

Episode 10 – 525 Years in the Pursuit of Truth: A New History of the University of Aberdeen

Automated Welcome [00:00:02] This podcast has brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Dr Bradford Bow [00:00:12] Hello, my name is Dr. Bradford Bow, and I'm a co-deputy director of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies, which is sponsoring this new series of podcasts entitled Five Hundred and Twenty Five Years in the Pursuit of Truth A New History of the University of Aberdeen. In this episode, my colleague Jane Pirie, who is a curator in the University of Aberdeen's Museums and Collections department, will survey the historic libraries, archives and Museum of the University of Aberdeen, which have been enriched by donations, gifts and acquisitions leading to collections which are now of international significance.

Jane Pirie [00:01:08] Five hundred and twenty-five years of collection and care. The libraries, archives and museums of the University of Aberdeen. The collections of the University of Aberdeen are amongst some of the most important and valuable in the world. They reflect not only the history of the University, but that of Aberdeen, Scotland and the wider world, and tell the stories of the people who created, collected, curated and encountered them. In addition to individual books and manuscripts of rare and historical significance, the archival collections contain the institutional records of the University, along with records of estates, businesses and individuals. The University's Museum Collections, meanwhile, are a recognised collection of national significance and reflect many areas of human culture, medicine and health and the natural sciences. These collections of unique material are carefully curated and conserved and are increasingly available for use by students and staff of the university. A wide variety of people in the North East of Scotland and researchers throughout the world. The collections continue to be developed as new and important acquisitions are made and are being reinterpreted using new techniques and from different perspectives. This podcast will look at the history of the collections and spotlight, just a few of the individuals who have been involved with these irreplaceable items over the centuries.

Jane Pirie [00:02:34] The books and manuscripts that belong to the University's founder, Bishop William Elphinstone, formed the earliest collection. The 34 handwritten manuscripts and early printed books reflect the curriculum of his new University. There are legal text of canon and civil law and devotional and scriptural works used to educate the future priests, lawyers, educators and councillors needed in the North of Scotland in the 16th century. Elphinstone's books can seem slightly inaccessible to us today, written in Latin on ponderous subjects, but occasionally you see a little more human figure, here it looks as if Elphinstone's mind has wandered doodling a bishop's mitre on the opening page. As library books were at first kept in a secure room known as the Scorpio Chamber in the college, however, as the stock of books increased through donation and gift, more space was required and in around 1535 a library house was built on the south wall of the chapel.

[00:03:37] At the end of the 16th century, a rival University, Marischal College, was established in the town of New Aberdeen. It was supported by the town council with a different educational direction and focus from that of King's. Almost from the outset, the two institutions were either determinedly separate or under duress to join together, this push and pull between the establishment's shaped the collections under their care. The new college received some remarkable early donations, the first made in 1613, when Duncan Liddel bequeathed his working library of scientific and medical books. The library

began to challenge King's library for size and magnificence when Thomas Reid, Latin secretary to James the sixth and first left over thirteen hundred titles to the college Reid's request made in 1624 included treasures such as the Aberdeen Bestiary and the beautifully illuminated Hebrew Bible. Reid included in his bequest, money for a librarian to make the books available not only for the students of Marischal College, but to the public of Aberdeen at King's. The books were at first under the care of the First Principal, Hector Boece then the task of Bibliocad was given to the arts faculty regents.

[00:04:57] Towards the mid-16th century, the administration of King's began to falter and by the mid 1600s, the buildings too were falling into disrepair. When a visitation by Charles the first in 1641 forced the two institutions to join into the short-lived Caroline University. King's came under instruction to renovate the old library buildings. However, by the end of the 17th century, things were no better at Marischal, with the books described as being in a perishing condition. In the 18th century however, there was a shift in the fortunes for the libraries and collections of both institutions. At King's several donations of books from the wealthy alumnus James Fraser of Chelsea meant that space had to be found to store them. Fortunately, Fraser also gave funds to construct a new housing for the collections and for a librarians post with a guaranteed tenure. Fraser was royal librarian to a succession of monarchs and secretary and registrar of Chelsea Hospital in London. He was regarded as the undisputed savior of King's College library. However, it must be acknowledged that a portion of his fortune relied on the proceeds of slavery. In his mortification of 1730 he left a son principally for the maintenance of two bursers, each of whom was to have the role of librarian for a four year term. This endowment was in the form of shares of the South Sea company, although the company partially collapsed in 1720 it continued to trade in enslaved persons, making a profit for those who invested after the company's restructure. The library at King's also increased its stock through the Copyright Act of 1710, giving all Universities the right to claim a copy of every book published and registered at Stationers' Hall, London. The statute mistakenly granted the privilege to four Scottish Universities, not five. It did not identify which of Aberdeen's colleges was to be allocated the books. A bitter legal contest ensued, which Marischal lost, and during the 18th century King's library grew rapidly due to this regular source of books.

Jane Pirie [00:07:17] The 19th century was a tumultuous period as arguments for and against the proposal to join the two Universities were disputed. The growing collections Library, Archive and Museum were housed in rooms within buildings that were either too small or suffered from damp. The University Royal Commission in 1826 reported that the buildings in Marischal were in such a state of disrepair, but rebuilding was the only solution. At King's, the library was still stored in the chapel building with other books on the floor of college rooms, a programme of rebuilding was begun at both Old and New Aberdeen, which added impetus to the development of formal museum collections.

