

A day in the life of... a Special Collections Library Assistant

By James Ryan, Special Collections Library Assistant, Senate House Library



Special Collections at Senate House

Located in Bloomsbury, the heart of London's literary quarter, Senate House Library was London's first skyscraper. The architect Charles Holden designed the library in Art Deco Style between 1932-1937. One of the most striking features of this building is from floor 7 to 19 where the supporting mechanism for this, is bookshelves. They are welded into the skeleton girders and rise in perfect symmetry for about 200 feet over the city [1]. Senate House Library is the central library for the



University of London and the School of Advanced Study. With over 2 million Books, 50 Special Collections and 1,800 Archival collections we are one of the UK's largest academic libraries for arts, humanities & social sciences.

I currently work as a Library Assistant in Special Collections at Senate House.

Special Collections can be defined as a group of items, such as rare books or documents that are either irreplaceable or unusually rare and valuable. An example of this can be seen in the image below of Edward Topsell's *Historie of foure-footed beastes* published in 1607 [2].

There are some 260,000 printed books designated as Special Collections at Senate House Library, and there are more than 60 named special collections of printed books, many of which also contain pamphlets, periodicals, printed ephemera, archives and manuscripts. Furthermore, we have over 1800 archives collections within the deposited archives and 260,000 items designated as special collections

items. More information on our collections can be found [here](#).

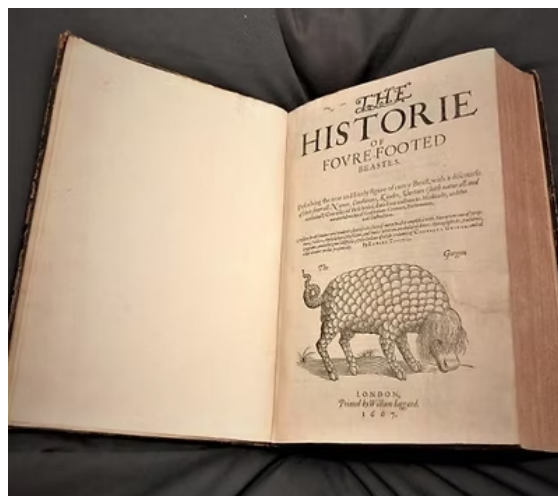
One of our most heavily used archives at Senate House are those of Harry Price who was a researcher in psychic phenomena. Price was heavily invested in psychic investigations, the paranormal, and magic. In 1923 he established the National Laboratory of Psychological Research in Queensbury Place. He is most famously known for conducting paranormal

investigations into Borley Rectory in the 1930's. It was believed to be the



most
haunt
ed
house
in
Engla
nd.
His
collect
ions
includ
e the
weird
and
wond

erful which makes the Harry Price collection such a unique resource. Such items include laboratory equipment in order to investigate psychic phenomena, a rapping hand used in séances, and these eerie negatives as seen on the left.[3]



