

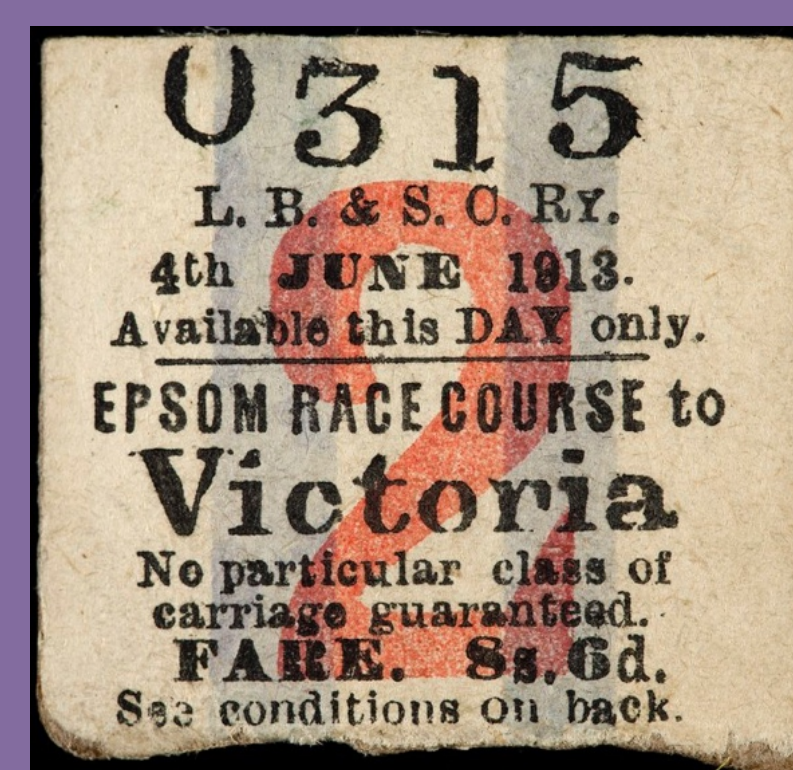
In Search of Stability:

The Women's Library's New Home at the London School of Economics



“The Women's Library is one of the most inspiring places in Britain. The collection is irreplaceable and having access to it should be a right for all. It truly is a national treasure which must be maintained at all costs.”

– Sandi Toksvig¹



Emily Wilding Davison's return ticket²

“The Women's Library has been a unique part of the renaissance of feminist, gender and women's history since the 1970s; everywhere one travels in the world, the Women's Library is a landmark.”

– Professor Sally Alexander¹

Elsie Duval's hunger strike medal²



“The greatest collection of women's history in the world.”

– Michael Wood, 'Story of England', BBC 2010¹

Introduction

The Women's Library (TWL) is a special collection relating to all aspects of the lives of UK women, including the political, economic and social changes they have experienced over the past 150 years. TWL's identity, purpose and function has greatly evolved over time: it was created during the suffrage movement, in 1926, as the Library of the London Society for Women's Service; today it functions first and foremost as an academic archive. The population of users has accordingly shifted over time. These changes are correlated with changes in stewardship or ownership of the collection. This research study focuses on TWL's most recent change in ownership, from London Metropolitan University to the London School of Economics (LSE), which took place in 2012-2014. The move has meant more limited access to the collection for members of the public, and faced considerable backlash from some of TWL's long-time members.

Purpose of the Study

- To examine and document the history, resources and administrative structure of TWL collection at LSE
- To offer some insight into the nature and causes of the controversy surrounding TWL's recent move from London Metropolitan University to LSE

Research Questions

- R1. Who owns or maintains this collection? Do they have a collection development policy?
- R2. What are some of the major resources in the collection?
- R3. How is the collection/archive funded?
- R4. How is it staffed; how many work there and in what capacity?

