CILIP Rare Books & Special Collections Group Newsletter

Editors' Notes:

Welcome to the Autumn Edition of our newsletter! It's hard to believe that we're nearing the end of 2025 but it's been another year of learning, and we were delighted to see many members - and non-members - at the annual RBSCG Conference. Recordings from the sessions are now available online (see News from the Committee for the link), plus one of the speakers, Dan Sheehy, has kindly shared an article focusing on his experiences of managing access to sensitive literary archives.

This issue also marks our first contribution from our new chair, Tanya Kirk, along with a round up of learning from the conference.

Beyond our own conference, we also have a report from the online 'Collections 2030 and Beyond' conference, a challenging and inspiring consideration of archives and libraries in unsettled times.

As always, we'd love to hear what you think of the Newsletter. If you have anything to share, please do email us. We still have space for submissions to the Spring issue, on AI and inclusivity: please let us know by the end of January 2026 if you're interested.

All that remains is for us to wish you a happy end to the year, and a great start to the New Year!

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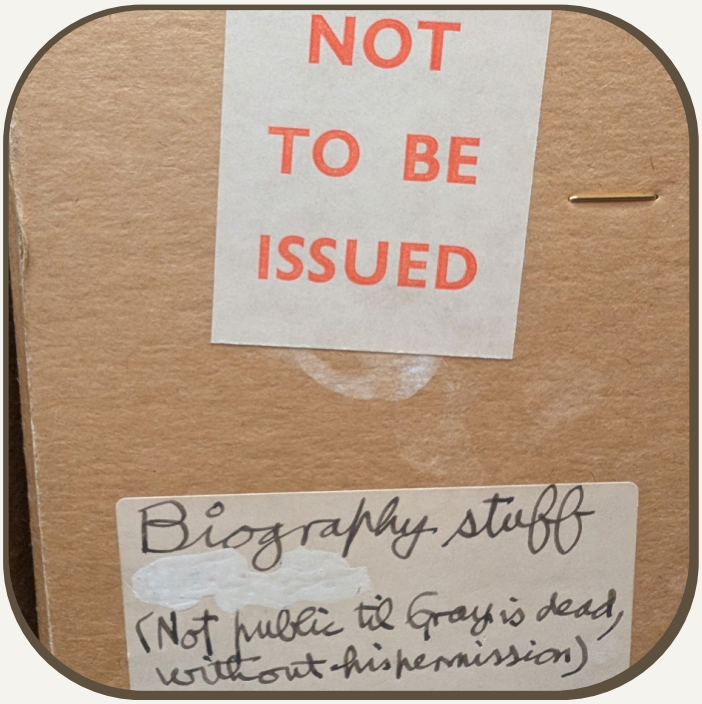

Image of access restrictions on Alasdair Gray's archive. (Image ©National Library of Scotland).

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Chair's Letter

I am delighted to write my first introduction to the RBSCG Newsletter as Chair. As a librarian, I am deeply cognisant of the intellectual rigour and professional dedication that underpins our field. Our community's mission—to champion the preservation, accessibility, and scholarly exploitation of rare books and special materials—remains vital.

The group was encouraged by the robust engagement at our recent online conference, Systems, Standards and the Discoverability of Special Collections, which successfully took place in September. The insights generated by that forum will continue to shape our priorities. I look forward to working with the committee and membership to navigate the evolving challenges of custodianship, digitisation, and findability in the coming year. I encourage you to engage with the group's activities and contribute your expertise to our shared vocation.

I have a confession to make. The two paragraphs above were written by AI; could you tell? I hope so, I don't think it's a particularly good start to my first newsletter introduction.

Perhaps my prompts weren't very effective. Maybe stereotypes about special collections librarians, or about committee chairs, have had an impact. Or perhaps it's a timely reminder that AI can't always have the answers, and tends to respond with a list of standard platitudes. I have concerns, ethical and professional, about the use of generative AI. However, one thing we can, I think, agree about is that AI isn't going anywhere. It will likely have a profound effect on our profession and activities beyond the creation of newsletter texts. As a tool for speeding up tasks or working at a scale previously unthinkable, AI has the potential to be transformative.

But what impact will AI have on our professional knowledge and skillset over time? What impact on the planet? I'm thinking of these questions as I reflect on our recent conference. Over three enjoyable and thought-provoking days, AI and machine learning loomed large, though always in a balanced and constructive way. Elsewhere in this issue you will find further comment on the conference, and I would encourage you to watch the recordings on our YouTube channel if you haven't already.

I'm writing this from St John's College, Cambridge – venue for next year's conference – where I am the Librarian and a Fellow of the College. For those of you who I haven't yet met, I've been at St John's for almost 18 months having previously worked at the British Library for 16 years, mostly as Lead Curator for Printed Heritage Collections (1601-1900). I took over as Chair of the RBSCG from Lucy Evans in January. I'm sure readers will join me in thanking Lucy for all her hard work for the Group; she is a hard act to follow.

Chair's Letter

I have had a few roles on the RBSCG Committee over the years, starting as the Day Events Coordinator, and most recently as CILIP liaison. In my day job at St John's, I'm responsible for a working college library serving the research needs of our student community, as well as an Old Library containing many of the College's most precious items, in both print and manuscript. I also oversee the institutional archives and curate the College's art collection.

Having left behind my role at the BL, in a library constructed in the 1990s according to BS:5454, it has been a major change to take responsibility for a collection housed across buildings dating from the 12th to the 20th centuries (and situated immediately next to a river). Issues with temperature and humidity are ever present, as too is the need to remain relevant to the modern College whilst respecting the collection's origins and specific setting. With that in mind, I am already looking forward to the 2026 conference which will take as its broad theme 'collections and places'. More on that to come soon but for now I welcome Tim Pye, National Curator for Libraries at the National Trust, who has been co-opted onto the committee to work with our Conference Organiser Rich Wragg on next year's event.

As chair of the RBSCG I look forward to continuing to engage with these important discussions at an exciting time for those of us who work with rare books and special collections. Enjoy this issue of the newsletter; it was, I promise, written and edited by humans!

Tanya Kirk
RBSCG Chair

News from the Committee

RBSCG 2025 now online

The recordings from this year's RBSCG annual Conference are now online via our RBSCG YouTube channel. Whether you want to catch up on learning from across the sector, or go back to check something you heard, you can now access almost 6 hours of sessions over 3 days at your convenience.

