



# Special collections policy

## 1. Policy statement

Explore is committed to ensuring all the collections in our care are accessible to current and future communities. We recognise that the Special Collections at York Explore are an exceptional resource for a local library and archive and are a reflection of the city's remarkable heritage and internationally significant history. Ensuring access to these collections supports the following activities outlined in the Explore Libraries and Archives Strategic Action Plan:

- Engaging people with the culture and heritage of our City
- Inspiring people of all ages to learn, imagine, create and share ideas
- Supporting individual and community wellbeing

## 2. Policy context

This policy should be read in conjunction with the following internal policies:

- Explore Libraries and Archives Stock Policy
- Explore Archives Collections Care and Preservation Policy
- Explore Archives Access Policy

This policy supports the key organisational priorities outlined in the Explore Libraries and Archives Strategic Action Plan 2024-2027:

- Getting the Basics Right
- Engaging our Communities
- Building the Future

## 3. Key terms

**Special collections:** can incorporate a range of material, depending on the organisation but usually covers material that is unique, rare or significant.

**Rare books:** books can be rare owing to scarcity, age, content, binding, or provenance.

**Provenance:** is the record and history of ownership

## 4. Scope and purpose

For the purposes of this policy, special collections includes:

- rare books, primarily those that are published before 1900
- printed material, including pamphlets and newspapers
- annotated physical publications
- printed volumes with significant provenance
- physical maps and prints deemed to be rare or to have special significance to the archive or Local History collections at York

This policy outlines the principles governing the acquisition, management, access, and preservation of Special Collections items in the care of the Archives Service at York Explore.



## 5. Introduction

The special collections items we hold were acquired and collected by the former Reference Library that formed part of the Central Library under the City of York Council. Over decades, the Reference Library collected local history stock, rare books, printed material and original archives (the latter an entirely separate collection to the City Archive Service). The Reference Library ceased to exist in 2012, when York's Library and Archives service was restructured and Explore York Libraries and Archives spun out from the council. Local History stock within the collections formed the Local History Reference Collection on open access shelves at York Explore. Where appropriate, the archives in the library collection were amalgamated with the collections of the City Archive. The rarer printed material and rare books were also transferred to the care of the archive service, although stored separately from the archive collections.

Since 2014 the archive team has focussed on building and developing a modern archive service that meets with the Archive Accreditation Standard. The special collections in our care are available for consultation but remain an underused resource. We recognise that we need to:

- develop staff knowledge around the management of this resource
- facilitate access to the collections via catalogue improvements
- raise the profile of the collections through promotional activities

These priorities feed into the Archives Forward Plan.

## 6. Acquisition and development

Special collections items may be acquired through donation, bequest, or transfer. All acquisitions must:

- Align with the archives service's collecting priorities
- Be legally obtained, with clear title and provenance
- Be assessed for long-term preservation needs and resource implications

We selectively collect rare and printed material that:

- relates to the history of the area governed by City of York Council, or former parts of the historic County Borough of York, including the Ainsty.
- reflects the influence of York in the wider County of Yorkshire and the historic Ridings of Yorkshire
- relates to organisations or individuals which reflect the economic, cultural, social or political development of the City of York
- augments and aids understanding of the archive collections, regardless of geographical area

As a charitable organisation, we do not have the resources to actively develop our special collections in the same way that we develop our archive holdings. However, we recognise the value that these rare, printed collections add to our research and engagement offer, particularly as it is unusual for some of this material to be available to the public outside of academic or specialist institutions.



## 7. Cataloguing and classification

All Special Collections items will be catalogued to the minimum standard of ISBD: International Standard Bibliographic Descriptions, 2011. In collaboration with library colleagues, we are in the process of developing a long-term plan to improve the quality and discoverability of catalogue entries for this material.

All library material, including Special Collections items, are classified according to the Dewey Decimal system.

## 8. Access and use

Descriptions of our Special Collections items are searchable on our online library catalogue. Our customers can consult items in our Reading Room, during advertised opening hours. In some circumstances, it may be possible for users to consult material in the Quiet Study Area of the library when the Reading Room is closed. Access may be restricted due to:

- fragility or conservation concerns
- legal or donor-imposed restrictions
- privacy or data protection considerations

## 9. Preservation

The principles set out in our Collections Care and Preservation policy for archive holdings, provides the framework and principles for the preservation, handling, storage and care of special collections items.

## 10. Disposal

Disposal of material will be rare and carefully considered, but may be necessary when:

- items fall no longer meet the collecting criteria set out above
- duplicates exist without added value
- items pose conservation or legal risks

Where material in our custody no longer aligns with the collecting policy, and is owned by CYC, we will seek to find an alternative home for the items in the following order of preference:

- Transfer to another public cultural institution which will maintain free public access to the material
- Transfer to another custodian (public or private) who can offer a realistic proposal for the long-term preservation of the material with free public access
- Transfer of title to another custodian (public or private) who can offer a realistic proposal for the long-term preservation of the material but not necessarily with free public access
- Offer back to the original donor or their successors in law
- Offer for sale
- Dispose by other means

All disposal decisions for Special Collections items will be documented and permanently preserved.



## 11. Roles and responsibilities

The Head of Archives has oversight and overall responsibility for this policy, with input from library colleagues. Library and archives staff are responsible for support and implementation.

If you would like to provide feedback on this policy, please contact [archives@exploreymork.org.uk](mailto:archives@exploreymork.org.uk)

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