

# The Portico Library Collection: an overview

## Intro slides ....

### First slide (main library area)

- The Portico's collection today is amassed over one floor of the building it occupies, and put together by the men who built it.

### Second Slide (the library before 1920)

- At its peak the Library held around 60,000 volumes housed around the entire building. The photo shows the Library before the ground and mezzanine were closed off from each other and shelves can be seen on either side of the entrance at the back of the picture.

### Third Slide (The Reading Room)

- The space on the upper floor of the building is where the Library has continued to focus on its mainly 19<sup>th</sup> century collection, designated as such during the mid-1980s when it went through a major refurbishment and rethink. The Main Library and the Reading Room are also where the Library holds all of its events. They are also very attractive for location filming and have been chosen on many occasions.

### Fourth Slide (The first Minutes book)

- To this day, the library holds archives such as the minute books from the first meeting to date.
- The archives alone offer a wealth of information and, indeed, inspiration, from the detailed Issue books from the last 50 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the private archives of people past and present, as well as places relevant to the library and its wider community in and around Manchester.
- A great number of newspapers, journals and periodicals were a significant part of the intake. The library today holds no historic newspapers but still has several bound journals – like *Punch*, *The Gentleman's Quarterly* and *Notes and Queries*, amongst others. All excellent inspiration for the student who wants to know what the media were saying during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### Fifth Slide (first printed catalogue of 1810)

- From the first catalogue published in 1810 we can see that there are a fair number of books still in the library today. Virtually all of those on the page on the left are in the current digital catalogue. However, none of the titles shown on the page on the right are in the library today.
- We must remember, too, that these were the first couple of thousand volumes – which would suggest that there were many empty shelves for some time.

### Sixth Slide (some of the Library's treasures)

- The library has some treasures which it continues to highlight in exhibitions today – such as the Belzoni and the Strutt shown in this slide, (which happen to be two personal favourites – of many!). Through exhibitions and projects the Library brings out how its collection continues to inspire and remain relevant to the present day.

### **Seventh slide (Conrad Gessner – *Historiae Animalium*)**

- The oldest book in the collection is Conrad Gessner's *Historiae Animalium* – one of the earliest works of illustrated natural history – dealing with mammals, sea creatures, flying creatures and reptiles. Some of the illustrations were from stock availability (such as the rhinoceros on the bottom left of the slide – recognizable as Durer's well-known and much used engraving). Unicorns and sea monsters abound in these volumes.
- It gives a fine insight into how the natural world was viewed 500 years ago – and the imagination of the explorers and their recorders of the new world in general.

### **Eighth slide (some volumes looked at during team meetings)**

- The direction of the Collection was determined towards an identity which reflected entirely the men, the society, the culture and the general mindset of the long 19th century. Following various financial difficulties over many years the Library decided to focus on its strength – a mainly 19th century collection and, although the subjects are those that can be found in most libraries today, the Portico's uniqueness lies in its snapshot of time – which, of course, also imposes limitations. The literature was written mainly by men, although there are many works by women – novels, memoirs, travel journals – but very little history is written by them, unless it appears in the fiction. The perspective is often one of Empire. Interpretation, perception and assumptions are those of the time and some are not compatible with our times – but provide much room for discussion and development.

### **Ninth slide (some children and young adult books in the Collection)**

- A Collection Policy arose to add those titles that would complement the existing 19th century collection – so commentaries, revisions and philosophies that could offer new perspectives and counter-arguments to the thinking of the Library during nearly two centuries. One new area that was introduced, however, was the North West Fiction Collection, which was possibly the earliest display of the celebration of place in creative writing – giving rise to The Portico Prize for Literature. The local history and fiction collections have also inspired the Portico Sadie Massey Awards.
- The NW Fiction holds such respected names as Elizabeth Gaskell, Ben Brierley, Frances Hodgson Burnett and Howard Spring but also names that we celebrate today, some of which may be found in school libraries also – such as Melvin Burgess, Livi Michael and Alan Garner – and surprisingly more for children and young adults than we thought we had - even within its 19th century context – and quite likely required reading to those children who had to be seen and not heard ...

### **Tenth slide (traditional Northern literature)**

- The illustration on the right chosen from Mrs Banks' *Manchester Man* depicts a meeting that takes place at the steps of The Portico Library. It's an excellent example of the relevance of the collection to the Library. Names such as John Ruskin (on the left) are certainly widely known, whilst Tim Bobbin (pseudonym of John Collier) is certainly less well known today even though he

was known as the Hogarth of the North at the time The Portico was being built. Furthermore, he wrote in the Lancashire dialect.

- The books suggested have gone down the route of reflecting the library within its collection history, and it was important to bring out those titles that can inspire as well as raise questions. The language used, the ideas put forward and the mindset not only of the writers but also of the people who chose or recommended the books in the first place is what hopefully comes forward.
- What's added to the collection now addresses some of the questions that young people, indeed anyone, may have about context and content – but always has the power to let imagination go where it will. The NWF and Local History collections in particular allow new ideas and new information that complements as well as contrasts the historic collection to be added to the creaking shelves of the Portico and a full Bibliography of the books selected – to which more may be added – is available.

### **Eleventh slide (Illustrated editions)**

- Illustration in books is very important to me – and likely to be for young people too. This is also strongly reflected in the books suggested for the workshops. After all, as Alice once said, “What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?”
- Some illustrators, such as George Cruikshank, created illustrations that may be seen as a precursor to comics and graphic novels. *Lispings from Low Lattitudes* (on the left) is a satirical graphic account, full of humour, poking fun at the intrepid women travellers of the age – written and illustrated by a woman!
- Since the Age of Exploration descriptions were sent back to the Old World which included sketches and drawings by on-site artists of the wonders seen. *Voyages and Travels*, then, is probably the section with the most stunning illustrations, remembering always that this is a perception, an interpretation, that may not always be accurate. The maps offer added inspiration for new ideas. The Library holds the first and second editions of Captain Cook's journal of his voyage around the South Pole, and William Hodges was the commissioned artist for that and other trips. The illustrations (an example given in the image in the centre) have been invaluable in understanding something of this part of the world.
- Poetry, too, is rich in inspiration for illustrators – such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, inspired by the published account of a sea captain of the previous century.

### **Twelfth slide (final slide – The Portico today)**

- The Library has evolved since its Georgian beginnings from a proprietary library for the benefit of the great and good gentlemen of Manchester into a thriving hub of knowledge and creativity inspired by its Collection.

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Manchester, 5.4.2022