

THE MERL AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS REVIEW 2020–2021



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Front cover Design for The MERL's reopening health and safety signage, featuring the world famous Absolute Unit.

Inside front cover Women's Land Army tractor mechanics training at Wye College, Kent (P FS PH1_K21433).

INTRODUCTION

This has been a year dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The MERL and Special Collections went into lockdown in March, reopened in September, returned to lockdown again in November 2020 and had to close again on 18 December 2020. Since March 2020 we have had to transform most of our activities into remote services and virtual programmes so they could be delivered online.

It has also been a year of considerable achievement and productivity. The strength of our collections, partnerships, and engagement with our user community, locally and globally, has been highlighted through a dynamic, proactive and creative response to the unanticipated closure. The MERL has continued to play its part in Museums Partnership Reading (MPR), its work with Reading Museum, as an Arts Council England, National Portfolio Organisation. We have faced considerable financial challenges, due largely to loss of earned income from services, sales and donations, in common with the wider museums and cultural sector.

Staff have worked hard to sustain income streams as far as possible online, including reprographic services, the successful launch of new products on the ArtUK shop, and more recently through sales on the University online shop of a new t-shirt range. We were also fortunate to secure ACE/DCMS Culture Recovery round one funding in October. This allowed us to invest in additional staff capacity to enable access to the Museum's archive and library via the digital on demand and enquiry services, the development of a marketing campaign for reopening, and to launch 51 Voices, the Museum's year-long project to celebrate its 70th anniversary.

Against this background we have, nevertheless, been able to adapt and proceed with a number of ongoing partnerships, programmes, projects and events.



Leon Kossoff, 'Willesden Junction – Early Morning' (1962) from the University of Reading Art Collection.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

This year has seen a considerable transformation in the digital infrastructure of the University of Reading's Museums and Collections. We have introduced new and improved digital tools and services, developed rapidly and at low cost in response to user needs; with highly focused co-ordination of digital strategy; and our workforce has tackled complex digital projects with enthusiasm.

The key aspect of that change was the exploitation of the Digital Asset Management system (DAMS) which has now become essential to delivering collections access; initially for staff, and then via a new Virtual Reading Room (VRR) tool.

<https://vrr.reading.ac.uk>

Over 13,000 digital assets have been added to our DAMS system since April. Recently uploaded material includes images from the MERL galleries and the European Manuscripts Collection.

- The new Special Collections website and the University of Reading Museums and Collections portal were launched on 1 May 2020.

<https://collections.reading.ac.uk/special-collections/>
<https://collections.reading.ac.uk/>

- Google Arts & Culture platform launched, drawing on University of Reading Special Collections alongside cultural content from all over the world.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/university-of-reading>

"[On Google Arts & Culture] Well, this is a wonderful announcement and continued proof that Reading is true icon, leader and other similar words in the world of arts, culture and heritage. Massive congrats to @UniRdg_SpecColl"

<https://twitter.com/RDGWatsOn/status/1304023823449305088?s=20>

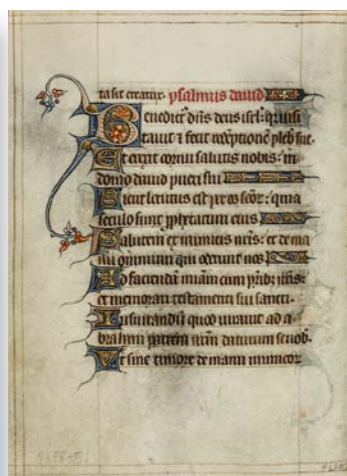
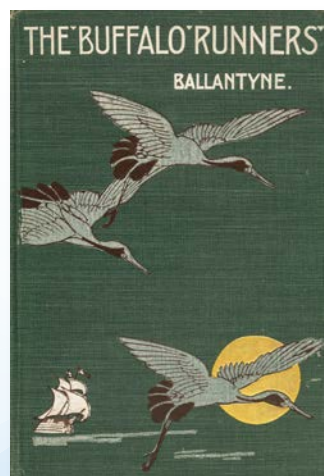
Social media has been vital in sharing the stories of our collections and objects. From March–December 2020, the MERL tweets have been seen 79.7 million times. This includes several viral campaigns, including AniMERL Crossing (where we invited engagement with the Museum's collection of smocks through a new and popular social simulation video game, Animal Crossing).