Your Committee is always looking for ways to improve the Conference offer, so if you have any thoughts or feedback you'd like to share, please do get in touch.

Call for Reviewers

We currently have two e-books available for reviews to be published in forthcoming newsletters.

Book 1: *Library Catalogues as Data: Research, Practice and Usage*, Paul Gooding, Melissa Terras, Sarah Ames

Book 2: *The Routledge Companion to Libraries, Archives, and the Digital Humanities*, Isabel Galina Russell, Glen Layne-Worthey

If you'd like to review either book, please contact both Katherine and Jane, our newsletter editors, via email at k.a.krick@gmail.com and j.m.gallagher@leeds.ac.uk.

RBSCG Conference 2026

Our 2026 conference will take place from 9-11 September in person at St. John's College, Cambridge. Save the date in your diary now!

The Directory of Rare Books

2026 marks the 10th anniversary of the 3rd edition of the *Directory of Rare Book and Special Collections in the UK and Republic of Ireland*, edited by Karen Attar (Facet Publishing; 2016). To mark this anniversary, and to consider the future of this significant work, the Committee would like to hear from you. How do you use the *Directory* now, and how have you used it in the past? What do you find most helpful about it, and are there any other sources of information you use in the increasingly digital age? Whether it's for collections practice work or research, we would love to hear what you use the *Directory* for. Contact the editors, or the RBSCG Secretary Alex Kither at ak155@soas.ac.uk to let us know.

Cataloguer's Corner

If you have a cataloguing query, conundrum, or mystery that you would like to share or seek advice about, please consider submitting it for Cataloguer's Corner! Email your ideas or entries to Christine Megowan at cmegowan@gmail.com.

Share with us on Socials

Did you know that RBSCG are on Instagram and Bluesky @ciliprarebooks? We're looking to share more content from our members with our growing audience online, the more visual the better! If you'd like to share anything with us (to share again), contact Chloe Carson-Ashurst, our Social Media Officer, via email at chloe.carson-ashurst@nationalgallery.org.uk or directly via the handles above.

Reflections on the 2025 RBSCG Conference

And so, the RBSCG Conference is over for another year. Taking as its theme "Systems, Standards and the Discoverability of Special Collections", the conference explored the library and archive standards and systems that inform our cataloguing and description activities and upon which the discoverability and use of our collections is dependent. In amongst the three afternoon sessions, discussion about inclusivity and – perhaps inevitably – the use of AI was regularly present. But our conference was wide-ranging and, as Tanya Kirk, RBSCG Chair, noted in her introductory remarks, we considered many new approaches to traditional activities, whether that's adapting standards to meet local requirements or embracing new methods to increase and improve accessibility.

For anyone reading this who missed out on the conference – or indeed attended but would like a recap – recordings of the sessions are available via the RBSCG YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/@ciliprarebooksspecialcolle5939.

However, whilst the 2025 conference may be finished, the work of the RBSCG Conference Co-ordinator is not; planning for the 2026 conference has already begun. In fact, it started a little while ago with confirmation that we will meet in-person at St John's College, Cambridge, on 9-11 September. Perhaps you can hear tiny violins playing for me as you read this, but I write not to garner sympathy that I plunge straight back into conference organising mode – indeed, many others also contribute their time and effort to making the conference a success – rather to preface what comes next.

With the recordings available and the conference mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter, I thought it would be useful to reflect on the conference feedback (yes we do read it and find it helpful) and discuss with you the thinking behind our ongoing conference planning.

Let me start with the question of whether the conference should be held in-person, online, or a combination of the two. At the moment, we don't feel as though hybrid is an option. To do it justice would require a level of infrastructure that would make the conference prohibitively expensive. And not to do it justice would be to knowingly offer a reduced experience to delegates. When asked, 42% of delegates completing the feedback survey stated a preference for an online conference, compared to 7% who would prefer to meet in-person. This reverses the response from last year's in-person conference where the preference was to meet physically rather than online. This is perhaps a predictable outcome.

In-person conferences offer better opportunities for networking and those professional conversations we all find so useful. The ability to focus on sessions without the distraction of emails or routine tasks is also cited in favour of coming together in one location. Online events can be offered with a cheaper ticket price. This year we charged £10 for all three sessions with a free option for anyone who required it. We recognise that online conferences offer greater levels of accessibility for many reasons, available funding, caring responsibilities, and geography all being

Reflections on the 2025 RBSCG Conference

amongst them. Making the RBSCG Conference as inclusive as possible remains a key objective for us and, whilst bursaries support in-person attendance, online events also support our work in this area.

Interestingly, however, the percentage of respondents that favoured alternating between an in-person conference one year and an online conference the next remained fairly stable when asking attendees of both types of event. A preference to alternate was expressed by 51% of delegates this year, compared to 54% of delegates at our 2024 Edinburgh conference. For now, at least, we think we have the right approach, and we will work hard to make the 2026 Cambridge conference as accessible as possible.

The theme for the 2025 conference developed out of conversations which took place in Edinburgh. Focusing on systems and standards, and knowingly placing an emphasis on AI, took the conference into new territory for the RBSCG. We considered this to be important in maintaining the relevance of rare books and special collections work. Many delegates agreed and 94% of respondents to the feedback survey rated the usefulness of the presentations as 'Very Good' or 'Good'; of course, that leaves 6% who found them 'Adequate' or 'Poor'.

Some delegates viewed the talks as lacking relevance to special collections or perhaps being too technical and difficult to understand. Others enjoyed being taken out of their 'comfort zone' and having the opportunity to learn from experts about new and emerging ideas. I tend to agree with John Lydgate, if indeed it was he who first wrote, you can't please all of the people all of the time. Nevertheless, we take constructive criticism onboard and will strive to ensure that future conferences remain current whilst acknowledging that 'traditional' skills, concerns, and areas of research remain vitally important to our sector. With all of this in mind, it was great to read a number of delegates' comments that they would take back to their workplace new concepts even if they might not apply them in the same way or to the same extent as they speakers had done. Space to think about new ideas and how they apply to our own particular contexts is surely a core purpose of any conference. Whether online or in person, this has always been – and will remain – an important aspect of the RBSCG annual conference.