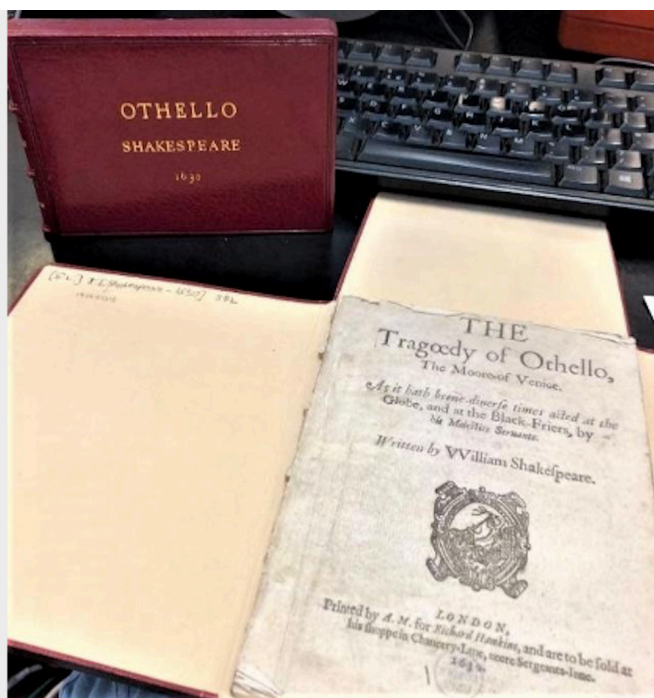
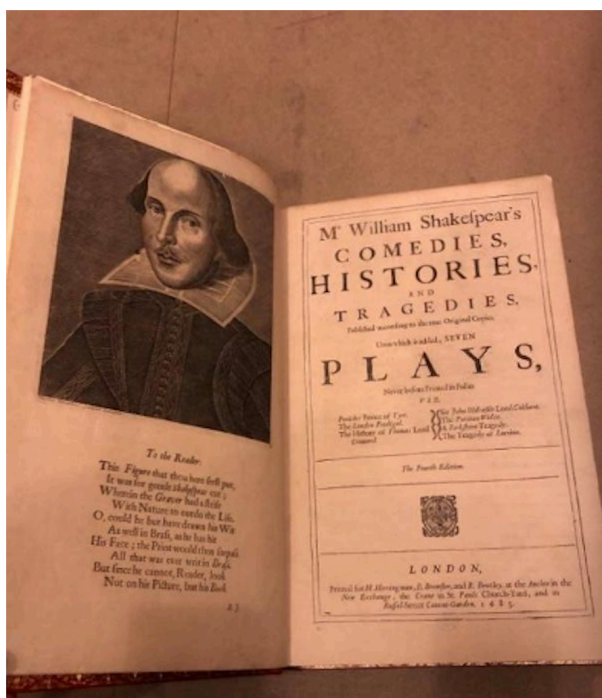
Working in Special Collections

Daily tasks in special collections are quite varied and are prioritised by reader enquiries and requests. As an assistant my daily tasks and responsibilities are:

- invigilating in the reading room
- responding to reader enquiries in person and in email
- fetching and re-shelving of items

On the invigilation desk we provide a welcoming and friendly reference service to reader queries. I relish this interpersonal aspect of this position as it's a real joy to help a would-be researcher begin their journey. Our goal is to help researchers match their interests with useful archival and special collection materials and resources. Having knowledge of our collections and systems of retrieval is key as the organisation of archive materials is vast and complex, as are the systems in which they are organised.

For me, the most interesting aspect of this position is fetching rare books, manuscripts, and archive ephemera and the subsequent re-shelving. The sheer range of items one can come across in Special Collections is mind blowing. When fetching it is a real privilege to explore (momentarily) the treasures of our vast historic collection. For example, it's not every day that one gets the opportunity to have a quick glimpse at rare copies of *The comedies, histories & tragedies* [4] or *Othello* [5] by William Shakespeare.



Walking around the labyrinth of movable stacks in the basement, I often imagine myself descending the stairs of Jorge Luis Borges Library of Babylon fetching for infinity. However back in reality we have excellent location guides alleviating my imaginary conundrum.

Once the readers are done, the next step is the re-shelving of these items. While re-shelving may be quite a repetitive process, this repetition has helped me to build up knowledge of our vast archival and printed collections. Another bonus in this process is that you get to have one final look, and I like to take a picture as you never know when you might see this item again.

How I got into Special Collections

I started as a customer service library assistant where my tasks and duties were varied. This broad role allowed me to gain experience in the circulation, membership, and finally the special collections team. Getting the foot in the door was my way into special collections at Senate House Library. What drew me to this department was the fascinating collections and the opportunity to engage with rare books and manuscripts. I think it is essential to be passionate and enthusiastic for one to make the most out of this role.

In regards to skills needed for this position you actually gain a lot of on the job training which in turn helps to build up your knowledge of not only our vast collections but also the processes and procedures which will help to run the service. Many of the transferable skills gained as a library assistant would complement many of the tasks carried out as an assistant in special collections, as is the case in libraries all over the world. Also, I believe having experience in teaching, research, and public engagement would be highly beneficial. Alison Cullingford has written an [excellent article](#) on how to start a career in special collections, I highly recommend this as a great starting point.

