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Mary Ida Roper & Her Herbarium

- **Mary Beckett: Documentation Officer (Herbarium), School of Biology,
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Introduction

In 2003 a project was undertaken to research and catalogue the herbarium of an eminent 20th century botanist, Miss Ida Roper. Ida Mary Roper was born in Bristol and spent the majority of her life in the city, but for various reasons she bequeathed her collection to the University of Leeds shortly before her death in 1935. Funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Board for one year, the aim of the project was to improve access to the collection and make it available to a wider audience. This has been achieved by improving the physical and mental retrieval of specimens through databasing, digitisation, research of the collection and collector and the creation of a website. The collection was examined in a broader context than botany alone to help people realise its potential as a resource for a wide range of disciplines. The following article will outline the history of the collection and its creator, and will describe how the project was conducted and how it progressed, concluding with some thoughts on what has been learnt and what the future holds.

Ida and her herbarium

Ida Mary Roper was born in August 1865 to John, a wholesale druggist, and Lucy Roper at Westbury in Bristol. The couple already had one son, Harold, and Mrs Roper had two sons from a previous marriage, Ernest and Frank Samson. In 1879 Ida started at Clifton High School. The family moved several times when Ida was young and the various home addresses suggest they were an upper middle class family, employing in 1881 a house servant and four men in the family business.

I am not sure when or why Ida's interest in botany started to develop but I think it probably stemmed from her father's occupation as a chemist, especially as her brothers seemed to share the interest but had less time to pursue it. It is difficult to know whether Ida was taught Natural History at school. One of the reasons it was so popular with children was because it was not a subject on the school curriculum until the end of the 19th/beginning of the 20th century. However, science, including botany, was generally taught at girls' schools because Classics was still seen as the male reserve. According to a handwritten document about Ida, found folded in the pages of a copy of *'The Flora of Bristol'* (J.W. White, 1912) originally owned by a contemporary Bristol botanist, Ida finished her education in Germany. Although this was not definitely the case, it is certainly possible and an interesting idea as Germany was considered the centre for botanical study during this period and knowledge of the language was accepted as a useful tool.



Ida on a Botanical Ramble, July 15th 1933

At some stage in the late 19th century Frank Samson, one of Ida's half-brothers, became her guardian and set up home for them both. According to the handwritten document, Frank was of great assistance in collecting specimens and conducting research and was 'an active supporter of all that his sister undertook'. Also it describes how they 'both possessed a thoroughly business sense of organisation, allied to caution. They would never state a fact (and did not mind admitting that they could not answer a question) unless they could verify their statements by facts and they would take any amount of trouble to do this'. Frank's name appears on sheets in the herbarium.

In 1929 Frank Samson died. Sometime in the early 1930s Miss Roper moved to be looked after by a Rev. Cratchley. Ida died on June 8th 1935 having been ill for a while. Her funeral was held at St. Aldhelm's church, Bedminster and her body was interred in the family grave at Arno's Vale cemetery. The reputation of Ida amongst natural historians, archaeological enthusiasts and in the city of Bristol is evident by the list of mourners at her funeral. For example representatives from Bristol City Museum, the British Bryological Society, the Bristol Naturalists' Society and the British Microscopical Society attended.

Miss Roper's career as a botanist seemed to begin in the early 20th century, as attitudes towards women started to change. In 1908 she had her first paper 'The Blossoming of the Trees', published by the Bristol Naturalists Society. The following year Ida became a fellow of the Linnaean Society, only four years after they first admitted women. For the first years of the 20th century Ida was also very busy helping James Walter White compile a 'Flora of Bristol', published in 1912, which I think raised her profile and put her in

contact with many individuals and societies. In the Preface, White acknowledges Miss Roper for her ‘trustworthy & energetic help’ and ‘for fieldwork’ and ‘assistance in literary research and in revision and correction of the press’. In 1913, Ida became the first female President of the Bristol Naturalists Society. She recognised it as a great honour and a fantastic position to hold, not just for herself but for all women. In the 1901 census Ida was recorded as ‘Living on own means’ and she was therefore able to put all her energy into her ‘hobbies’ and was very committed to the voluntary positions she held. Miss Roper worked tirelessly for the Bristol Naturalists Society and held the positions of Editor, Secretary, Librarian and Sub-librarian over a period of 30 years. The BNS was not the only society with which Ida was associated. She was actively involved with the South-Western Naturalists Union, the British Bryological Society and the British Association for the Advancement of Science, acting as Local Honorary Secretary in 1930 when the meeting was held in Bristol. Ida also put on a display of wild flowers in the city museum every week for 12 years, from 1911 to 1923. These displays were reported to have been very popular with the general public, particularly during the Great War.

