

The Display's The Thing ...

An exercise in archival exhibitionism

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There were three ingredients:

An homogenous audience, many of whom were known to be keenly interested in history; a week's programme commemorating a significant historical occasion; and a brand new, eye-catching and secure display cabinet in a prominent location.

To the archival mind, the above suggested a rare opportunity for outreach; an opportunity for an exhibition of original records. But how can an over-taxed, one-person Archives cope with staging a special exhibition, in addition to coping with the multitude of daily tasks?

This article describes how it was possible in one case and the sense of professional fulfilment which resulted.

1986 was the year the University of Queensland Archives came out of the closet. The occasion was the 50th Anniversary of the University's Faculty of Medicine. An invitation was extended to all graduates of its courses and to all interested practitioners to join a focal week of celebrations with a wide-ranging programme in May.

For more than twelve months prior to the occasion extensive use had been made of the University Archives by various members of the medical profession, mainly in connection with chapters which individuals were writing for a Jubilee History. A 50th Anniversary Historical Committee, with the University Archivist as a member, had been formed in October 1985 and proceeded to plan a morning of historical seminars with a medical theme and a number of historical displays, for example, medical instruments, pharmaceutia, and medical philately. By November 1985 I was faced with a dilemma — should I bring the archives out of the closet?

To Display or Not to Display

During my sojourn with the Australian Archives in Canberra I had often felt what a shame it was that there were (then) no effective display facilities. Accessions such as a superb sewing box given to a former Prime Minister's wife, a relief model of the early Canberra landscape, and the table on which (reportedly) the Constitution was signed, vied for space in filing cabinets,

drawers or remote repositories, to say nothing of the wide range of exciting documents hidden away in various anonymous record series. As an institutional archivist I hoped that at last some emphasis could be given to the display not only of archival 'objects' but also of key documents in the institution's past.

So, in principle, I strongly favoured the exhibition as a form of archival extension, while recognising the primary need of moral defence of the record. Yet in a one person operation, of the magnitude of mine, the amount of resources needed to stage even a relatively small display was virtually prohibitive.

The interest of various key members of the Faculty, past and present, in the University Archives as a source of raw material for the history of their Faculty had an intoxicating effect. Their combined enthusiasm for various documents in my custody, items which as an archivist I took for granted, persuaded me to try to undertake the task. I felt a responsibility to bring these items to the view of a wider audience. I felt confident of the audience's response and I saw the opportunity to promote the Archives. It was a rare chance for professional development (and importantly, I knew that I would have a permanent assistant, albeit half-time, in the new year).

Planning the Display

Preliminary

The intense activity on archives relating to the Medical Faculty had left me very familiar with relevant holdings. (At last, an advantage of a one-person operation!) In an afternoon I was able to examine relevant records and compile a list of suitable items.

The University Archives had custody of a set of spectacular hand-coloured plans of the Medical School, not all as built. These were ideal as a centrepiece for the display. Unfortunately the best of them had been patched with the dreaded 'sticky tape'. The plans had been commissioned by the State Department of Works at a time of state control over University buildings. Under these circumstances the Queensland State Archives agreed to conserve the two chosen for the display. (There are no conservation facilities available to me at the University).

The display case used was constructed as part of an extensive refurbishment of a seminar rooms annexe to the historic Medical School building and this meant that the major work for the display had to be undertaken in the month prior to the celebratory week. The Archives was closed for other business for two weeks to facilitate this. (Previous experience had shown that this was the only realistic option, if I was to tackle a project such as this).

The display cabinet

The completed cabinet was quite splendid. It was made of Tasmanian oak and was about 2 metres long, 0.5 metres deep and 1.3 metres high. Metal runners provided for adjustable heights for glass shelves which could be split in three lengthwise.

A 'mock-up' run was undertaken at the earliest opportunity with key items from the preliminary list to see how they would fit. (I should perhaps add that the Medical School is located at Herston, adjacent to the Royal Brisbane Hospital, a round trip of some 22 kilometres from the campus at St. Lucia. Consequently each visit complete with my car boot full of records was no mean feat, particularly as the Archives is located on Level 4 of the Administration building at St. Lucia, and car access to the building is difficult).

