

**Plymouth's Greatest Gift**  
Wednesday 6 November 2013  
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Good afternoon and welcome to the Cottonian Gallery at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery.

My name is Victoria Smith; I am a Graduate in Art History from Plymouth University and part of the Young Explainers programme. The Young Explainers are a group of Plymouth University students from a number of disciplines that volunteered their time too curate a programme of events and presentations relating to the Cottonian Collection. We have undergone extensive research into the histories of individual items, the collection as a whole, and the collectors themselves. During this research we have been able to work in the Plymouth and West Devon Records Office, looking through the archives, and even found Highland House, one of the residences of William Cotton; who donated the Collection to the city of Plymouth and which I will expand on later in the talk.

Until taking up the research aspect of our programme I did not know much about the collection, but very much looked forward to delving into the collection's depth of history.

I have lived in Plymouth my whole life and I am, like many, guilty of just passing through the Cottonian gallery and not giving myself much of an opportunity to really look at the objects on show.

The Cottonian Collection is an engaging assortment of works collected over a number of generations, made up of a variety of disciplines. This talk will recall the last 300 years of the collections history from its beginnings right up the present day.

The collection has been on display to the people of Plymouth since 1853. Originally it was housed at the Proprietary Library where there was a purpose built room erected for the collection in Cornwall Street. The collection faced much turmoil, during the WW1 the collection was evacuated and safely returned to its sight on North Hill. It was also evacuated in WW2, when the collection was taken to relative safety in Tavistock. This was extremely fortunate as the Central Library was hit by a bomb in 1941 and 8,000 books were destroyed, luckily the Museum and Art Gallery had minor damage. The Collection was nearly lost to us again in 1983 when vandals started a fire in one of the ventilation ducts causing heat and smoke damage to some of the books in the collection which required treatment. We should count ourselves very lucky indeed that we still have the Collection in the state we see it today!

The earliest point of which we can date the Collection is with a man named Robert Townson (1640-1707). Townson, like the later owners of the collection, worked at the Customs House, London, as Chief Clerk. His duties involved checking the cargo of incoming vessels through London. Although the role did not have a big salary it did carry status and responsibility. His father, the first Robert

Townson, was originally from Lancaster but moved to London in 1640, the year of his son's birth, to set himself up as a merchant.

Townson II's known London residence was at 3 Laurence Pountney Lane, a house that would later pass with the collection. He is believed to have been a religious man; sermons were thought to have taken up a third of his book collection. He had also begun to collect a number of paintings and drawings; this is the foundation of the collecting culture seen as we go into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Townson would have been able to come in contact with these object through his role at the Customs House.

In 1707 William Townson, Robert II's son, was to then inherit the house, the collection and the post of Chief Clerk of the in the Custom House; as well as his father's debts. William, like his father, had a keen interest in the collecting drawings, books and prints. He made many of his own additions to the Collection mainly drawings from contemporary English artists, Samuel Scott and James Thornhill to name but two.

William was a bachelor, and in May 1731 Charles Rogers (1711-1784) was placed in the Custom House under William Townson; it was to Rodgers that Townson left his estate to in 1740. Rodgers inherited the London house, which now housed plenty of art and treasures. Roger's added to his collection whenever he could and even employed people to collect pieces on his behalf overseas. He contributed 20,000 prints to the collection.

Rogers was also elected in 1747 as Chief of Certificates at the Customs House as well as taking on other voluntary roles focusing around the arts. In 1752 he was elected a F.S.A which is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquities, and was also a member of the Royal Society, formed mainly of scientists. The Society of Antiquities was formed in 1707 and its focus is on the historical and archeological. The society conducts its own research and produces a number of publications events and lectures alongside grant giving, heritage conservation and its own exhibitions. Even to this day to be part of the society you have to be nominated by existing Fellows of the Society and must be signed by at least five and up to twelve existing Fellows, certifying that, from their personal knowledge, the candidate would make a worthy Fellow. Both societies were very prestigious and continue to run today.

Rogers was run over on Fleet Street January 21st 1784 and died from his injuries. Rogers left his collection to his brother-in-law William Cotton who died in 1791.

