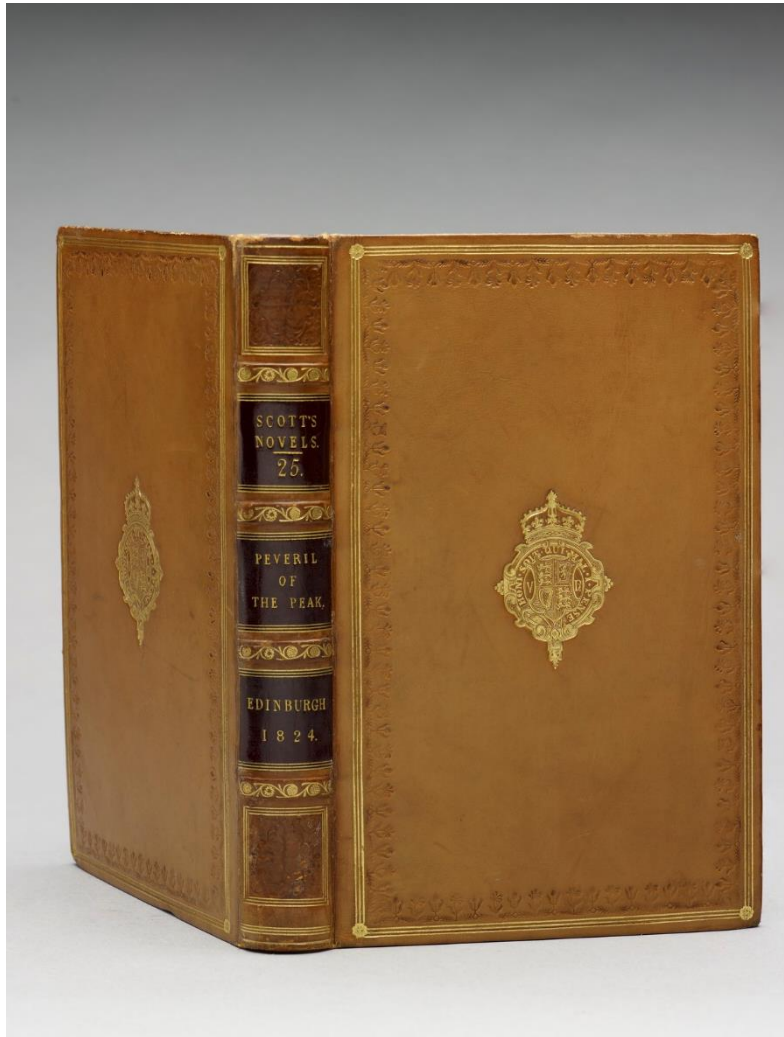


CILIP Rare Books and Special Collections Newsletter

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Binding of Sir Walter Scott's Peveril of the Peak (1824).

This is the copy that Queen Victoria read to Prince Albert as he lay dying.

Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

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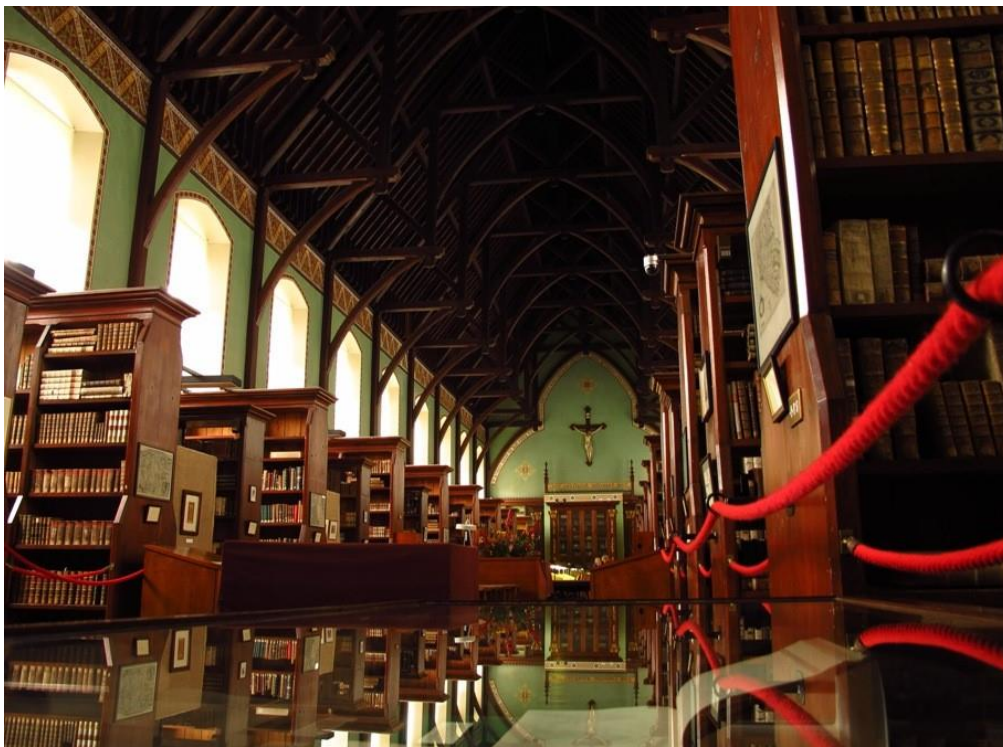
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Working Remotely with Special Collections & Archives during the Pandemic: Experiences from Maynooth University Library