Items from the collection

I'm now going to show you some of my favourite items that I have fetched in my time at Senate House Library.

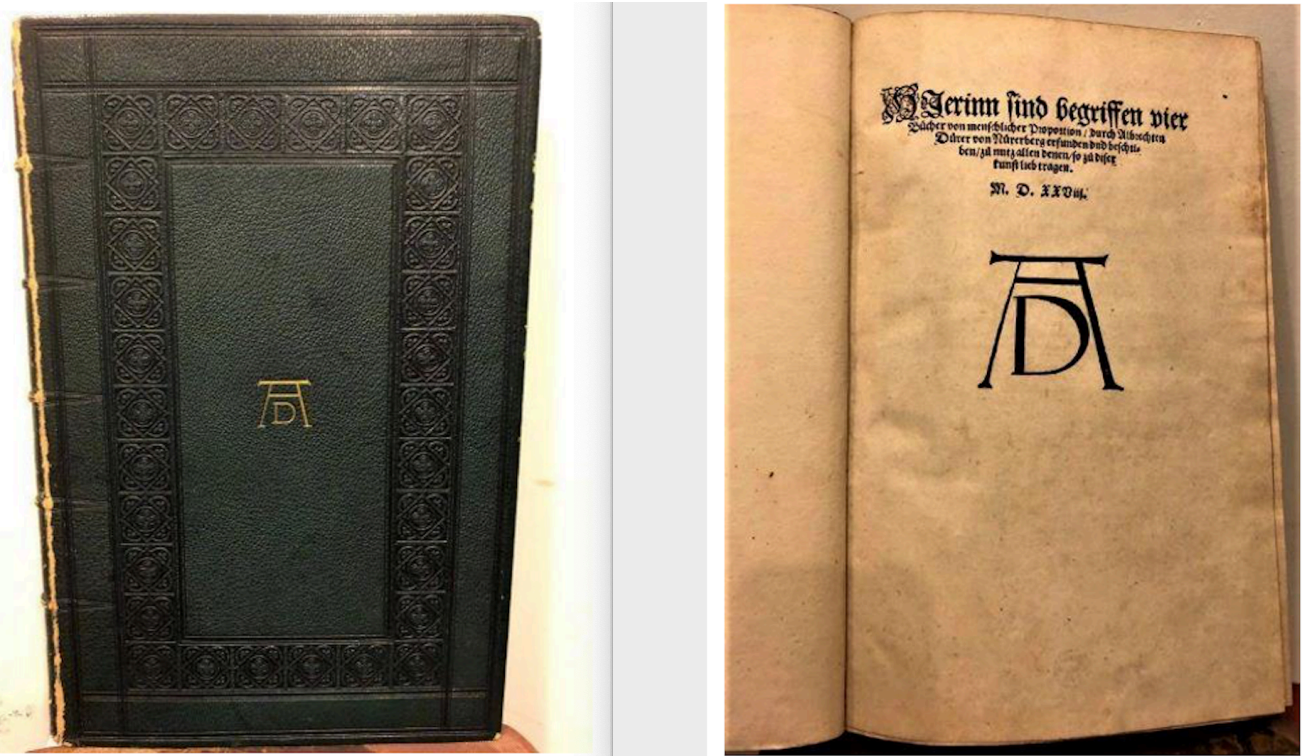
A miniature version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1904) [5]:



