

Visit to the... Wellcome Library

Staff development group, London Health Libraries – 16 March 2016

www.wellcomelibrary.org



Within the sphere of medical libraries this one has the broadest remit that I have seen so far. The Wellcome library caters for specialist biomedical research, undergraduate and postgraduate study, public curiosity, and everything in between. One reason they are able to do this is, rather bluntly, access to mountains of vintage cash, courtesy of the Wellcome Trust of which they are part. University libraries have to prioritise their (*fee-paying*) students and Hospitals focus sparse library resources towards the needs of their staff or trainees, and each of them answer to the demands of higher education or a health service. The Wellcome Collection, meanwhile, was set up with the express purpose of making its vast and varied contents available to anyone who wishes to use them.

Introductions

Our raggle-taggle group of London health librarians was met by staff member Nicola, who gave us an introduction followed by an engaging tour. She knew the space and collection extremely well and fed us with plenty of detail, but still gave us a chance to explore for ourselves. The only omission (donning my educator hat for a moment) was a chance for the attendees to introduce themselves; there were over a dozen of us and I would have been interested to know which institutions everyone else came from. We could have found this out by talking to each other spontaneously (one or two people did), but as library and information professionals we prefer not to do that sort of thing.

We were told the tale of Henry Wellcome, pharmaceutical entrepreneur extraordinaire, compulsive collector of curiosities and his vision for a “museum of man”. The Wellcome Trust funds a lot of medical research, as did its founder, who also harboured an interest in medical history. This is reflected in the makeup of current book stock, which is divided into two collections. All material on contemporary medical practice (the Medical Collection) is classified under the National Library of Medicine (NLM) scheme, while the History of Medicine collection uses Barnard, named after the resident librarian who concocted it at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Both schemes make anyone raised on a diet of Dewey do a double-take, but they ‘work’ in their own way, reducing a complex field into relatively short call numbers.

Systems and sharing

To really get a feel for a library you have to interact with the catalogue, the central nervous system of the collection. Nicola demonstrated the trendy 'discovery layer' for searching across physical, digitised, or purely digital material, before burrowing down into some of the more specialised parts of their catalogue. The archives and manuscripts viewer was impressive (more about this shortly) but the dual approach of 'Wellcome images' section caught my particular attention: in keeping with the collection's public service ethos the images are free to download in low-resolution form, but fees are charged for hi-res downloads and prints, in the style of a commercial image bank. The widely recognised Creative Commons licenses have been applied to the collection, and anyone creating suitable images is invited to contribute.

Digitising historical printed material – scanning it at high resolution to produce an image file – is a good way for specialist libraries to simultaneously preserve unique stock and open it up to a wider audience online: lots of people can look at a 17th Century manuscript, say, without everyone manhandling the original until it crumbles to dust. The Wellcome Library decided to devise an archives and manuscripts viewer in collaboration with some content management ninjas called Digerati. Originally called the Wellcome Player, it allows fluid browsing or zooming in on details. This turned out to be so good that the British Library adopted it, who then made improvements which the Wellcome incorporated back into the software, now called the Universal Viewer.

They have developed a habit of developing useful software and making it OS (Open Source) for other institutions. Other examples include tools that can browse medical subject headings, share and compare archival images internationally, or present information in a handy timeline format.

Use of space: fun with stairs and oversized cushions

It was the three-dimensional entity of the library itself that had lured us onto the tour, and on this front it delivered. The stairs connecting the journals section to the main book collection was installed during the 2013-2014 refurbishment of the building; it stands away from the wall and connects at the top via a short bridge, allowing for an impressive floor-to-ceiling display of artwork two storeys high.

At the top of these stairs was the Rare Materials room, a long glass-fronted space with large tables. It is here that readers can access material kept away in secure storage, by request and under the strict observation of the staff seated at one end. The best part of this facility is that any member of the public can come in and request to see anything from the catalogue, including the large framed canvases, which will be duly brought in for viewing.

I had a chance to browse the History of Medicine collection, and easily found several titles that I would happily have taken down and read, from such diverse fields as the modern information society, tribal customs, and horticulture. If I wasn't required to get back on the Metropolitan line to West London I would have done precisely that, and I would have found the ideal spot at the tour's final stop.

Two notices outside the Reading Room informed us that it holds human remains, and that eating or drinking were not allowed. I wondered if the subject of the former notice was composed of people who had ignored the latter. The galleried space originally housed the entire library, but is now arranged as a showcase, designed to capture essence of the collection and engage the

public. It mixes artwork and curious artefacts with leisure reading and cutting-edge science. A visitor can examine a 1920s x-ray machine, manipulate a layered image of a mummified baby on a giant touchscreen, then grab a graphic novel. A grand but redundant staircase has been turned into casual seating with beanbags. One wall space was adorned with completed activity sheets from a visiting school group: inside a drawing of a plate titled Best Food to Keep me Healthy: “potatoes potatoes potatoes pot...”. The Reading Room regularly hosts a programme of open talks, forums, and presentations, with the topics proposed by members of the public. The program is only advertised on posters inside the library, never online; this helps control the numbers for the limited floor space, but it also keeps the events intimate.



Heading back out through the bustling lobby of the Wellcome Collection, I was left with the impression of a library that is staying true to its founder’s values; it celebrates historical treasures but also supports ongoing medical and scientific research, and this is reflected in its web-based tools. Serious practitioners and academics are well catered for, but anyone with a bit of curiosity is included in the party. If Henry himself was to walk in, or even visit the website, I think he would find exactly what he had in mind.

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Photographs courtesy of the author