Jane Pirie [00:08:23] Whilst today, that is a curatorial distinction between printed books, archives and manuscripts and museum objects, the early collections consisted of a mix of all three disciplines. The early bequest from Thomas Reid and James Fraser, as well as the Foundation Library of Elphinstone, contained a mix of manuscript and print. And those of Duncan Liddle and Alexander Reid included extensive collections of scientific and medical instruments. The two institutions were always collecting and accruing objects, including paintings, sculptures, coins and medals which were used in teaching or placed on display in the college libraries. It was only in 1727 that any reference was made to a display of objects at King's and only in 1786 was a room put aside as a museum in Marischal. The focus of these collections was wide and disparate when, in 1837, a new room in Marischal was dedicated to the museum. It housed collections of objects from

North America, Polynesia and Africa, plus animal specimens, geological specimens, statues, paintings and interestingly, rare books and manuscripts.

Jane Pirie [00:09:32] Following the 1860 union, teaching at Marischal focussed predominantly on science and medicine, whilst the arts and divinity was based at King's. The two colleges now had distinct museum collections, an archaeological museum at King's, and that of natural history at Marischal. The physical rebuilding programme allowed for an expansion and a rearrangement of the museum collections galvanised by the Professor of anatomy, Robert Reid. In 1907 a University museum opened which fused the three main collections, archaeological specimens from King's and ethnographic and classical antiquity collections from Marischal. These displayed objects from many cultures with a distinct colonial and imperialist outlook. Reid also operated an anatomy museum in Marischal for the use of medical students.

Jane Pirie [00:10:26] The union of the colleges also led to the first full appointment of a University librarian, PJ Anderson was a graduate of Aberdeen and devoted his career and life to curating the collections onto an extensive modernisation of the library. Anderson did not see the library's role as that of supplementing students study, but as a way of cementing the University within the culture and history of the North East of Scotland. One of the achievements of his career was the creation and publication through his involvement with the spalding clubs of transcriptions and translations of the records of King's and Marischal from their foundation to their union. These key lists still form a cornerstone of much research into the history of both institutions and sections have been digitised to allow ease of access. Anderson also had then revolutionary idea of employing women in the library, Aberdeen only admitted women as students in 1894, and Anderson had to present a case for employing female library assistance to the library committee. Successfully his argument library employed a number of women in posts, notably Maud Storr Best, who became assistant librarian and worked alongside Anderson to mould the library into a thriving modern institution. Following Anderson's death, Best was acting librarian for six months before the appointment of W. Douglas Simpson in 1926. Simpson was an energetic man and historian, archaeologist and University administrator in addition to librarian. Like Anderson, he was an advocate of interdisciplinary cooperation between the various collections, particularly that of archaeology and archives, viewing the library as an engine of research he oversaw the extension of library buildings. His final act before his death in 1966 was to oversee the building of a new science library at the King's campus.

Jane Pirie [00:12:28] The 1960s saw the development of the University as a regional archive, the absence of local authority, regional archive offices meant that the University acquired many local private archives, such as papers or family estates, institutions and businesses. This accrual led to the need for a specialised role, someone able to administer these archive collections and also collate an order the University's own remarkable institutional collection. In 1969, the post of archivist and keeper of manuscripts was created, the first holder being Colin McLaren, in 1973, the complementarity Department of Special Collections for Printed Books was established, and in 1979, the University appointed Charles Hunt as the first professional curator of the museum. Since 2018 Museums, Special Collections and Archives are formed, one department with increasingly more specialised and professional postings, the move of special collections and archives from the old King's College location to the Sir Duncan Race Library in 2010 saw the establishment of a dedicated conservation laboratory and the appointment of professional staff. It is noteworthy that the current arrangement that sees archives, rare books and museum objects has one administrative unit. Similar to the museum set up in the 19th

century and Marischal College. These collections, however, are more than curiosities reflecting the status of the University of Aberdeen as one of the ancient Universities.

Jane Pirie [00:14:03] It is fitting that we always look afresh at the history of some donations and bequests to the collections too. The University in Aberdeen had long established links and networks with Europe, and the graduates and townspeople travelled internationally generously gifting their wealth and possessions. However, the collections have usually been interpreted from a white male Eurocentric point of view, and this is now being reappraised in order to tell a wider historical truths and view objects from other cultural perspectives. This can where appropriate include the repatriation of some items. The collections are now a focal point for engagement with the local community and increasingly a worldwide online community. Exhibitions, displays and events are a fundamental part of the department's activities, forming not only an important educational function, but also widening access. Increasingly, many of the collections are being made available through digitisation, particularly during the covid-19 pandemic. Digitisation can reveal hidden aspects of an object or page and if carefully managed, can help to preserve and share something which otherwise would seldom be available to many. This is perhaps best illustrated by the Aberdeen Bestiary. The Bestiary is probably the most famous item in the University collections, it has always been something that brings prestige to the University, but it is also the focus of current study and new research. In 1986, it was one of the first manuscripts to be digitised and made publicly available online, giving it an international accessibility. More recent research has included a pigment analysis of the manuscript for a project run by Durham University. However, the original manuscript is a thing of great beauty when observed, in actuality, it was the focus of one of the first exhibitions hosted in the Sir Duncan Rice Library in 2012 and was more recently loaned to The Getty Museum in Los Angeles in 2019 to take centre stage as part of their exhibition on Bestiary's. It is a perfect example of something that is accessible to all due to its digital manifestation but is also available in the original form for research and exhibition.

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