

A Rare Books Librarian... naturally

As Assistant Librarian at the Natural History Museum (NHM) in London, I'm lucky enough to work with collections of international importance, housed in a spectacular building. When I'm having a bad day, this means it's pretty easy to do something to pick me up—whether it's walking out to the spectacular Main Hall designed in 1881 as “a cathedral to house all God's creatures, great and small”, watching a three-year-old child encounter a *Diplodocus* for the first time, or poring over some of the Library's treasures.

While 75,000 monographs are held in the Botany Library (there are five subject libraries across the Museum), often the only chance to explore our collection is when we bring them out for visitors. As a research library open only by appointment, the bulk of our visitors are scientists and botanical artists. Often, the correct modern name of a plant hinges on a reference originally cited two centuries ago.

I love the variety that comes when working with rare books. This morning, I was looking at one book from 1523 and another from 1528; this afternoon a lady came in to make a bequest of three trunks of 17th Russian Herbals, with a few million pounds for conservation and upkeep thrown in! Surprises like this mean that life as a Rare Books Librarian is never boring.

The NHM holds a collection of international importance. I ensure items such as the Banksian Collection (the letters, journals, and library of Sir Joseph Banks) are well looked after, whether in use or on the shelf. Our collections are constantly in demand for in-house and external exhibitions, meaning rare books (often worth over \$120,000 each – or more!) must be first wrapped in layers of tissue paper and bubble wrap, boxed, and escorted when taken by car between sites. Whether just across London or to another country, all contingencies must be thought of, to ensure items are always protected.

Unfortunately, many books are self-destructive and the most we can do is slow their decline, rather than stop it - books from the 1700s are usually in a much better state than those produced 1850-1900. This is because during the Industrial Revolution the quantity of books increased enormously...but the quality dropped through the floor. Paper was made by machine rather than by hand, using different materials. This increased the acidity of the paper (think of a sun-damaged newspaper), leading to very fragile books a hundred years on. Leather also started being processed in new ways, meaning the chemicals used make leather bindings literally turn to dust (known as 'Red Rot'). Our books from World War II are another very delicate collection—the Library got fire-bombed during the Blitz, so seeing 'presumed lost in war' listed as an item's location is not unusual. Nor is working with books that are a bit crunchy and charred around the edges!

Whilst my first degree (a Bachelor of Arts in Literature) was a good grounding for this role, I think my Master of Information, Management & Systems (Monash) adds much more value to what I do daily. I chose my subjects with a heavy bias towards Book Conservation & Restoration. With a final project written on Conservation Issues in Special Collections, it's evident to employers I'm very interested in keeping collections intact.

Being flexible and seeking out new opportunities for learning is also very valuable - I studied my Masters online. That came

in handy when moving to London, as I completed the last 6 months of the course here. Another cloud with a silver lining was when my UK visa ran out. I had a period of around 6 months when I couldn't work, so I used the time to volunteer at the Museum of London. I gained valuable experience of the museum environment, so I already had the skills and knowledge when it came to landing my first role at the NHM.



Sharon Touzel

Now, I must go and check whether our hand-coloured plates have come back from photography...

Sharon Touzel
Assistant Librarian
Natural History Museum London
s.touzel@nhm.ac.uk

Sharon Touzel has worked at the NHM since 2007, when she contracted in the Botany Library. Since then she has become permanent in the Entomology Library. She loves her work and London, but misses good old Australian meat pies and Big Ms. You can contact her at s.touzel@nhm.ac.uk.

Energise>> Enthuse>> Inspire!

...gives a voice to the new generation of library and information professionals. If you have any suggestions or topics for this column, please contact the column co-ordinator Naomi Doessel, naomi.doessel@au.ey.com

TIME FOR A CHANGE..?



- Development of design brief
- Collection and space analysis
- Workflow analysis and process re-engineering
- Accommodation Master Planning
- Design Concept, development and tender documentation
- Total project management, including relocation management

www.ckdesign.com.au

FREE INITIAL
CONSULTATION

CK DESIGN INTERNATIONAL
T. + 61 2 9955 0755