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**The Royal Horticultural Society’s Lindley Library:**

**Safeguarding Britain’s Horticultural Heritage**

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The Royal Horticultural Society is the world’s largest horticultural society – membership passed the 400,000 mark this year – and it also has the world’s largest horticultural library. This would be the case even if we took only the principal branch, at the Society’s offices in London, into consideration; but there is also a major collection at the Society’s principal garden at Wisley, and smaller collections at its three other gardens. In 2011 the Lindley Library was given Designated status by the Museums and Libraries Association as a collection of national and international importance.

1. History

Before I talk about the Library’s collections, I must give a brief history of the Society and its Library. The Society was originally known as the Horticultural Society of London; it was founded in 1804 by John Wedgwood and Sir Joseph Banks, and for its first two decades its primary purpose was to provide a forum where Fellows could read papers, the best of which were published in its *Transactions*, and display and comment on items of interest. By 1830, it had a garden at Chiswick, with a celebrated collection of fruit varieties; it was running a training programme for gardeners, among the graduates of which were Joseph Paxton, later to be knighted for his role in creating the Crystal Palace; and it was sending plant collectors to nearly every continent, and introducing many new plants into cultivation in Britain. It also had as its effective administrator Dr John Lindley, whose job title varied over forty years from Assistant Secretary to Deputy Secretary to Vice Secretary (until in 1858 he finally became full Secretary, and forthwith lost his salary, as it was an unpaid position). Lindley did the work we now have five departments to do: he handled normal administration, he supervised the flower shows, he ran the training programme at Chiswick, he edited the Society’s publications, and he identified the plants brought back by the Society’s collectors, naming them if they were new to science. (In addition to this, he was simultaneously Professor of Botany at University College for 35 years; ditto at the Chelsea Physic Garden for 20; a prolific author of works on botany; and the editor of three different external magazines, most notably the *Gardeners’ Chronicle*, a weekly gardening newspaper he and Joseph Paxton founded in 1841, for generations the greatest of gardening periodicals, and still going after a fashion, though since the 1960s it has dwindled into a trade magazine and is now known as *Horticulture Week*.)

The Society hit severe financial difficulties in the 1850s, and kept going only with great difficulty and a series of emergency measures, which included the sale of its magnificent library in 1859. Its President, Prince Albert, worked out a rescue package which included a new Royal Charter, a change of name (to the Royal Horticultural Society), and an additional (short-lived) garden in Kensington. At the end of 1865, Lindley died, and his private library came on the market the following year. 1866 was the year of the International Horticultural Exhibition, staged by the RHS in collaboration with other organisations; the profits of that exhibition were used to buy Lindley’s library as a partial replacement for the library that had been sold. (Partial only, because Lindley had used his money to buy the books he needed for his work as a botanist, but which the Society did not buy because they weren’t horticultural enough. So what we got in 1866 was a very good botanical library.) In 1868, to ensure that this library couldn’t be sold like its predecessor, it was invested in the Lindley Library Trust, whose Trustees originally represented all the organisations involved in the 1866 exhibition; but in 1910 the Council of the RHS became the sole Trustee.

So all the books owned by the RHS are legally part of the Lindley Library, regardless of their site. Since the RHS now has four gardens in addition to its London offices and exhibition hall, the Lindley Library now has five branches. Two gardens – Rosemoor in Devon and Hyde Hall in Essex – have small reading rooms with books for reference only. Larger than these is Harlow Carr in Yorkshire, which until amalgamation in 2001 was the home of the Northern Horticultural Society. The second-largest branch is at the Society’s principal garden at Wisley in Surrey; the basis of this library was the old library for staff and students that Lindley had created at Chiswick, so it is the oldest of the Society’s libraries, and today has both a science library primarily for the use of the staff, and a garden library open to all. The largest branch is housed in the Society’s main offices in London, on Vincent Square, with an upper reading room open to all and a reference collection available by appointment. The London, Wisley, and Harlow Carr branches all run lending services for the Society’s members.