Whether it's the annual conference or one of our day events, the sessions we organise are run for all of you. We want them to be relevant, thought-provoking, useful and enjoyable. If you'd like to comment on anything you've read here, or if ever you have ideas that you'd like to share, please email me at r.wragg@nhm.ac.uk. More information about the 2026 conference will be available soon, including an answer to what is surely the biggest question of all: will the subject of 'biological insertions' appear for the third year in a row?

Richard Wragg
RBSCG Conference Co-ordinator

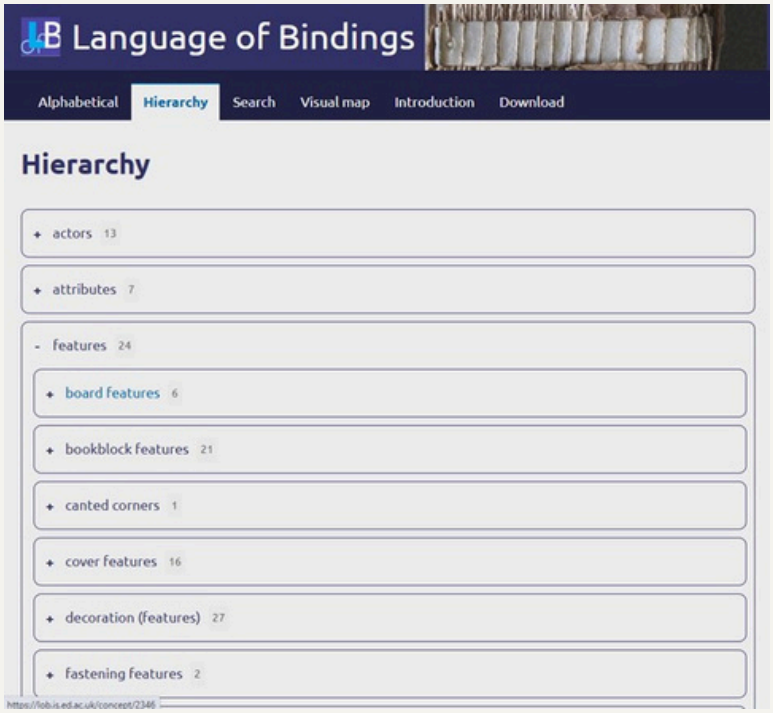
Cataloguer's Corner: Generically Speaking

Do you use genre/form headings in your catalogue? The American Library Association's Rare Books and Manuscripts Section published its first thesaurus, Genre Terms, in 1983 and MARC field 655 for tracing genre/form headings has been around since 1995, and, but the humble genre/form heading is often overlooked in favour of its close cousin, the subject heading.

Genre/form headings differ from subject headings in that they describe what something IS, rather than what it's ABOUT. For example, you might apply the LC subject heading 'expurgated books' to a dissertation on the history of censorship, but when cataloguing a Bowdlerised version of Shakespeare, you would apply the genre heading 'expurgated editions'.

Genre/form terms can be used to describe the nature of an entire work (like a literary genre), or just one part of it (like a binding structure). They can refer to the ideal copy (like a typographical feature) or a copy-specific detail (like a provenance marking). In MARC, remember to add a $5 to fields tracing copy-specific attributes.

While LC maintains its own list of Library of Congress Genre/Form Terms which appear in authorities.loc.gov alongside the LC Subject Headings, a number of specialised vocabularies exist to provide detailed and nuanced access to resources in the catalogue. Field 655 allows you to use genre/form headings from any controlled vocabulary, as long as the second indicator is coded appropriately, and the source of the term specified in a subfield $2. As of my writing this, there are 127 MARC source codes for different vocabularies, and while using existing vocabularies makes data more interoperable, 'local' is always an option. At my institution, we apply and index headings from:



Screenshot of the hierarchical browse page of Language of Bindings:

- RBMS Controlled Vocabulary for Rare Materials Cataloging ($2 rbmscv)
- Ligatus Language of Bindings Thesaurus ($2 lobt)
- Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus ($2 aat)
- Library of Congress Genre/Form Terms ($2 lcgft)

Cataloguer's Corner: Generically Speaking

At the Marc Advisory Committee meeting in June, codes were approved for two new thesauri which may be of particular interest to the RBSCG community:

- Opening Artists' Books: artists' book terms ($2 oabt)
- Dictionary of letterlocking (Unlocking History Research Group) ($2 doll)

When I first started at the University of Edinburgh as a rare books specialist working outside of the main cataloguing team, I added genre/form headings to catalogue records for an embarrassingly long time before realising that they were neither displayed nor searchable in our local configuration of Alma/Primo. If you are thinking of incorporating genre/form headings into your catalogue, it's worth checking in with your Systems staff to make sure they are enabled. Whatever your library management system, you will want to ask:

- Do they display?
- Are they indexed?
- Are they indexed separately from subject headings, or lumped into one index?
- If cataloguing in MARC, does the indexing include the $2 (source of term), so that identical terms from different vocabularies remain distinct from one another? Or would you rather they were all indexed together?
- Does the display include the $2 (source of term)? Do you want it to?
- Will you display/index all 655s, or only ones from certain vocabularies?
- Will you keep 655s in imported records, or strip them out? (e.g. FAST headings derived automatically from 6xx $v)

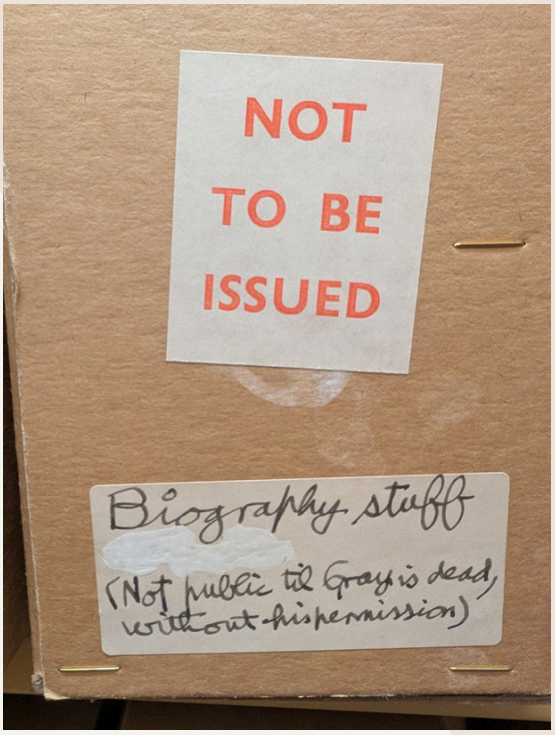
Genre/form headings have become a firm favourite of mine because they make it possible to quickly identify and retrieve examples of intellectual or physical features for teaching, exhibitions, research, and collections management.

