

Manuscripts and archives

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QG HCOL003

The Wolfson Reading Room

Special Collections Centre
The Sir Duncan Rice Library
University of Aberdeen
Bedford Road
Aberdeen
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Introduction

Special Collections is home to around 5000 collections of manuscripts and archives dating from antiquity to the 21st century and containing material in some 25 different languages. The University of Aberdeen is a 15th century foundation with King's College established in 1495, Marischal College in 1593 and the University formed in 1860 from their fusion. Collectively, their archives constitute a rich source for the history of higher education in Scotland and Europe and illuminate the relationship between the University and the city and, indeed, the region.

It is one of only five institutions of higher education in the English-speaking world to have experienced fully the period from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment. This antiquity is reflected in the Archives, which include a fine collection of medieval and early modern manuscripts, outstanding 17th – 19th century collections relating to science, medicine, Scottish Enlightenment philosophy and Jacobitism as well as an important collection of oriental manuscripts, papyri and ostraca.

Moreover, until the 1970s the University was the main repository for archival collections for the northern half of Scotland. As a result, it has acquired an unrivalled collection of written material relating to the history and culture of the north-east of Scotland. These diverse collections include the records of families, estates, churches, institutions and businesses, as well as the literary, academic and antiquarian papers of individuals.

The archives range in date from ancient to the contemporary and come in various formats. They may be on parchment, handwritten (manuscript) on paper, they can be typescript and in digital format. They may be photographs on glass or paper, maps and plans, sound recordings, films and digital images.

Archival collections

University institutional papers

The University's own records are diverse and range from the original senatus books to charters, dispositions, writs and other legal documents relating to the regulation of the colleges, their teaching, and in support of their considerable landholdings. There are letters, licences, and agreements between the two colleges, and between them and the Town, Parliament, and even Crown; the colleges had a powerful political dimension, and they operated on a local, national and international level. More comprehensively, from the 18th century onwards there are student registers, bursary and trust papers, inventories and catalogues, records regarding building repairs and papers concerning rectorial elections and staff appointments.

As well as graduates and alumni of the University and its preceding bodies, there are also records from the Aberdeen Colleges of Education, Christ's College, Aberdeen, North of Scotland College of Agriculture and the Rowett Institute of Nutrition and Health.

Family and estate papers

The University is the pre-eminent centre for the study of north-east family and estate papers. Most contain title deeds of land owned, rentals (lists of rent owed and paid), maps and plans, records of buildings and building work, records of business or industrial interests and personal records, for example letters, diaries, family certificates, wills and photographs. These archives are fantastically rich for the study of estate management, local and regional politics, law enforcement, art and architecture, foreign trade, military adventure and colonial power. Notable examples include the Arbuthnots of Arbuthnott, Earls of Fife, Gordon of Buthlaw & Cairness and Ogilvie-Forbes of Boyndlie.

Organisation papers

Institutional records of churches, charities, schools, societies, clubs, employer associations, trusts, political organisations and trades unions are strongly represented in the University collections. As well as records of the Episcopal Church of Aberdeen and north-east churches, we hold the records of numerous small charities such as the Aberdeen and Northern Friendly Society and the Gardener Fraternity of Old Aberdeen and recreational organisations such as the Cairngorm Mountaineering Club. We hold many records of the

labour movement such as those of Aberdeen Trades Council as well as records for over 40 trade unions. Lastly there are records from some local schools in existence prior to the introduction of national schooling in the late 19th century.

Business papers

The University holds records of numerous businesses from all the region's traditional industries (fishing, granite cutting and paper-making) and also from newer industries such as oil and gas production. They usually contain board minutes, accounts, production records, staff records, advertising records and photographs. Notable examples include Aberdeen Journals, George Washington Wilson & Co. (an extensive collection of some 40,000 glass plate negatives), Grampian Transport and TOTAL E&P UK (Frigg Transportation System and St Fergus).

Personal papers

The majority of personal papers we hold are those with a connection to the University, although there are numerous papers created and gathered by local antiquarians, architects, artists, authors, historians, journalists, poets and soldiers. Papers we hold include journals, correspondence, research papers and photographs.

Oral history collections

There are two major collections:

The University of Aberdeen Oral History Archive comprises nearly 200 interviews with individuals connected with the University.

