

# The light in the North

## Behind the scenes at University of Aberdeen Special Collections



Images: University of Aberdeen Special Collections

**S**unrise over the Sir Duncan Rice Library...It's a regular feature on Facebook, usually courtesy of students taking advantage of the 24-hour opening in the run-up to exams, but still finding time to be captivated by the red dawn sliding up over the North Sea, reminding them that the university and the region they chose has always looked beyond.

When Her Majesty the Queen arrived in an Aberdeen downpour, in September 2012, to formally open the dramatic

Danish-designed cube of glass lighting up the west side of the University of Aberdeen's King's College campus, it was in truth a new dawn. Treasures collected over many centuries, from Aberdeenshire to Alaska, would now benefit from a 21st-century environment designed to showcase them to a wider audience while safeguarding their precious vulnerability.

Three years on, much has changed. Over the last year alone, thousands of members of the public of all ages have joined

researchers and specialists from across the globe in getting engaged with magnificent collections which chart the story of humankind - locally, across the northern latitudes, and also across the world. Now housed in climatically-controlled facilities, the holdings comprise more than 230,000



rare printed books and 5000 archival collections, with material dating as far back as the 3rd century BC.

But what do those entrusted with the custodianship of such material actually do in a typical day? *Leopard* caught-up with the highly-skilled team, led by the head of Special Collections, Siobhán Convery, to find out.

### A convivial Dickens of a morning

"People may think we are all about the past - but to make our public programme such a success we spend a *lot* of time planning for the future." A highly-experienced curator, Siobhán has been with the University for 12 years, following nine years at Aberdeen City Archives. She has an obvious and infectious passion for her job.

"We started the day with a planning meeting for our big exhibition next year, and we know it's one the public here will love," she says. "We hold one of the finest collections in the world of the works of Charles Dickens, including first editions of all the novels, copies of his periodicals, and a wide range of additional material. And we also have an internationally-renowned emeritus professor, Paul Schlicke, here at Aberdeen, with whom we will be working to bring this exhibition to life." ▶

The celebration three years ago of the Dickens bicentenary brought enthusiast Jim Naughtie, of Radio 4's *Today* programme, to the campus, and a sell-out performance of Miriam Margolyes' Olivier-nominated production *Dickens' Women*. Siobhán is convinced that the popular appeal and



*Bleak House*, frontispiece

relevance of the great Victorian novelist to today's society will ensure an enthusiastic response to the programme next year, when the City of Aberdeen will host the annual conference of the Dickens Fellowship, and many international Dickens-lovers will be in the Granite City to celebrate the great storyteller. The conference is in July, but the exhibition in the ground floor Gallery in the Library will run through spring and summer.

"It may seem a long time ahead, but exhibitions don't happen by themselves," stresses Siobhán. "Our meeting this morning brought together senior conservators with specialists in rare books and archives - and of course our learning and outreach team, who are already working on a programme to engage audiences of all ages. The theme will be 'conviviality' - which gives us plenty of scope for showcasing our great collection."

## Getting hands-on for future generations

Preserving great works proves a theme for the team in all ways this morning, including the physical and highly-specialised work it is now able to perform on material needing conservation and treatment. Siobhán's next stop is the Glucksman Conservation Centre, a state-of-the-art facility integrated into the Special Collections Centre, and named after the New York-based Glucksman family, strong supporters of the University. This morning, the team are discussing treatment proposals for two late 19th- and early

20th-century photograph albums donated by the Lumsden family of Cushnie, in Aberdeenshire.

"We have wonderful records and archives for more than 200 family estates in the North-east," says Siobhán. "Some stretch back to the 13th century and we continue to acquire newly-discovered material - such as these albums, which provide a unique window into the lives of family members in turn-of-the-century India. The conservation team does an extraordinary job with this material to make it such a wonderful resource for researchers."

## Piecing together people, places, and lives

A sandwich lunch offers an opportunity to catch-up with colleagues working in health research, to discuss treasures of a different kind. The medical and social records of North-east families provide wonderful tools for researchers in health and medicine, enabling them to track volunteers over their lives and gain useful insight into



Siobhán (right) with book conservator Brannah Mackenzie

how people age, and, importantly, what influences how fit, healthy and mentally agile we are in our later years. Today, the team is meeting with Foresterhill-based researchers in applied health sciences, to talk about adding further value to a unique tracking project.

The Aberdeen Birth Cohorts of 1921 and 1936, and the Aberdeen Children of the 1950s, is proving a valuable resource for research on the health of people who grew up in Aberdeen during a century of huge economic, cultural and technological change. The project examines detailed aspects of the influences of childhood and adult life experiences through surveys, health checks, brain imaging and links to all health and social data.

The project is funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council, in light of its national importance. But Siobhán

and her team believe there is yet further value to be added, and today the group is discussing the cohort of Aberdeen residents born in the city during the 1950s.

