

# Teaching old books new tricks: how special collections outreach can help you, your career, and your library

Katie Birkwood and Naomi Herbert

## Introduction

I'm Naomi Herbert. At the moment I work as the Assistant Librarian at Christ's College, Cambridge. In my last post, at St John's College, I set up a schools and communities program for the special collections there.

I'm Katie Birkwood. I currently work as a rare book specialist at Cambridge University Library. For 3 years until March 2011 I worked at St John's College Library as Hoyle Project Associate. I'll explain what that means later.

## Special collections

The title of this paper is a bit misleading. When we talk about special collections, we don't simply mean old books; special collections needn't be books, and they needn't be old. They are any collections that have particular significance because of subject, provenance, rarity, or any other reason. For example, important archival collections often end up in libraries and these can have been collected at any time – right up to the present.

## Outreach

The word outreach can have many different meanings so we need to clarify the sense(s) in which we're using it.

At St John's College, 'outreach' meant engaging non-academic audiences with the Library collections through events held in the Library, in the College, and elsewhere. The Library's primary audience is academics, either from the College, the University or from other institutions around the world. The Library's outreach work aimed to give other sorts of people access to the collections. These people were school pupils, local residents, special interest groups, and so on. In other libraries, 'outreach' of this kind might mean engaging young people, old people, academics, schools, colleges - whoever doesn't currently have access. What we're not talking about is marketing or promoting your collections to your core user groups.

## Why do outreach?

Outreach has many benefits for the institution, the staff that organise it, the wider community, and society as a whole.

The community get to experience something out of the ordinary. They get to see amazing books, photographs, documents, or buildings. They get privileged access to what's normally a hidden environment. And they get to connect with history by interacting with tangible objects. Those who participate also get a great educational experience. They might learn about the local area, their special interests, or the wider world. Their intellectual curiosity will be aroused, and they, and their teachers and group leaders, will be inspired.

The institution that offers the outreach also benefits. The public image of your library will be improved, and an active outreach program might encourage benefaction now and in the future. You will learn new things about your collections by using them for outreach, both from the research you do beforehand, and from what you learn from your visitors. Outreach also helps preservation, even though that might sound like a paradox. Using your collections for outreach you will find out what needs conservation work, and will be able to justify that work being done. Outreach will also inspire and motivate your staff.

Outreach benefits everyone. It improves the public image of libraries, it increases public access to cultural and heritage events, and both staff and visitors will have fun because of it.

## **Case studies**

We will use two case studies from our work at St John's College to illustrate different ways of doing outreach. Our first case-study is a school outreach project that Naomi started in 2007.

### **Hocus Pocus Junior, Naomi Herbert (Librarian's Assistant, St John's College Library, Cambridge, 2007-2010)**

#### **Background**

When I joined St John's College Library, its special collections had recently received MLA (Museums, Libraries and Archives) Designated status.<sup>1</sup> This Designation scheme was designed to recognise, and improve standards in, important collections outside national museums. Designated collections are expected to widen access. Consequently, I was encouraged to provide opportunities for new audiences to access the special collections.

In Cambridgeshire the professionals who had the most experience working with these audiences were the museums education officers. So I made myself a cunning disguise and went to their meetings. I met professionals from all around the region and they gave me support, ideas, and information about funding and training. Although the funding and training seemed to be aimed at museums only, I realised that St John's Old Library was a museum of the written word in all but name.

I applied for MLA Learning Links Funding and was awarded £1500 to collaborate with teachers.<sup>2</sup> I used my network to find two Year 4 teachers at a Primary School within walking distance from St John's. They were initially encouraged to work with us by the funding. Once they had seen the seventeenth-century library they were determined to work with us and asked me to help them overhaul a boring literacy module on explanatory texts.

We worked together to design the module. They brought their knowledge about the curriculum and their students and I brought my knowledge of our

collections. I showed them lots of books that I considered to be explanatory texts and they chose Hocus Pocus Junior, published in 1638, the first book in English devoted to magic tricks.<sup>3</sup> I then researched their choice and the rest appeared almost as if by magic...

## What we did

We planned that pupils would end the project with a hand-made book that contained explanations of how and why magic tricks work (like Hocus Pocus). These would be judged at the end for a prize. To prepare the pupils for their visit to St John's, I went into the classroom the week before. I used E2BN (a photo sharing network for teachers in the Eastern region) to take the pupils on a tour through the College to the Library and introduce Hocus Pocus.<sup>4</sup> I then took pupils through making and decorating a simple stab-stitched book.

On their visit to the Library, we split them into three groups on a rotation of half hour activities: A tour of the College with the Librarian (a History Fellow), a look at Hocus Pocus and other magic books in the Old Library with the Special Collections Librarian, and...a magic show! (Thankfully not by me). I also put all the resources I'd created on our website, including pictures of Hocus Pocus and the College, and my instructions on how to build a book.<sup>5</sup> Hopefully other people may use them.

