

Case Study from the APAC Symposium 2017:  
Bridging the Gap: The Role of the Archivist and the Researcher

## Bridging the barriers: engaging with key audiences at Special Collections, Leeds University Library

*Tim Procter, Collections & Engagement Manager (Archives & Manuscripts)*

### Special Collections and its performance-related holdings

The Special Collections at Leeds University Library are one of the richest university special collections – comparable in breadth and significance to the John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester, or the University of Edinburgh's special collections. Special Collections is a department within the university library, and holds over 200,000 rare books and several thousand archive and manuscript collections.

Five collections have been Designated by the Arts Council as being of national and international significance, namely:

- The English Literature collections
- Leeds Russian Archive
- The Liddle Collection of WW1 and WW2 material
- Cookery Collection
- Gypsy, Traveller and Roma Collections

Performance archives, although not Designated, are one of our major strengths and a key growth area, although the subjects we hold are extremely varied:

Business • Geography and travel • Science and  
medicine • Education • Music • Theatre &  
performance • Politics & social history • Yorkshire •  
Fine art & history of art • Religion and theology •  
Quaker • University Archive • Letters • Medieval  
manuscripts • 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Manuscript  
Verse • Feminist Archive North • Incunabula • Leeds  
Archive of Vernacular Culture • Leeds General  
Cemetery • Medieval manuscripts  
and much more...

*Special Collections word cloud*

The loosely aggregated 'performance collections' include large archives from major regional cultural institutions, the West Yorkshire (formerly Leeds) Playhouse and Opera North, plus the English Stage Company. There are archives from radical and fringe theatre groups, most notably Red Ladder Theatre and Blah Blah Blah! Theatre. Dance is represented by a major

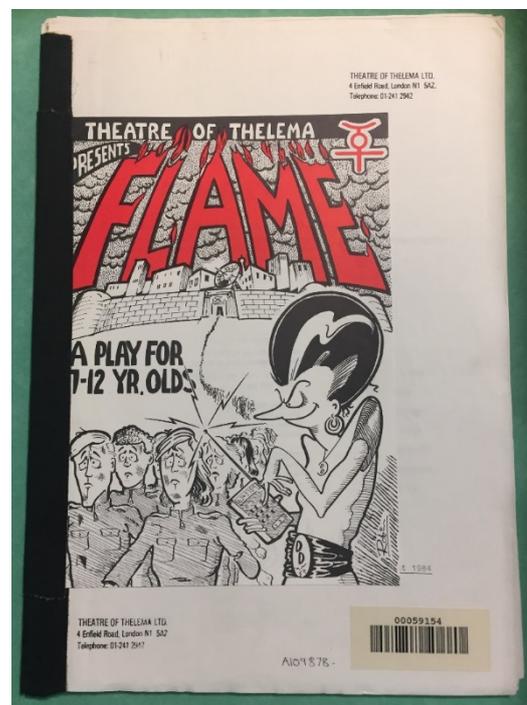
archive of material relating to Rudolf Laban, the archives of Phoenix Dance, and RJC Dance. Music collections include the papers of Dennis Aplvor and the extensive collection of William Thomas Fremantle. Performance in education strongly features, in the extensive archives of Herbert Read, the Standing Conference on Young People's Theatre (SCYPT), and archives from Bretton Hall, the college for visual and performing arts education and creative writing. Leeds-based critics' papers include those of music critic Herbert Thompson and theatre and film critic Alec Barron. Many of the represented institutions remain active partners and depositors of new material. Many of the collections have not been fully investigated, and the potential for new research at many levels is clear.

### Our key audiences – the challenges

Our key audiences are the staff and students of the university, although Special Collections is open to all, and external researchers account for 25% of our reading room visits. Perhaps not surprisingly, our largest client base comes from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Culture (FAHAC), particularly the Schools of History and English; the faculty also includes the Schools of Music and Performance & Cultural Industries, with whom we also have close relationships.

Over the past two years, as research methods change and students in particular rely more on what they can find online, we have sought to address some of the barriers to access that prevent us growing our staff and student clientele. In particular, Special Collections' physical location at the rear of the Brotherton Library, behind a closed door, and the oft-repeated perception that Special Collections is exclusively for a particular set of (mythical) top-level researchers were barriers that we really wanted to address. In addition, surveys told us that very few undergraduates had any experience of research using original sources and were not confident in accessing them; yet the University of Leeds requires all undergraduates in FAHAC to complete a final year research dissertation.

The richness of Special Collections means that there is a wealth of material on the students' doorstep, but the combination of the barriers outlined above, a lack of outreach and profile-raising, and a lack of skills amongst students meant that we were not fulfilling our potential. Yet working with Special Collections could give students a unique research experience using internationally significant collections, a real selling point for both Faculty and University in attracting arts undergraduates. The undergraduate cohort in the Faculty numbers in the thousands, so clearly traditional archive skills sessions were a long way beyond Special Collections' resources. We have therefore sought various collaborative ways to raise our profile and introduce students to the basics of using archives.



*Script from the SCYPT archive (MS 1984) © University of Leeds*

## Bridging the barriers

One of the first steps was to draw up a Student Support Policy, which sets out for academics what Special Collections can do to support teaching and research at various levels, and by implication what we do not have the resources to do. The policy can be openly accessed via the University Library website <https://library.leeds.ac.uk/about-the-library> and underpins new discussions with academics. This has enabled us to provide a more consistent and achievable offer across the board, moving away from a piecemeal support scenario, with resources unevenly spread. Included in the policy is a commitment to 'train the trainer', to give academics the confidence to handle Special Collections material and introduce their students to it; particularly valuable for new PhD level researchers who find themselves teaching for the first time as well as doing their own research within our collections.



*Charlotte Tomlinson, Special Collections / School of History intern. © University of Leeds*

The School of History internship has been a major pilot project. This has seen an MA level intern embedded in the School of History, tasked with raising the profile of Special Collections, mapping our collections to Special Subject modules, and delivering skills training sessions and drop-in workshops. In addition, the intern, Charlotte Tomlinson, has undertaken various surveys about experience and confidence levels in using Special Collections and archives more generally, which has given us hard evidence of the need for many of the initiatives we are undertaking. For example, at the start of the intern programme in December 2016, just under 80% of respondents selected "I'm not confident at all – help!" or "Not very confident, I definitely need some more support in this area" when asked about using archives. But 78% thought Special Collections would be useful to their degree, proving the engagement is there to be made. The fact that Charlotte had been a Leeds undergraduate and had just moved to the MA programme when she was appointed meant that not only had she had the same experiences as the students she talks to, but she is still effectively one of their peer group, rather than a seemingly remote professional.

The final new initiative is a series of downloadable teaching packs, linking to the 'train the trainer' approach for the academics set out in the Student Support Policy. These packs

equip academics to run sessions with a variety of primary sources, such as diaries, letters, photographs and maps. The packs can be used on their own, as they come with quotes and surrogate images from the originals, or they can be used with the actual originals. The packs have also proved useful for the more adventurous or higher level research students who want to upskill themselves. As with the internship, these were created by a peer, a recent PhD student from the School of English, Ruth Burton, who was appointed as a temporary Collections Assistant for this work. The packs have been complemented by a more basic introductory guide to using archives written by the School of History intern.

These are just some of the approaches Special Collections is taking to ensure we properly fulfil our aim of engaging with and enriching the studies of Leeds' students and academics. There is always more that could be done, but with limited resources, the approach of clearly defining our offer and engaging via interns and online packs is giving us maximum reach.

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