

# New College Collections

## A New Course

One exciting venture has been the teaching of a new course in semester 1 2025–26 oriented entirely around the Special Collections of New College and the Main Library and taught in the new bespoke space of the Funk Reading Room. This is 'New College Collections: Archival History and Theology' which is a joint course with a cohort of both undergraduate honours students and postgraduate students. The course owes its genesis to Dr Sara Parvis (Senior Lecturer in Patristics) the Director of Teaching at the School of Divinity, who was seeking a way to give students the opportunity to acquire skills in archival research, as well as to showcase New College's rich collections and integrate them into mainstream teaching. The hope especially was to give students the confidence to pursue independent archival and library research in their undergraduate or Masters dissertations and as preparation for doctoral research.

As the idea developed Dr Parvis recruited Dr Simon Burton (John Laing Senior Lecturer in Reformation History) and Dr Felicity Loughlin (Lecturer in the History of Modern Christianity) as co-teachers and the course also developed a wider focus on the interaction of the History of the Book with the disciplines of Church history and theology. As Curator of New College Library Dr Burton was especially keen to promote this important collaborative venture between the School and the Library and ended up taking the helm as course organiser. Indeed, the support of both the Main Library and New College Library at all levels has been invaluable and the direction of the course has been shaped and continually enhanced through dialogue with Dr Elizabeth Quarmbay Lawrence (Rare Books Librarian) and Daisy Stafford (Research Services Supervisor). Daisy and Elin Crotty (Archive and Library Assistant, New College) have also beautifully curated the items for each week and provided much-needed hands-on support. The unparalleled expertise of Professor Paul Parvis on early modern patristic editions also brought a rich dimension to the course.

Each week the students have the opportunity to interact closely with a rich and varied set of books, manuscripts and pamphlets from across the centuries. The topics vary widely from Books of Hours and editions of patristic texts, through incunabula and Reformation prints, to Enlightenment debates over religion and Victorian missionary journals. Some texts are iconic like the Nuremberg Chronicle of 1493 or the Wode Psalter and some are incredibly rare – including one recently discovered seventeenth-century catechism which is the only copy in the world – but all are interesting and have a story behind them. A number of the texts also have important Scottish connections including a work of



Staff and students examine a folio in the Funk Reading Room. New College Library, University of Edinburgh.

Franciscan theology owned by William Scheves, a fifteenth-century Archbishop of St Andrews and Scotland's 'Renaissance man', and inscribed with his distinctive owner's mark and some of the earliest reports of the 1741–2 revivals at Cambuslang.

Students are often thrilled to handle material centuries old and have been poring over exquisite medieval manuscripts, intricate scientific diagrams and leather-bound volumes of eighteenth-century sermons. Soon they will be beginning their poster project in which they pick one of the books studied in class and prepare an academic poster on an interesting or unusual bibliographic feature. However, the highlight of the course will undoubtedly be the opportunity to carry out a supervised research project on an item from the university's rich collections and explore contextually its theological or historical relevance and importance. Such opportunities are all too rare and even if many of the students go into other fields the memories of meeting such remarkable books and the skills acquired will surely go with them.

**Simon Burton**  
Senior Lecturer, School of Divinity