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Acquisitions and Special Collections: The Quaker Collection and the University of Sunderland Library

Rachel Webb

Many people leave papers and books to a local or much loved institution or library. They have treasured memories of having built and used the collections and want others to have the same experience. Sometimes they have been leaders in their field and their work is of historical importance and interest. It will seem odd to some people therefore that collections of publications of this sort, sometimes containing material which is rare, valuable and of interest, may lie forgotten, perhaps uncatalogued, certainly unused, for long periods. Not a very happy situation! What can we do, in a very pressured environment, where resources are scarce, to bring such collections into the light?

We probably all hope that in most cases we should have some choice about which collections we accept for our libraries, and under what terms. A clear collection policy covering Special Collections is essential, so that we only accept new material which is relevant and of value to our users, to which we can give good access and which we are able to care for properly. Many collections (though not all!) which are already in our care fulfil these criteria and are just waiting to be made available, and online catalogues and web pages now allow researchers outside the institution to be made aware of these collections. If resources can be found to support the accession and organisation of such material, it can become an asset to both the library and the institution, in addition to its intrinsic value.

Special Collections is part of the Technical Services section of the University of Sunderland library service and is currently revisiting the position of its Quaker Collection, a library of books and pamphlets collected by Omerod Greenwood, acquired some years ago to support teaching in Quaker Studies. Large parts of this collection were for some years shelved and catalogued within the main library collection and in regular use by students, but due to changes in teaching and in the physical arrangement of the libraries, it has become once again a 'special collection' and in need of reconsideration.

Benefits

A special collection often represents the viewpoint and approach of a particular person or group in a particular place and time, in addition to the interest of the individual items. They can be part of the collective memory or intellectual output of the nation or community. The benefits of exploiting them are many and varied. They can:

- Increase the profile of an institution (for example among local history and faith groups), and in the outside world (for example in the research community).
- Increase the skills of staff, both in acquiring and maintaining the collection and in research based on the collection (for example, we can plot the importance of literature and books in the Quaker story).

- Increase opportunities for liaison and cross departmental work within the institution through interest in the collection, as part of bigger projects, and through contact with other departments such as marketing.
- Encourage interest in the general collections in the library, both in person and online.
- Enhance the standing of the institution, particularly when the collections are apposite to the interests of the institution. Visits to the Collection, either online or in person inevitably raise interest in, and increase awareness of, other aspects of the institution.
- Support and promote research within the university, particularly where the collections relate directly to research interests of the university.
- Promote widening participation in history, literacy, learning and individual subject areas, particularly where they are relevant to the local community.
- Forge and strengthen links between institutions and related interests.

Considering Resources

Unlike most book acquisitions, Special Collections material usually arrives, or is held as a distinct and complete collection, but in other respects it requires the same processes and calls for the same cataloguing and processing skills. For cataloguers, decisions need to be made on the appropriate system or part of the catalogue to use (some libraries have separate catalogues for the main and special collections), on how to dovetail with the main collection's classification system, on whether to expand a section, or on whether to use a separate scheme in keeping with related collections elsewhere.

'Processing' may involve extra cleaning, particular requirements for stamping or labelling, indentifying items for special treatment, or for conservation. However, the entire process calls for the particular skills of the acquisitions and cataloguing staff in order to make the collection ready to use and promote.

It is important to consider realistically what resources are available and what approach is appropriate for each particular collection. Is the collection of interest to a large or to a limited number of scholars? Is it of use both inside and outside the institution or community? Is it of national or international significance? Is it rare or unique?

For the Quaker Collection at Sunderland, it was clear that the resources required would be finite and measurable:

- As this is a closed collection of books and pamphlets, the space required for storage will not change, unless we decide to add to our collection of support material.
- Staff time is required to audit, sort and catalogue the material and to identify any preservation steps necessary. This is a finite commitment, and a further opportunity for staff development. The schedule for completing these tasks is within our control and therefore will not interfere with other priorities.
- A limited amount of preservation materials (acid free boxes and casing for a few items; archival cleaning materials) is required, and the advice of a conservator has been sought for a few items.

- Potential demands for access need to be assessed. In this case we feel this can be accommodated within current Special Collections access arrangements.

Action required

We took the opportunity to return the Quaker Collection to its original order, identified by the shelf list which was originally created by the owners and came with the collection. It was important to ensure we had a complete picture of the items which were in the collection, to track down any items which remained on the library shelves, and to identify any preservation steps needed. It soon became clear that there was a considerable amount of material that did not appear on the lists, which caused some consternation until a letter was found tucked into a book which indicated that the extra material had been added just before the acquisition, and had been mixed in with the original collection (this material is being put into a separate sequence).

As the items are catalogued in Special Collections, class numbers will be added using the scheme in the main Quaker collections in the UK, to aid subject searching and browsing. Some of the older material is fragile and rare, and the collection is kept within the strong room, so the use of class numbers on the catalogue will take the place of browsing on the shelves.

Our responsibility for the collection is to make it known and available, and the internet opens up glorious possibilities. For us this has included identifying different groups of potential users, contact with other institutions with Quaker collections, considering the most appropriate web placing and future possibilities for digitisation and online exhibitions. The key is finding the right level for the collection, and making sure we can guarantee the access and service we offer without detrimental effects on our other responsibilities within the institution.

There is evidence that many institutions are finding ways of opening their Special collections, aided by new technologies in raising awareness and enabling greater access. The benefits which this will produce for the library, the institution and the whole community make it well worth the effort required, and it is an important and valuable contribution which acquisitions and cataloguing departments can make.