

Collecting for Britain

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The unique nature of the collections of the Society of Antiquaries of London arises from the continuous support of its members over 300 years. They have been generous in their gifts and far-sighted in their acquisitions; the result is a resource of extraordinary richness and diversity. For the first half of the eighteenth century space was restricted to a room generally in a tavern where regular meetings were held, and without corporate status the Society was unable to receive bequests. Nevertheless, by 1751, a small collection of topographical prints and drawings, a few portraits, manuscripts, antiquities and some books had been acquired. The situation improved in that year with the grant of a Royal Charter giving the Society the clear objective of encouraging the study of the past of Britain and other countries, and the power to enjoy in perpetuity any antiquities, manuscripts, goods and chattels. The move to Robin's Coffee House, Chancery Lane, in 1753 provided the Society with exclusive use of sizeable premises for the first time. Some notable gifts followed and the collections started to grow¹.

Prints and Drawings

Prints and drawings formed the most distinctive element in the Society's collections in the eighteenth century. In 1708 Humfrey Wanley drew up a list of activities that should be promoted that included 'to take the prospects of Ancient fortifications, Castles, Churches, Houses etc. To take drafts of Tombs, Inscriptions, Epitaphs, Figures in painted Glass etc'². After the Society was formally constituted in 1718, drawings were commissioned for record and publication. Even more were acquired by purchase or gift; and the first substantial collection bought was that of the Director of the Society, John Talman, in 1727.

By 1850, the Society possessed an extensive collection of illustrations. It had employed the best draughtsmen of the period, such as George Vertue, John Carter, Charles Stothard and Richard and Robert Smirke. Other well-known artists, such as Thomas Girtin, Richard Cosway and William Blake, are also represented by drawings made early in their careers. The illustrations formed two main subject groups: portable antiquities and (mostly British) topography. With the historic brass rubbings acquired later, the extent, quality and early date of this material have resulted in collections of outstanding national importance.³

¹ Nurse 2007

² Evans 1956, p. 43

³ Lewis 2007. The drawings of portable antiquities were digitised between 2004 and 2006 and can be seen on the Society's website (www.sal.org.uk); the topographical collections are described in Barley 1974.

Manuscripts

Before the bequest of Charles Lyttelton, President from 1765 to 1768 and Bishop of Carlisle, was received in 1769, the Society owned about a dozen manuscripts, the most important being letters to Oliver Cromwell formerly in the care of John Milton and donated in 1746. Lyttelton added another thirty, including the Lindsey Psalter (cat. 42) and the contemporary copy of the *Magna Carta* (cat. 41). He also left papers on Worcestershire history, establishing the Society as a place of deposit for manuscripts on antiquarian and historical subjects long before the creation of county record offices. Several other important county collections followed.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the Society was active in purchasing manuscripts regarded as significant sources for British history. One of the earliest acquisitions was the Bolton petition for a Royal Academy of 1619, which was purchased in 1770 (cat. 23); the twelfth-century *Winton Domesday* (cat. 40) and the *Inventory of Henry VIII* of 1550 (cat. 54) were acquired at the same auction in 1790. Documents as well as artefacts and monuments were judged important by antiquaries for studying the past; inventories and accounts combined an interest in all three aspects and would make potentially valuable publications⁴. Heraldry was another subject of study, not just because of the number of heralds who were Fellows, but also for its use in dating monuments. In 1796, Joseph Jekyll MP, gave some early heraldic manuscripts, including the fourteenth-century roll of arms that became known as the Antiquaries Roll, and the curious jousting cheque for a contest at the Field of Cloth of Gold (cat. 44). The collection of heraldic manuscripts developed considerably at the end of the nineteenth century with further important deposits. By 1816, when the first catalogue was published, there were 216 manuscripts and 34 rolls and charters ably listed by the Society's Secretary, Sir Henry Ellis, who was also Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum. The latest catalogue published in 2000 has over 1,000 entries, ranging from single to multi-volume acquisitions⁵.

Pictures and Antiquities

The history of the British monarchy was a long-standing area of interest to members. The first items purchased by the Society for its collections were three royal portraits acquired in 1718 (Henry V, Edward IV and Elizabeth of York). A portrait of Henry VII was added in 1753. The bequest of the Revd Thomas Kerrich received in 1828 made the collection an outstanding one. He gave 26 fifteenth- and sixteenth-century paintings, including two of the earliest portraits of

⁴The household book of Edward IV (MS 211) given by Lyttelton was published by the Society in 1790; the *Winton Domesday* (MS 154) was published by the Record Commission in 1816; the inventory of Henry VIII (MS 129) had to wait until 1998.