This historical sketch should provide sufficient background; now for an account of the collections. The purpose of our collection is horticultural: its primary concern is not with the plant kingdom in general, but with those plants that are cultivated in gardens. So I do not propose to talk about our botanical collections, for while we have an excellent botanical library, there are many other organisations in Britain - Kew and the Natural History Museum for instance - and in the world generally with larger ones. Nor do I propose to describe our collection of botanical art, except where it has particular relevance to horticultural matters. I will not even discuss the role of the Royal Horticultural Society in science: for example, its part in the rediscovery of Mendel’s laws and the fact that the word “genetics” was coined at an RHS conference in 1906.

2. Garden design and garden history

I am going to begin with what is today a popular subject: garden history. Indeed, now that there is a Register of Historic Parks and Gardens maintained by English Heritage, now that research into the history of a garden is a prerequisite for restoration or conservation work, now that there are Gardens Trusts in nearly every county dedicated to the preservation of important gardens in their territories, it is difficult to remember that before the Victoria & Albert Museum held its exhibition *The Garden* in 1979, garden history was a subject with a small literature, a small band of enthusiasts, and a long legacy of rumours and period prejudices as the body of received wisdom. The key events in the rise of garden history to its present status have been: the founding of the Garden History Society in 1965; the V&A exhibition; the National Heritage Act in 1983 and the establishment of the English Heritage Register; and, in the 1980s, the first diploma courses in garden history and conservation, at York University and the Architectural Association. And as all these forces converged on the rising discipline, the RHS Lindley Library came into its own as the primary collection of relevant materials on the subject.

First of all, as an organisation which now has four gardens, and has had three others in the past, the Society has its own archive of garden design, but it must be admitted that it is very incomplete and at times fragmentary. Of all our gardens, it is the short-lived one at Kensington, sited between what is now the Royal Albert Hall and what is now the Natural History Museum, that is best represented: we have a few photographs of its construction, dating from c.1860, a collection of some 400 plans for the garden and its buildings, and additional photographs in a book we published at the time. The plans, which range from functional details of window joints and pipe junctions to beautiful perspective drawings of pavilions, carry the signatures of architects and designers such as William Andrews Nesfield, Francis Fowke, Sydney Smirke, Saxon Snell – as well as unsigned drawings attributed to Godfrey Sykes. (We also hold collections of plans and other records for later garden designers such as Edward Milner, Percy Cane, and Lanning Roper.)

If we look at earlier generations, it is largely printed books that the RHS Library offers. The first British publications on garden design were by Thomas Hill, in the 1560s and 1570s: the illustrations are few, poor, and repetitive (since it was an expensive business commissioning woodblock carvings in those days), but the older the period that garden historians look at, the more grateful they become for any scrap of paper that carries some decipherable information. By far the largest collection of plans for knot gardens was published in the 1660s, in Stephen Blake’s *Compleat gardeners practice*, just as styles were on the cusp of changing and the French-style parterre was about to sweep in and make the old-fashioned knots look, well, old-fashioned. It is always, however, salutary to be reminded that what is currently fashionable is never the whole story, and the occasional pattern for knots continued to be published into the beginning of the 18th century.

The 18th century, of course, saw the arrival of the English landscape garden, and here the RHS Library has one of the key documents of the movement: the surviving account book of Capability Brown. This was first deposited in the Library on permanent loan by its owners in the 1960s, and Dorothy Stroud, in the last edition of her biography of Brown, included an appendix listing the gardens dealt with, so the basic facts have been in the public domain for the past forty years. But with the tercentenary of Brown’s birth approaching in 2016, the account book, which has now been finally donated to the Library, is coming in for new sorts of attention. Since some of the entries were made or amended by Brown’s assistants, there are multiple hands which can be distinguished and frequently identified by signatures; one project currently under way is a survey of Brown’s surviving landscape plans, using the account book scripts to determine how many were drawn by Brown himself and how many by his staff.

A generation after Brown came Humphry Repton, who began his career declaring himself to be Brown’s successor, and ended by reintroducing into garden design many of the formal elements that Brown had rejected. We have Repton’s published books on garden design, as well as a splendid copy of his printed volume of plans for the gardens of the Brighton Pavilion. Repton was an innovator at marketing strategy: he presented to his potential clients a manuscript volume, known as a Red Book, containing his proposals, with before-and-after views of scenes in the garden. (He gave instructions that these were not to be printed, and so none of them were reproduced until the 1970s, when Charlene Garry of the Basilisk Press, reasoning that as Repton had known nothing of offset photolithography, it didn’t count as printing by his standards, published facsimiles of three of them.) We have one of Repton’s original Red Books in the Library: the one for Waresly Park, Huntingdonshire, compiled in 1792.