Importance of the Study

This case will be of interest and relevance to other special collections that face similar struggles with balancing funding and safekeeping with allowing adequate user access in order to justify their very existence. This study highlights some of the innovative ways the LSE Library staff have been integrating TWL collection within their existing collections, in an effort to provide a stable and secure home for this valuable collection.

Methodology

The author had the opportunity to interview LSE staff who worked with the collection throughout this period of change, as well as having the opportunity to visit and use TWL's collections, to see first-hand the administrative papers documenting the collection's history and this most recent move. This project was completed as part of the British Studies Program in the summer of 2015, which involved a 5-week stay in London, England to study libraries and archives. The program is offered by the University of Southern Mississippi, and is open to library and information studies students in Canada and the US.



References

1. "A prospectus for the Women's Library." 11TWL/F/3. London: TWL @ LSE, 2012.
2. LSE Library, <http://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/collections/thewomenslibrary>
3. For more information, see <http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/news/archives/2013/06/womenswalks.aspx>

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Findings/Results

Collection Development Policy (R1)

- Policy has changed over time, depending on status with owner/steward:
 - Society library (specific) → Academic library (very broad)
- Today too broad: anything to do with British women
- Goal: align with other special collections at LSE (Hall-Carpenter) and LSE's mission more generally
- Focus going forward (for TWL, Hall-Carpenter & LSE Archives as a whole):
 - People and organizations who sought to influence services at various government levels or to influence the public agenda
 - Pioneers whose work resulted in changes in attitude, bringing issues to public attention, or changed societal 'rules'



Major Resources (R2)

- Over 60,000 books and pamphlets, 3,500 periodical titles, printed ephemera and press cuttings, over 500 personal and organisational archives and a museum collection of 5,000 objects including posters, photographs, banners and badges
- "Unique and distinctive" foundations of collection are historical papers, artefacts and ephemera of UK suffragettes
- Eight items from collection included in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register: 'Documentary Heritage of the Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1865-1928'
- Digital projects, including the Emily Wilding Davison Online Exhibition and Women's Walks
- New public exhibition space in LSE Library to highlight items from TWL and the LSE archives



Funding (R3)

- TWL has struggled with funding since inception
- Almost all of TWL's many moves can be traced back to funding issues
 - London Metropolitan University's Board of Governors announced at their meeting on March 14, 2012 that the university could no longer afford to maintain TWL
- TWL has 3 endowment funds
- Today, funded as part of LSE Library: no separate staffing, maintenance or building or preservation budget
 - Proportion of acquisition budget set aside annually for TWL's purchases
- Fundraising led by LSE Advancement, and Friends of TWL still very active

Staffing (R4)

- Not a separate TWL team at LSE Library
 - Staff who transferred with TWL from London Metropolitan University merged with already-existing departments in LSE Library
- The Women's Library Reading Room is used for viewing all of LSE's archives, and is staffed by LSE Library's Reader Services Team
- There are two collection development teams (printed collections and archives & special collections), an acquisitions team and a collections management team (handling physical organization and processing)
- While at London Metropolitan University, TWL was managed very separately from rest of university
 - Own buildings and staff
 - Lots of TWL-specific projects
- This separation made TWL vulnerable to budget cuts: hard to understand how it benefitted London Metropolitan to be caretaker for it, or where it fit within organization as a whole
- Hope to prevent similar vulnerability by having it more integrated within LSE Library

Conclusion

The challenge of balancing the preservation of this valuable collection with allowing adequate access to it continues. The organization that houses the collection ultimately sets the rules concerning access. At London Metropolitan University, the collections were highly accessible but they did not adequately meet the needs of the university. Hence it was not a sustainable stewardship model. Public access has been more restricted at LSE, but there has been a stronger focus on aligning TWL collection with LSE's goals. LSE Library has made significant efforts to promote this valuable collection and to provide outreach. The relationship between TWL and LSE is mutually beneficial, and they are moving forward with a solid foundation.

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