

Our Region Revealed: the Devon and Exeter Institution's prints and drawings collection

Founded in 1813, the Devon and Exeter Institution is a thriving independent library and educational charity in the heart of Exeter with a diverse membership of all ages. The founders resolved to establish an Institution to promote 'the general diffusion of Science, Literature and the Arts; and for illustrating the Natural and Civil History of the County of Devon, and the History of the City of Exeter'. However, they had a wider vision for the Institution: it was to be a library, a museum and an intellectual centre for debate and scientific enquiry. Indeed, the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), which was founded in the 1860s, has its origins in the Devon and Exeter Institution.

Over the past four years, and due to an initial investment from Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Institution has widened its reach and begun to explore its potential as a provider of excellent public programming and learning and engagement activities for all ages and abilities. The Institution's historic library and West Country studies collection is available to individual and joint members, Exeter University staff and students, accompanied Junior members, temporary members (daily or weekly) and institutional members, including local libraries, museums and heritage organisations. The Institution is a vibrant community and much of its work is facilitated by an enthusiastic volunteer team, drawn from its membership. People at all ages and stages describe the Institution as a unique space for learning and research, for well-being and for connecting with others.

At the heart of the Devon and Exeter Institution is a fine historic book collection which underpins its research and learning and engagement programmes. The collection reveals the intellectual, political and cultural interests of the Institution's earliest members and benefactors, from natural history, biology and zoology to history, travel and exploration, music, art and architecture, theology, mathematics, science and engineering. Westcountry newspapers and periodicals were collected from the outset, now a rich resource for local studies. As well as books, the Institution also built up a miscellaneous but highly significant collection of prints and drawings, maps, photographs and printed ephemera, reflecting the founders' and subsequent members' interests in the art and topography of the South West.

While the Library's books were eventually catalogued on the University of Exeter's library management system, the prints, drawings and paintings remained, until recently, unsorted, uncatalogued and, ultimately, unknown. With initial funding from the Pilgrim Trust in 2019, and with subsequent funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2020, the Institution set in place operations and systems to undertake a project to preserve and digitise the collection. With support from the Devon Heritage Centre, a team of volunteers set to work cleaning and sorting the artworks and the Institution launched its online public access catalogue with an initial batch of about 270 drawings and 7 Edward Ashworth sketchbooks digitised by TownsWeb Archiving. Staff have discovered some fascinating items, including a beautiful collection of engraved trade cards and many pencil, pen and ink and watercolour drawings of Devon buildings and landscapes. The most striking items, including several stained-glass designs from the Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society collection, feature in the Institution's new range of merchandise:

<https://devonandexeterinstitution.org/introducing-our-new-merchandise/>

The Covid-19 pandemic has escalated the need for online access to collections. While the Institution has had to close during three national lockdowns, staff have been able to use digitised artworks creatively to divert people isolating at home with online jigsaw puzzles, research call-outs and social media posts. However, there is still a long way to go until the entire collection is rehoused,

catalogued and digitised and can be embedded in the Institution's learning and engagement programme.

With a further grant from FODA, the Institution has purchased a graphic arts A3 scanner so that over the next three years fragile artworks can be scanned on site. The Institution is very grateful to FODA for their continuing generous support of the project. If you would like to find out more or are thinking of undertaking a similar project you can email the Institution at:

library@devonandexeterinstitution.org

Website: www.devonandexeterinstitution.org/

Collections Explorer: <https://collectionsexplorer.devonandexeterinstitution.org/>