Advances in printing meant that beautiful volumes depicting gardens were possible by the middle of the 19th century, as witnessed by *The gardens of England*, a chromolithographic reproduction of a series of paintings by E. Adveno Brooke which had been exhibited in 1856. But photography was by then arriving. The earliest published photographs of gardens we hold were those views of our garden at Kensington, pasted in Andrew Murray’s *Book of the Royal Horticultural Society* in 1863. In the following decade, the rock-garden construction firm of James Pulham & Son published a now excessively rare volume on *Picturesque ferneries and rock-garden scenery* (1877), which included albumen prints (some of which have now faded to the extent that they show the ink used in retouching), and a client list. As there was never a subsequent client list, all the firm’s later works have had to be identified by research and serendipity; English Heritage maintains a Pulham website, and there is now a splendid book by Claude Hitching on the history of the firm. Other garden designers and glasshouse manufacturers sometimes included client lists in their trade catalogues: one of the benefits of our enormous collection of horticultural trade catalogues, of which more later.

While on the subject of nurseries and their catalogues, I will mention that we have a very good collection of printing blocks – those used in the Veitch nurseries’ *Manual of Coniferae*, and by some other nursery firms.

This brings us to the archives of individual gardens: we have manuscript garden diaries for people like our founder John Wedgwood, Canon Ellacombe of Bitton Vicarage, and others. We have the archives of the great plantsman E. A. Bowles, including three scrapbooks devoted to the development over half a century of his garden at Myddelton House; also a photograph album compiled by Sir Frederick Stern of his garden at Highdown, near Worthing. From the interwar years we have a collection of some 300 glass lantern slides of British gardens made largely by Mrs Reginald Malby, who ran one of the most important garden-photographic studios. We also have a collection of paintings made in the 1920s of Reginald Cory’s garden at The Dyffryn in Wales, by Edith Helena Adie; these paintings have been used in the recent restoration of that garden.

Nor is it only British gardens for which we hold primary archival sources. The earliest known map of the Peradeniya Botanic Garden in Sri Lanka is found in our drawings collection; it had been sent to John Lindley by the garden’s first Curator, James Macrae, around 1830.

Not all aspects of the history of gardens can be found in books or even in the gardening magazines, which from the second quarter of the 19th century are more important than books as a source of information. Postcards are particularly important for the documentation of municipal parks, of which few illustrations were published in the mainstream horticultural press, and entire fashions, like three-dimensional carpet-bedding, have relied on postcards as their main form of publication. The Library has a collection of some 5000 postcards of British municipal parks, one of the two largest collections of postcards of parks in the UK (the other, of equivalent size, is owned by English Heritage). Sometimes one can trace the history of the bedding schemes in individual parks – the carpet gardens in Eastbourne being probably the most prolifically represented example.

3. Kitchen gardens

Garden historians have traditionally been concerned mainly with the ornamental garden; it is only since the 1980s that the kitchen garden and its history have received serious scholarly attention. And yet food production has been the primary purpose of the garden throughout most of history.

Much of the literature on gardening, from the 16th century to the 20th, has focussed on the cultivation of fruit and vegetables, and directories of fruit varieties – called pomonas - in particular go back to the 18th century. In an age when publishers seldom issued coloured copies of books, and it was generally left to the purchasers to arrange for colouring, the images in early pomonas are not very reliable. But the early 19th century saw an efflorescence of beautifully produced, and accurately coloured, treatises on fruit varieties, not only in Britain but across Europe, and almost all of these will be found in the RHS Library. Even before the Society acquired its first garden, it initiated a project of fruit identification, in an attempt to determine how many of the names under which fruits were sold in the markets were synonyms – the goal being to reduce the multiplicity of names, and prevent customers from buying the same fruit under different names. So, beginning in 1815, the artist William Hooker was commissioned to portray fruits, either new varieties whose breeders brought them to the Society’s attention, or long-established varieties whose provenance could be tested and confirmed. Hooker produced 25 drawings a year until his production was slowed by a stroke, and other artists were hired to continue the project. The eventual result was nine volumes containing over 200 drawings. But then the project fizzled out: the Society had a garden with a major fruit collection, and once it became possible to step outdoors at the appropriate season and look at growing specimens, the incentive to depict them in paint seemed to wind down.

