

The Transformation of the Lawrence Room (LR)

Lawrence Room Book Launch – Thursday 21 February 2019

My subject this evening – mostly in the words of Frances Gandy, who is really sorry not to be here this evening – is the transformation of the LR. I start back in the days when like all public venues in college the room was kept open for anyone to visit. As Classics students in the late 1950s we attended our translation supervisions there. Later it was in the LR that I was interviewed for my Research Fellowship. In still later decades and changing times when it became necessary to keep all rooms in college locked when not in use, the LR too was kept closed. So in the 1980s – in F's words – although much loved and valued, it was not the first priority on anyone's busy schedule. And then came the flood.

In 1991 overnight water cascaded through the ceiling and down the walls from faulty pipework on the floor above. Panic stations were calmed by the speedy and expert help immediately offered by the Fitzwilliam Museum in the person of Julie Dawson. The water had damaged the wall cases, the walls and the floor, but fortunately there was no damage to the contents of the cases. Nevertheless all contents had to be removed. They were placed in temporary storage boxes and stowed for the large part in my room, where they were to stay for some time. In the room itself over the next few years repairs and some improvements were made, with new lighting and power, controlled glazing and wooden window blinds, a new air conditioning unit and some fine replacement cases from Glasbau Hahn. Frances Gandy, as College Curator, and Peter Sparks, our architecture Fellow who was Domestic Bursar at the time were mainly responsible. The wall cases were irretrievably damaged and there was no budget for a complete refurbishment.

For the next few years it was largely a case of keeping things **ticking over**, although there were some notable highlights, not least the loan of Hermione to the British Museum's Ancient Faces exhibition in 1997 – a major undertaking and great publicity for Girton. Frances Gandy, as College Curator, and Kate Perry who was Archivist at the time and also shared in curatorial responsibilities worked to fill some of the gaps in the room caused by the absent artefacts. They brought in other college treasures such as Ethel Sargant's microscope, Emily Davies's writing slope, the Stanley Spencer paintings once part of the JCR picture collection and, for a while, the Napoleon and Josephine chairs. They ran exhibitions such as Hidden Treasures and The Bodichon Trail in an

attempt to make College more aware of our collections and holdings. Some of these items are still in the LR and some of their stories in the book. The Committee ensured that essential tasks were undertaken and work was gently pushed forward with the help of university colleagues, such as a full, scholarly inventory and photography of all items, to form the basis not only for revised insurance valuations but also for the outline catalogue. At that stage Frances and Kate were also occupied in the ten-year planning and fundraising for the new library and archive buildings which opened in 2004. Others of us had different concerns and those objects still languished under my table and on my conscience.

Then in 2005 a number of factors came together to indicate that this was an optimum time to begin a major push for the Lawrence Room. I was due to retire the next year and would of course be leaving my room. A new home I knew was needed for those artefacts. My classical predecessor, Alison Duke, had recently died and – all agreed – improvements to the Lawrence Room would be a fine way to commemorate her life. In May 2006, a triumvirate consisting of myself, Frances Gandy and Peter Sparks submitted a paper to Council asking for the go-ahead to launch an appeal to raise £50,000 to cover the costs of a major programme of work.

We planned for the following:

- 3 new Rothstein or Glasbau Hahn display cases to house the displaced artefacts and allow more of the collection to be openly displayed
- A new custom-built case for Hermione
- The refurbishment of the existing oak cabinets together with museum-standard drawer linings and custom-built mounts
- The enhancement of the displays by the reorganisation of material to form a cohesive narrative
- Conservation of at least 20 items, particularly the bronzes
- A complete electronic catalogue of the whole collection

Council approved our plan and the appeal was launched later in 2006. The Friends of the Lawrence Room was formed, money was raised, the work was done, and two years later in 2008 we held the official opening of the refurbished displays. That puts it all very simply, but it was an immense task. Central to the work was the Lawrence Room Committee, at first the initial triumvirate, later joined

by our new DoS in Classics, Anne Rogerson and later still Lila Janik when she became Director of Studies in Archaeology.

We not only commissioned a custom-built mummy case but also worked with the Fitzwilliam Museum to create a special support bag for Hermione (filled with charcoal). To get this properly into place involved – under direction – the lifting and adjusting of Hermione by four brave committee members. We had to do this several times over a few weeks and it was a nerve-wracking procedure. Hermione, Frances reports, is not light. We also wanted to bring back to Girton some of our excavated items which had been sent to the Museum of Arch and Anth many years earlier. On a spread-sheet of tasks Frances was instructed to go and collect the ‘Roman Lion and Paw’. A hoist came into action. New labels were needed for individual items and we were concerned to get these right. Frances again was key in keeping us up to high professional standards from the very start; Lila gave advice on museum standards, I provided some of the content information, and Peter made the actual labels. Anne Rogerson composed those fine story-boards. Finally – at the very last moment before the opening – Lila and Frances were detailed to polish all the glass! This was truly a joint enterprise.