Sensitivity in literary archives: making assessments and managing access

In September 2025, I had the great privilege of presenting a paper on sensitivity and access to the RBSCG annual conference. Unfortunately due to the nature of some of the material in the talk I wasn't able to clear it for inclusion on the RBSCG YouTube channel, and so I was delighted to be invited to rework my talk in a slightly altered form for this newsletter.

In December 2023, as Assistant Curator in the Archives and Manuscripts Division of the National Library of Scotland, I began work on a project to catalogue the archives of three significant Scottish writers: George Mackay Brown, Alasdair Gray and James Kelman. In addition to making these collections available to Library members, part of the project's scope was dedicated to looking at sensitivity concerns within these collections and developing methods to record decisions and manage access to material of concern.

The main structure for making and recording sensitivity concerns in the Library is a traffic light system which records decisions of open (green), open with advisory (yellow), restricted (amber) and closed (red). When it comes to deciding whether an item or collection meets a certain threshold, the SAF centres around the likelihood of harm being caused by making something openly available, and the size or scale of that harm. So, something that is very likely to cause significant harm, would likely be made restricted or perhaps closed. Something that is unlikely to cause harm, and that harm would be minor or mild, then it would likely be open or open with advisory. However, the Framework is not designed to provide a scoring system or an explicit list of criteria for each threshold, and this is where some ambiguity and room for interpretation comes in.



Alasdair Gray's archive has had access restrictions placed on some on earlier accessions. (Image ©National Library of Scotland).

The mechanics of carrying out this work centred around the creation of an Excel spreadsheet to record decisions on items or files in the archive, a spreadsheet which I ended up dubbing the Sensitivity Sandbox. The sandbox allows users to check each file against the different types of data of concern, and record decisions individually against each type, before then recording a final decision. An Excel spreadsheet may not sound very exciting or glamorous but reformatting the information from the SAF in this way made a fairly dry and occasionally abstract policy document into something more real and actionable that was easier to present to colleagues in mine and other departments.

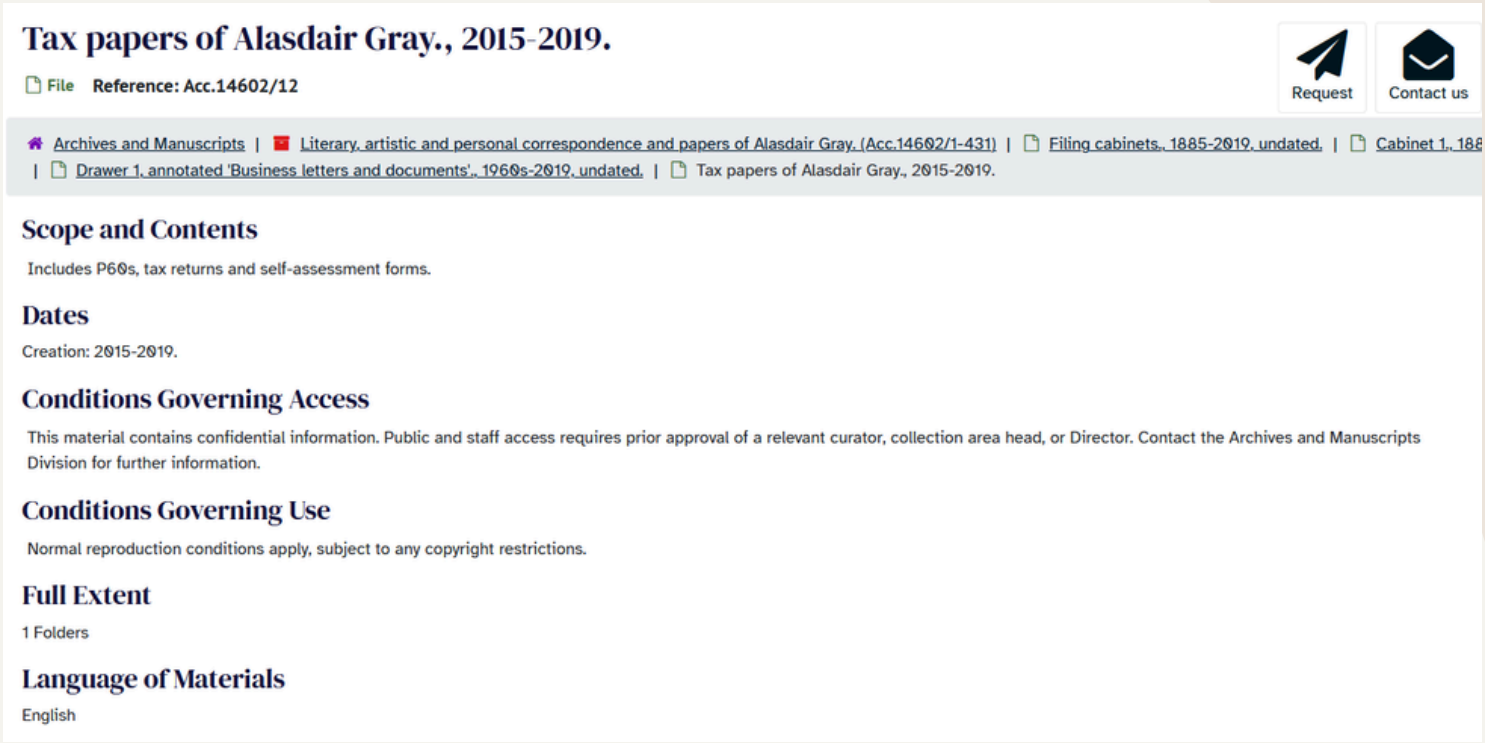
Sensitivity in literary archives: making assessments and managing access

Description	Identifier	Adult conte	Confidential business informati	Confidential informatic	Culturally sensitive informatio	Distressing or harmful content	Embargoed informatio	Obscene informatio	Personal data	Private informatio	Special category personal da
Tax papers of Alasdair Gray.	Acc.14602/12	Open	Restricted	Restricted	Open	Open	Open	Open	Open with advisory	Open with advisory	Open

The 'Sensitivity Sandbox' for tax papers in the Alasdair Gray archive. (Image © National Library of Scotland.)