It was not only apples, pears, plums, peaches, apricots, and soft fruits that were depicted. Most country houses had glasshouses devoted to the production of exotic fruits for the table; right up to the end of the 19th century, the ability to grow pineapples was regarded as one of the true tests of a gardener. And so we find pineapples and mangos among the Hooker drawings, and yet other tropical fruits illustrated in the Society’s *Transactions*. If you can find it at Waitrose today, James Bateman was probably growing it under glass at Knypersley Hall in the 1830s.

For whatever reason, the literature on vegetable varieties has never been anything like as extensive as the literature on fruits, and there are far fewer drawings of vegetables in the Library’s drawings collection than of fruits. Probably the best collection of illustrations of vegetables ever published was a part-work produced by the German seed house of Ernst Benary, in the 1870s and 1880s. It was produced with a multilingual text, so intended for an international clientele.

The kitchen garden, as I have implied, was the mainstay of the country house garden, and far more resources were ploughed into it than into the ornamental displays. Families needed to eat, even if they didn’t have a stunning outlook from the windows. The literature on practical gardening, therefore, until the late 19th century, took the kitchen garden and the orchard as its focus, and gave more attention to fruit tree pruning and the management of hot beds and greenhouses for food production than to the raising of plants for beds and borders. The late 17th century saw the emergence of an interesting genre, the garden calendar: instructions for the gardener arranged by the month of the year. The RHS has the largest collection of such manuals that I am aware of; and in recent years this collection has been turned to good advantage in the study, for instance, of climate change, for some calendars provide lists of which plants flower in which month, and changes in the predicted month of flowering tie up very nicely with the known phenomena of temperature change over the generations.

4. Garden plants

After that excursion into real life, let us return to the world of decorative display. Garden history has often been thought of as synonymous with the history of garden design, but the plants used in gardens have their history as well.

The RHS Library has a collection of botanical art that goes back into the 17th century; our oldest volume of drawings is by a Dutch artist named Pieter van Kouwenhoorn, who is known to have flourished in the 1630s. This volume contains portraits of garden plants, in some cases, most notably tulips, including a range of cultivated varieties. It is drawings like these that are of greatest importance for garden history, for cultivars are largely the work of man rather than of raw nature, and they are also in most cases comparatively short-lived. How many of the famous 17th-century tulip cultivars, or of the favoured bedding plants of the 19th century, can still be found in cultivation today? (Answer: hardly any.)

So the RHS Library, in addition to the botanical works which, as I said earlier, are common to the libraries of many botanic gardens and scientific institutions, has long had a policy of acquiring literature on varieties produced in cultivation, and of commissioning drawings of them. The conventions for depicting cultivars developed gradually between the 17th and 19th centuries, as horticulturists and artists realised that one did not have to depict the entire plant, but only those details that distinguished one cultivar from another: in most cases the flower. Naturally, the literature has tended to depend on the fashions of the day, but the drawings collection allows us to follow the work of particular enthusiasts, like H.J. Elwes, who in addition to his published works on trees and lilies, also grew nerines, and had his collection depicted by the young Lilian Snelling, in the days before she became the principal illustrator of *Curtis’s Botanical Magazine*. (And we also hold the records of a certain number of plant breeders, most notably the daffodil nurseryman Lionel Richardson.)

In 1856 the first orchid hybrid was produced, by John Dominy of the Veitch Nurseries, and in the latter part of the century orchid breeding became the rich man’s horticultural hobby. Since 1897 all the orchids which have received awards at the Society’s shows have had their portraits painted, so that future generations of judges would have a record against which to judge whether the orchids of the future represented a genuine advance over their predecessors. This collection now stands at some 7000 drawings, and represents probably the largest and most continuous battery of documentation of the cultivars of any category of plants.

5. Garden plant introductions

The British Isles have what the botanists of an earlier generation called “an impoverished flora”, and certainly the majority of our garden plants were either imported from abroad, or bred from wild ancestors brought back from overseas.