## What people said about it

This project was so successful that we ran it again the next year, and the next. The children wrote thank you letters which show the impact of the project. Here is a selection:

*"Dear Naomi. The magic show tricks were brilliant. I would love to be a magician when I grow up."*

*"I loved the small book. In fact I went home and had a go at making one. But did not succeed. The Old Library was amazing. Next time I come I would like to stay for longer. P.S. see you in 9 years"*

*"I can't believe we got to see Hocus Pocus Junior! Although I really enjoyed it next time I would like to see the biggest book because it looked very exciting."*

*"The number one best was when Jon showed me the old library and I saw all the old books. That was cool."*

*"Thank you Mark, Jon and you for giving us a wonderful trip ever!"*

## Costs

The costs of the project could have been covered entirely by the funding. Some of the teacher's and all of my time was given free, and photocopying and materials were paid for by St John's, so we had some funding left over. We used the extra funding to pay for the magic show a second year running. The third year that we did the visit the school paid for the magician.

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Magician (two years' worth from funding, 3rd year paid by school): £235 (including costume hire)  
Supply cover (to release teachers for planning sessions): c.£400  
Materials (needles, thread, coloured card, white paper. Decoration materials provided by school): c. £30  
Photocopying: c. £10 (but not accounted for separately)  
Staff time: Not recorded

Our second case study is a science-based project that Katie designed and ran.

## **Build your own astrolabe, Katie Birkwood (Hoyle Project Associate, St John's College Library, Cambridge, 2008-2011)**

### **Background**

In 2002 the personal papers of astronomer and author Sir Fred Hoyle were donated to St John's College Library. The Hoyle Collection comprises some 150 boxes of papers, a library of 600 books, audiovisual materials and a number of artefacts. At the time of donation it was the largest collection of personal papers in the College Library, and because of its size and prestige it became a processing and cataloguing priority. The Library made a successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a grant of £48,000.<sup>6</sup> This covered half the costs of a three-year project and one full-time member of staff to run it.<sup>7</sup> That member of staff was me, the Hoyle Project Associate.

The Lottery requires its projects to engage with the public, so I had a clear mandate to increase the level of access to the Hoyle Collection. One of the outreach elements stipulated in the Project plan was involvement with Cambridge Science Festival. The Festival is an annual two-week programme of free events coordinated by Cambridge University and part of National Science and Engineering Week. It focuses on families and hands-on activities.<sup>8</sup> It was difficult to find a hands-on activity directly related to Hoyle's work, much of which was about cosmology and stellar physics. We couldn't really hold a 'build your own big bang' session in the Library!

Inspiration came from an exhibition that I had already curated about the history of astronomy at St John's College.<sup>9</sup> The exhibition included an astronomical manuscript from the Library's collection of medieval manuscripts: an early fourteenth-century copy of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*.<sup>10</sup> I really enjoyed working with this manuscript, because I'd previously studied Middle English manuscripts and although I didn't know much about astrolabes when I started, I discovered that they're both beautiful and fascinating. Astrolabes are portable scientific instruments, traditionally made from brass and intricately carved, that let you calculate which stars will be in the sky when, or let you work out from the stars and sun what time it is, and where you are.

However, despite thinking astrolabes are great, I found it very difficult to explain in words and diagrams how an astrolabe works. They're something that you really have to see in action. I had a pie-in-the-sky idea for how I could have improved the exhibition - why not have a working model for people to handle? And, indeed, if we could have one working model, why not let everyone have one of their own?

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## What we did

I did a literature search to find out more about Chaucer's Treatise on the astrolabe and to see if anyone else had produced an astrolabe kit. This search uncovered an article which explained how amateur astronomers could build their own astrolabes.<sup>11</sup> But this wasn't written at a level that a general audience could understand. I happened to be friends with a professional astronomer and he helped me design and test a simplified template for building an astrolabe out of card, overhead projector transparencies, glue, ribbon and split pins.

I submitted an event for Cambridge Science Festival 2010. I ran three hands-on sessions aimed at ages 10-plus. Each session had a capacity of 15 people. The publicity and booking were managed by Cambridge Science Festival, not by the Library, which saved a lot of work. The aim of each hour-long session was for everyone there to build a working astrolabe, and to learn the basics of how to use it.

Although this seemed like an ambitious plan, it was such a success that I ran the same event again the next year, although this time I enlisted some volunteers to help run the sessions. I wanted those who came to the sessions to be able to find out more about their astrolabes when they got home, and I wanted the kit to be accessible to more people than the 45 who could be there in person. I therefore designed and built an online resource to add to the Library website.<sup>12</sup> It has a kit of astrolabe parts to download and print, assembly and usage instructions, some historical background information, and brief introductions to the Library collections that inspired it.

## Costs

The costs of the project were confined to materials, photocopying, and staff time.

Volunteers designed the astrolabe and ran the 2011 sessions, and their costs were limited to goodwill gifts.

Card, acetate, scissors, split pins, glue, ribbon and other astrolabe-building necessities: c. £90

Photocopying: c. £20 (but not accounted for separately)

Staff time: Not recorded, as part of wider project with outreach remit.