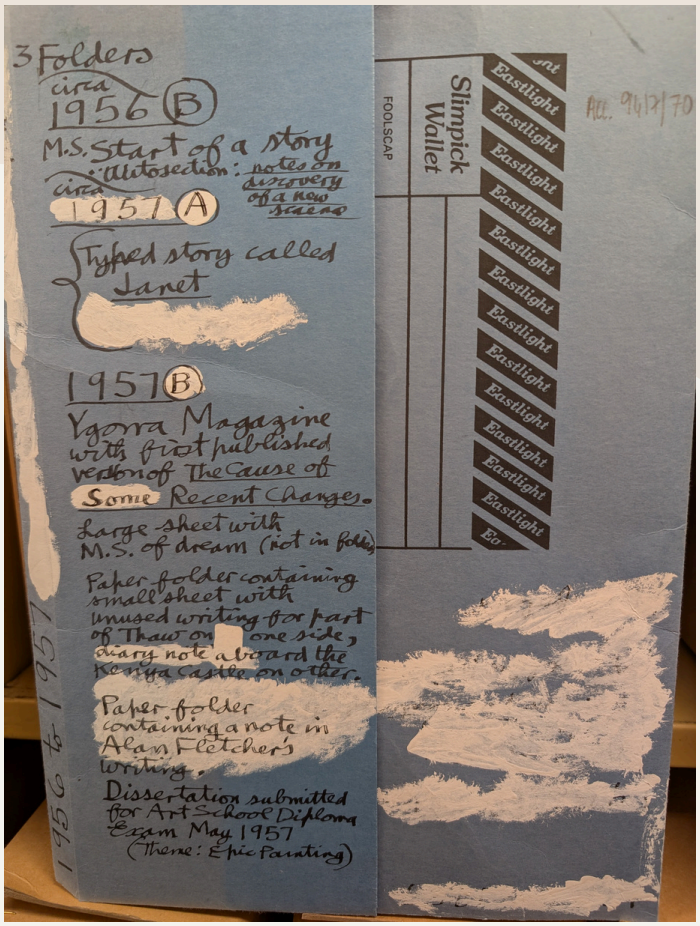
One of the key parts of this process – the decision making about what should be flagged as open with advisory vs restricted, and so on – is the part that is probably the hardest to describe and quantify, and as I prepared for my talk I empathised greatly with my colleagues who wrote the SAF, because this is the hardest part to really define and set guidelines for. A lot of this work can feel very 'You know it when you see it', but when you know that you have a duty to the reader to explain to them why an item might have restricted access conditions, we need to do a lot better than 'You know it when you see it', which is where clearly communicating decisions and access restrictions comes in.

My colleague, the curator for Discovery and Access, developed a way of using ArchivesSpace's Assessments function to record sensitivity decisions, in a way that allows us to assign a sensitivity 'score', which is tied to the open/closed/etc grading system, and also a date and nature of decision. These Assessments sit on the staff side of the catalogue only, allowing them to contain more sensitive or private details of a decision than might be appropriate to share on the public side of the catalogue. This is complemented on the public side by an Access Note which communicates the level of restriction and any data types of concern but does not divulge any restricted information. The phrasing of this statement is something which we continue to work on, especially for material which may require certain permissions for access, as we want to encourage readers to contact us with valid access queries, rather than being deterred by too many warnings.



Sensitivity in literary archives: making assessments and managing access

The cataloguing of the James Kelman collections was completed by my predecessor in the role, and so my focus was on the Gray and Mackay Brown collections. The Alasdair Gray archive was identified as a priority for sensitivity work owing to its size, complexity and the placement of access restrictions on earlier accessions of Gray's archive in the Library, and it's on the Gray papers that I'll focus to provide some examples of how we manage sensitivity in these kinds of collections.



An example of Gray's active participation in the creation of his own archive. (Image © National Library of Scotland).

At this stage it is helpful to take a brief diversion to discuss the history of Alasdair Gray's archive at the Library, and the restrictions therein. The Library has been collecting the literary and personal papers of Alasdair Gray since 1984, and Alasdair was an extremely active participant in the creation of his own archive. He would often collect archival folders from the Library, arrange the archive and write an inventory, and annotate the folders with his thoughts and insights into the material therein. Gray also specified restrictions on the availability of certain materials, most notably the collection of diaries which arrived at the Library in 1987, and which were not to be made available until after his and his wife Morag's deaths.

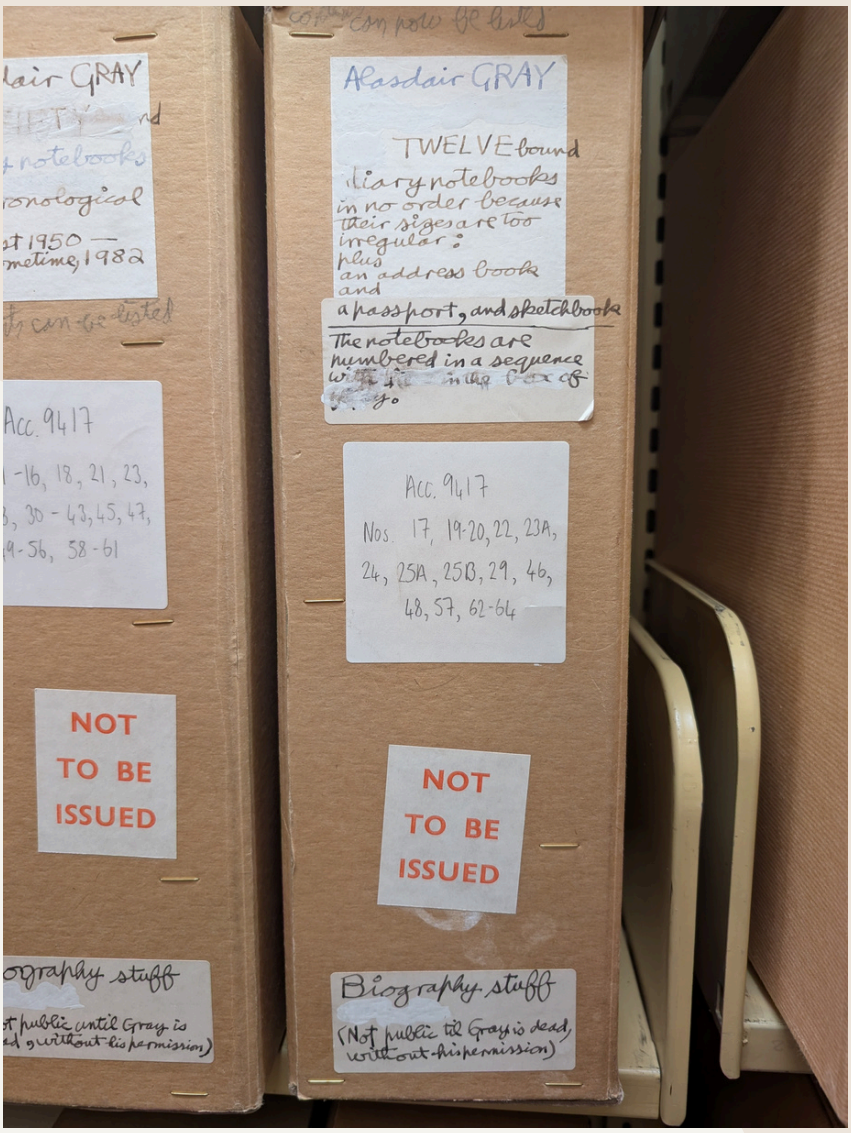
Given that the final tranche of material on which I was working had arrived in early 2020, following Alasdair's death in December 2019, and Morag having died in 2014, we knew we were on safe ground with Alasdair's own personal papers. Some other legal and financial material was restricted for data protection purposes, but we also needed to consider sensitivities around other people's papers in the archive, who would not reasonably have expected their letters and papers to end up in a publicly available collection. While the restriction of access is never ideal, relationship management and respecting the wishes of those involved in the archive is extremely important and we felt it was a compromise worth making, especially as no material is completely closed – restricted material can still be accessed with the consent of the appropriate party.

