

13 December 2013

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Citation: Eeles, P. (2013). *An Interview with Kate Santry, Head of Archives and Library, Oxford University Museum of Natural History* [Online]. Available from <http://www.dispar.org/reference.php?id=13> [Accessed December 13, 2013].

An Interview with Kate Santry, Head of Archives and Library, Oxford University Museum of Natural History

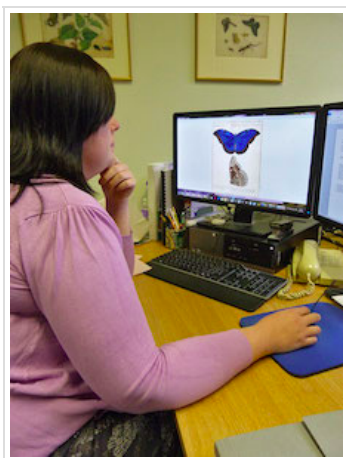
Peter Eeles

Pete: Hi Kate - and thanks for agreeing to be interviewed! Kicking off, what does your role as *Head of Archives and Library* at the museum entail?

Kate: I'm responsible for all the library and archival collections at the museum - a unique collection of natural history books, journals and archives. A significant focus for me is the cataloging of the collections, whether this is modern or antiquarian material.

Pete: How did you come to be an archivist?

Kate: In general, you need a relevant degree. In my case, I have a somewhat-unrelated degree in bio-archaeology that is the study of human remains and the like. I completed the degree in London, Ontario in Canada, my home country. I found the bureaucracy of research in the field somewhat frustrating and turned to my second love of books and history. I decided to do a Masters degree in *Library and Information Science* which, in Canada, is the most common degree that both archivists and librarians have. In the UK there is a degree specifically for archivists. I'm the first professionally-trained archivist the museum has ever had. I'm lucky to have a rare combination of degrees which fit the role at the museum perfectly!



Checking some digitised pages

Photo © Mark Colvin



Kate perusing the books

Photo © Mark Colvin

Pete: So what constitutes an 'archive'?

Kate: An archive represents unpublished material. But my work actually blends the roles of archivist and librarian. Unlike an archivist, a librarian focuses on published works. You wouldn't normally do both roles since archivists and librarians are considered separate disciplines with different training required.

Pete: So what does this distinction mean in practical terms?

Kate: The main differences are in the processes and rules by which items are catalogued. If you take an archive such as the works of J.C. Dale, you have quite a variety of items - in this case, his correspondence, field notebooks, photographs and so on. While the various elements are part of a single collection, this collection can be viewed as a hierarchy that allows you to drill down to a single item, such as a particular letter. When it comes to archive material, we also try and leave items as they were found. For example, Dale's letters were organised by correspondent, and so we kept that organisation, rather than reorganising by date, for example.

Unlike an archivist, a librarian is able to organise works based on consistent rules that are applied worldwide, such as each work having a title, author and publisher. There is also a third category of *antiquarian librarian* that has, once again, a different set of rules for cataloging old books. In this case, we also need to make allowances for how rare and valuable a book is. For example, the value influences the security around the item and, therefore, how accessible it is to readers. You're also more likely to spend more value on a rare book to conserve it.

Pete: So what is the oldest book in the museum?

Kate: We have a book from 1592 by Joris Hoefnagel, a Belgian printer who was also one of the first to draw specimens - especially entomological specimens - to scale. That came from Frederick Hope as part of his bequest to the university. He got it himself from Benjamin Disraeli's father - so it has history as well. We have a lot of items that fall into this category where an item isn't just rare, but has an interesting provenance.



The Aurelian by Moses Harris

Photo © Pete Eeles



The Aurelian by Moses Harris

Photo © Pete Eeles



The Aurelian by Moses Harris

Photo © Pete Eeles

Pete: And what is the rarest book?

Kate: We have so many rare books. Many are unique. William Jones' *Icones* of 1,500 watercolours of butterflies and some moths is an unpublished book which is currently being digitised. It's an original manuscript that was never formally published. The digitisation of the 6 volumes is being done on the premises. We had to make the decision to take it out of its binding which was a tough decision, made easier by knowing that it has been rebound at the Bodleian Library in the 1970s and that the binding wasn't original. When it is rebound at the end of the project, the binding will use the original boards, but the spine will be more in keeping with the original binding design, and will be done using methods and materials that are conservation-safe.



A page from William Jones' Icones

Photo © Pete Eeles

Pete: How do you feel about materials being made available online?

Kate: If I had my way then all materials would be online and available for free. There are obviously commercial considerations since the museum needs to get its funds from somewhere, but I believe that there is also value in making the materials available for free. People can do some really cool things with the materials once they have access! The perceived model of curation is the complete opposite - focused on hoarding and secrecy! But what is the point of keeping a collection that isn't there for people to use?!

"If I had my way then all materials would be online and available for free"

Pete: Given that you occasionally receive donations to the library, what do you do with duplicates?

Kate: It depends. Although we're limited by space and relocating duplicates would help, not all duplicates are the same. For example, a duplicate that's been annotated by Wallace isn't something we'd want to lose! In fact, one aspect of my job is to more-clearly define the collections so that things identified as rare or antiquarian are retained, whereas more recent duplicates are removed. We have an enormous collection of reprints around the museum which results in more duplicates being found, with more boxes coming in from various museum departments each week.

Pete: So who uses the material?

Kate: It depends on the department, but the entomology department is the most widely-used. We're seeing, increasingly, amateur naturalists taking an interest in the library, rather than the traditional researcher, who is normally affiliated with a university. This is something we want to encourage and we try and promote the fact that we're open to anyone, where no particular affiliation or purpose is required. Those wanting to see what we have in the museum can visit the [Search Oxford Libraries Online \(SOLO\)](#) website.

Pete: What projects do you have underway and planned?

Kate: As well as the digitisation of the William Jones' Icones material funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, we've just completed the digitisation of materials from the famous geologist, William Smith, funded by Arts Council England. We're also in the process of creating an online catalog for the archive which will go live in January. Dale's materials are now at the top of the list which is good news, given that so many people have come in to look at this material in recent months. Thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund, we're also able to run a series of workshops that are planned for the new year. These will be aimed primarily at those who are uncomfortable doing academic research and need guidance on topics such as copyright and using archives for research.

Pete: How do people arrange to visit the library?

Kate: [Contact through email](#) is the best way. You do need to make an appointment since there needs to be someone onsite. Interested parties should also be aware that we are a non-lending library - books can't be borrowed. This has always been the case and this isn't going to change because of the uniqueness of the collection. Visitors are also welcome to photograph and photocopy items, so long as no copyright laws are being broken.



Mark Colvin researching Dale's diaries

Photo © Pete Eeles

Pete: Is there anything that the UK Butterflies community can contribute to the library and its aims?

Kate: Actually, there is. I've just produced [a survey to help me better understand how people are doing research in the natural sciences](#), so I can develop workshops geared specifically at the naturalist research audience. If your members could complete this, it would be a great help.

Pete: Kate - thanks so much for giving us an insight into your work!

Kate: My pleasure.