From here it passed to Cotton's son, also named William Cotton II (1759-1816). Cotton II who was also an F.S.A and worked at the Customs House, sold a considerable amount of the collection as it was just too large for his already extended house at Clapham Common, Surrey. Many of the most valuable items were sold, including 1800 Old Master drawings. The sales lasted 24 days between 1799 and 1801, raising £4,000 at the time of sale.

We know that one of the paintings that was sold was Jean Antoine Watteau's Landscape with Castle (1718/19) which sold on April 15<sup>th</sup> 1799 through Sotheby's

(no other records from the sales have been found, as Sotheby's encountered a direct hit during WW2 destroying their records), it is now owned by the Art Institute of Chicago, USA. The painting was known to have come down through the collection from Rodgers and was sold by Cotton where it found its way to Paris, then back to London where it made its way to a gallery, Charles E. Slatkin Gallery, New York, and finally to the Chicago Art Institute in 1964.

When Cotton II died in 1816, the collection passed to his eldest son William Cotton III (1794-1863). Cotton III did make a few additions to the collection and he displayed them at his house at The Priory, Leatherhead in Surrey as well as owning Highland House in Ivybridge.

The portrait of Cotton III in the gallery was painted by artist Stephen Poyntz Denning in 1845 was one of these additions. Denning, born in 1795, was an English painter of portraits and miniatures. Cotton met Denning in Rome whilst on his Grand Tour which he underwent in 1816.

The grand tour was a fashionable trip made by men with a substantial wealth around Europe. The trip was mostly for pleasure, curiosity and learning, and would cover cultural capitals including Naples, Florence, Geneva, Rome and Paris; Cotton visited all five. The men would pick up trinkets from their travels; these would include small copies of sculptures and antiquities, much like we would in the modern age.

The Cottons lived at Highland House from 1839-1862 where they had a vast amount of land a very grand drive. We have been very fortunate to have had a tour of this magnificent house in Ivybridge which is now divided into three exquisite family houses many years after the Cottons passed away. Whilst walking around you can still see the stunning original features, you can picture the grandeur of the welcome hall and the staircase. Wide arches, which have now been filled in seem like ghosts of the house's former life.

One of the owners gave me a collection of documents about the past residence, it included a description of what the house would have been like when the Cottons were living there. It states, "On the main Exeter-Plymouth road, a magnificent position on the southern edge of Dartmoor, nine miles from Plympton and ten and three-quarters from Plymouth, stands the estate of "Highlands", formally the residence of the Cotton family. Originally consisting of 59 acres, with the cutting off of the Pound Farm the homestead has now dwindles to seven acres. Situated at Ivybridge, it has lately been divided into three separate residences, but consisted until 1947 of five reception rooms, ten principle bedrooms, three bathrooms, two dressing rooms, five servants' bedrooms, and good domestic offices, with three garages, extensive stabling and a squash court. Mainly in the Georgian style, with parts dating back to 1790, it is extensively modernized with all the amenities, and is covered with creepers and magnolias."

Whilst living in Devon, Cotton met some of the descendents of Sir Joshua Reynolds when he purchased some of his work and also co-wrote a book named 'Sir Joshua Reynolds and his works' which was published in 1857. Cotton also

wrote books on Exeter and one on Plympton called "Some account of the ancient borough town of Plympton St Maurice, or Plympton Erle".

Cotton made the decision to gift the Collection and after being turned down by Plympton he offered it to the Plymouth Public Library. The collection was given in two installments, the majority given in 1852 and the rest in 1862 the year before his death.

Cotton III stated that he was giving it '... for the purpose of amusement and instruction of the inhabitants of the towns of Plymouth, Stonehouse, Devonport and their vicinity'. This quote was written in the programme that was given out to the people that attended the gallery opening; a copy can be found in the Plymouth and West Devon Records Office. The collection opened to the public on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1853 as the 'Cottonian Collection' at the Plymouth Propriety Library, at its original site on Cornwall Street. The collection had its own room which was decorated with a copy of the frieze of the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum, London.

