early January.

The loan of the painting of the Parsi shipbuilders to the Museum of London is set to be renewed.

Publicity

In November, the Librarian delivered an online lecture for the Athenaeum Club on the founding of the Society and the context of Oriental studies in late-Enlightenment Britain.

Other projects

Philip Jagessar, a doctoral candidate at the University of Nottingham, has won a Royal Geographical Society Harley Fellowship to examine the Society’s map collection in Summer 2021. This should help lay the groundwork for comprehensive cataloguing of the collection. It also provides the perfect opportunity to improve the storage and arrangement of the map collection, as the maps are currently grouped in soft card folders on static shelving. This would be a good time to look into the feasibility of purchasing a dedicated map chest and storing the maps in individual, transparent melinex folders instead.

Basement

Temperature and humidity readings in the basement were within acceptable parameters.

Edward Weech, Librarian

Archives

The Archivist spent her first few months in post familiarising herself with the Society's collections and cataloguing several smaller collections onto the Archives Hub. This included the personal papers of Gerald Tibbetts, who was a specialist in Arab navigation, and material highlighting the activities of the Oriental Translation Fund. The Oriental Translation Fund papers covered both the origins of the fund in 1828 and its revision in 1888 by Forster Fitzgerald Arbuthnot. Further information about these collections can be found on the blog by following the links below.

[Cataloguing the Gerald Tibbetts Collection – Royal Asiatic Society](#)

[The significance of The Oriental Translation Fund and the role of Forster Fitzgerald Arbuthnot – Royal Asiatic Society](#)

Before the Christmas break, work had started on organising material from the 'Lectures and Events' section of the institutional archive. Whilst this material is already listed, these need to be assigned a series prior to cataloguing. A small amount of appraisal also needs to take place. The cataloguing of this section is currently on pause until we are able to return to the building.

Work has also continued on formalising the Society's records management procedures and the Archivist has started to draft a records management procedural document for staff. This aim of this document is to provide clearer guidance to staff around the management of paper based and digital records. The retention schedules that were previously completed by Nancy Charley will also be added to this document as part of the appendices. This project has also involved examining how the Society's digital records are currently stored and how these could be managed more effectively for the future.

Both the blog and social media accounts have continued to thrive in recent months. Special mention must go to the Instagram account with followers up by 20% in the month of December. In order to track social engagement more effectively, the Archivist plans to compile monthly stats to gain a greater awareness of the types of posts that are engaging the most with our followers.

Emma Jones, Archivist