Introduction

It is without doubt that we are currently in the midst of the most challenging times of our lives and our livelihoods across the globe. At [Maynooth University Library \(MU\)](https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/library)¹² we have actively responded to the most recent challenges we are all experiencing of providing access to the various special collections and archives in our care during a global pandemic.

[Special Collections & Archives \(SC&A\)](https://nuim.libguides.com/specialcollections)¹³ at Maynooth University Library consists of two reading rooms – one in the historic Russell Library, which was designed by British architect and designer Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and completed in 1861, and the other in the recently extended John Paul II Library, which features a state-of-the-art environmentally controlled storage area. Together they house over 37,000 pre-1850 printed works, 55 items of incunabula (early printing), approximately 300 Gaelic manuscripts, and over 50,000 archival documents, dating from approximately 3,500 BC to the present day.



Russell Library, St. Patrick's College Maynooth

Curatorial Challenges

By the end of March 2020 Ireland was under lockdown in a bid to stop the spread of the virus across the country. As a Rare Books Librarian my role involves hands-on cataloguing of the historical collections of the Russell Library which meant that access to the collections during this period was not possible. For the summer months most of our curatorial work moved online which kept us busier than ever.

¹² <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/library>

¹³ <https://nuim.libguides.com/specialcollections>



Special Collections & Archives Reading Room, JPII Library

At Maynooth University we had been busily preparing for the implementation of a new Library Services Platform (LSP) before Covid-19 took hold of the country. Not an easy transition for a library to make, least of all having to do it remotely over the last few months! The majority of my time during lockdown was spent attending virtual implementation meetings and workshops and ensuring that our new discovery layer adequately displayed the

descriptive metadata related to the early printed books and manuscripts in our care. This involved creating a [Collections Discovery page](#) for the Russell Library.¹⁴

As we could no longer facilitate visits to the Russell Library or develop physical exhibitions during the summer, I undertook to curate a [virtual exhibition](#) which highlighted a remarkable collection of Irish imprints bringing them to life in a digital world.¹⁵ Our tag line on social media was *#StayHome* letting the exhibition come to you.

Working remotely also provided the opportunity to work on important aspects of rare books curatorship that didn't necessarily require an onsite presence. These activities included preparing a project plan for a metadata clean-up of our legacy records for special collections and developing training sessions and guidelines on rare books cataloguing for library staff using our new system.



[Archives at MU Library](#)

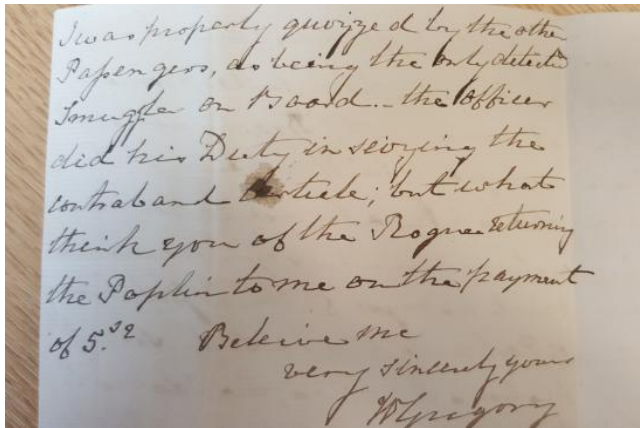
During Lockdown, the archives team at MU Library have had to re-assess various workloads. Without physical access to our archival collections, the focus has shifted to other related projects. This included assessing some of our older catalogue entries on CALM which needed reviewing in light of more recent data protection legislation. Once the archival system was set-up to facilitate working

¹⁴

https://maynoothuniversity.userservices.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/collectionDiscovery?vid=353MAY_INST:Services&inst=353MAY_INST&collectionId=8181759990006276

¹⁵ <https://sway.office.com/DFx6hHDDr8Y1Xy11?ref=Link>

remotely, transcribing and cataloguing photographic copies of our archival collections recommenced - in particular the early nineteenth century letters from the Edward Baker Littlehailes Archive held at Maynooth.