Ida’s other interests included archaeology, and more specifically monumental effigies. In 1931 she had a book “Effigies of Gloucestershire” published and she was the first woman to be elected to the Council of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society. Ida also produced pamphlets and guidebooks and embroidered wall hangings and altar frontals for St. George’s Church Brandon Hill, Bristol.



Viola odorata L. var. *praecox* Greg. Specimen collected by IMR at Tickenham Hill on 12th January 1915. Typical herbarium sheet from the collection and demonstrates style of photograph for digitisation

Miss Roper began her herbarium in 1893 and continued to add to it until a year or so before her death in 1935. Specimens at the University of Leeds and other institutions indicate that the main period of collecting was c.1900 - 1930. Most of the British Plant Families are represented in the herbarium. There is a large number of Genera from the Orchidaceae and Violaceae Families, the latter reported to be an area of particular interest to Ida. Another noteworthy feature is the specimen of *Nitella mucronata* discovered growing in a pond in Wickwar, West Gloucestershire by Miss Roper in 1917. The discovery was significant as it was the most western recording of that species in England and was described by Groves and Bullock-Webster as a distinct variety, which they named *gracillima* (*Journal of Botany*, November 1917, Vol. 55). Ida travelled extensively in this country, and occasionally abroad, often on various club and society excursions and added to her collection. However, she collected most actively close to home in Gloucestershire and North Somerset (vice counties 6 and 34). Many of the specimens in the herbarium were obtained through exchange. Ida was an active member of The Botanical Exchange Club of the British Isles and the Watson Botanical Exchange Club. Specimens collected by Ida are present in public collections all over Britain, for example the National Museum of Wales alone has over 300.

A feature that makes Ida’s collection particularly delightful and unusual is the presence of associated material. Many sheets have letters, articles, coloured diagrams of flowers, postcards, photographs and lengths of embroidery thread or pieces of textile attached. In addition, there are many other loose items and the University was lucky enough to receive her collection of botanical books. The bequest included many county floras, her personal and heavily annotated copy of White’s ‘Flora of Bristol’ and exercise books she used to record details about her herbarium. The items form an integral part of the collection. The books are held in the School of Biology and the University Library.

Miss Roper arranged her herbarium according to ‘The London Catalogue of British Plants’ (Tenth Edition, and later, the Eleventh Edition). W.H. Burrell, Honorary Curator of the University of Leeds Herbarium in 1935, rearranged it according to the ‘The British Plant List, 2nd edition’ by Druce published in 1928 and this is how the collection remains. Various Honorary Curators of the herbarium, particularly Mr Burrell, added material to the collection and these are now considered part of the Ida Roper herbarium.

Ida started to arrange the bequest of her herbarium several years before her death, in the early 1930s. The bequest of J.W. White’s herbarium to the University of Bristol in 1932 left them short on space and in no great need of another British herbarium so Ida approached Professor Priestley at Leeds, a friend and colleague for over 30 years. Professor J.H. Priestley knew Ida from his time at University College Bristol, both as an undergraduate and later as head of the Botany Department (1905-1911). Professor Priestley accepted the bequest with open arms realising its value to the university and local botanists. The herbarium

remained for over sixty years where it was first delivered on June 15th 1935. Over the years the collections have received varying levels of care, ending up rather neglected by the 1990s lining the walls of the tea-room in the Baines Wing. In 1997 all of the biological collections moved to the new School of Biology building and the Honorary Curator, Dr J. Edmonds, took the opportunity to compile an inventory of all the botanical collections and freeze specimens that had an active insect infestation.

The Project

The project was conceived by Debbie Snow, University Collections Officer, and Jenny Edmonds, Honorary Curator of the Herbarium, in 2002. In January 2003 I was appointed as Documentation Officer to undertake the project. The basic ideas of the project are set out below, as written by D. Snow for the A.H.R.B. Application Form, 2002.

Aims of the project:

1. To computerise the existing inventory of the Ida Roper herbarium with the addition of common names
2. To fully catalogue at least 40% of the collection (4000 specimens)
3. To scan images of 10% of the collection (1000 specimens)
4. To input all the above data into the database system 'The Museum System'
5. To research biographical and contextual data on Ida Roper and the collection
6. To create a web site associated with the project for the delivery of this catalogue data and background information.

Broad objectives of the project:

1. To pilot the use of the database 'The Museum System' with natural history collections, as part of a long-term aim of cataloguing the majority of the University's museum collections on this system
2. To improve access to the Ida Roper Herbarium, both physically (improved retrieval of specimens) and virtually (on-line retrieval of collections data)
3. To increase use of the herbarium for teaching, research and by the general public.

