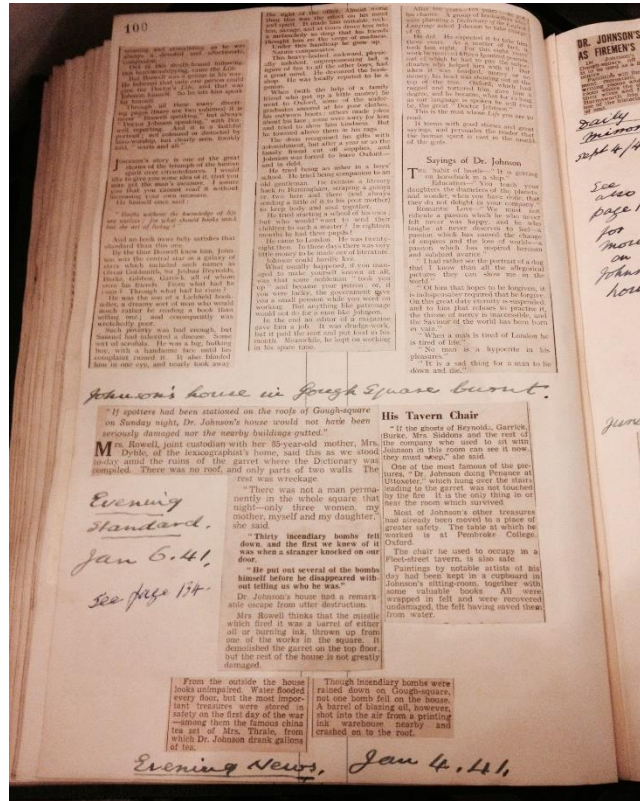


Journal of a Tour to the Archives: Volunteering at Dr Johnson's House

A'RCHIVES. *n. s. without a singular* [archiva, Lat.] The places where records or ancient writings are kept. It is perhaps sometimes used for the writings themselves.



17 Gough Square – Dr Johnson's House – was built around 1700 and is one of the few buildings of its kind to survive in what is now a fairly typical, modern-looking area of the City. Dr Johnson's tenancy of the property spanned 11 productive years, during which time he completed the bulk of his *Dictionary of the English Language*, the work with which he is nowadays most closely associated.

For the last century of the building's 300-year history, the house has been home to Dr Johnson's House museum and library. Naturally enough, having operated as a heritage institution for so long, the archives at DJH – an acronym of which I have grown increasingly fond – are home to a formidable collection of Johnsonia. Even without the “irrelevant bric-a-brac” that museum founder Lord Cecil Harmsworth was adamant should never be part of the collection, there was still a fairly intimidating amount of information to process for a newbie volunteer.

It was, therefore, with a mixture of excitement and trepidation that I approached my first day at Dr Johnson's House; having recently left my job in the media industry in search of a new challenge, I was met with just that. As Collections Volunteer, it was my role to catalogue the contents of the House archives, collating all relevant details in a searchable computer database. Opening my first archive box, I was faced with a hoard of large, seemingly ancient scrapbooks, packed full of hundreds of press clippings from dates ranging from the 1920s to the 1950s. Wow.

Undaunted, I set about recording the contents of these articles in the database. Each clipping had to be assigned a catalogue number, its content summarised, its location recorded, and the names of associated people mentioned in the article transcribed. This was quite the baptism by fire: having studied 18th-century literature as part of my degree more than a decade earlier (I'm showing my age there), I had what I thought was a fairly good knowledge of the literary and political figures of the

time, but this was a completely different arena. Figures like Mrs Thrale (or Piozzi, depending on your point of view), Francis Barber, Elizabeth Montagu and Anna Williams soon became very familiar.

The process of cataloguing these clippings was as fascinating as it was painstaking. What I found most astonishing was just how frequently Johnson was referenced in the press during the early part of the 20th century. Publications from the Banffshire Journal to the Times Literary Supplement lapped up all things Johnson, with the majority of articles treating the Great Cham with an almost god-like reverence. Surprising, too, was the number of Johnson-related books being published at the time. The discovery in the 1920s of a collection of unpublished, unedited James Boswell manuscripts certainly led to a spark in interest in both Boswell and Johnson, as well as the publication of a wave of 'new' and 'unedited' versions of various works containing juicy passages expurgated from previous editions. Not that writing about Johnson was a lucrative job, it seems: A.L. Reade, author of the eleven-volume opus 'Johnsonian Gleanings', commented in one letter (held in the archive) that publishing his work cost far more than any money he earned from it.

It was particularly interesting to come across clippings about 17 Gough Square itself. Damaged by Luftwaffe bombing raids during the Second World War, articles on the restoration of the property under the curation of Phyllis Rowell and her mother, Isabella Dyble, were especially moving. There's been a long tradition of female curatorship at DJH, one which continues to this day. Dr Johnson's apparent misogyny has been discussed at length over the years – he famously compared a woman preacher to a dog walking on its hind legs – but he kept a wide circle of female friends and told Mrs Thrale, close companion and potential paramour, that "it is a paltry trick indeed to deny women the cultivation of their mental powers, and I think it is partly a proof we are afraid of them." I'm happy to confirm that there's nothing to be afraid of in either Morwenna or Celine!

It's been great fun and a real privilege to have been let loose in the archives at Dr Johnson's House. 17 Gough Square has a unique atmosphere and a tangible link to its past: to leaf through a facsimile of a first edition of the dictionary Dr Johnson and his amanuenses prepared in the very room in which the work was done is a special experience. If you haven't yet visited the House, do come (and make sure you take advantage of the excellent audio guide). If you are thinking of volunteering at this or any other London Shh property, I can highly recommend doing so – I am already looking forward to returning to Dr Johnson and his House in the very near future.

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Collections Volunteer, Spring/ Summer 2014