- During the same period, Facebook generated 29,559 engagements and 441,480 impressions, and our Instagram follower numbers doubled (now at over 12,000).

Our programming also took a digital shift: From well-attended seminar series to the creation and delivery of family-friendly resources including under-5s group Friday Fledglings, a new app that enabled us to share our popular Seasons animation from the galleries and online exhibitions and blogs on topics spanning many different aspects of rural heritage:

- The MERL website received 222,327 page views across the site, with a 24% year-on-year increase in site-wide average dwell time – with particular highlights being a 10% increase of dwell time on our blog posts, a 62% increase on our 'explore' pages (and a 36% increase on our visitor information pages).
- Special Collections (SC) social media channels thrived with an upward trend for engagements per month (100,000+) and impressions per month (160,000+).

The buffalo runners by R.M. Ballantyne (1891) from the Children's Collection, and a leaf from a French Book of Hours (c.1300) from the European Manuscripts Collection (MS 5650/89) – two of the many highlights featured on our Google Arts & Culture platform.



Social media user feedback

Feedback on reader services

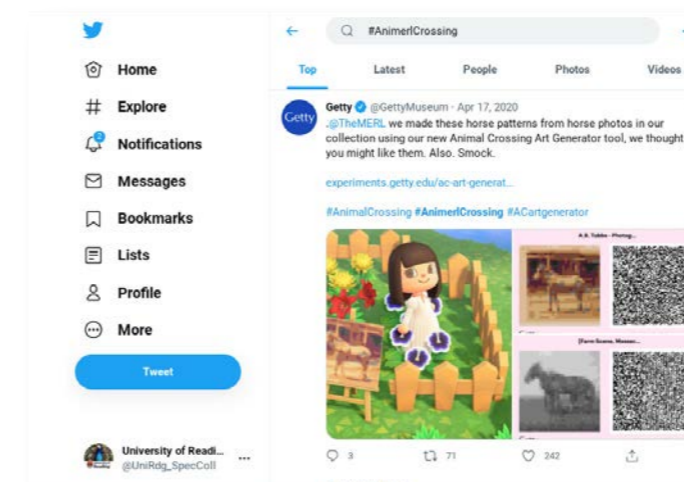
"Big shout out to Joanna at @UniRdg_SpecColl who has SAVED THE DAY by sending me some images that I needed for my essay, but which AdLib was hiding behind a proxy error. The automatic "closed for Christmas" email made me have a little panic, so I was overjoyed when Joanna replied!"

<https://twitter.com/eternalmagpie/status/1339892575927463936?s=20>

Feedback on digital content

"Great to see that the Collections Team have been very active during lockdown. Should have a lasting benefit for researchers in post-COVID times!"

https://twitter.com/joe_doak/status/1365237514974486529?s=20



- Special Collections blog posts published on subjects ranging from the 'Resources you can use from home' series to Ole Worm's masterpiece Museum Wormianum (1655) from the Cole Library. Chris Adams, a PhD student at the University of London, wrote a post about how the digital access service, enabled him to continue his work with the publishing archives:

<https://collections.reading.ac.uk/special-collections/2020/10/30/archival-heroism-how-digital-access-to-archives-saved-my-phd-during-lockdown/>

"A glorious blog by @beijingcoma & a great example of how librarians & archivists (in this case @UniRdg_SpecColl) have worked to help researchers overcome Covid-related restrictions."

<https://twitter.com/LondonRareBooks/status/1323683265186856965?s=20>

"Totally echo points made in this blog post. @UniRdg_SpecColl helped me access material during the lockdown too. Thank you to all involved."

https://twitter.com/DWWithers_/status/1322158893510905856?s=20

- Online exhibitions included the 'Embellish'd with gold' illuminated manuscripts exhibition, 'Did you know?' which highlighted interesting facts about our collections, and exhibitions on the Land Girls and Open Spaces Society archive on The MERL website.

Highlights from our Twitter platforms

AUDIENCE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Engagement with schools had to be moved online and highlights included the filming of a Diwali activity for sessions with schools. A selection of artefacts were scanned onto Sketchfab, a platform for digital 3D modelling, for use in online sessions.
- The launch of the Primary School programme in September 2020 included the delivery of virtual sessions to New Christ Church CE Primary School. The Secondary School programme included delivery of the popular 'My Lockdown Museum' series with Leighton Park School.
- Widening Participation sessions, supporting Access to HE were delivered remotely for Little Heath School, who participated in a GCSE Design and Technology pre-recorded session on Timber (Wagons) and pre-recorded Year 9 session on food.
- The MERL Teachers' Panel has continued to meet virtually during the year.
- At the November Teachers' panel, The University's EIT Food programme team (European Innovation in Food Technology) joined us to consult with attendees about their learning resources.



