

The Library and Archives of the Royal Bath & West

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Note: The following text summarises a talk given by the author to the Council of the Society on 1st March 1984. While still substantially Mr. Bryant's text, it has been edited slightly to reflect the current (2005) circumstances of the Library and Archives.

Introduction

If you had been riding out of Bath on the London Road on a summer evening in 1776 you might well have seen through the trees, in the garden of a large house near the junction with Bailbrook Lane, a gathering of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen listening to David Garrick reading verses from a poem *The Pleasures of May at Batheaston* which he had written. Bath at this period was a flourishing literary centre and various little coteries gathered for the purpose of encouraging budding writers.

Probably the most famous of these were those arranged by Lady Miller, who held 'poetical revels' at Batheaston Villa. Prizes were offered for the best verses read to the assembled company and the meetings attracted such distinguished competitors as David Garrick, Christopher Anstey and Richard Graves. Edmund Rack, the founder of the 'Society instituted in the City of Bath for the encouragement and improvement of agriculture, arts, manufactures and commerce' was a regular attender and participant at these gatherings after he moved to Bath from Norfolk in 1775. Several of his contributions appear in the 'Poetical amusements' from which I have just quoted and one of the volumes of these 'amusements' is in the stock of the Society's Library.

Previous to his arrival in Bath, Edmund Rack had contributed articles to the *Farmers' Magazine* and, realising the backward state of West Country agriculture, he had conceived the idea that methods might well be improved by the existence of a society specially formed for exchanging and diffusing knowledge on the subject. Rack was very able at involving himself in local society and he used the many contacts he made in circles such as those of the Millers and Catherine Macaulay to obtain influential backing for the establishment of the 'Bath and West' on 8th September 1777 at the York House, Bath.

The Library's origins

From very early in the life of the Society the value of books and the printed word were fully realised. Within six months of its foundation there is a Committee minute which states:

A motion being made and seconded, it was unanimously resolved that the following gentlemen be a Committee to consider what books are most proper to be purchased by this Society for the use of the members and report to the next meeting.

Within a month the Committee recommended the purchase of about a dozen books of which some are still in the possession of the Society and two displayed were Stillingfleet's *Tracts* and the *Universal*

Gardener and Botanist by Mawe and Abercrombie. By 11 August 1778 Rack, as Secretary, was able to report that all the books ordered had come to hand, been numbered, entered in a catalogue, and lodged in the Society's Library.

Archives, Letters and Papers, and Journal

The archives from which the above minute was copied, and the earliest volumes of which were displayed, are among the most valuable historical assets of the Society. They were described by the late John Russell as a 'gold mine' of information concerning eighteenth-century agricultural science and related matters. They are now deposited in the City of Bath Archives Office, along with the rest of the Society's extensive collection of archival material, although of course they remain the property of the Society; however, being housed with an official collection of archives means that they can be supervised and cared for in a professional manner. It should be noted that the Society is sufficiently enlightened to make sure that its modern archives are also carefully preserved. All correspondence files over ten years old are regularly sifted to ensure that files on important aspects of the Society's life and development are retained for future historians.

An attractive feature of the early life of the Society was the essentially practical nature of its activities. Solutions to problems of all types were actively sought by the award of annual premiums (prizes), and encouragement was given to present any worthwhile idea in writing. For example, it is minuted on 14th July 1778 that:

Mr. Benjamin Axford having recommended the introducing of plants that are beneficial to cattle into dairy farms and made some very judicious remarks thereon, he is requested to digest and present his thoughts thereon in writing, to our next meeting.

Subsequent to this we read from the minutes of 8th December 1778:

Mr. Benjamin Axford's observations and the report of the Committee thereon having been considered – it is resolved that the said observations shall be reserved together with the rest of the Society's papers and correspondence to be published in a volume under the sanction of this Society as soon as a sufficient number is collected for that purpose.

In fact there was sufficient material over the next fifty years to justify the publication of fifteen volumes of *Letters and Papers*, and there is a complete set of the first edition in the Library. Premiums were offered for a wide variety of activities ranging from 'good behaviour in maid servants' to 'destroying vapours in coal-mines'.