⁵ Willetts 2000; the entries are also available on the National Archives A2A website.

Edward IV (cat. 48) and Richard III (cat. 49), and one of the best-known images of Mary I (cat. 53). The National Portrait Gallery, London, had not then been established, and the Society had fine rooms for displaying pictures at Somerset House, where Kerrich had often attended meetings. The bequest was timely as the Society had just been asked to return several large historical paintings that had been loaned by George III in 1804.

Purchases were rare, but included two large paintings: the 1616 diptych of Old St Paul's, acquired around 1781 (cat. 19) and the full-length portrait of the first Secretary, William Stukeley (cat. 33). Portraits of Fellows such as Humfrey Wanley (cat. 27) and George Vertue (cat. 30) were generally donated. The opportunity to rehang the framed pictures in chronological order was taken after the Royal Society's former meeting room in Somerset House was taken over by the Antiquaries in 1858. Soon afterwards George Scharf, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, wrote a descriptive catalogue of the 68 pictures then in the collection⁶.

Whereas wall space to hang a limited number of paintings could be found, finding room to display historic artefacts adequately presented more serious difficulties. They were never purchased and sometimes had to be given away because of their size. A large model of the Temple of the Sybil at Tivoli, which had occupied much of the space in the library, went to the United Services Museum in London in 1846. The Society's meetings were often occupied by discussion of new discoveries of portable antiquities and the Society was seen by Fellows as a natural place for depositing smaller items. One of the first to be discussed was the lamp found at Windsor, which achieved a special significance as an emblem of 'the light of learning'. It eventually became the Society's device and was donated (cat. 32). In 1754 Henry Baker, one of the leading scientists of the day, presented two urns 'to be lodged in some future museum of the Society'⁷. Sir William Hamilton presented the medieval stone head found at Merton and the Becket casket (cat. 43). Other gifts donated to the Society included an early model of a prehistoric monument (cat. 87) and the prehistoric axes from Hoxne in 1795 (cat. 128). Although the result of accumulation rather than design, an extraordinary variety of objects was always present in the rooms for Fellows to see and handle, providing a distinctive element to the Society's character.

Before the 1850s, the Society was one of the few national organisations collecting British antiquities and, in 1828, John Markland, the Director of the Society, attempted to promote the establishment of a museum of national antiquities based on the Society's collections. The Trustees of the British Museum were hostile at the time towards the idea of actively collecting British material themselves, but the government would not provide the Society with any more space. About 400 objects or groups of objects from a wide variety of periods and places were in

⁶ Scharf 1865. The Society now possesses about 90 oil paintings, and a new catalogue is in preparation.

⁷ Pearce 2007

the collection when Albert Way, the Director, compiled the first catalogue, published in 1847⁸. After the objects had been rearranged in cabinets in 1863, Lord Stanhope, the Society's President, commented in his anniversary address, 'A museum in the proper sense of the word, we have neither the space nor the inclination to keep up. We content ourselves with the humbler object of decorating our meeting room with a few typical specimens of antiquities, classical or medieval⁹.' By then, the British Museum had been persuaded, after considerable pressure from Fellows, to develop its own British collections.

Printed Books

The holdings of printed material were slow to develop. When the first catalogue of printed books was published in 1816, it listed only about 3,000 titles, less than many country-house libraries, and contained few books published before 1700. The main strengths were in British topography and the rare early broadsides, such as that of the Virginia Company Lottery (cat. 45), and proclamations¹⁰. The chief period of growth came in the second half of the nineteenth century with the rapid increase in archaeological journals and historical publications, a concerted effort to improve the library from the 1840s, and the provision of far more space for books at Burlington House. Fellows were encouraged to donate books, the Society set aside regular sums for new acquisitions and an active exchange programme was pursued with related institutions. At the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, the historic special collections of manuscripts, drawings, pictures and artefacts were expanding less than the collections of printed books and journals. By then all the collections complemented each other to create the leading specialist library for research into the physical evidence of the human past in Britain, a position that the Society's library still holds today. Although developed as a private resource by its Fellows, the Society has made all its collections increasingly accessible to others, and they are widely used by scholars.

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⁸ Way 1847; de Cardi 1988. De Cardi's expansion of Way's catalogue comprised over 1,000 entries.

⁹ Stanhope 1861–64, 23 April 1863, pp. 256–7.

¹⁰ Lemon 1866.

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This text is a revised edition taken from 'Making History: Antiquaries in Britain 1707 – 2007' exhibition catalogue published by the Royal Academy of Arts, London – all catalogue numbers referenced can be found in this publication