Items created by The Mewes Knitters for their Christmas Stockings project.

- A YPWD (Younger People with Dementia) Virtual Reminiscence programme was delivered between November and December.
- The partnership programme with Alana House 'Unlocking our Lockdown Stories' – took place over the summer when it was possible to meet in person and an online exhibition was later presented on The MERL website.
- The MERL's new Assistant Volunteer Gardening Coordinator started at the beginning of this year, and contact was renewed with gardening volunteers and community groups. We also participated in the Soil Fermentation project as part of Reading Borough Council's Climate Change Strategy.
- New partnerships developed over the last year have included Mustard Tree/ Starting Point which supports young people who are NEET (Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training) or at risk of NEET and the Pangbourne Memory Café. The Mewes Knitters (our in-house craft volunteers group) supported their Christmas Stockings project for individuals most at risk of social isolation and loneliness.
- Aspire 2's Whitley Early Years project was looking for ways to illustrate their Nursery Rhyme Packs. MERL and Special Collections staff helped identify material from the collections which linked to nursery rhymes to support some of the most vulnerable families in Whitley.
- The MERL continued to deliver the Cultural Commissioning 'Life Stories' project (part of the Reading Place of Culture Great Place Scheme, attending training on measuring social impact and participating in Reading's Ageing Well Forum.
- With Cultural Commissioning Funding the MERL partnered with Age UK Berkshire to support older people most at risk of loneliness and social isolation, answering a particular need during the pandemic.
- With support from the P. H. Ditchfield Bequest, research took place to identify images from within our collections to support local history activity. Those images were used as stimuli for collecting and connecting to older people's life stories. The images created talking points at virtual Coffee Mornings (starting with Older People's Day), during one to one interviews over Zoom and on the phone, and through virtual reminiscence.
- The Everybody Outdoors programme, aimed at supporting children with special needs, was developed in partnership with Addington School to create six film resources aimed at PMLD (Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities) teachers supporting their students in accessing the outdoors.



- The MPR Youth Strategy included provision for a Youth Panel which met regularly during the year to consider various activities including the potential for a 1971 Reading Festival exhibition for 2021.
- During the year various young people's organisations including the Reading/Berkshire Youth Action Team and Reading Borough Council's Brighter Futures, were consulted about the MPR plans to develop a Youth Manifesto in 2021/22.
- The English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) musicians in residence project concluded with a final concert by Jackie Oates and Peter Flood in January 2020, fortuitously before the first lockdown.
- The Lost Museum display cabinet was put together by a community group in Whitley and installed at The MERL in February 2020 and has since been on display for onsite visitors.
- The MERL's well established reminiscence sessions at Royal Berkshire Hospital were nominated for the Royal Berkshire Hospital Staff Awards in the 'Excellence in Partnerships' category.
- The MERL joined a group of museums across the country as partners in Accentuate's Curating for Change programme which aims to apply during 2021/22 to the National Lottery Heritage Fund to deliver a programme of fellowships and traineeships for deaf or disabled participants, with The MERL potentially supporting a trainee.
- The MERL is a partner in two LGBT+ focused initiatives, SupportU's NLHF funded 'Broken Futures' LGBT research and exhibition project, and the Queer Rural Connections project led by Tim Allsop of 'Turn of Phrase'.



Left Aspire 2's Whitley Early Years project Nursery Rhyme Packs featured images of items from our collections.

Above A photograph suggested for a virtual reminiscence session, of a worker at the Simonds brewery in Reading in the 1930s, led to the wonderful discovery that the subject of the photograph was in fact the grandfather of one of the participants. From the Dann-Lewis Collection (P DX322 P4/9).

"A BIG thank you for helping out with the Project and talking to the students. Out of 10 students in this Travel & Tourism class, I think we only had one not present online listening and asking questions. With Foundation students at College, and the fact that because of 'COVID times' lessons are on-line, this level of attendance is fantastic! Thank you again for a great presentation/chat with the students, I think it went really well."

Claire Dhaffir (Widening Participation Project Officer) feedback from their Work Experience Coordinator following first session at the college



Exhibit from 'The Lost Museum' display.

