Research Skills Series

Ways into the Collection: Serendipity

Dr Alison Newby

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Research Skills Series

In previous posts, we’ve discussed the importance of the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre (AIU Centre) and its collections, touched on some of the realities of archives and archival research, and looked at the kinds of questions we need to ask ourselves before engaging with an archive collection. We’ve also delved into the two main ways into the collection:

- Databases (including subject area resource lists)
- ‘Human Interface’ (speaking to the librarian and/or Collections Access Officer)

We might be forgiven for thinking that's about it. However, we've briefly mentioned a third way into the collection, which we're going to take a look at here:

- Serendipity (just going in and browsing)

So you’ll be able to dip into this post to find information that’s particularly interesting to you, I’ll be looking at serendipity under the following headings:

1. What is Serendipity?
2. Serendipity in action

1. What is Serendipity?

'Serendipity’ has been defined in various ways:

- “the fact of finding interesting or valuable things by chance” (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary)
- “the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way” (Oxford Dictionary)
- “luck that takes the form of finding valuable or pleasant things that are not looked for” (Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary)
The common thread to these three definitions is the element of 'luck' or 'chance' - the key feature of how serendipity works, particularly when we're browsing round a library or archive. Something might catch our eye. We might detect a pattern in the resources. Going in for a period of time without a plan and rummaging can often lead to unexpected results.

Nevertheless, we do need to be prepared if serendipity is to leap into action. We have to physically get ourselves into the library or archive in the first place, and we need to cultivate in ourselves a conducive attitude. The kind of attitude which best attracts the workings of serendipity is one of openness and 'excited anticipation'. This creates the kind of focused yet free-wheeling attention that serendipity seems to favour.

From my point of view, the Centre's resources lend themselves well to the magical influence of serendipity for two reasons:

- **The Centre is quite small in physical size, but full of highly significant material** This means it's ideally placed for something meaningful to be achieved in terms of 'findings' if we go in for a couple of hours to just browse around.
- **The Centre resources are organised simply, around subject areas where related material is shelved together** Most libraries use much more complex systems. Whilst this might not sound very significant to non-librarians, for you and me it means less headache in trying to find books on a particular subject because they haven't been scattered around the facility due to the way they've been catalogued. In most libraries it's necessary to visit several locations to browse through books on very similar subjects.

Browsing in the Centre can be a very pleasant experience because a lot can be achieved in a short time. For time-poor researchers and students, that's by no means an insignificant benefit.

### 2. Serendipity in action

The best way of illustrating the power of serendipity is to check out some of the work of the Centre's own Roving Reader. Below we'll take a look at three blog posts from the Roving Reader category so you can see how serendipity leads from one thing to another with sometimes surprising consequences.

Click on the links to read the blog posts along with the discussions, so you can follow exactly what I mean.

**'Finding Barrington' series**

- Click [here](#) to read the three blog posts. Once you've opened the link, scroll down to read Part 1 first.

The 'Finding Barrington' series arose because the Roving Reader happened to pull a very small book off a shelf whilst browsing. It contained wonderful images of Jamaica - plus an enigmatic hand-written note on the title page: "*Donated by Mr Barrington Young September 07.*"

Our Roving Reader asked Ruth Tait (Senior Library Assistant) if she knew who "Mr Barrington Young" was and how the book had come to be placed on the library shelves. From those two questions emerged a whole hinterland
of material related to the individual concerned - oral histories and testimonies, materials from a lecture series, a beautifully-bound book in which Barrington Young's story featured.

The 'Finding Barrington' project would never even have been thought of, let alone researched and written, if during her browsing the Roving Reader hadn't been in the kind of open, free-wheeling frame of mind noted in Part 1 of this post, which was conducive to the serendipitous noticing of something out of the ordinary,

**Hulme and the Nightmare Scenario**

- Click [here](#) to read the blog post.

Sometimes noticing a small detail can lead to the conceiving of an interesting angle that gives shape to the writing up of a research project. Whilst leafing through files in The Hulme Study collection, the Roving Reader's eye was caught by an interesting quotation printed on the cover of a Manchester City Council Survey Report from 1987 about the area of Manchester called Hulme. Noticing that it was the vision statement from the 1960s of the architects and town planners responsible for the redevelopment of the area, she was reminded of something she had read in the Local Studies section of the Centre library.

The book the Roving Reader had been looking at was *Hulme Views. Self Portraits* from 1990, a volume which preserved the opinions and hopes of Hulme residents for the second redevelopment of Hulme in the 1990s. One individual had been friends with the architect who'd designed the new Hulme of the 1970s, and she spoke of his regret for the ensuing disaster. The juxtaposition of the expressions of hope and regret helped the Roving Reader to decide to concentrate her attention for her project on the testimony given by residents to illustrate how difficult the problems of Hulme had become, both for those who lived there and the Council which had to pick up the pieces.

Again, it was the Roving Reader's focused yet free-wheeling quality of attention which allowed serendipity to come into play.

**The Devil Man Springs to Life**

- Click [here](#) to read the blog post.

Books are not the only form of stimulus which can induce serendipity. Images and objects can catalyse thought which opens a new avenue of research or refines a particular line of exploration. Race relations knowledge came into play when the Roving Reader was shown a lantern slide from an uncatalogued collection in the John Rylands Library, Manchester.
The image was so startling and its caption (‘The Devil Man of Ladysmith’) so question-inducing that it spurred the Roving Reader to try to discover how and why it was produced. In the process, she brought into play research in the Manchester Geographical Society archive (held in the archive of the University of Manchester’s Main Library), advice from an academic colleague, and the skills of the University's Centre for Heritage Imaging & Collection Care (CHICC).

Without an attitude of excitement and curiosity, the Roving Reader might have passed the lantern slide by without a second glance.

So remember. Serendipity favours the prepared mind - and one that appreciates something curious, something different, and something that presents a challenge.

If you’d like to check out a couple more examples of serendipity in action, take a look at the following posts for yourself:

- [‘From the Horse's Mouth - the Underhanded History of the USA’](#)
- [‘Tennyson Makiwane comes to London - but how?’](#)