

Nicholas Crouch: Reconstructing the library of a 17th Century physician

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This paper will focus on the collection of Nicholas Crouch, a 17th Century physician and collector of tract volumes. He included a detailed contents page and price listing in each of his books, providing a valuable insight into 17th century book production. Over the course of one year the collection has been catalogued and conserved, and the combined work has produced a body of data on the books and their contents. This paper proposes to trace a narrative of the collection through a study of its material structure, and explore what Crouch's detailed notes can tell us about 17th Century book production in Oxford.

Nicholas Crouch was a physician and academic at Balliol College, Oxford. He spent almost 60 years of his life at Balliol, and took an active role in the affairs of the college. His hand is found throughout college documentation, tracking the movement of books and papers and calculating budgets. Over the course of his life, Crouch collected over 1 600 pamphlets and tracts: ephemeral material covering a range of subjects, including a large collection of medical items. These items were bound together in bindings commissioned by Crouch from Oxford binders, to specifications indicative of a used and consulted collection. After his death in 1690, Crouch's will states that the "Master and Fellows are to have choice of all his bookes". Most of them were taken; the monographs and notebooks are now scattered throughout the wider collections but the 213 tract volumes remain together.

A unique feature of Crouch's tract volumes are his detailed contents pages for each item. These contain costings for the individual tracts and for the binding. In a number of cases a note has also been made as to who the binder was and when it was bound. The conservation documentation for the project has incorporated details on these figures, and now has a body of data comparing costs of the bindings with detailed notes on the binding itself. The volumes share a distinctive set of characteristics, but with key differences in materials and tools that appear to be binder specific. This paper will explore patterns and connections between the different binders. It will also compare the costs of the volumes: looking at how the size and materials used affect the price. Set in the context of seventeenth century collecting, the contents pages highlight how a collection becomes shaped by the character of the collector in building up a functional library. The conservation data enables a narrative to be constructed, looking at who, when, and how the books were being bound.

The contents pages give a significant insight into the items themselves, but there are a number of other ways of determining how the collection was being used over the centuries. The items are frequently annotated, and material evidence shows that they were being read and circulated both pre and post binding. The fore-edges are painted to demarcate the tracts, page markers indicate specific items, and a shelf marking system was used by Crouch to organise the collection. The items would have been originally stored fore-edge out, and college records even indicate which room the collection may have been stored in. After joining the college library the volumes were chained, and later they were stored spine out with spine labels. Evidence in the material objects continue to give an idea of how the collection was being used.

This paper will construct a narrative of the Crouch collection by drawing on his detailed notes and the objects themselves. Through the process of conserving and cataloguing the collection, a body of data has been compiled that constructs a picture of 17th century Oxford book production, and the similarities and differences between specific binders and time periods. The listing of prices provides an invaluable resource into the economics of collection and the cost of materials. Through the Crouch collection, we can better understand the culture of reading and collecting in the 17th century.