PUBLIC PROGRAMMES AND EVENTS

“I just wanted to write to say huge congratulations on the Glow late event. I was just hugely impressed with what you and the MERL team managed to achieve with it ... it was a fantastic example of what’s possible in online engagement. There’s so much learning here that it would be great to share with future organisers.... I hope that you are basking in the satisfaction of a job really well done. A real 2020 Being Human highlight for me!”

Dr Michael Eades, Public Engagement Manager & Research Fellow,
Manager and Curator, Being Human festival



Kala The Arts performing at Reading Abbey as part of The MERL’s GLOW event. Image credit: Chris Forsey.

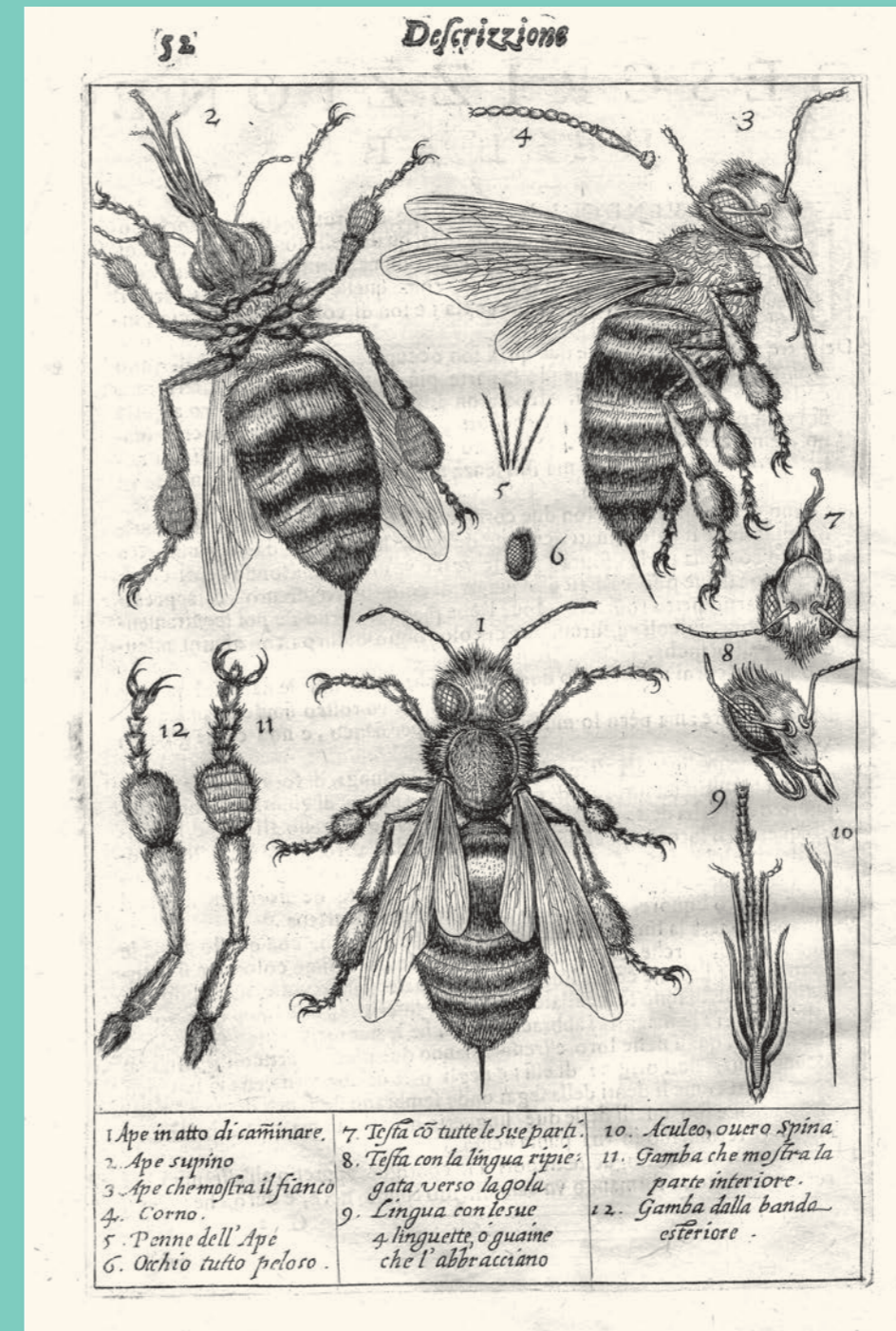
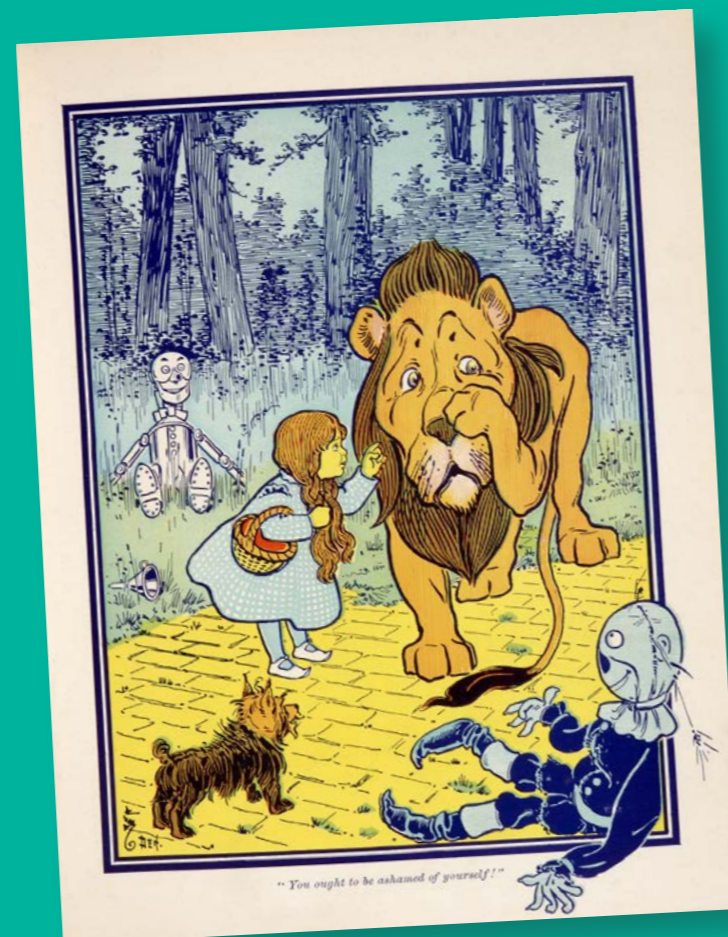
Public programming activities included:

