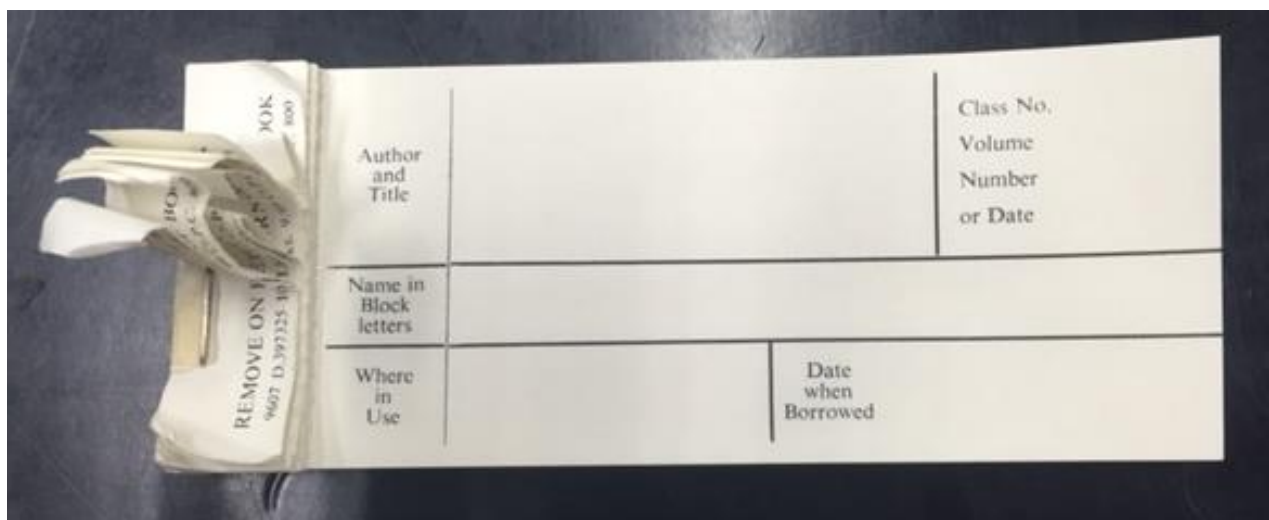


On the 7th of June 2016 a group of health librarians gathered at Kew Gardens to visit the Kew Gardens Library. There has been a library at Kew in some form or other since the 19th century – developing from the private collections of individuals such as Sir William Hooker, the first official director of the gardens. We were greeted by Craig, the information services librarian who gave us a thorough tour of the library. We began in a room with a display case full of beautiful Victorian orchid specimens, finely crafted from wax, so I already knew I’d be seeing something a bit different from my medical campus library at Imperial College. Craig is one of 30 or so people that work in the library service, including specialised staff to care for the biggest collection of botanical art in the UK, paper conservators, digitisers and archivists who manage the Garden’s historical archives in addition to “traditional” library staff. There are also staff that work in other locations such as the Millennium National Seed Bank in Surrey. While there is variety of staff at Kew from scientists to events organisers only about 30% of staff use the library and they are mainly people who do research for plant taxonomy, plant conservation and extracting useful chemicals from plants.

We moved through into the main library space, holding the majority of the book and journal collections. The collection is a mix of some historical items, maps, atlases, published travel diaries of explorers and records of expeditions, proceedings of groups like the “Herefordshire Natural History Society 1907-11” and plenty of scientific and horticultural books and journals. The collection reflects the needs and interests of the staff who work in the Herbarium in Plant Taxonomy so they need a variety of material across countries, languages and the years to do their work of researching and tracing plant names and discoveries.

It was here that the visiting group, who had been politely nodding and asking a few questions here and there became quite animated on discovering that this main section of the library is unsupervised and has a manual issuing system comprised of little slips of paper that users write on to issue items to themselves.



Craig was bombarded with many more questions about theft, loss rates etc. They have been trying to scrap the manual system for years but have found their self-check machines have massive connectivity problems with the rest of Kew’s IT. Items do go missing but this area is only open to Kew staff so it’s not quite as dramatic as it sounds and they are able to recover items sometimes by holding book return amnesties. However, obviously isn’t the most practical system and is difficult to keep up with at their current staffing levels and they are keen to get electronic systems up and

running. Everything was always catalogued but now the items are tagged and barcoded so they hope to be online soon.

We finished our tour in the attractive public reading room, part of a new building extension with study desks, displays of new items, PCs, a customer service desk and a secure, climate controlled area for the rarer, more valuable and delicate items in the collection. Some of these had been put out for us to view including a beautiful bound manuscript dating from the 1300s illustrated with some strange fish/animal hybrids that took my fancy.



This is where the Library's busy service for external users takes place. Enquiries range from family historians looking for information on relations who used to work at the gardens to people calling to get identifications for mystery plants in their garden. That type of query is generally passed on to the plant scientists and taxonomists! Other types of users include art students and artists, landscape design and architectural students and of course scientists.

It was an enjoyable afternoon and it was great to see and find out more about a library that serves a very different purpose from that of my own workplace. Thanks to Liz Lourandos for organising and to Craig Brough for conducting the tour.

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