This project will greatly improve access to this important resource. Awareness of the existence of the resource will increase and those who wish to consult the physical specimens will be able to identify more specifically what they wish to see before their visit. Physical retrieval of specimens on a wide variety of criteria (genera, common name, date etc.) will be facilitated and this will reduce handling of delicate materials and ease and speed of consultation. Not only will data be available to the specialist the incorporation of common names and provision of themed tours through the collection will greatly improve access to the non-specialist. The intellectual accessibility of herbaria will therefore become more apparent to the general public. The resource will therefore become accessible for research and teaching across several disciplines (both in the sciences and arts and humanities) in a way which is difficult at present.

Officially the project has now finished and below is a summary of what was actually achieved during the year.

Aims of the project:

1. The handwritten inventory was entered onto an 'Excel' spreadsheet early on in the project. Common Names have been added either at specific or generic level.
2. The following Families have been fully catalogued: Characeae, Orchidaceae, Violaceae, Aristolochiaceae, Berberidaceae, Caprifoliaceae, Celastraceae, Commelinaceae, Elaeagnaceae, Ilicaceae, Lemnaceae, Nymphaeaceae, Resedaceae, Rutaceae, Tamaricaceae, Thymelaeaceae; 1255 records. A record can be more than one specimen as long as collection data is the same and as some sheets hold multiple records, less than 1255 sheets have been catalogued in detail (but probably more than 1255 specimens)! It is not really possible to know how many sheets or specimens are contained within the collection. The figure of 10,000 was taken from an article written by the curator of the University of Leeds herbarium shortly after the bequest of the collection. It is therefore impossible to know what proportion of the collection has been fully catalogued.
3. It was decided that the most suitable method for digitising the collection was to use a digital camera. 478 images have been created which equates to approximately that number of records because some of the images are of loose material associated with the specimens. There are images for all the Characeae and Violaceae specimens and additional material.

4. Due to technical difficulties with computer servers it was agreed in August 2003 to use a different database to 'The Museum System'. An Access database was created for the project and all the text and images have been inputted.
5. Research has been carried out on Ida and her contemporaries, and to a slightly lesser extent, the collection. A study trip was made to Bristol and research was carried out over the Internet and at the University of Leeds Library and Special Collections.
6. The first web site went on-line in April 2003 with a limited amount of information and the basic inventory. The web site received a major overhaul in Spring 2004, with the addition of the searchable database. Unfortunately it is unlikely the web site will be regularly updated as there are not members of staff available. It may occasionally received attention from volunteers.

Were the objectives of the project met?

For reasons "outside of our control", 'The Museum System' database was not used for the project and therefore could not act as a pilot study for the rest of the University. Without a doubt, the project has achieved it's second objective. It is now infinitely quicker and simpler to find specimens both for people associated with the collection and interested outsiders. The herbarium is available 'virtually' on the Internet, along with everything that is known about the collector and collection, all over the world at any time. Use of the herbarium has not really increased as yet. Roper specimens were studied as a part of the Yorkshire Naturalists' Society's History Section AGM in January 2004 and the collection is becoming more widely known of. As a result of the project, several articles have or are to be published, a talk was given at a Centre for Heritage Research seminar and a small display has been put on in the University's zoology museum. There are also plans to produce a booklet on Ida, the herbarium and the project.

What has been learnt?

Having an 'Access' database built specifically for the project has been very successful because we had a lot of input into how it would look and function. We were able to specify what fields to include and what form they should take and how the database can be searched. It is impossible to know whether the purpose-built database is better than a generic system would have been but it certainly fulfilled our needs. Inputting the data obviously became quicker over time as I established field definitions clearly in my mind. The digital camera worked well for the digitisation aspect. As the camera is of a high specification it can be set up to take very accurate images that require little manipulation on the computer thus saving time. Once the camera and lights are set up, taking the images is a quick process. Buying the largest affordable Memory Card is a good idea to reduce the frequency of removing it from the camera and downloading the images. The construction of the web site proved very time-consuming; however once it is complete it will not really become dated or irrelevant. Again we had a lot of input into how the database search facility would appear on the web which was very important to guide the IT man constructing it. Research into Ida Roper has been fascinating and successful at building up a picture of the collector although there are some aspects where I have been unable to reach a conclusion. The problem with research is to know when to stop!

The future

Until August 2004 work will continue on aspects of the project for one day a week. After August 2004 it is unlikely the collection will have regular attention. If more funding were secured in the future it would probably be for a project with a different focus. However, the achievements of the project are irreversible. A major step forward has been made to improve both the physical and mental accessibility of the collection. The project has renewed interest in the herbarium and much has been learnt. The knowledge and experience gained as a result of the project, particularly in relation to databasing and digitisation, can be applied to many collections in the University.



Miss Roper and fellow naturalist at the summit of Snowdon,
25th August 1931