- The ‘MERL Late’ moved online and hosted GLOW as part of the AHRC ‘Being Human’ Festival in November 2020 streamed live on YouTube. The event has had a total of 1,282 views so far. <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/event/glow-merl-late/>
- The sell-out Servants’ Ball, a new music and dance project inspired by staff parties of English country estates, was hosted by The MERL in January, just prior to lockdown.
- Also in January, The MERL hosted Common Salt – a Sitalines performance developed by South Street and The University’s Film, Theatre and Television Department. A ‘show and tell’ that explored the colonial, geographical history of England and India through expansive and emotional time travel – from Enclosure and the East India Company to the 21st century.
- The MERL’s curatorial team participated in the International Association of Agricultural Museums (AIMA) virtual symposium, ‘Coping with Crisis in Agricultural Museums’ in November 2020.
- A major MPR exhibition to be hosted by Reading Museum and highlighting the University’s Art collection, ‘Rubens to Sickert’ planned for May 2020 had to be postponed until 2021 but a workshop on drawing and diversity was able to take place, led by artist Saranjit Birdi.
- A joint exhibition with the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts, ‘Shoulder to the Wheel’ was hosted by The MERL in early 2020, celebrating the work of Farnham writer and wheelwright’s shop owner, George Sturt. Guest curated by Dr Glenn Adamson, it involved commissioning three ‘copy’ wheels based on one in The MERL’s collections. An ‘In conversation’ with makers, Greg Rowland, Gareth Neal and Zoe Laughlin was included in a linked online exhibition. A piece made by master wheelwright, Greg Rowland was acquired for the collection.

COLLECTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE

- 1,020 enquiries about the MERL collections and 693 Special Collections enquiries answered since April 2020.
- 146 photographic orders completed and 47 licences issued.
- The reading room re-opened for socially distanced study from early September until mid-December. Despite reduced opening hours and reader capacity, 102 MERL researchers and 234 Special Collections researchers were welcomed and the service ran to near capacity throughout.
- Retro-conversion of catalogues that were previously only available as handlists resulting in 32,986 new records added to ADLIB (23,089 MERL, 9,897 Special Collections).
- Remote cataloguing of the MERL Library pamphlets collection (c. 10,000 items) was completed, together with the completion of the Wizard of Oz and Frank Duffy library collections and work on the Cole Library.
- The Cowan Bee library cataloguing project continued and further funding secured from the Eva Crane Trust to complete the project.
- The Special Collections Storage Project was completed, which involved the installation of racking and plan chests at Special Collections and our external store, Worton Grange; 1,127 boxes and 63 linear metres of film reels, plus 18 plan chest drawers, moved between Worton Grange and Special Collections.
- Some 450m of library material was reviewed and moved at our external store to maximise storage space. Some 50m of open access library material was reviewed and moved to reconcile these collections over summer 2020.
- The archive team is engaged in two European networks, contributing our large motion picture film collection to the online portal of the European Rural History Film Association, and working with the new European Network of Landscape Architecture Archives (NELA) to devise a multilingual glossary of archival terms.
- The Open Spaces Society project, the Wellcome 'Field' project and the paper cataloguing of the Dwoskin archive all completed, with funding secured for another year from the Landscape Institute and Random House.

- 'Building Connections', a Designation Development Fund project, commenced, aiming to create deeper digital interpretation of the MERL object collection, and introduce new interpretative themes into the galleries and on the MERL website. The themes will include the history and perspective of traveller communities and the experience of black and other ethnic minority groups in relation to food, farming and the countryside.
- With funding from the Ditchfield bequest, digital, learning and engagement resources have been enhanced with content relating to the history of Reading and the local area.
- Work on the redevelopment of the Cole Museum continued with support from the UMASCs Collections Care Manager.
- A rehang of artworks at Park House and the University Library was completed, with new works from the Art Collection and the rehang of 'Willesden Junction, Early Morning' by Leon Kossoff.



Far Left Colour plate from the first edition of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum (1900) from the Wizard of Oz Collection.

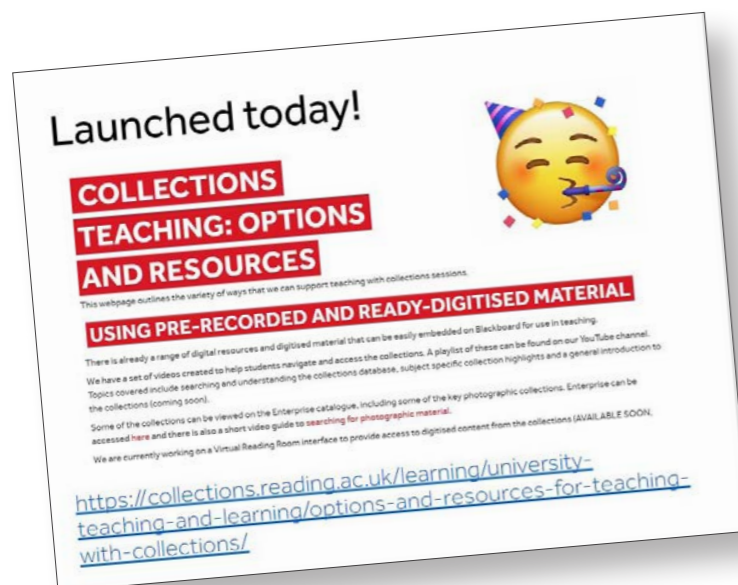
Left Engraving of a bee observed under a microscope, thought to be first of its kind to appear in a printed book, preceding microscopy works by Kircher and Hooke. From *Persio* by Francesco Stelluti (1630) COLE 90/04 catalogued remotely from printed catalogue during lockdown.

Bottom left New products available on the ArtUK online shop featuring 'A View of Whiteknights from the Park with a Lady Sketching' by Thomas Christopher Hofland (1777–1843) from the University of Reading Art Collection.

Bottom right Photograph from the Records of the Open Spaces Society (1964) (MERL SR OSS ET3/45).



ENGAGING OUR STUDENTS



Feedback from academic colleagues for our support with blended collections teaching

“The module was flagged by our external examiners as being hugely innovative and clearly beneficial for the students involved – it’s only thanks to support from Special Collections staff that we are able to run it.”

Dr Nicola Wilson, Department of English Literature, Publishing Cultures module

“The Special Collections Service has allowed us to provide a diversified teaching offering, greatly increasing the quality of student engagement with programmes, and enhancing the sense that students have of the distinctiveness of their programme.”