The records of deliberate plant collecting go back sporadically into the 16th century. The first artist to take part in a botanical expedition was Claude Aubriet, who accompanied the great botanist Tournefort on an expedition to the near east in the 1690s, and illustrated Tournefort’s account of his travels. We have hundreds of ink sketches by Aubriet in our Library, and also a volume containing six paintings made on vellum, one of which is probably the earliest European illustration of a coffee plant (so unfamiliar as yet that Aubriet named it on the sheet as *Jasminum arabicum*).

In 1817, John Reeves, a tea factor in Canton, began sending to the Society both plants and drawings of plants, which he commissioned from local Chinese artists. Among the eight volumes are three devoted specifically to chrysanthemums, peonies, and camellias, which not only record the early cultivars to reach England but also, through the work of the Horticultural Society and its Secretary Joseph Sabine, influenced the conventions of nomenclature for cultivated plants. These drawings are currently the object of intensive study, for their importance in the history of Anglo-Chinese relations, Chinese pigments and painting styles, and as records of the introduction of Chinese plants into Britain, where they had a documented influence on English cultivar nomenclature.

The Horticultural Society sent its first plant collector abroad in 1821, and over the next 30 years sent collectors to every continent except Australia. Among the plants we owe to the work of these collectors are the monkey-puzzle, sent back by James Macrae (the same Macrae who was later to become the first superintendent of Peradeniya); the Society began distributing plants to its members in 1827. Today the most famous of these collectors is David Douglas, after whom the Douglas fir is named. All these plant hunters were contractually obliged to produce a manuscript journal of their travels for the Society, and these journals are held today in the Library.

6. Nurseries and commercial horticulture

Introducing plants into the country is one thing; but how do gardeners then get hold of the plants? The answer lies in the nursery trade, and the history of commercial horticulture.

Of primary sources there is a great quantity in the RHS Library. The scale of the collection of nursery catalogues is immense, and over 3000 firms of nurserymen, seedsmen, and horticultural sundriesmen are represented, mostly British, but with a large number of foreign firms, especially European and American. It is not the largest collection in the world – that is held at Göteborg – but it is the largest in this country.

The oldest printed lists of plants offered for sale were published as addenda to books. Trade lists as independent publications in book form began to appear in the 18th century, and early lists from the firms of Christopher Gray, William Malcolm, Daniel Grimwood, and others are held in the Library. These lists do no more than enumerate names until the middle of the 19th century; in the early 1860s, the firms of Peter Barr and James Veitch began to include illustrations and detailed descriptions. This trend was not greeted with uniform enthusiasm: John Lindley, in the *Gardeners’ Chronicle*, denounced the publication of “fat catalogues” as pretentious and a waste of effort, when all that was required was the list of plants available. But the standard set by these companies was eventually followed by all the larger firms. By the end of the 19th century, the larger seed houses (Sutton, Carter, Webb, Daniels) were producing annual catalogues that were comparable to books, in quarto format, with coloured illustrations and ornamental wrappers. Some nurseries included illustrations of their own premises and nursery gardens, an invaluable resource for those researching those sites today. Sometimes the Library has complete runs of a firm’s catalogues (e.g. the firm that began as Barr & Sugden, then became Barr & Son, then Wallace & Barr, and is now a subdivision of De Jager); sometimes incomplete but very substantial runs (we do not have a complete set of Hilliers’ catalogues, but we have more than Hilliers have); sometimes single issues – but there is more joy in the Library over a mimeographed price list from a British provincial nursery of the 1950s than over many a recent coffee-table book. And, of course, there is a substantial collection of the catalogues of overseas firms as well.

Sundriesmen – the manufacturers and retailers of garden tools, garden furniture and ornament, and glasshouses – are less well represented in the collection until recent decades, but as I remarked before, some of these include lists of clients, and these have become essential for garden historians researching particular estates. And, of course, they also form primary material for the history of the glasshouse as a building type: one can trace the rise and fall of the conservatory by seeing the way in which the great 19th-century manufacturers either folded or diversified in the interwar years into making windows and glazed roofs for garages. Catalogues can be supplemented, however, by the illustrated advertisements that began to appear in the gardening magazines from the 1860s. I reproduce here one favourite advertisement, from the Molassine Company for its humatised peat, offering its product as capable of doing more for the country than all politicians. To illustrate the point, iit depicted the members of the War Cabinet; it was printed twice in issues of the *Gardeners’ Chronicle* in 1916 before being withdrawn.