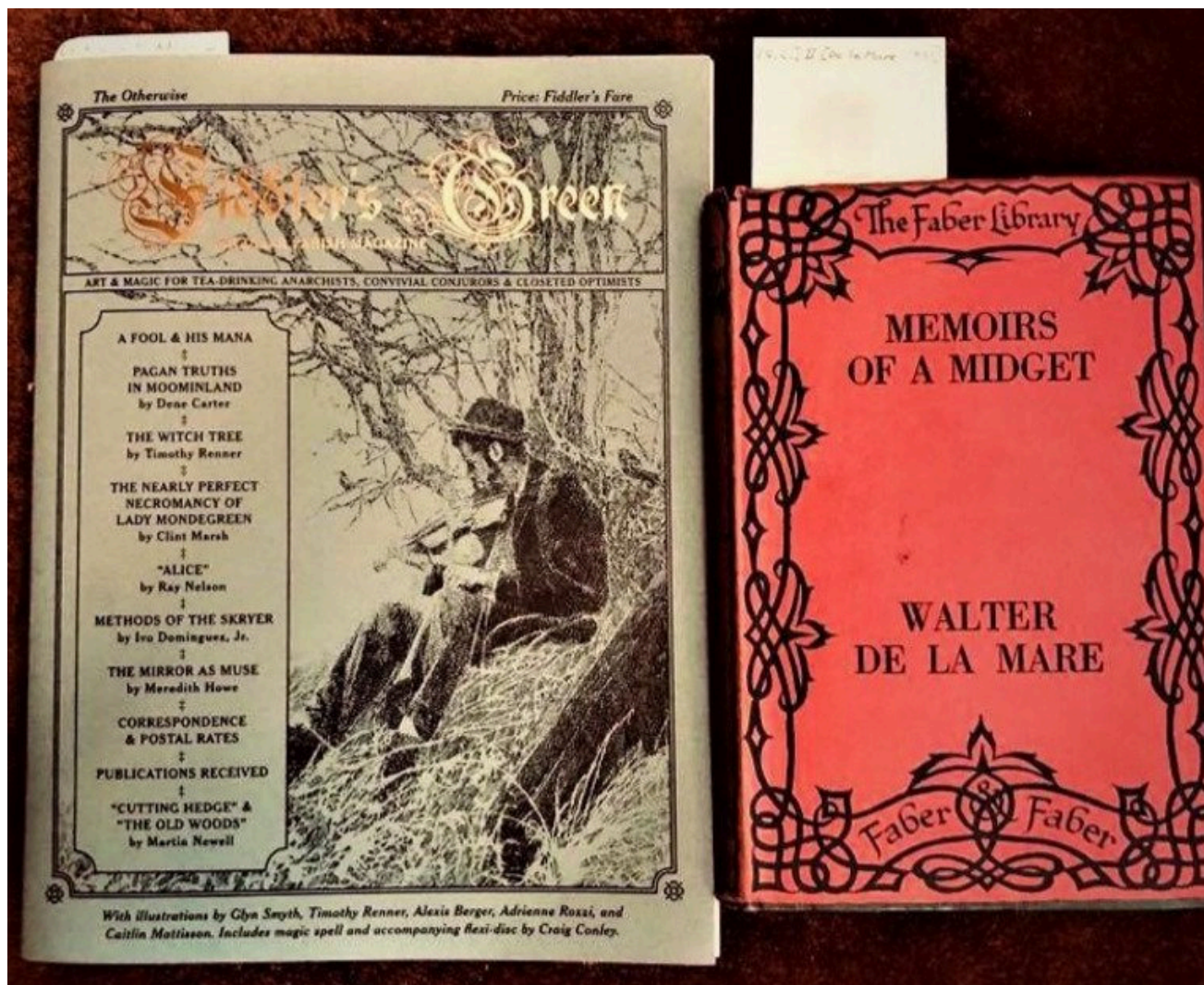
An image of an elephant from Edward Topsell's *Historie of foure-footed beastes* (1607) [6]:



Cover and title page of Albrecht Durer's *Hierinn sind begriffen vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion* (1528) [7]:



Fiddler's Green: *Peculiar Parish Magazine* (2018) [8] and Walter De La Mare's *Memoir of a Midget* (1932) [9]:



(All collection photos by James Ryan)

Author Bio: James Ryan



Like many people I stumbled into library work. My background has primarily been in the hospitality industry which helped to support my undergraduate and post graduate studies. Being a History and English graduate I have always been drawn to books, manuscripts, facsimiles, and archive materials. I fortuitously stumbled upon a rare opportunity at the London Irish Centre in 2014 where I helped to set up a library from scratch. I have written a [blog post](#) detailing my involvement there. This position ignited a passion in me to gain more of an academic and professional understanding of libraries. I completed my MSc in Library and Information Science in 2019 from City University London. After graduating I was very fortunate to get my first academic library job at Senate House in 2019.

