

'It's the Third Disruption!'

Many of us are familiar with the sight of New College keeping a stern eye on Edinburgh's city centre from its position at the top of The Mound. Less well known is that its Library and Special Collections are stored safely and snugly two floors down into the ground. The safety of the collections which make up the UK's largest theological library was the impetus for the 'New College Fire Asset Protection Project' or as Library staff called it, 'The Move', capital T, capital M. So it was in 2019, that a group of Library professionals put their heads together to start planning and moving the contents that would keep everything secure and, as far as possible, minimise disruption.

The complexities of a long-established collection in a long-established institution are too numerous to detail but simply put they necessitate a specialist move. Curators, conservators and librarians ensured every aspect of managing collections was considered from maintaining a service to deframing pictures for improved storage. Appointing a project manager, conservator Katharine Richardson, and student interns helped share the burden of work. Almost 50,000 rare books were cleaned ahead of specialist movers Restore Harrow Green (RHG) packing them up and taking them to their secure stores in England as there was not enough suitable, spare storage space in Edinburgh. This inevitably meant that a large proportion of books were inaccessible.

In the autumn of 2019, initial preparatory work was disrupted by an emergency elsewhere. By December 2019, the User Services team had removed to 40 George Square,

to provide access to the lending stock and student study. No sooner had Heritage Collections staff begun again in earnest when the pandemic hit and all the measuring, stabilisation work, listing, labelling, logistics planning was upended for everyone. 'It's the *Third* Disruption!' the Head of School declared: the first, of course, being the genesis of New College itself in 1843, when over 200 ministers turned their back on The Kirk to form the Free Church of Scotland.

In 2020, Heritage Collections staff continued to work remotely as best as they could on 'The Move' planning and in due course were able to return to the site, working within pandemic restrictions. By December 2020 the Special Collections were all out, carefully dispersed between the Centre for Research Collections or the University Collections Facility (UCF) or RHG stores. In total, almost 5.5km of collections items were moved:

- 3484m general collections
- 217m archives
- 1908m rare books
- over 100 historic objects, furniture and paintings

Before the first semester of 2023/24, and working around the many disruptions of the Festival Fringe, User Services Team returned home to New College. There were still snagging issues with the underground storage conditions for the rare books and archives, which further postponed their return. For long-term preservation reasons, it was not



Left.
Drawing by Grace Chalmers for her father Thomas

Opposite top.
Illustration by Anna Phoebe Traquair for moderatorial address to Rev Prof Alexander Whyte

Opposite bottom.
The Witness, 23 February 1864



possible to return all of the collections to The Mound. About 170 metres of veritable tomes, volumes exceeding 48cm in height, are now permanently stored flat rather than upright at the UCF along with 13,800 volumes of general collections. Despite the distance, a well-established van service means that these books are still accessible on request.

Losing about 200 linear metres of storage to the fire protection measures meant that the recant project manager, archivist Jasmine Hide, had to utilise her 3D visualisation skills to fit as much of the collection into New College Library, without compromising on good, professional practice. Collections stabilisation work, replacing over 400 archive boxes or re-housing the extraordinary sequence of printed pamphlets in bespoke boxes, some 700 so far, has helped to optimise the available space. A by-product of this ongoing work has revealed to current staff the richness of this resource. The pamphlet *Free Church Alliance with Manstealers. Send Back the Money. Great Anti-Slavery Meeting in the City Hall, Glasgow*¹ includes a verbatim account of the speeches, the reporter recording,

Scotland is in a blaze. Well may she be ... The people were not consulted in this guilty participation with man-stealers in their ungodly gains ... Send back that money ... [Great applause.]

Thankfully, among all the efforts and delays are significant improvements. The Funk Reading Room, funded by the late, generous benefactor Dr Robert Funk, was moved upstairs adjacent to the David Welsh Reading Room. Staff from Research Services Team were appointed to invigilate researchers and answer enquiries; the Rare Books Curator joined the Archivist to provide collections development and expertise; and the reading room became a flexible space to host teaching with collections, hands-on collections work and support visits.

New College staff were especially delighted to welcome The Friends in June 2024, where alongside Dr Simon Burton's presentation, curators Elizabeth Quarmby Lawrence and Kirsty M. Stewart, showcased an array of the returned Special Collections.

This included the magnificent volume of Walton's Polyglot Bible,² a real feat of early printing in nine separate languages; and the first Gaelic Bible,³ remarkable beside the 17th-century correspondence⁴ which led to its creation and distribution to the Gaels. The Friends' generosity has enabled work on more contemporary collections. In 2024, a student intern was employed to conserve and rehouse photographs of New College staff and students, which span from 1856 to the present day.⁵ These are now ready for long-awaited digitisation work, destined in due course for the Digital Collections portal.⁶

Some six years on, in late 2025, the last remaining items returned home: marble busts of Free Church founders; National Covenants and satirical cartoons to the new plan chests; and the assortment of objects including a Disruption medal. While there have been no medals for this disruption, 'The Move' will definitely be a significant point in the long history of New College Library.

Kirsty M. Stewart
Scottish and University Collections Archivist

- 1 Pamphlet *Free Church Alliance with Manstealers. Send Back the Money. Great Anti-Slavery Meeting in the City Hall, Glasgow, containing speeches delivered by Messrs. Wright, Douglass, and Buffum, from America and by George Thompson, Esq. of London with A Summary Account of a Series of Meetings Held in Edinburgh by the Above Named Gentlemen*, Glasgow, 1846. Shelfmark. M.d.9-10.
- 2 Walton, Brian. *The Considerator Considered, or, A Brief View of Certain Considerations upon the Biblia Polyglotta ... and the Ancient Hebrew Character Briefly Handled*. London: Printed by Tho: Roycroft, and are to be sold at most book-sellers shops, 1659. Print. Shelfmark TR.1140.
- 3 Bedell, William et al. *An Biobla Naomhtha ...* [London], 1690. Print. Shelfmark: B.r.356.
- 4 Correspondence of Rev James Kirkwood (c.1650–c.1708) regarding the provision of Irish Bibles to the Gaelic-speaking Highlands and Islands of Scotland c.1690. 4 September 1688, ref. MS KIR 3.1.
- 5 Annual photographs of staff and students at New College, 1856–present, ref. AA1.8.2.
- 6 Website: <https://digital.collections.ed.ac.uk> (beta site).