Dr Paddy Bullard, Department of English Literature

“Our colleagues in @UniRdg_SpecColl are just wonderful. Thank you, @AdamCLines and the rest of the team, for all you do for our staff and students.”

English Literature and Creative Writing @UoR @UniRdg_EngLit

“the fabulous @AdamCLines on how @UniRdg_SpecColl responded to Covid-19. Brilliant work creating a virtual environment (but I still want to come and visit in person when I can!)”

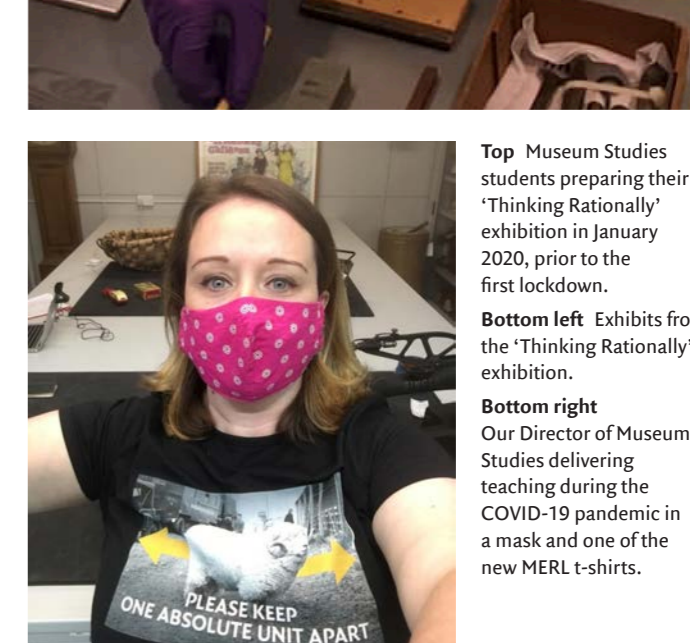
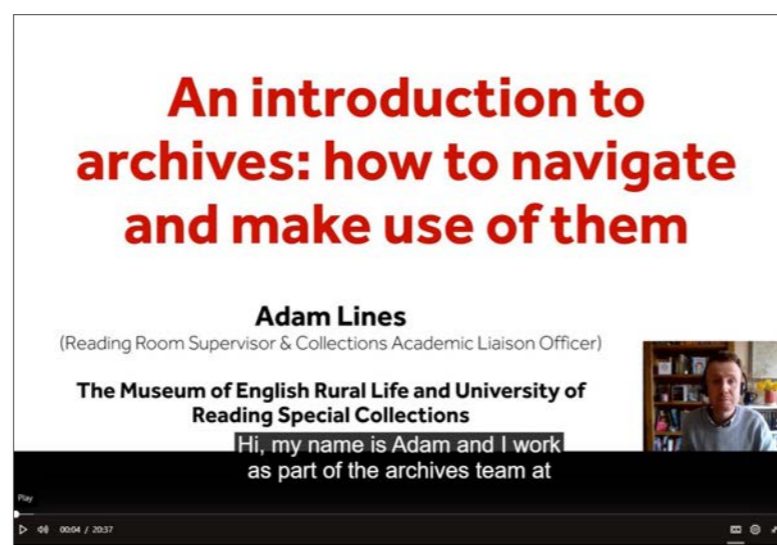
Dr Helen Parish @HelenLParish

A blended (virtual and physical) teaching with collections offer was launched on 28 July 2020.

- The team hosted 21 sessions across 6 modules, with 141 students involving 306 different collection items.
- The new cohort of Museum Studies students is our most international ever with students from across the UK, Oman, Brunei, Germany and South Africa.
- Our third year Museum Studies exhibition ‘Thinking Rationally’ was installed in February 2020. It dealt with issues of sustainability in fashion and food and was turned into an online exhibition during the spring lockdown of 2020.
- Presentation by Special Collections staff to the ARA South East Training group, ‘Please, don’t touch: how do we offer teaching with collections opportunities in a virtual setting?’ discussed the technology of moving collections teaching online, to a record audience of over 130 attendees.
- Hosted our first remote live teaching session with the Manchester School of Architecture and supported three History placement students.
- Special Collections library and archive staff planned and delivered new English Literature ‘Shelf Life’ module (EN1SL) in collaboration with ELL colleagues virtually.