Although the Honorary Archivist and Librarian receive relatively few enquiries in the course of a year, practically all are concerned with some aspect of scholarly research and a few of them have had quite unusual repercussions. For example, in 1866 Miss J. de L. Mann was writing her book *The cloth industry in the West of England from 1640 to 1880*, and made quite extensive use of the Society's collections. Following an enquiry Miss Mann had made regarding a specification for a spinning jenny,

the Librarian received a letter from her, part of which reads:

When you showed me the Archives of the Bath and West Society... you pointed out to me a letter from Thorncombe (near Chard) from a man (Thomas Cook) who had been experimenting with the spinning jenny. I think you may like to know what has happened about this jenny... I sent the description to Mr. C. Aspin of Helmsholme, Lancs., who has written a book on the jenny, to ask him whether he thought it would work. He was much impressed by it and considered it would work better than the ordinary jenny. Since then you may have seen a paragraph in The Times saying that he had been asked by the American Peace Corps to recommend improved spinning methods to places where the one-thread hand wheel is still used; and he tells me he is recommending this jenny for backward neighbourhoods in Turkey! I wonder what poor old Cook who invented it would have said; he was old, poor and inform and apparently must have died before he could send in a model to claim the premium...

The letter to which Miss Mann referred dates from the 1790s!

The *Letters and Papers* of the Society ceased publication in 1837, but fifteen years later, coinciding with the establishment by Sir Thomas Dyke Acland of the Society's peripatetic annual show in 1852, an annual *Journal* was issued which was to continue publication until 1940.

The Library's rediscovery and renovation

The Society's Library was placed in the care of the Librarian of the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution, C.P. Russell, and in 1864 he published a catalogue of the collection. Following Russell's period as Librarian, for some reason which has never become clear, the collection became neglected and during various intervening moves many volumes went missing. It appears that it was not until 1958 that interest in the Library was once again seriously reawakened. Professor L.P. Pugh, while engaged in preparing his book *From farming to veterinary medicine 1785-1795*, approached Mr. J.G. Yardley, the then Secretary, to find out if the Society possessed a copy of V. de St. Bel's *Plan for establishing an institution to cultivate and teach veterinary medicine* (1790). The British Museum had been unable to trace a copy and the Professor had made nationwide enquiries without success. On making a search of the then dirty and dilapidated collection of books at the Society's offices in Pierrepont Street, he found the copy which is reprinted as an appendix to his book. In the light of this discovery, a decision was taken to have the Library made presentable and usable, and the advice of Mr. Peter Pagan, the then Director of the Bath Municipal Libraries and Art Gallery, was sought. The condition of the books when the Peter Pagan and Philip Bryant first examined them in 1958 at Pierrpont Street, Bath, was one of the worse of any collection of books they had ever seen. Practically every cover was loose and all the items were thick with dust. Following Mr. Pagan's report a good many of the volumes were rebound, and the collection was rehoused in a room specially designated for it. An 86-page printed catalogue prepared by Philip Bryant and Peter Pagan was issued and this was published in 1964 exactly 100 years after that of C.P. Russell.

Maintenance of the collection

A Library and Publications Committee was established and this meets twice a year to consider not only matters relating to the maintenance of the Library and Archives, but also such matters as exhibitions, publications, lectures and any other special ventures. The membership of the Committee has included some very distinguished persons and it has been exceptionally fortunate in having good chairmen.

In the early 1970s, following Mr. Pagan's early retirement due to local government reorganisation, the collection was deposited in the University of Bath Library. This not only ensured that it would be easier for the Hon. Librarian to supervise it, but also that the items were more readily available to academics who could more easily exploit its resources. It must be stressed that the Library, as with the Archives, remains the property of the Society and the arrangement may be terminated by either the Society or the University at one year's notice.

Items were at this time, and still are, being added to the collection, either by gift or purchase. A second edition of the 1964 catalogue was planned for publication, and this appeared in 1990. The Hon. Archivist included details of the archives in that edition. Up to 1984, when he retired, the Hon. Archivist was Mr. Robert Bryant; the present holder of the post is Mr. Colin Johnston, Mr. Bryant's successor at the City Archive Office.

Mr. Philip Bryant was Hon. Librarian from 1964 until 1989, when Mr. Tony Holbrook, Faculty Librarian for Humanities & Social Sciences at the University of Bath, took over the role and proved a most worthy guardian of the collection until his untimely death in 2005. The present Hon. Librarian is Ms Katy Jordan.

The Society's Heritage

The Library and Archives are a valuable financial asset, but more importantly, they demonstrate with greater clarity than perhaps any other of the Royal Bath and West's ventures that it is not just a 'big show', but that it is a distinguished institution which aims still to fulfil its original aim as a Society to encourage and assist in the role of education and research.