

Minutes of AHRC Project Meeting on Collaborations with BSI

3rd July 2017

University of Sussex

Attendees:

Vinita Damodaran (Sussex)
Michael Rayner (Sussex)
Sarah Naomi Lee (Sussex)
Debojyoti Das (Sussex)
Leo Cutting (Sussex)
Antonia Moon (BL)
Ranee Prakash (NHM)
Paramjit Singh (BSI)
James Simpson (Commonwealth Heritage Forum)
Fiona Ainsworth (Kew)

The meeting was initiated with three presentations by Paramjit Singh, Antonia Moon and James Simpson, respectively. The first of these dealt with the BSI manuscript holdings and herbarium. Paramjit explained that the BSI held correspondence relating to Nathaniel Wallich, Robert Kyd and Joseph Hooker, as well as Linnaean and pre-Linnaean publications. Owing to the climate of Kolkata and the poor conditions that these collections have been held in, it is now imperative that these collections are digitised. These collections also need conservation, but it is considerably easier to obtain grants for digitisation than for conservation.

Paramjit continued to discuss the BSI's herbarium. The BSI is currently attempting to make the first complete Flora of India since Joseph Hooker. They are currently 40% complete. Paramjit views this as an urgent project, as many species such as mangroves are likely to be critically affected by climate change in the years to come. It is however difficult to complete this flora without access to the important historical collections, in particular those held at Kew, NHM and Edinburgh. The BSI's own type specimens have all been digitised, but are not currently available online owing to server issues.

Antonia followed this, talking about the Nathaniel Wallich correspondence. Wallich is a very important figure in Indian Botany, and was responsible for putting the Calcutta Botanical Garden (now the AJC Bose Botanic Garden) on the map. The BL have digitised the India Office Records relating to Wallich and the BSI have digitised 30 volumes of Wallich's letterbooks. These cover a wide range of subjects, such as maintaining the garden, plant exchange and unique material on Wallich's visits to London.

James Simpson then spoke about the Roxburgh House and Old Library, which the BSI is currently attempting to restore. There were no available drawings of either building, but this has now been done. James is hoping that it will be possible to make more detailed plans of each building using digital recording and photostitching to create a 3D model

accurate to 5mm. Both buildings are well suited to the Indian climate and have survived remarkably well considering how little work has gone into their upkeep. This makes conservation markedly easier.

In response to the issue of how to conserve and digitise the collections at the BSI, the Endangered Archives Grant was suggested as a potential source for funds. The issue with this is that the majority of the grant is for digitisation, rather than conservation. This would therefore not be suitable for the Wallich collection, which has already been digitised. There is also no funding available for cataloguing, however it may be possible to obtain funding for using Transkribus, a text recognition programme currently in development, as use of Transkribus feeds into its development, and results in greater archival good. A solution to the conservation would be to hire a full time conservator, rather than funding individual conservation projects. Paramjit explained that the Indian government would not hire conservators, but that it might be a possibility to train BSI scientists in conservation. The V&A organise a paper conservation course which could be useful. Paramjit confirmed that funding two scientists for such a course should be possible.

Action Points: 1. For manuscript materials To apply for BL endangered archives for conservation of Wallich papers by September 2017 (Vinita and Mike Rayner with advice for Antonia Moon)

2. To apply to the Newton fund for digitising herbarium specimens of Indian types held in British herbaria (Vinita, Raneer Prakash, Tim Utteridge and Alan Paton (Kew))

Revival of the Indian Botanical Liaison Officer (IBLO) programme is currently under discussion with the Kew science team. Paramjit is hoping to have the first IBLO in place by Christmas. IBLOs are BSI scientists who work at Kew for five or six months, in order to answer requests from their colleagues, conduct their own research on Kew's collections and generally improve communication between Kew and BSI. The IBLOs should be able to assist with the digitisation of the area 5 (India and surrounding regions) specimens at Kew. Raneer also suggested acquiring a digitisation grant from the Newton Fund.

Action points: To facilitate the letters that will be sent by the Asia team at Kew to revive this role as important to both Kew and the BSI as soon as possible (Vinita and Mike Rayner)

Paramjit wants to start the Roxburgh House project imminently, as he is retiring in September 2018. He needs to present a Detailed Project Report (DPR) for the funds to be raised, and will be tendering for a DPR as soon as possible. However, James said that any DPR made at this stage is likely to be inaccurate and that cost estimates should be completed step by step, beginning with an outline cost, and working towards a specific cost. Paramjit explained that this is not how things work in India, and being a government institution, the BSI needs to approach all projects in a specific way. He also made assurances that the architecture company will not be selected simply based on the cost of the DPR. James wants to involve the Jadavpur University Architecture School to set a precedent on how architecture should be practiced in India, however Paramjit stressed that time was a factor and that it would be simpler to work according to the government

protocols. Discussions will continue when James visits Kolkata in August. In the meantime, Paramjit has agreed to draw up an A4 summary of the intended purpose of the two buildings.
Action points: To meet with the Ministry and to facilitate the DPR as soon as possible over this summer (Paramjit Singh and James Simpson)

Debojyoti spoke about the school project that has been ongoing since January. This has involved two school trips per month from Bengali speaking schools in Kolkata to the Indian Museum and the AJC Bose Botanic Garden. Paramjit has agreed to fund this for another year. Debojyoti is hoping to set up a website for the project that will record the experiences of both the teachers and the students. The BSI has also recently set up a Green Skills for Youngsters initiative, as gardening is simply not taught in India. This teaches students about biodiversity and how to identify plants. It is for students aged 16 to 20. After three months in the scheme, the students can decide to work in the gardens or the herbarium. A BSI exchange programme with UK students including those at Kew, Edinburgh and NHM studying natural history was also suggested. This would of course require funding

Action points: To extend the school project for another one year and to enhance a student exchange with BSI and the Kolkata Garden (Debjyoti Das, Paramjit Singh and Fiona Ainsworth)

The Joseph Hooker exhibition that opened at the Indian Museum in October 2016 is currently touring all the regional offices of the BSI. This is now under the broader title of “100 Years of India’s Botanical Heritage”. This includes the Janaki Ammal exhibition and could also include the BL exhibition, as this is an easily portable exhibition. Antonia will provide Paramjit with the material so that this can be included. Vinita expressed a desire to explore similar projects in Ghana and Ecuador.

Action points: This touring of the exhibition will be facilitated by Paramjit Singh, the curator Anandita Saha and Antonia Moon