

Rehousing the Bodleian's Papyri

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Work to box and re-shelve the 761 glazed frames of papyri within the collection of Western manuscripts in the Bodleian Library has recently been completed. It was prompted by the introduction of a new method for ordering manuscripts and concerns that these vulnerable items held between sheets of glass were not being fully protected during transit to readers. The new boxes and their shelving brings to a close a method for storing papyri that has been in use for over 130 years, but which is perhaps little known outside of the Library.

In 1810 the Library received its first papyri from the Prince of Wales (later George IV), a gift of four burnt papyrus rolls from the library excavated at Herculaneum in 1752. However, nearly all the Bodleian's papyri were acquired directly or indirectly from Egypt between 1878 and 1934.¹ The annual report to the Curators of the Bodleian for 1890 under the heading 'Arrangement, referencing, and handlisting of papyri, &c.' catches some of the difficulties that this new class of material clearly posed for the Library, it also outlines newly introduced solutions undertaken directly by the Librarian E. W. B. Nicholson.

Each fragment or groups of fragments was placed between two sheets of glass (the edges of which were bound with cloth) so as to leave both sides visible ... The frames thus made were sized, referenced, and handlisted as ordinary MSS., except that the reference is followed by (P); but they are stored in specially constructed cabinets. The number of frames finished in 1890 was about 80.²

This approach to mounting papyrus between sheets of glass remains the preferred method for permanent storage, with the transparency and rigidity of glass being an advantage for this fragile and often fragmentary material.³ However, the use of heavy wooden cabinets to store groups of the individually glazed frames is more problematic, they are protected during storage but not while they are removed and transported to readers for study.

The number of cabinets or cases for the collection would eventually grow to twenty-eight, arranged to hold papyri within the seven size categories (a-g) introduced by Nicholson in 1887: Papyri (W.MSS.) cases a. 1-3, b. 1-2, c. 1-4, d. 1-5, e. 1-4, f. 1-5, g. 1-5. The 'specially constructed cabinets' are of a standard and sturdy design, made from a mixture of hard and softwoods with dovetailed joints and a lockable door. Within the cabinets, wooden vertical dividers allow the frames to be slotted in place without risk of falling over or touching other frames, and all frames were locked in place by a removable brass bar. The cabinets have sturdy brass handles to the top and sides and have the look of rugged campaign furniture. Some of the cabinets have painted

¹ For an overview of the papyri collection see the entry by Bruce Barker-Benfield within 'Classical studies', in Gregory Walker, Mary Clapinson and Lesley Forbes (eds), *The Bodleian Library, a subject guide to the collections* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 25-30, at p. 26. The four burnt rolls are now MS. Gr. class. b. 1 (P)/1-12 and MSS. Gr. class. f. 25-27 (P), with the Summary Catalogue noting that MSS. Gr. class. b. 1 (P)/1-12 are 'glazed sheets of a burnt roll ... unrolled in 1883-4' (Falconer Madan, *A Summary Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at Oxford* (Oxford, 1905), Volume V, p. 403).

² *Oxford University Gazette*, 708 (5 May 1891), p. 445.

³ Lyla Lau-Lamb, *Advanced papyrological information system guidelines for conservation of papyrus* (January 2005), https://staff.lib.umich.edu/sites/staff.lib.umich.edu/files/2020-07/APISconservation_fig.pdf and Bridget Leach, 'Mounting papyri at the British Museum', in Judith Rayner, Joanna Kosek and Birthe Christensen (eds), *Art on Paper: Mounting and Housing* (London, 2005), pp. 193-198.

inscriptions on their doors, either related to content or in some cases to a possible earlier use of the cabinets. A number of the smaller cabinets have a painted inscription 'Negatives', which probably refers to photographic glass plate negatives which were stored in similar cabinets and may be related to the introduction of photography at the Bodleian, also in 1890.⁴ One of the cabinets (Papyri (W.MSS.) case c. 4) is a later addition, though it is constructed to match the earlier examples.

Each of the glazed papyri frames have now been boxed individually in standard boxes for each Nicholson size category, and with protective layers and a well of Plastazote (an archival type of Nitrogen blown foam) within each box. All of the frames were measured and the boxes made by the Packaging and Delivery Service of the Bodleian. These boxed frames are now stored on library shelves, can be ordered individually and are fully protected from shelf to reader.

The 1890 report notes that (P) follows the shelfmark for this material and this clearly originally stood for *papyri*. More accurately it should perhaps refer to items framed between glass as the collection also contains a number of ancient parchment fragments, including parts of two bifolia retaining a length of sewing thread which is possibly the Bodleian's earliest fragmentary bookbinding, and some late nineteenth-century anomalies such as the letter from Tennyson presented to the Library in 1899.⁵ A representative selection of five of the cabinets in different sizes has been retained for the Library and has been transferred to the Janitors' List.

Retained cabinets, now JL 1054a-e

Papyri (W.MSS.) case a. 2 - Painted inscriptions on the door 'a.' and 'MS. Gr. class. | a. 4 (P) | REVENUE-PAPYRUS | OF | PTOLEMY PHILADELPHUS | sheets 1-18', formerly containing MS. Gr. class. a. 4 (P)/1-18; 65.5 x 33 x 40.5 cm (height x width x depth).

Papyri (W.MSS.) case b. 1 - Painted inscriptions on the door 'b.' and 'MS. Gr. class. | b. 1 (P) | BURNT ROLL | FROM | HERCULANEUM', formerly containing MS. Gr. class. b. 1 (P)/1-12; 54 x 38.5 x 42.5 cm.

Papyri (W.MSS.) case d. 1 - Painted inscription on the door 'd.' and 'Negatives', formerly containing MSS. Gr. bib. d. 2-6 (P), MSS. Gr. class. d. 2-15, 17-24 (P); 34.5 x 33.5 x 34.5 cm.

Papyri (W.MSS.) case e. 1 - Painted inscriptions on the door 'e.' and '[Ne]gatives', formerly containing MS. Autogr. e. 7 (P), MSS. Gr. bib. e. 4-6 (P), MSS. Gr. class. e. 4-15, 20-21, 24-36 (P); 26.5 x 33.5 x 26.5 cm.

Papyri (W.MSS.) case g. 4 - Painted inscription on the door 'g.', formerly containing MSS. Gr. class. g. 67-83 (P); 16.5 x 31 x 17 cm.

⁴ Edmund Craster, *History of the Bodleian Library 1845-1945* (Oxford, 1952), p. 203.

⁵ Bodleian, MS. Gr. bib. d. 2 (P) - parts of a quire of two bifolia from a parchment Biblical manuscript in Greek from Egypt, dated to the first half of the fifth century and retaining a length of a four-ply undyed sewing thread with a final twist direction of Z; MS. Autogr. e. 7 (P) - a single leaf letter written about 1885-90 by Alfred Lord Tennyson, described as 'between two pieces of glass' (Falconer Madan and H. H. E. Craster, *A Summary Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at Oxford* (Oxford, 1924), Volume VI, p. 176).



Fig. 1: The five retained papyri cabinets (Bodleian Library, JL 1054a-e).



Fig. 2: Detail of a cabinet showing the vertical dividers, removable brass bar and brass handles (Bodleian Library, JL 1054e).



Fig. 3: Seven frames of 'g' sized papyri rehousing in new boxes.