Letter from the Littlehailes Archive in JPII Special Collections

Queries from our research community are managed remotely, including a recent request to examine items from the archive of scholar, author, playwright, and TV producer Desmond Forrester (1930-2012). This fascinating collection was donated to MU Library in 2001, and contains correspondence, essays, lectures, scripts, research notes, reviews, and photographs. In such cases, researchers are provided with digital copies of the relevant documents where possible rather than conducting the traditional on-site visit.

Re-opening the Reading Rooms

After many preparations and setbacks including a further localised lockdown of County Kildare, the month of August saw Special Collections & Archives at Maynooth finally re-open initially with an appointments-only service to staff and students of the University. During this time access to the collections was permitted for staff in staggered work patterns. For me, this meant both collection assessment activities and cataloguing could recommence albeit in a slightly different manner. Onsite work involved a mix of physical “book in hand” cataloguing and photographing the various elements necessary for rare books cataloguing to facilitate curatorial work offsite.

Library staff continue to receive and respond to queries from readers. In an effort to reduce visitors attending in person, a staff member from SC&A will photograph the relevant items subject to copyright restrictions, condition of the item, purpose of the request, and make them digitally available to the requester. This system worked well, and meant we were able to provide a quality service, even with reduced footfall.



ScanTent used as an aid for imaging. Photo by David Rinehart

New teaching models

Maynooth University Library has had a variety of successful teaching undergraduate and postgraduate partnerships with various faculty on campus. The feedback from the students who have attended these classes has always been very positive. Typically, this teaching would see specialised, bespoke classes, with a strong interactive element and which would normally see the student engage in a tangible way with collections to some capacity.

This year things are different, and it would be naive not to admit the loss of impact. At best now, we can offer very small, socially distanced classes, but as the semester progresses, there has been an understandable drive to move even further into an online environment. Engagement with special

collections is successful when there is some degree of tactility and immediacy and both of these aspects are impacted in the current landscape.

We have been emphasising the array of online sources available to our staff and students – and we are lucky to be able to provide access to a large body of such work. However, getting a sense of the materiality of the source is so much harder, and when you are teaching about physical aspects of manuscript production and book history, much of the detail that can be conveyed face-to-face is lost.



Visualiser as a teaching aid. Photo by David Rinehart

Nevertheless, it is clear that there are benefits to this change and we need to embrace them. One of our special collections rooms is a particularly (and unavoidably) difficult space to access and therefore providing access to classes online removes that particular obstacle. Furthermore, by recording the session, the student has the opportunity to revisit it, allowing them to focus and learn in a less pressurised manner. Offering our classes online also allows students to ask questions in various different ways, as opposed to having to do so in front of a physical crowd (which is not for everyone).

In these challenging times, it is our responsibility to continue to innovate and to find ways to convey the wonder, but also the materiality of our collections as best we can in an online world. To do this, we are using a visualiser in the hope that it will allow us to offer an experience as close to the real object as possible. This kind of technology allows us to focus on particular aspects of special collections in a way that an ordinary camera would not. It is certainly not a substitute for the physical experience, but for now we need to focus on what teaching online can do for us and work to limit the impact of what it cannot.

[Social Media Engagement](#)

One positive outcome of working remotely with Special Collections & Archives has been an increase in our social media activity, including regular contributions to our [award winning MU Library](#)

[Treasures blog](#), from team members, staff and students across the University contributing on various topics related to our collections.¹⁶

Library staff were also permitted to photograph images from some of our early printed books which are used to showcase our range of collections in a more informal way via our [@SCA_MULibrary](#) Twitter account.

Other initiatives include:

- Our [#QnAMonday](#) in which our followers can get to know more about our team and the work that we do.
- [#TermThursday](#) where staff members post a term and accompanying image from the world of special collections and archives
- Our [#CaptionContest](#), where we ask followers to think of an appropriate description/pun for a carefully selected image from the collections.



Twitter account for MU SC&A

Lastly, preparations are underway for this year's [Explore Your Archive](#) Campaign which is taking place from 21-29 November 2020.¹⁷ This year, our MU Library Treasures Blog will host a series of Document of the Day posts. So, while we are in the midst of a second lockdown in Ireland, watch this space!

Acknowledgements

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¹⁶ <https://mulibrarytreasures.wordpress.com/>

¹⁷ <https://www.exploreyourarchive.org/>