"The historical sources that survive from this period provide additional pieces of the jigsaw of the environment within which these people grew to adulthood and aged," she explains. "For example, school records, socio-economic data, and census records of the time can all help piece together the influences on people's health as they grow older. We are very keen to help our colleagues gain a richer understanding of this historical and cultural context, and we're delighted to be working with them on plans for a large-scale public engagement event which will bring together all the people involved."

## Time-travelling back to the cloisters

It's afternoon, and in the Learning Room, a group of fledgling medieval monks are hard at work, painstakingly perfecting their quill skills in a 'medieval artists' studio workshop', guided by Sarah Chapman of the Learning and Outreach team.

It's actually a Primary 5 class from a local school enjoying exploring the elaborate texts and colourful illustrations of the real and fantastic creatures inhabiting the *Aberdeen Bestiary* - one of the finest medieval books of its time and among the University's greatest treasures. With picnic lunches now packed firmly away, the children are creating their own mystical beasts.



A Bestiary is a collection of short descriptions about all sorts of animals, real and imaginary, accompanied by a moralising explanation. Although dealing ►

with the natural world, these colourful tomes were never intended as scientific texts, and observations which are quite accurate are given the same weight as totally fabulous accounts. *The Bestiary* appeared in its present form in England, in the 12th century, as a compilation of many earlier sources, and its humour and charm succeeds in capturing the imagination of today's generation as it has so many before.



Over the year, more than 50 primary classes will take part in these and other workshops, bringing this opportunity to over 1500 children as part of a comprehensive education programme supporting the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence. Hundreds more have enjoyed drop-in sessions - including crafts and storytelling - as part of a hugely-successful Family Fun programme at weekends and during holidays.

### Capturing the Energy

Not all material stewarded by the team was created in the distant past. This is Aberdeen, after all, and the oil and gas business is never far away. A late-afternoon conference call connects Siobhán with the Business Archives Council (Scotland), a group of historians and archivists dedicated to preserving material related to Scotland's industrial and business history. Her involvement with BACS is due to a project, Capturing the Energy.

There is plenty to discuss. Siobhán is just back from a conference in Copenhagen, organised by the European Oil and Gas Archive Network (EOGAN), which she

founded with archivist colleagues in Stavanger and across Europe some years ago. She is keen to update those on the call about discussions at the conference on methodologies for archiving in the oil and gas sector, including using oral history interviews with workers and families whose lives have been formed by being part of an industry which revolutionised life in the coastal communities of North-east Scotland.

"We are recording history as it happens," she explains. "Working together to develop an ongoing archive of the oil and gas industry in the past, present and future, is crucial. Capturing the Energy encourages companies in the industry to donate key records to the archives for the benefit of current research and future generations. This is such a powerful story, and, unlike much of our work here, we are building this vital record as it is actually happening."

The call over, and actions noted, there's just time to touch base with colleagues in the Wolfson Reading Room about preparations for the first of this year's Special Collections Centre Visiting Scholars. These awards, supported by the Friends of Aberdeen University Library and the Aberdeen Humanities Fund, are available to academic researchers wishing to travel to Aberdeen to undertake research which directly relates to the University's collections. Dr Samantha Walton is a lecturer in English Literature, Writing and the Environment at Bath Spa University, and is researching inter-war writing and, in particular, Scottish fiction. The Visiting Scholars Award supports her stay in Aberdeen, where she will have access to the correspondence and personal papers of Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Nan Shepherd, from which she hopes to establish the intellectual, medical, literary and environmental context of their writing.

### Re-imagining the Far North

The current exhibition on the Far North, in the Library's ground-floor Gallery, is the 11th to date and has clocked-up the 60,000th visitor since the Gallery opened, in 2011. Tonight is the latest in the accompanying series of popular public talks which have ranged from how plants in the Arctic tundra are coping with climate change to advancements in breeding programmes for polar bears.

Tonight's talk is on *Polar Horizons*, and looks at what happened when polar explorers took to the skies in the 1920s. Dr Marianne Cronin, research fellow at the University, will speak on how this new era of aerial exploration created images which continue to influence contemporary debates about the Far North.



"The team has really enjoyed putting on this programme," says Siobhán. "And feedback suggests they have done a great job. The topics we picked have all attracted audiences not only of academics, but also of interested members of the public, some of whom were making their first visit to the Library - and we are confident they will be back. And of course it's always a great pleasure to welcome to these events the familiar faces of our Friends of the Library and Special Collections Group, whose loyalty and generosity is absolutely invaluable both in our care of the Collections and also in enabling us to bring them to a much wider audience in ways that educate, inspire and entertain. We're very grateful to them all."

As the audience disperses, a setting northern sun is lighting-up the western face of the library, where it looks out over the panorama of the evening city. A passing couple is taking a photo from Bedford Road, keen to capture the light reflected in the striking glass façade. The building appears to glow: a shining beacon of the past and the future; a stronghold of learning, invitingly open for all who visit from near and far.