Similar work took place on the George Mackay Brown and James Kelman collections, with slightly different methodologies and scope. The Alasdair Gray archive was the largest of the three (9.7 linear metres as opposed to 8.1 for Kelman and 5.6 for Mackay Brown) and also the most complicated in terms of Gray's recent death. By contrast George

Sensitivity in literary archives: making assessments and managing access

Mackay Brown passed away in 1996, meaning there were very few recent or 'live' concerns; while James Kelman is alive and well and so was able to actively participate in identifying or clearing material of concern. Inevitably, circumstances such as these will mean that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution to sensitivity assessment, and some projects will be much more demanding than others.

Perhaps the main lesson which I learned from working on this project centred around the need to make sensitivity a core part of the cataloguing process. We should ask ourselves what role it can play at different points of the acquisition process, whether appraisal, arrangement or description. For older collections, this could take the form of assessment at the point of request, rather than retrospectively assessing entire collections, which is extremely resource-intensive. Fundamentally, the most important thing is to implement processes which are easy to use for staff and easy to understand for readers, so that appropriate access and use isn't hampered.



Boxes from Alasdair Gray's archive.
(Image © National Library of Scotland).

Ultimately, sensitivity can seem like an incredibly daunting topic – whether you're tackling concerns around cultural sensitivity, relationship management with donors and archive creators, or the endless grey areas of the public, private and confidential. Even so, it continues to grow as an important part of our cataloguing practice and I look forward to hearing from colleagues in other institutions about how they're solving these problems.

Collections 2030 and Beyond: 22-26 September 2025

In September, I was lucky enough to attend the Collections 2030 and Beyond conference, an online event across five half-days which explored significant issues facing cultural heritage, covering aspects from value to warfare, climate to social cohesion. It was a wide ranging and inspirational conference, bringing together truly global perspectives which left me feeling humbled and inspired by the work taking place across the world. The strong underlying theme was to support and enable people to change their lives and the future using cultural heritage, and to look at ways in which organisations and individuals can work together to address some of the most challenging issues of our time.

This free conference is now available on YouTube via the official ICCROM Channel: I would highly recommend taking some time to explore the sessions and draw your own conclusions, as I offer some general reflections and insights in this piece. The conference was organised by ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property), APOYOnline, IIC (International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works) and the Universitat de València.

Over the five half days, we considered a range of big issues, under the headings of Collections and: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership. Each day consisted of a short keynote session, lightning talks and an intersectoral panel before an interactive breakout session to enable international collaborations. Unfortunately, due to scheduling issues, I was unable to attend the second day or the breakout sessions but am delighted to be able to catch up on 'Collections and Planet' on YouTube.

The UN SDGs formed an inspiration for our discussions

Collections 2030 and Beyond: 22-26 September 2025

Several key themes emerged across the half days, with a clear focus on the UN Sustainability Goals and the role of collections in social good. Our first keynote speaker, Alexandra Xanthaki (Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, United Nations (UN)) gave us a strong reminder of the role of collections and heritage in rights, and that cultural rights support community identity and freedom of expression, as well as prioritising minority and indigenous groups. Discussing the challenges of how we share cultural heritage, Alexandra reminded us of the need to approach the narratives of oppressors with nuance and that we must not fall into populist or simplistic tropes in order to try to engage with wider audiences. Culture, she argued, has no hierarchy and doesn't always oppress, but nor is it static in a way which makes it easy to share.

Over the course of the conference, we were reminded of the importance of ensuring wide inclusion in cultural discussions, and that we have a duty to provide safe spaces for exploration and potentially challenging conversations. The positive outcomes of cultural engagement on health were highlighted by Amy Iwasaki (Program Manager, Urban Heritage Accelerator, Cultural Heritage Finance Alliance), while Katerina Mavromichali (Archaeologist–museologist and cultural mediator, Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Greece) and Dominik Havsteen-Franklin (Professor of Practice in Arts Therapies, Brunel University London) discussed the value of collections in sparking new ideas and creativity.

Digital technologies were considered to provide access, enabling global engagement with collections and potentially opening up funding streams (George Gray Molina, Chief Economic Advisor and Head of the Inclusive Growth Team, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)). There is an opportunity for AI to amplify cultural content, but also a risk that this accelerates a sense of displacement, alongside risks of limiting access through digital divides and non-inclusive digital spaces. Digital technologies have great benefits to offer, but there are risks that cultural heritage (tangible or intangible) becomes monetised as technology companies' intellectual property and further exploits minoritised groups.

