

## Call for HEI Partners/Academic Supervisors



### Research Theme:

## Eighteenth-Century Knowledge Work in the Harleian Collection

British Library Co-Supervisors:

Dr Alice Marples, Research & Postgraduate Development Manager

Dr Alice Zamboni, Curator of Modern Archives and Manuscripts

### Context & Summary

In October 1704, the politician Robert Harley (1661-1724) purchased more than 600 manuscripts which had belonged to the antiquary Sir Simonds d'Ewes (d.1650), adding them to his growing collection of materials relating to the ancient history, languages, religions and laws of Britain. In 1711, Harley was elevated to a peerage and his son, Edward, took over the management of this collection, buying up groups of important English manuscripts, acquiring items via auctions, and engaging overseas agents to make mass purchases of manuscripts from Continental Europe. A prominent role in the formation and expansion of the collection was played by the scholar Humfrey Wanley (1672-1726). Wanley was a draper's apprentice who taught himself Anglo-Saxon. One of the original members of the Society of Antiquaries in 1707 and library-keeper to the Harleys from 1708, Wanley maintained wide-ranging contact with a number of important contemporary collectors including Hans Sloane, Samuel Pepys, Arthur Charlett, John Bagford, Thomas Hearne and others, as revealed in his diary and letters.

Bequeathed to Edward Harley's daughter, Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, Duchess of Portland (d.1785), the collection was purchased in 1753 for £10,000 by the British government where, together with the collections of Hans Sloane and Robert Cotton, it became a founding collection of the British Museum. Compared with these other collections, however, the Harleian Collection has received relatively little study due to the complexities of its organisation and cataloguing history.

Embedded within current work at the British Library, including the first substantial re-cataloguing of the Harleian Collection since 1805, this project provides a unique opportunity to produce an original piece of research on the origins, development and management of the Harleian Collection. It will focus on revealing diverse forms of 'knowledge work' relating to the collection, the role that the collection and its management played within broader eighteenth-century society, and what this might reveal regarding modern-day custodianship in cultural institutions.

### Research Areas

On Edward Harley's death in 1741, the collection contained an estimated 7618 manuscripts, 50,000 printed books, 350,000 pamphlets and 41,000 prints. Although the printed collections were subsequently dispersed, the manuscript collections were acquired by the British Museum and are now at the British Library. This project is designed to explore the management (rather than just content) of this vast

collection, and the specific interventions that were made in its creation, organisation, representation and use in the eighteenth century.

The project lends itself well to potential methods, theories and approaches from various disciplines including: Cultural and Museum Studies, History, Human Geography, and Library and Information Studies. The History of Collecting and the History of Knowledge are rapidly growing fields with the scope to adopt holistic, cross-disciplinary approaches that explicitly connect historical evidence with the realities of modern knowledge institutions and cultures.

There are several potential themes for this project:

- How and why the collection was initially assembled, developed and used – what were the Harleys' motivations for collecting, and how was this demonstrated through knowledge work and use?
- History of antiquarian and others forms of scholarship, and its role in eighteenth-century life – what research work did the collection speak to and inspire? Did this change over the course of the period, and how can we know?
- The political and cultural role of collecting – how did collecting interact with the broader public lives of the Harleys? How did the collection become considered a 'national' collection by contemporaries? What role did it have in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century nation-making?
- The role of specific individuals in organising, documenting and promoting the collection – decision-making regarding acquisitions and dispersals, and how this influenced and/or illustrates the development of museum and library practices and structures.
- Precarity and power in knowledge work – the relationship between elite and non-elite communities; intersecting networks of differing priorities and forms of exchange; how paid international agents were engaged and monitored; career paths and questions of agency.
- The institutionalisation and professionalization of knowledge work – the eighteenth century was a time when a shift in conceptions of knowledge led to new forms of employment involving specialist skills for interpreting, recording and managing collections and archives.
- Research ecosystems and networks – what do early ownership inscriptions and other evidence reveal about the eighteenth-century structures and individuals routinely obscured by traditional conceptions of individualistic academic activity?

The main output of this project will be a ground-breaking piece of research into the origins or development of the Harleian collection which is rooted in close study of the Harley manuscripts themselves, with the potential for making connections with other contemporary collections. We are interested in a range of potential approaches, which could take the form of either a general investigation into or a detailed study of a section of the collection – for example, the heraldic manuscripts or literary material – in order to best engage with the research themes listed above.

### **Benefits & Training Opportunities for the CDP Student**

This project provides a unique opportunity to understand and link historical and contemporary practices of research management and development than would be possible for a student or academic to gain via a 'traditional' PhD route. The student will benefit from a project which explores early histories of collection and curation in a way which speak to modern-day organisational knowledge, academic hierarchies and cultural policy, gaining valuable experience working within a collections-based institution at a time when provenance and legacies of collections are the subject of much critical examination. There are a number of PhD students and supervisors at the Library currently working on early modern collecting histories.

More specifically, they will be supported and will assist in connecting diverse materials and expertise relating to the Harleys and the Harleian Collection across the Library.

The student will be joining an active area of current work and will be expected to spend 3-6 months of this studentship supporting the ongoing re-cataloguing of the Harley Collection, under the supervision of the Second Library Supervisor. This will form the material basis of their PhD research.

They will be supported in gaining specific and transferable skills – from palaeography and prosopography to project-management and team-working abilities, as well as specific language skills such as Latin – as required. This scope of this studentship and the range of opportunities available will provide the student with a broader array of potential career paths, post-PhD.

## **Application Deadline**

*Friday 29 November 2024, 12pm*

## **Application Guidance**

Further information and details of how to apply can be found in the 'Information for HEI Applicants' document made available as part of this call.

## **Contact for Queries**

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and

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