Further Reading:

- Clough, Louis e (2014), *Undergraduate Use of University Archives and Special Collections: Motivations, Barriers and Best Practice*, 2014, MSc Dissertation Aberystwyth University. https://cadair.aber.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/handle/2160/30065/Clough_L.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

- Cullingford, Alison (2018), *How do I make a career in Special Collections?*, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-do-i-make-career-special-collections-james-williams/>
- Cullingford, Alison, *The Special Collections Handbook* <https://specialcollectionshandbook.com/>
- Hansen, Kelli, *Education, Training, and Recruitment of Special Collections Librarians: An Analysis of Job Advertisements*, 2011, <https://rbm.acrl.org/index.php/rbm/article/viewFile/358/358>
- Kamposiori, C. and Crossley, S. (2019), *Evidencing the Impact and Value of Special Collections*. RLUK Report. <https://www.rluk.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Evidencing-impact-and-value-of-special-collections.pdf>
- Pressler, Christopher, Attar, Karen, *Senate House Library University of London*, (Scala Publishers, 2012).

Image Credits:

- Old book photograph - image used courtesy of Senate House Library. Photographer: Laurie Griffiths
- Senate House of the University of London - image from Wikimedia Commons, photographer: [Bastique](#)
- Photos of the collection - all by James Ryan.

References:

- [1] Pressler, Christopher, Attar, Karen, *Senate House Library University of London*, (Scala Publishers, 2012).
- [2] Topsell, Edward, *The historie of foure-footed beastes Describing the true and liuely figure of euery beast, with a discourse of their seuerall names, conditions, kindes, vertues (both naturall and medicinall) countries of their breed, their loue and hate to mankinde, and the wonderfull worke of God in their creation, preservation, and destruction*, London: Printed by William Iaggard, 1607, ([D.-L.L.] Q [Topsell] fol.)
- [3] Glass Plate Slides from the Harry Price collection viewed on a lightbox ([HPG/3/743-858](#))
- [4] Shakespeare, William, *The comedies, histories & tragedies of William Shakespeare*, New York : Limited Editions Club, ([S.L.] III [Limited Editions Club - 1939])
- [5] Shakespeare, William, *The tragoedy of Othello, the Moore of Venice : as it hath beene diuerse times acted at the Globe, and at the Black-Friers, by his Maiesties Seruants*, 1630, London : Printed by A. M[athewes] for Richard Hawkins, ([S.L.] I [Shakespeare - 1630].(S))
- [5] Dickens, Charles, *A Christmas carol : in prose : being a ghost story of Christmas; with seven illustrations*, London : H. Frowde, 1904, ([Miniature books](#).)
- [6] Topsell, Edward, *The historie of foure-footed beastes Describing the true and liuely figure of euery beast, with a discourse of their seuerall names, conditions, kindes, vertues (both naturall and medicinall) countries of their breed, their loue and hate to mankinde, and the wonderfull worke of God in their creation, preservation, and destruction*, London: Printed by William Iaggard, 1607, ([D.-L.L.] Q [Topsell] fol.)
- [7] Durer, Albrecht, *Hierinn sind begriffen vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion*, [Nürnberg : s.n.], MDXXVIII [1528] (Y4 [Durer] fol. (SR)).
- [8] Fiddler's Green : *'Peculiar Parish Magazine. The Otherwise'*, 2018, Berkeley, ([H.P.L.] Fiddler's)
- [9] De La Mare, Walter, *'Memoirs of a Midget'*, 1932, London, Faber & Faber, ([S.L.] II [De la Mare - 1932]).