Volunteer time: c. 5 days

Volunteer gifts: c. £50

## What people said about it

Visitor comments such as these proved the event to be a success:

*"This was a really useful workshop. I've seen astrolabes in museums & had no real idea of what they are for."*

*"Very interesting - I didn't know how old astrolabes were, for example & fun for non-science minded people"*

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The Library has had enquiries about the online kit from astronomers around the world, and the template has been downloaded hundreds of times.

## **Summary of useful points and conclusion**

### **Questions**

We hope that these two case studies answer some of the questions you might ask when thinking about doing outreach for the first time.

### **Where will the money come from?**

Funding, both major and minor, may come from large organisations such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, or, at least in the past, the MLA. Other bodies such as professional organisations, learned societies and charities may also have funding schemes from time to time. Even if you can't get external funding, it is still possible to have an outreach offer. Many independent museums charge schools for their visits, so it's not unreasonable to fund library outreach with a small per-person charge. Costs outside staff time can be very low; your institution and collaborating institutions might manage to squeeze together the funds to cover limited quantities of materials, especially as the success of initial events will help to bring in funding in the future. (The St John's HLF application was strengthened by the existing schools outreach work.)

### **Who can I ask for help?**

There are all sorts of people and groups who can help you out, simply by being a supportive listening ear, or with specific technical advice, or with practical on-the-spot help, or as collaborative partners. Institutional colleagues are a great source of advice and support, especially if you need an extra pair of hands when your event is taking place, but do look more widely, too. Don't be shy about using existing contacts to support what you're doing. That might mean professional contacts who can help directly, or who can put you in touch with people who can help, or even your own personal friends. Museum education professionals in particular are very knowledgeable, friendly and helpful. Get in touch with some local to you, and try and get involved with any ideas-sharing meetings that they might have. Local and national organisations, such as the Museums Association and the Archives and Records Association also have useful publications, courses and email lists.

### **Don't I have to be an expert to work with special collections?**

You probably already have expertise about something; don't be shy about using that. If there's interest in something outside your expertise, you can always learn, and recruit experts to help you. You don't ever have to know everything; you can use the skills of those around you, or of the people to whom you're offering the event. Don't be scared that visitors will know more than you. They'll always be learning something new, and the new things that they can tell you will contribute to your institution's knowledge of its collections; it's a win-win situation.

### **Where will I start?**

It can be daunting, looking at a collection and wondering what you could do with it. There are various ways to make it less scary. You can ask potential

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visitors what they would like to see or learn about, and then work from there. Or you can find out what other events - festivals, open weekends, or open nights - are happening locally or nationally and think of ways in which you could contribute. Always remember that you don't have to 'do everything at once'. You can try one thing first, and see how it goes, before carrying on to exploit your collections more fully. You also might not need to start from scratch: use what's been done before, even if that's not much, and improve that, rather than reinventing the wheel.

## **Practical stuff, or Where are the toilets?**

Every venue and event is different, but there some practical things that every event will have to consider. These include:

- Transport and parking (whether it's a group that want to bring a coach or minibus, or public opening when people will want to know how to find you. Never underestimate how difficult it is for people to find their way around new buildings: put up lots of signs!)
- Food and drink (will your school group be eating lunch during their visit? Will visitors want to know where the nearest cafe is?)
- Toilets and other facilities (How will you cope with a class of 30 that want to go to the toilet before they leave?)
- Disabled access (Are your venues accessible? How will you let potential visitors know about access restrictions? How can you make your visits accessible to as many as possible?)
- Timing (It's best to have a to-the-minute plan so that visits and events run smoothly)
- Staff and volunteer roles, responsibilities and training requirements (Make sure everyone knows exactly what they are, and aren't responsible for in advance, on the day, and afterwards. Make sure that everyone taking part can confidently fulfil their role. )
- Risk assessments, child protection and health and safety (These will not stop you doing what you'd like to do. They will make sure that you've thought about any potential dangers, and will have your back covered in case of the worst happening.)
- Evaluation (How will you measure the success of your program? Evaluation will help you to plan the next step, improve and hopefully justify the work to your stakeholders and funders.)

## **Will my employer like this?**

We can't promise that your employer will go head-over-heels about the idea. But it's very likely that once they've seen it happen they'll start to appreciate the benefits. So do try and see what you can do.

## **Your CV**

Organising outreach projects and events can seriously enhance your CV. You'll be able to add skills and experience such as:

- Staff and volunteer management
- Staff and volunteer training
- Bidding for funds and grants
- Budgeting
- Project management

- Exhibition and design work
- Teaching people of various ages and abilities

Lastly, working with people who are amazed by your library holdings is fun for all concerned.

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Katie Birkwood  
Rare Books Specialist, Cambridge University Libraries  
kib21@cam.ac.uk

Naomi Herbert  
Assistant Librarian, Christ's College, Cambridge  
nsh27@cam.ac.uk

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