The 'Lives in the Oil Industry' Oral History Archive and associated records is a major collection of sound recordings completed between 2001 and 2006 and includes interviews with nearly 200 people, totalling nearly 800 hours of recordings.

Other collections

Scottish Catholic Archives, Historic Archives

The Historic Archives of the Scottish Catholic Archives predominantly relate to the Catholic Church from the 12th century through to the restoration of the Scottish Catholic Hierarchy in 1878. The collection contains material of regional, national and international significance and provides evidence of the survival of Catholicism both in Scotland and abroad through the archives of its missions, seminaries and colleges. There are also extensive collections relating to prominent Catholic families, many in the north-east of Scotland (SCA).

NHS Grampian Archives

The archive dates from the founding of Aberdeen Infirmary in 1739 and contains substantial material relating to 18th and 19th century hospital provision, notably general and specialist hospitals, cottage hospitals and asylums. These have information not

only on the administrative and financial affairs of the hospitals but also on individuals who were patients, staff or managers.

There are also records of members of the general public who contributed to local hospitals in the time before the National Health Service by means of annual subscriptions, donations or legacies. As some of the capital of the larger hospitals was tied up in land, estate papers are also to be found among some hospital records. In addition there are records from three local poorhouses which in 1948 became hospitals in the newly-formed NHS.

Material from the 20th century includes the minutes of the local National Insurance Committees and the records of the various NHS administrative bodies and its constituent Boards of Management, local Executive Councils and, from 1974, Grampian Health Board. Also contained in the archives are records of various local authority health departments which prior to 1974 had responsibility for a range of healthcare services including prevention of epidemics, mother and child welfare, and school medical services (GRHB).

Medico-Chirurgical Society

The Aberdeen Medico-Chirurgical Society was founded in 1789 in response to the perceived lack of medical teaching offered by both King's and Marischal Colleges. Its members, including such figures as Sir Alexander Ogston, Professor Matthew Hay, Sir Ashley Mackintosh and Sir James McGrigor, contributed to the development of medical teaching and practice in Aberdeen and beyond in profound ways. For more information see the website but please note that although the catalogue is available via the University, the papers are held by the Medico-Chirurgical Society (AMCS).

On-line resources

Many of our collections are now being made available in digital format. Some of our treasures have been digitised, such as The Aberdeen Bestiary and The Burnet Psalter. The extensive photographic collections of George Washington Wilson & Co. and Aberdeen Harbour Board are also fully available. In addition, there are resources which also include material from other institutions, such as The Music of James Scott Skinner, The Voice of Radicalism and The University Roll of Honour.

Factsheets

There are many factsheets available on the website as well, organised by type, subject and geographic area.

Access

Materials are available upon request for consultation in the Reading Room. Please search our online catalogues to identify individual items:

Collection level descriptions are also available on the Archives Hub project site and information on new accessions is sent annually to the National Register of Archives.

Published catalogues of our medieval manuscripts, collections of papyri and ostraca and many of the early records of King's and Marischal Colleges, are also available (see Further Reading section below).

Further reading

For further reading please see the studies of a number of our manuscripts, printed books and collections in the journals *Aberdeen University Library Bulletin*, *Aberdeen University Review* and *Northern Scotland*.

A number of the above papers were highlighted in: Beavan, Iain; Davidson, Peter; Stevenson, Jane. *Library and archive collections of the University of Aberdeen: an introduction and description*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press with the University of Aberdeen, 2011).

Anderson, Peter (ed.), *Fasti Academiae Mariscallanae Aberdonensis: selections from the records of the Marischal College and University MDXCIII-MDCCCLX* (Aberdeen: Spalding Club, 1898). Vols. 1-3.

Innes, Cosmo (ed.), *Fasti Aberdonenses: selections from the records of the University and King's College of Aberdeen 1494-1854* (Aberdeen: Spalding Club, 1854).

James, M. R., *Catalogue of the medieval manuscripts in the University Library, Aberdeen* (Cambridge, 1932).

Ker, N. R., *Medieval manuscripts in British libraries*, vol.2 (Oxford, 1977).

Turner, E. G., *Catalogue of Greek and Latin papyri and ostraca in the possession of the University of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen University Studies, 116, 1939).