“Really helpful to get more in-depth info on using the search tools to find archival sources. I feel more confident searching for collections!”

MA History student



Top Museum Studies students preparing their ‘Thinking Rationally’ exhibition in January 2020, prior to the first lockdown.

Bottom left Exhibits from the ‘Thinking Rationally’ exhibition.

Bottom right Our Director of Museum Studies delivering teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in a mask and one of the new MERL t-shirts.

VOLUNTEERING



Despite the challenges of the pandemic, volunteer engagement remained strong during 2020. Over 90 volunteers were active or engaged in some way since the pandemic began.

- 57 of these volunteer for UMASCS and donated approximately 1,000 hours.
- 54 people volunteered remotely in a virtual role.
- 43 people volunteered in-person in between lockdowns and in outdoor roles.
- 57 people attended virtual volunteer coffee mornings, talks and team meetings for their role.
- The new Better Impact volunteering platform was launched in October 2020 making it easier to recruit and onboard a new volunteer, or to start an existing volunteer in a new role.
- Lockdown newsletters with positive news about the organization issued highlighting opportunities to stay involved, online social events and a volunteer-led evening lecture on the photographic documentation of the conservation of the Abbey ruins.
- Fortnightly Zoom meetings for knitting volunteers and monthly sewing group meetings helped reduce isolation. Volunteers also worked on community-oriented projects such as mask and scrubs making for NHS workers.

- Pioneered five remote/ virtual volunteering opportunities during the various lockdowns that enabled volunteers to support MERL projects or those delivered by Museums Partnership Reading. The opportunities attracted a diverse group of volunteers from a range of different age groups and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Our most remote volunteer currently lives in Shanghai in China.

Museums Partnership Reading (MPR)

The past year has seen good progress against our current business plan, despite the challenges of lockdown. Both museums have benefited from the digital capacity provided through this programme, with successful digital campaigns that have attracted national and international attention.

During the last year, our MPR Programme Officer moved back to Australia and a new Programme Manager joined MPR in January 2021. Arts Council England have announced their intention to extend the current four-year programme funding for a further year, subject to submission of satisfactory new business plans for Year 4 and 5.

LOOKING AHEAD

Our plans for reopening will involve a streamlined transition programme, either to encourage the return of visitors or, if necessary, continue an online engagement offer.

Our longer-term survival requires us to regain visitor numbers as quickly as possible, for which investment in effective marketing is vital. As restrictions are lifted, we will use our Culture Recovery funding to support our highly successful commissioning of local creatives, contributing to the project remotely and potentially on-site. We also aim to open the exhibition, 'Rubens to Sickert', as part of our Museums Partnership Reading programme, drawing on University holdings and loans from national collections. Delayed by the pandemic, activities already devised, led by an artist-in-residence, Saranjit Birdi, are planned. We have delayed an artists' collective residency, Commons, an ACE-funded project involving craft and outdoor growing activity, culminating in gallery installations that we aim to restart from April 2021. We will also be hosting the Queer Rural project in July 2021 with a week of performances of the show, 'The Stars are Brighter Here', written and directed by Tim Allsop of Turn of Phrase Theatre Company. The promenade play, and an associated documentary to be shown each day, will focus on queer rural life, now and in the past.

In some areas of Reading people have suffered real hardship during the pandemic, not least when they have young children to home school in difficult circumstances. We want to support these communities. We shall cautiously reintroduce some regular programming including our Early Years activity, Friday Fledglings, occasional seminars, school bookings and half term and holiday activities for families. Evidence of consumer behaviour during autumn 2020 suggests good levels of local public interest for on-site visits have been retained – our garden and social and learning spaces helped ensure that visitors were safe to enjoy high quality experiences even with restrictions. By maintaining our marketing we believe visitor numbers will pick up and our online programmes are strongly placed to shift to on-site or to a blended offer.

Photograph of the designer and maker, Gareth Neal from the 'Shoulder to the Wheel' exhibition. Image credit: Jon Stokes.





The MERL GLOW Rangoli. © Bhajan Hunjan

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For more information, please contact:

The Museum of English Rural Life

University of Reading
Redlands Road
Reading RG1 5EX

merlevents@reading.ac.uk
Tel (0118) 378 8660

@UniRdg_SpecColl @theMERL @UniRdg_ArtCol

merl.reading.ac.uk

collections.reading.ac.uk/special-collections/

collections.reading.ac.uk/art-collections/



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