We were challenged to consider different 'values' of archives, beyond monetary gain. Photo by micheile henderson on Unsplash

Collections 2030 and Beyond: 22-26 September 2025

I found the discussion around demonstrating the value of collections fascinating. While there were some examples of where cultural heritage has provided monetary value, for example through partnerships with local festival organisers in Nigeria as part of the Ikorodu Cultural Heritage Trail (Mogbolahan Idris Ajala, Co-founder / Managing Director, IGA Nigeria Limited, Nigeria), the general consensus was that traditional economic models are not working for the cultural sector. Speakers explored other values, and considered new methods of measurement. Social value is key, alongside cultural diversity and social cohesion; Espéra Donouvossi (Programme Officer, Youth.Heritage.Africa, ICCROM) talked about the Heritage Alive project, which is shifting museums in Kenya from closed spaces to living assets, supporting employability and the sharing of new skills to make collections drivers for change.

Te Arepa Morehu (Tumuaki Māori, Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland Museum, New Zealand) discussed Collections and Māori prosperity, identifying prosperity as cultural wellbeing, with communities controlling their own narrative, social wellbeing, and environmental wellbeing as key measures. He argued that we must reframe prosperity as more than money, thinking instead of a connection to place, living languages, and cultural renewal. Through communities leading their own narrative, collections become vehicles for empowerment, with professional support and safe spaces vital to making this happen.

European colleagues discussed their approach to addressing the climate crisis, including reducing the energy burden of the sector's work, such as The National Archives' Carbon Literacy training. Arguing that cultural heritage institutions must influence policy and finance, speakers agreed that we need meaningful measures to demonstrate the value of culture to governments beyond purely financial outputs, which consider both experiential and intangible aspects of these interactions.

For me, the most impactful sessions were on day four, under the title of 'Collections and Peace'. Archives and cultural heritage are often victims of war, and the loss of cultural materials can limit accountability during and after hostilities, as well as destroying shared understandings of community and identity: this is why these materials are targeted. Colonial activities have also deprived some communities of their heritage and a basis of civil society, such as archives of the Democratic Republic of Congo being held in Belgium, or those of Algeria still in France (Paulin Regnard Independent Consultant / Peacebuilding & Governance Expert, PGMR Consulting, France). We were encouraged to consider anti-colonial work with archives, rather than decolonial, as demonstrated at the Barbados Museum and Historical Society (Natalie McGuire, Curator - Social History and Community Engagement).

EVENT REPORT

Collections 2030 and Beyond: 22-26 September 2025

We reflected on the reality and risks of archives being deliberately destroyed during conflict. Photo by Marek Studzinski on Unsplash.

We learned about how archives and shared culture have been used to build and maintain peace: at various stages of war in Ukraine, Latvia, and Georgia, for example, by giving displaced people space in local museums, or rebuilding collections which have been destroyed (Inga Surgunte, Head of Sustainable Development Projects, Latvian Museum Association, Latvia). Both commemoration and integrating communities were key outcomes of this work. In Cambodia, Women Peace Makers has been focussing on connecting young people with survivors and with peers from different communities, using heritage collections as a tool for dialogue, aiming to transform trauma into healing and connection. These projects look at museums and archives as safe spaces, as well as containers for objects, to build peace founded on shared stories. Memory, we were reminded, is a movement for change (Suyheang Kry, Executive Director, Women Peace Makers, Cambodia).

Peace was described as more than an absence of war: it requires trust and social cohesion, which careful and considered use of cultural collections can help to build. One-sided narratives and simplistic uses of cultural heritage can also be weaponised to divide communities and further oppress minority groups (Pradeep Wagle, Chief of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Section, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). In Pakistan, The Mountain Archive has been bringing together local and indigenous knowledge to build a shared narrative, and solve local, common problems through existing knowledge (Sultan Ali, Founder, Mountain Heritage Archives, Pakistan). This development, encouragement, and maintenance of dialogue and trust is something which cultural heritage, and professionals, are well placed to support.

The final day helped us to consider the future and what cultural heritage will mean beyond 2030. Gustav Wollentz (Senior Lecturer, Linnaeus University, UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures, Sweden) discussed the value of Systematic Strategic Foresight and the need to consider who we are planning the future for, ensuring we embed co-creation with diverse groups into our work. Collections both carry our futures and represent futures

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which might have been. This, he argued, is the value of museums and archives: their capacity to reveal our humanity. While heritage collections can help us deal with change and loss, we also need to come to terms with the loss of heritage as the world changes around us.

This concept of collections as humanity was well represented in discussions of philanthropy and partnerships, and the wonderful example of the APOYO (Association for Heritage Preservation of the Americas) volunteers, who support a network which volunteers to help preserve collections across Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking communities. We acknowledged that there are vast communities without knowledge of or trust in cultural institutions, and that it is up to us within the cultural sector to build bridges and ensure that people are able to tell their stories. Partnerships are hard to build and maintain, but vital to our future, especially for communities whose land will be lost to climate change within a generation.

I left this conference feeling less daunted by the enormity of challenges we face (but perhaps don't discuss as often as we should) than I was buoyed up by the vital role which cultural heritage can play in building social cohesion, providing people with real value and telling not one story but many. Our profession deals in centuries, and thinking ahead to how collections will exist and support communities beyond 2030, one of the strongest resonances for me was that we should pass on more good than bad. I feel that this is a good model for what we aim to do in our work with cultural collections, with our own communities and beyond. Through this conference, I felt able to explore a wider vision, deeper impact, and greater ambition than we often allow ourselves within the sector.

Review

Ezra Horbury, *Reading the margins of the early modern bible.* Oxford: OUP for The British Academy, 2024. 203 p. (British Academy Monographs Series). ISBN 978-0-19-726767-7 (hardback); 978-0-19-893160-7 (ebook); 978-0-19-893159-1 (UPDF); 978-0-19-893161-4 (online).

Despite its title, this study primarily addresses printed English bibles from Tyndale to the King James Version. It is not a study of manuscript annotations but of printed paratexts, some in margins (summaries, navigation guides, glosses, commentaries, headings, chapter numbers), others elsewhere (title-pages; tables of contents, indices, concordances; prologues, 'argumenta', summaries; interlinear glosses, endnotes, commentary; calendars, almanacs).

One of several publications and research projects on biblical paratexts undertaken in the last five years (see for example work by Harry Spillane and Debora K. Shuger), this is the output of a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship, through the Academy's selective postdoctoral monograph-publication scheme. It focuses on the reception of paratexts rather than their content. By studying their published re-use, (mis)quotation and adaptation by editors, clerics, literary writers and Catholic commentators (a chapter per group), the author aims to recover how biblical paratexts were read and engaged with in England, and by whom.