7. Growing for exhibition

Gardening is not limited to what takes place in gardens. There is a long tradition, going back at least into the 17th century, of exhibiting plants, especially in competitions.

The first documented competitions involved a group of plants known as “florists’ flowers”. These were plants that varied unpredictably in cultivation, so that new sports could excite attention and be vegetatively propagated for distribution. During the classic period of florists’ societies the categories of florists’ flowers were: anemones, auriculas, carnations, hyacinths, pinks, polyanthus, ranunculus, and tulips. By the middle of the 19th century alarms were already being raised over the future of these societies, and today only a few survive. In the 1820s the first efforts were made to publish the results of florists’ meetings, beginning with the 1821 *Account of the Different Flower Shews.* Some of the 19th-century journals covered florists’ shows, in particular the *Horticultural Journal* (1834-39) and *Gossip for the Garden* (1852-63). We also have an incomplete but substantial set of published accounts covering most of the competitive gooseberry shows from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the First World War.

The Horticultural Society held its first flower shows in the 1820s, and has been holding shows ever since, with occasional gaps caused by financial crises. At the new garden in Kensington, it began holding a Great Spring Show in 1862; in 1888, with the closure of that garden, the Show was moved to the gardens of the Inner Temple, and stayed there for nearly a quarter of a century before moving to the current site at the Royal Hospital Chelsea in 1913. As you can tell from that date, this year the centenary of the Chelsea Flower Show is being celebrated, and the Society’s archives have been put to use in compiling a book about its history: *RHS Chelsea Flower Show*, by myself (Frances Lincoln, 2013). In addition to Chelsea, and the other large-scale shows of recent decades held in external locations (Hampton Court, Tatton Park), the RHS has also held smaller shows at its own exhibition hall in London. The records of these shows range from printed catalogues to cartoons to show schedules (the printed instruction manuals given to exhibitors, covering information about access, timing, prohibitions, and the rules of competitions).

The RHS is, of course, not the only organisation to hold flower shows. There are hundreds if not thousands of local societies around the UK which hold shows and floral competitions annually if not more frequently. The records of these shows have only ever been intermittently published. Weekly horticultural newspapers like the *Gardeners’ Chronicle* made an effort to cover a representative selection of the country’s shows during the course of the year, and these will generally be found in the Lindley Library, but for most societies the only regularly published records of shows must be sought in the regional press. But for a reasonable portion of the 20th century, the Lindley Library holds another form of record. The RHS began its current programme of affiliation for independent horticultural societies in the 1860s, and it soon began to provide medals for local societies to award at their shows, so long as their criteria for award conformed to the RHS rules. It therefore became customary for affiliated societies to send the RHS their show schedules, and while in the past these were only occasionally passed to the Library for retention, the Library today holds a substantial collection of flower show schedules, primarily of recent decades but going back intermittently to the 1890s. Among these schedules will be found a neglected aspect of business history, namely the promotion of horticultural societies and shows within large firms, like the Post Office and Boots’ Chemists – not to mention such interesting and now defunct organisations as the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment Horticultural Society and the Speedbird Horticultural Society, for employees of BOAC.

So entrenched in British life is the flower-show mentality, that when during the First World War British nationals who had not been able to leave Germany before the outbreak of hostilities were interned in a camp created on the Ruhleben racetrack outside Berlin, the inmates wrote to the RHS asking for advice and help in setting up a horticultural society. The RHS sent a rule book and organised shipments of seeds, and received in due course a record of the Ruhleben Horticultural Society’s activities, including their barrack garden competition and their flower shows.

8. Floral decoration

Another aspect of the display of plants is floral decoration. There is hardly any literature on flower arrangement before the 1850s, although there have been several 20th-century works that have attempted to reconstruct what the flower arrangements of previous centuries might have been.