The original trustees of the Collection were chosen by Mr. Cotton and were set in place to watch over it. When the Collection was given, it was made up of around 4,700 prints and engravings, unique and extensive series of illustrations of the Italian, Flemish, French and English schools. There are bookcases containing 500 volumes of rare and valuable specimens from early typography to Greek and Roman classics and Fine Arts; 1,500 volumes of English books. There are carvings and an illustrated 15<sup>th</sup> century missal. 250 original drawings by 'Old Masters';

names include Rubens, Van Dyke, Leonardo di Vinci and more. There are also framed paintings, some of which are by Joshua Reynolds, drawings, illustrated manuscripts, terracottas, bronzes, antique 17<sup>th</sup> century vases, bookcases and cabinets; one which is 17<sup>th</sup> century and inlaid with red tortoiseshell!

After the death of his wife in 1861 Cotton moved onto West Hoe in Plymouth. William and Mary Cotton's graves lie in the graveyard at Parish Church of St John the Evangelist just metres away from the house they loved. The couple is laid next to each other shaded by a towering tree.

The Collection was moved to the Plymouth Corporation in 1915/16 by an Act of Parliament; the deeds to the Collection were passed over to the Plymouth Council in 1918. The curator Mr. H. J. Snell was given the task of redisplaying it and to keep to the original gifting, the Collection has to be all kept together. The Collection has taken many forms over the years from its beginnings to its sale and then its gift; but once it came into the hands of the Museum they have built up an archive on the collection.

When the gallery opened at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery there was an event thrown, earlier this month I and the Young Explainers team threw a similar event aimed to re-air the collection. Guests included the Lord Mayor, Vivienne Pengelly, this was very significant as I would now like to read to you an extract from the Western Morning News on Feb 16<sup>th</sup> 1918 after the original opening of the Gallery 'The Mayor said it was a great gratification to him to be identified with that occasion (being the opening of the gallery). He had, ever since he had

known the Cottonian Library, looked forward to the time that it would be properly housed in a place such as that. The value of the art gallery, and of art generally in connection with the life of people, they hardly realize, nor did they appreciate the selective study of beauty in its fullest extent in art, or how much they should endeavour to come under the influence of that study, however feeble. No matter how much they engrossed in the things of life, they failed lamentably in the mission of life, unless they come under the spell of the beautiful in art.'

Following the Mayor's speech 'The Mayor then proceeded to the door of the apartment set apart for the Collection, opened it, and declared it open to the public. The visitors present signed the visitors' book, and afterwards partook of refreshments provided by the Mayor and Mayoress.' This was the inspiration for putting on the event named 'Tea at the Cottonian'.

Although the Museum no longer makes additions to the collection it has bought items that relate to it. In Dec 1918 the Museum purchased 20 volumes of Batsch's engravings 'Le Peintre-Geaveurs'. This purchase was for reference in connection with the Cottonian Collection for £28.

In 1998 the collection was given national recognition where it received an award of Designated Status as part of a nationwide scheme designed by Parliament. This scheme was to identify as well as celebrate the nation's most important collections. Due to this the Cottonian Collection was able to get its own website on the internet.

The Museum has started a process this year on the conservation of the furniture in the Collection, which can be followed on the Museum's blog. The other projects that have worked with the Collection is the Young Explainers, this year we have worked hard to produce two gallery guides. One aimed at children so they can engage with the collection and make it more accessible. The second is to give information about the works on show broken down into sections to make the items easy to access. Please feel free to use them once the talk is over.

This talk has covered over 300 years of the Collection's history, starting from its mere beginnings in the 1700's up to its current home at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery. This Collection is of great importance to the city as well as the nation. In 2015 the museum will be celebrating 100 years since it was passed over to this site, so keep an eye out for the events that are ever pending in the Collection's future!

The collection is a jewel in Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery's ever-growing reputation. The Cottonian Collection is rich in history and passion for collection from the 18<sup>th</sup> century through to the modern day. It was given to the city by a man who knew its value not just in price, but also its educational value and amusement.

The third talk in our series will be on Wednesday 20 November from 1pm to 1.30pm, and is titled Sculpture in the Cottonian Collection.

I would thank you all for coming today and I hope that you have enjoyed listening to this as much as I did researching and writing it. If there are any questions I will now try my best to answer. I would also like to plug that if you produce your ticket at the museum café you will get a 10% discount.

Thank you.

Victoria Smith