Dividing paratexts into 'organisational' and 'explanatory' (p.15), Horbury demonstrates the first being overtaken by the second (nominal book and chapter headings becoming 'synoptic' i.e. interpretative in content), and vice versa (explanatory glosses becoming mere directions to consult another passage). Chapter 1 is particularly strong on the intersection between verbal navigation aids and translation: William Fulke's adaptation of the Rheims New Testament index, for example, to re-organise how English readers might search and structure their bible.

Horbury argues that biblical paratexts have distinctive complexities: paratext being necessarily spiritually subordinated to scripture (p.5); scholars being 'uniquely beleaguered by the problem of theological canonicity' and the pitfalls of 'denominationally inflected' readings (p.6). Tracking engagement by each reader type reveals interesting developments, including the 'threatening timeliness' of sixteenth-century glosses as Protestantism and printing nurtured simultaneous circulation of different vernacular translations, and the inevitable permeability of text and interpretation as gloss becomes biblical text, highlighting the high stakes of this process for scripture but without comparing similar processes for legal and literary texts.

Despite relying on published evidence, Horbury is aware that for many churchgoers, biblical paratexts would have been heard in sermons, not read, and traces adaptations of Geneva Bible glosses for public preaching in England (Chapter 3). Discussion of readers' reception ranges from longevity of the Geneva glosses in the theology of Tomson's notes (Chapter 3), to their stylistic impact on Catholic paratexts in the Rheims Bibles (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 introduces new perspectives on Anne Wheathill's, Anne Locke's, Mary Herbert's and Lucy Hutchinson's use of Geneva glosses. Although missing manuscript evidence, Horbury gathers a detailed body of printed evidence for contemporary engagement with biblical paratexts in England that will be useful for scholars in many disciplines.

Horbury's own paratexts (Introduction and Coda) present an unbalanced justification for a study that stands well enough on its own feet. Although it's verbally slick to say the content printed in the margins has been marginalised, the excellent accounts throughout this book show that historically isn't the case: they were instead the reason such books were read, recycled and re-imagined. Following Genette's understanding of paratext as subordinate to text under-estimates early-modern readers' familiarity with the mise-en-page of non-biblical, and non-English, canonical works read primarily for their paratexts. In this broader intellectual context, it is not surprising that scholarly, theological and literary conversations take place across biblical paratexts and the published outputs built on paratextual memory.

Review

Richard Sharpe, *Libraries and Books in Medieval England: The Role of Libraries in a Changing Book Economy. The Lyell Lectures for 2018–19*. Ed. with intro. and notes by James Willoughby. Oxford: Bodleian Library Publishing, 2023. Xx + 171 p. ISBN 978 1 85124 601 4. £80.

Richard Sharpe's Libraries and Books in Medieval England, drawn from his 2018–19 Lyell Lectures, appears thanks to James Willoughby, who completed the work after Sharpe's death in 2020. Working from the typescripts and recorded lectures, Willoughby aimed to present the clearest version of Sharpe's arguments, supplying only notes and indices. His expertise in medieval libraries makes him an ideal literary executor, and his "light touches" (xvii) have enabled the publication of a major study.

A central strength of the book is its function as a tutorial in interpreting the provenance evidence preserved in medieval books and library catalogues. Sharpe guides readers through how to use—and where to treat with caution—indispensable reference tools such as Ker's Medieval Libraries of Great Britain and the Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues. Chapters 1 and 2 offer particularly clear introductions to their value and limits.

Sharpe also challenges entrenched assumptions about medieval book ownership and the character of institutional libraries. He disputes the notion that medieval libraries were stable repositories whose contents remained largely unchanged until the Dissolution. Instead, he reveals a world in which books continually moved in and out of institutions. Chapter 4, "Turnover in Medieval Libraries," focuses on this dynamic, but the idea of a mobile eco-system of book traffic recurs throughout the lectures.

Understanding of the ways in which religious houses acquired their books in their libraries in the late medieval period has been something scholarship has suggested regularly happened through purchase, commission, and the temporary housing of commercial scribes as they completed commissions. Sharpe's study provides no reprieve for the notion of the monastic scriptorium, instead pushing institutional dependence on commercial scribal labour "back into the mid-thirteenth century and very plausibly earlier" (p. 64).

Perhaps Sharpe's most important corrective to assumptions concerning the nature of the landscape of book ownership in medieval England is the significance he finds in private book ownership, with numbers of books that existed outside of institutionally-owned library collections (whether belonging to individuals within or outside of institutional contexts), accounting for a great number of books in the period. Suggestive of just how prevalent private book collections may have been from a relatively early date is the case of Richard, the Worcestershire parson whose two cart-loads of books were impounded by an overly officious toll-gatherer (leading to a rare surviving record); as Sharpe says, the parson was "surely not [an] untypical figure" (p. 114), and such personal book hordes may have been relatively common.

Overall, Libraries and Books in Medieval England replaces the familiar picture of institutional libraries as static, ever-accreting repositories with a portrait of porous, dynamic collections. Sharpe shows how libraries were embedded in wider textual economies—acquiring, losing, and circulating books within shifting networks of production, ownership, and exchange. The result is a compelling account of medieval England's book culture as fluid, interconnected, and far more mobile than traditional narratives have allowed.

Around the UK

Sandars Lectures 2025

Cambridge and online

The Sandars Readership in Bibliography is one of the most prestigious honorary posts to which book historians, librarians and researchers can be appointed. Those elected deliver a series of lectures on their chosen subject.

Celebrating archival collections in Cambridge and beyond, in this year's Lectures Joan Winterkorn MBE shed light on the evolution of the buying and selling of archives since the 1970s. From influencing government policy to navigating trade deals, Joan revealed how this often-overlooked corner of the book world safeguarded some of the UK's most significant literary, theatrical, scientific and political archives.

The two Lectures were recorded and will be available to watch online soon.

For more information, please visit the Sandars Readership in Bibliography webpages.

About the speaker: Joan has been an independent advisor on archives and manuscripts since 2012. She began her career as an archivist in London and then a rare book librarian at Cornell University before joining Bernard Quaritch Ltd in 1979. For more than four decades she has handled the valuation and sale of literary, historical, political, scientific and business archives.

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