The Royal Horticultural Society staged the first documented competition for flower arrangement (then called table decoration) to coincide with the opening of its new Kensington garden in 1861. Thereafter, the Society’s involvement with flower arranging has been intermittent but significant, and has included conducting examinations in floristry (which provided the model for the Society of Floristry’s later examinations), and the promotion of flower arranging through exhibits at its flower shows. We have the best collection in the UK of published literature on flower arranging, and a couple of archival sources of particular interest: a pair of albums by the floristry firm of Pipers of Bayswater, containing photographs of their wreaths and other decorations, and the archives of Constance Spry (1886-1960), the foremost flower arranger of her day, and of the school she established.

9. Risks and achievements

All libraries are at risk, both from their environments and from policies based on interpretations of those environments (I need refer you only to Nicholson Baker’s *Double Fold*). The major risks are fire, flood, and theft, and the RHS Library has had its fair share of all of these. As we are still recuperating from the effects of a fire, I want to say a few words about that. The fire occurred on July 2011; a capacitor in a light fitting in our stack room exploded and caused a fire that grew rapidly, but was with almost equal rapidity put out by the fire department. Only a few shelves of periodicals were destroyed: and for most of those either we had duplicate copies in other branches, or they were sufficiently recent that we could acquire new copies from the publishers. But all the contents of the stacks got covered by soot: particularly noxious soot, as it was composed largely of plastic from the light fittings. Even in the Rare Books Room, which was as hermetically sealed as a room with a regularly opened door could be, a small amount of soot entered through the ventilation system. Harwell Document Recovery Services to the rescue: the entire contents of the stack room were taken offsite for cleaning – over 1500 crates of books, periodicals, and trade catalogues – while the remaining, less blackened, works were cleaned in situ. The Library staff attempted to keep working normally, while strange spectral figures roamed the Library carrying complicated pieces of equipment, ceilings were taken down to allow electricians access to masses of melted cables, and we took advantage of the salvage process to secure improvements to the housing of the drawings and manuscript collections. Nonetheless, the London branch of the Library was closed for eleven months, and today, nearly two years later, the crates of books and periodicals are still gradually being returned after cleaning, so we urge readers to let us know in advance what they require, so we can determine whether we have the works back on the premises yet.

For well over a decade we have been working on an online catalogue; all the books have entries, and the art collections, periodicals, and trade catalogues are now gradually making their way onto it. There are still masses of photographic collections, pamphlets, and ephemera awaiting their turn. But at last count there were over 65,000 records currently accessible online. For the older books in particular, the catalogue entries are the most detailed you are likely to find anywhere: not only does each entry, when complete (as this is still a work in progress, there are still a few hundred entries which carry the declaration “Short entry – full entry to follow”), include a complete physical description and collation, but every artist, every engraver, every lithographer who can be identified is listed, every contributor – from the writers of prefaces and commendatory verses to dedicatees – is listed, former owners, annotators and inscribers are listed, and many works have attached documents listing the plates, with botanical names updated as far as possible.

In the course of this work, I am proud to report the Library’s role in pioneering a contribution to the protection of antiquarian books. As with any collection of early printed books, the Library contains a variety of types of early paper, in many cases with watermarks. At the end of the last century, the Library sponsored a project on the imaging of watermarks, conducted by Dr Ian Christie-Miller. The analysis of the paper and watermarks in early English and French books resulted in the discovery that the older the book, the more disparate the sources of paper: since there were no paper mills in Britain in the 16th century, British printers tended to stockpile paper wherever they could find it, and upwards of fifteen different types of paper could be used in the production of a single book. In the course of this research Dr Christie-Miller developed his system of “Paperprint” identification for books printed on handmade paper. Take the title-page, and one or two other pages selected at random (so a thief does not know what to remove); photograph them using both reflected light (for easy identification) and transmitted light (to show the paper structure). Handmade paper always had imperfections and inclusions, and in no two copies will these be in exactly the same places on the page; in no two copies will the pieces of type occupy exactly the same positions in respect to the chain-lines in the paper. The result is, for an antiquarian book, the equivalent of a fingerprint: if the book ever disappears, and there is uncertainty over whether a recovered copy is the correct one, the paperprint will allow for an unambiguous identification.

This has been a brief and inadequate account of the collections and the work of the RHS Lindley Library – but, I hope, sufficient to demonstrate that the Library plays a key role in the preservation and study of this country’s horticultural heritage. It is the primary collection for the study of garden history in all its aspects.

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