Choosing a theme

From this visit the final ideas took shape and work began in earnest. The nostalgia value to early graduates and staff members was considered of primary importance in selecting a theme, especially as foundation staff and several of the first class of graduates and immediate family members had registered for the week. It was a case of having a definable and subject-interested audience, which made the choice of theme quite easy.

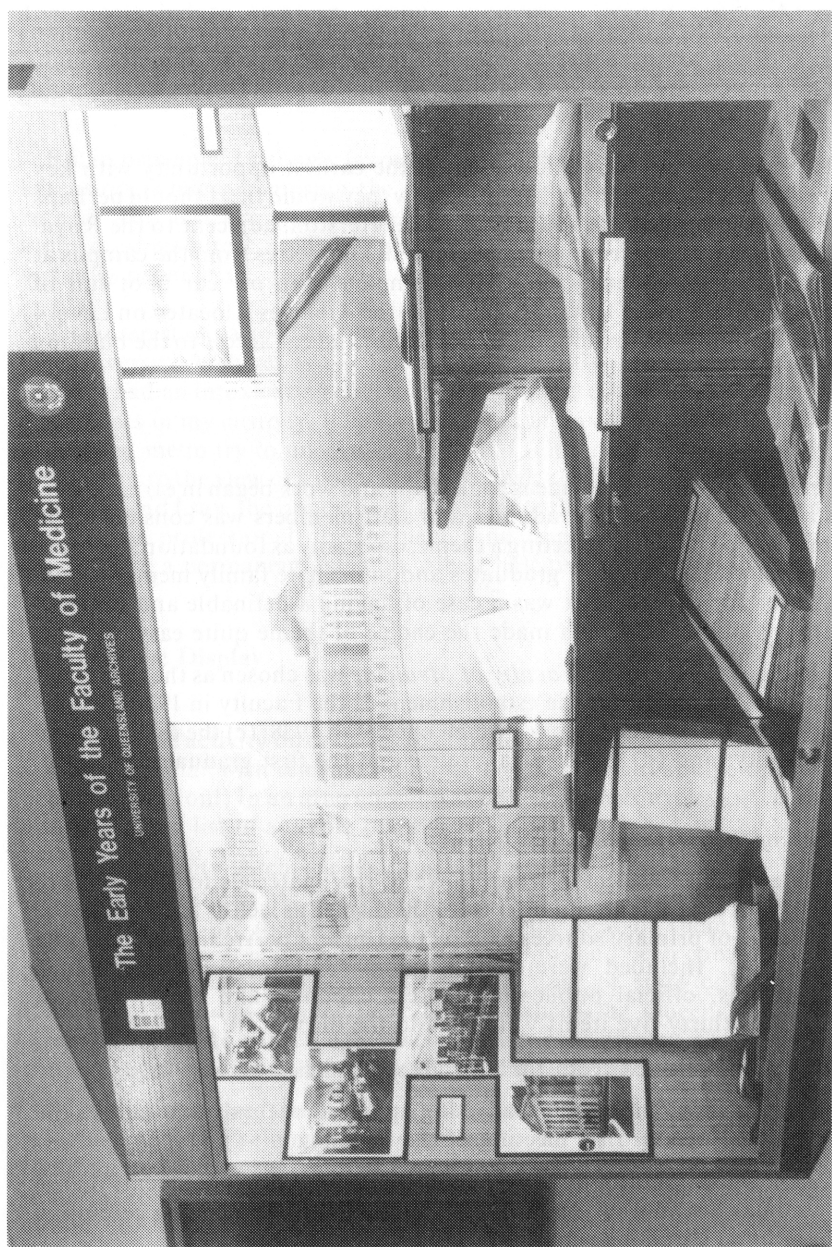
The Early Years of the Faculty of Medicine was chosen as the theme for the display to cover: (a) the establishment of the Faculty in 1936; (b) the building of the Medical School which opened in 1938; (c) the early staff of the Faculty; and (d) the medical course and the first graduates in 1940.

Selecting the documents

I determined to select a broad range of raw materials to provide both variety, texture, colour and interest to the display as well as to illustrate the wide range of primary sources held by the University Archives (ie. not just old papers). Included were bound volumes, files, letters, documents, photographs, official publications, press clippings and the two plans. Altogether thirty-five items were used in the display.

