



LIGUE DES BIBLIOTHÈQUES EUROPÉENNES DE RECHERCHE
ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN RESEARCH LIBRARIES

Manuscript Librarians Group

Great Britain – Backgrounds

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Contents: The British Library, London. — National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. — National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. — Bodleian Library, Oxford. — Cambridge, University Library. — Archival Institutions.

The British Library, London (BL)

Founded in 1973 as the United Kingdom's national library, the BL was formed by combining several institutions including the library departments of the British Museum (founded in 1753). It is a library of legal deposit. Contains internationally important collections of manuscripts across several departments:

- Department of Western Manuscripts — 330,000 ancient, medieval and modern manuscripts ranging from papyrus and ostraca, illuminated manuscripts, literary and theatrical manuscripts, to modern collections of personal and political papers and e-manuscripts. The department's medieval treasures include two of the surviving copies of Magna Carta, the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Luttrell Psalter, and the Sherborne Missal. The department holds the world's largest collection of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and an internationally renowned collection of medieval seals and charters. The literary and theatrical collections include manuscripts of Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur, medieval romances, Greek and Latin classical texts, manuscripts of most of the major figures in English literary history, and the archives of the publishers Macmillan & Co., playscripts from 1824 to the present day, and the archives Lord Olivier, Sir Ralph Richardson, and Sir John Gielgud. The modern political holdings include a major collection of 16th and 17th state papers, royal autographs, the archives of W. E. Gladstone and Lord Balfour, archives spanning several generations of families with significant roles in public and social life, papers of reformers, journalists, diplomats, and antiquaries. Explorers' papers include those of Sir Joseph Banks, James Cook, and Robert Falcon Scott. Major holdings of papers of scientists and medical researchers such as Alfred Russel Wallace, Marie Stopes, Alexander Fleming, and W. D. Hamilton. The department also holds a large collection of cartographic and topographical material.

- India Office Records – public records of the administration of India before 1947 comprising official papers, 70,000 volumes of official publications and 105,000 manuscript and printed maps. Also contains the India Office Private Papers comprising about 300 collections and over 3000 smaller deposits of papers relating primarily to the British experience in India.
- Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections – 65,000 oriental manuscripts in 350 languages including literature, poems, narratives, historical accounts, chronicles, and Biblical, religious, medical, cartographic, geographic and other texts.
- Map Library – the major cartographic collection in the British Isles, comprising 4,250,000 maps, atlases, globes, adverts, postcards, printing plates, coins and medals.
- Music Library – contains primary source material relating to the history of music in Britain, autograph manuscripts from the seventeenth century to the twentieth centuries.

National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh (NLS)

Founded in 1925 when the Faculty of Advocates offered its library, established in the late 17th century, to the nation. A library of legal deposit and the largest library in Scotland. The Manuscripts Collection comprises approx. 40,000 catalogued manuscripts. The library holds medieval and modern manuscripts of national importance including:

- Medieval manuscripts and documents dating from the 9th century and including devotional manuscripts, psalters, and books of hours.
- Material relating to the history and administration of the medieval Scottish kingdom can be found in a major collection of cartularies of monastic houses, and in large series of royal, baronial and ecclesiastical charters.
- The pre-eminent collection of Scottish literary manuscripts from the 15th to the 20th centuries including manuscripts and letters of major Scottish writers.
- Individual documents relating to famous or dramatic moments in Scottish history include the last letter of Mary, Queen of Scots (1587), the order for the massacre of Glencoe (1692), and several original, signed copies of the National Covenant (1638-9). Many letters and documents relating to the foreign policy of the pre-1603 Kingdom of Scotland are also to be found.
- Political and diplomatic papers containing many large personal or family archives crucial for the study of late 17th to 19th century Scottish and British political history.
- Religious archives include the records of the Church of Scotland's Board of World Mission and a considerable number of archive collections of 18th to 20th century churchmen and church-based organisations. The Library is also a major centre for David Livingstone studies.

National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth (NLW)

Founded by Royal Charter in 1907, the culmination of a campaign begun in 1873. The Library, a library of legal deposit, holds the largest and most important collection of Welsh manuscripts in the world, comprising 25,000 manuscripts, the earliest of which dates from 113 A.D. Apart from Welsh, the Library has significant holdings of manuscripts in English, Latin, French, and Cornish. The collections include:

- Literary manuscripts including a 15th century copy of Piers Plowman, medieval Welsh poetry, and modern papers such as those of Dylan Thomas.
- Medieval books of hours.
- Rolls – 305 items including pedigrees and orations.
- The Peniarth Manuscripts – a collection which contains the earliest manuscript in the Welsh language, the oldest Welsh verse, and the earliest chronicle of Welsh history.

Bodleian Library, Oxford

Founded in 1602, the Bodleian is the main research library of the University of Oxford and is a library of legal deposit. The Department of Special Collections and Western Manuscripts holds the second largest collection in Britain, comprising 190,500 manuscript volumes (as at July

2003) with items ranging in date from papyri of the 3rd century B.C. to correspondence and papers of the present. The collection includes:

- Illuminated manuscripts, deeds and rolls from the medieval period onwards, and pre-dissolution monastic works.
- Major collections of 17th century political papers and literary manuscripts.
- Antiquarian and topographical manuscripts of the 17th to the 19th centuries.
- Private papers of individual politicians, diplomats, civil servants, journalists, writers, scientists, scholars, churchmen and other public figures.
- Modern political papers including those of Disraeli, Asquith, Attlee, and Macmillan, and the archives of the Conservative Party.
- Manuscripts deposited by other Oxford colleges, the Library's own administrative records, and the archives of the University.
- Approx. 20,000 Oriental manuscripts.

[Cambridge University Library](#) (CUL)

The University Library was formally established during the second decade of the 15th century and is a library of legal deposit. The Library's Manuscripts Department holds collections of international importance including:

- Scientific papers, including those of Darwin, Newton, Ernest Rutherford, and the Royal Greenwich Observatory.
- A wide variety of medieval manuscripts, including some deposited by Cambridge University colleges.
- Military and naval archives dating from 1300, including papers relating to most major conflicts since the English Civil War. Papers of statesmen, officers and servicemen are included.
- Business archives including those of Vickers.
- Cambridge University archives.
- Approx. 7000 Oriental manuscripts and approx. 150,000 fragments of texts.

Archival institutions

Archival provision in the United Kingdom is catered for by a patchwork of institutions. The [National Archives](#) at Kew is the repository responsible for the records of central government. The [National Archives of Scotland](#) and the [Public Record Office of Northern Ireland](#) acquire and maintain records and archives of historical interest relating to those parts of the United Kingdom. Local government provides record offices in counties, cities, and boroughs. There is a large academic archive sector with each of the major universities having important collections of both institutional and private papers and manuscripts. Large private businesses hold important collections, as do the larger charities. All of the major faiths also have an archival presence. Collaborative ventures and networks include [Access to Archives](#) (A2A), the English strand of the UK's archive network; [AIM25](#), Archives in London and the M25 area; [Scottish Archive Network](#) (SCAN); [Archives Network Wales](#); and the [Archives Hub](#), a national gateway to descriptions of archives in UK universities and colleges.