Behind all this (and resulting from it) work continued on the electronic catalogue, which was eventually to go up on-line. A formal collection policy was established and an annual budget eventually agreed which would allow for a modest rolling conservation programme. The collection policy reinforced what had always been the purpose of the collection, namely that it formed part of the College’s academic profile, to support teaching and research. To that end the Committee decided that it would not compromise on the scholarly level of label and catalogue information or the way in which artefacts were displayed. Any difficulty or complexity was offset by storyboards on the walls to offer a clear and cohesive narrative and special activity packs for visiting youngsters would make the collection fun and accessible. Large format versions of the case labels were also produced.

Since the grand opening there have been many changes to the LR Committee. None of the original triumvirate are now members though in our different ways we are all still involved. Anne Rogerson left for Australia and Helen Van Noorden took over in Classics and as Chair of the LR committee. Helen too has served as both instigator and editor of the book. More recently, with Helen on leave, Caroline Brett has efficiently been acting as Chair. Others, who serve or who have served, on the

committee include Lila Janik (still a key member), Gillian Jondorf (responsible for seeing the Book through press and much else besides), our current Archivist Hannah Westall, Rose Ferraby, Anastasia Piliavsky, Sam Williams, Veronica Bennett to name just some. Of the many responsibilities one of the most challenging was (and probably still is) that of **outreach** – to continually put the collection before people who don't realise it's here. This is what Frances did a lot to help with when still in post and the current committee continues.

There were – and are – two main constituencies for **outreach**, firstly the college community and secondly those outside. Regular e-mail reminders of the existence of the LR serves to remind successive generations of Girton's treasures. In this respect Hermione remains our key exhibit – her name well known to current generations of course from Harry Potter. The regular opening of the Room through the assistance of our loyal team of volunteers is crucial to our profile in allowing visitors to enjoy our small museum. Again with their help and that of committee members we are open on most college occasions: the Roll weekend, Guest nights, Commemoration of benefactors, Graduation Day, Formal Hall, and so on – and we stage special openings for groups of undergraduates and graduates. Our Annual September lecture is another regular item in the calendar. Both within and outside the college we hope to encourage work on our collections. There have been handful of MPhil and final year dissertations based on our objects – indeed we currently have an undergraduate who is writing a dissertation on the archaeology of death in Roman Egypt, starting from Hermione.

We have been concerned to bring in not just students and scholars but groups from schools and local societies. We've had U3A visitors, those on summer courses, we've had a podcast made for a local group for the blind, and particularly enjoy the visits of primary schools, for whom we can offer related activities. A group of visiting Engineers will be here next week and I am happy to announce our first nursery school visit when the Girton village Cottontails nursery comes next month.

Opening on more large-scale occasions like the Festival of Ideas and Open Cambridge is always desirable but is heavy on resources and energy. But I'll never forget one happy sunny, summer day when visitors from a distance picnicked in the grounds and families from Cambridge flocked in. The children engaged in a range of activities based on our Anglo-Saxon cemetery. They plotted graves, charted their contents, then decorated cardboard pots with special implements, drawing precious grave goods inside, whilst others in the family lay down on the floor in Old Hall for their skeletons to be drawn. What with Health and Safety regs and managing the crowds, we ourselves were an

exhausted group at the end of that day. But all such visits are important if we are to fulfil our educational aim, and it's all worthwhile when visitors' response to the LR collections is unfailingly positive and enthusiastic.

In the period since the launch many have helped the LR in different ways. To give just a few examples out of many such.

- **New Artefacts:** The Mesopotamian eye idols from Dr Joan Oates; the Phoenician glass from the late Sir Geoffrey Chandler; the Roman coins from OG Margaret Pinsent.
- **The generous gifts made by so many friends**, like the late Florrie Buck, a long-standing member of our domestic staff, who donated her Girton centenary plate for auction, thereby raising £2000 for the appeal; and our former Catering Manager, Graham Hambling who donated so generously to the LR on his retirement and thereby made this book possible. Not to mention his son Will who has given his time to its design and production.
- Then there's the donation of **time and expertise** from a very long list of individuals. Frances picked out the following groups:
 - The Girton volunteer curators, past and present who cover the LR every Thursday afternoon and on some other occasions also.
 - The experts and academics from the Fitzwilliam Museum and other University Departments who have given generously of their time and expertise. We've always had someone to turn to for professional advice.
 - The cataloguers over the years of whom there have been many – latterly, and for the longest time, Imogen Gunn. I – this is me! – always think of the catalogue as hers.

So the transformation of the LR has been and continues to be a corporate enterprise in which many have been involved. We hope that this book will continue, and enhance, our long-held mission to put the richness of the LR collections before the wider community so they may be enjoyed and studied for many generations to come.

Frances Gandy & Dorothy J. Thompson, Life Fellows