Key items selected from the four areas identified above were:

1. Letter from the Premier advising approval of funds to establish the Faculty, minutes of first meeting of the Faculty;
2. The plans, photographs at the time of opening and documents on the ceremonial opening of the building ie. invitation list, opening ceremony programme, letters of congratulations;
3. Three key early staff members were chosen — letter of application of



1. View of most of the display which was staged to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the University of Queensland's Faculty of Medicine. The display was designed around two spectacular hand-coloured architectural drawings.

The master graduation registers record the admission on 14 December 1940 of the first M.B.B.S. graduates in the University of Queensland.

Letter from the Premier to the Chancellor of 6 December 1935, advising that the government would fund the building of a Medical School at Herston.

EQUINE ESTABLISHMENT, MEDICINE AND VETERINARY SCIENCE, 1864-1941

2. The two types of labels devised for the display
- (i) Example of a leather citation

(ii) and (iii) Examples of computer type-set labels which were mounted on cardboard with a 5 mm border on all four sides.

first Dean and his admission to degree *ad eundum gradum*, photographs, conditions of appointments, welcomes;

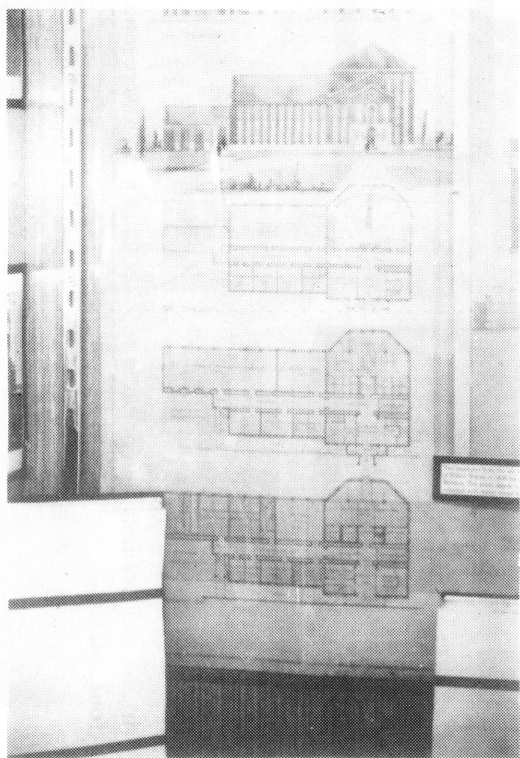
4. Examination results of first students, curriculum details, presentation list of first graduates, with photograph of first graduates.

Design and Display Techniques

Aesthetic considerations rated highly as did the desire to project professionalism with the display. (Obscure hand-written or manually typed labels on white cards were definitely out). No specific budget was provided for the display, so funds had to come out of the very small University Archives annual maintenance allocation. Notwithstanding, I determined to ensure that the equpage was of high standard.

The University has many internal services (all chargeable) for example, printing, computer type-setting, graphic artist, which can be utilised on such an occasion, but the coordination of all these aspects at short notice requires a lot of cooperation and a tremendous energy and determination.

Recognising the danger of lack of colour in an archival display, I chose a



3. One of the plans conserved and encapsulated in mylar. The encapsulation made it easier to fasten the plans to the back wall of the display cabinet.

theme colour of maroon for various items of equipage, but in the end this tended to be more burgundy in the interests of colour coordination. Yellow and/or gold were used with the burgundy and this linked through to both the warm yellowish tones of the display cabinet as well as the gold blocked titles on several items on display. (As maroon is the Queensland state colour and saffron the colour of the Faculty of Medicine, these colours had an added appeal.)

Backdrops

While the warm tones of the wood provided an effective back panel, a length of maroon cloth was obtained for the base of the cabinet. Most bound volumes were to be laid out on the cloth, and it worked well (Figure 7).

Theme Sign

The graphic artist prepared a sign to specifications on maroon cardboard with gold lettering. The University crest was placed on one end and the Medical School's Jubilee logo on the other end.

Labels

Two types of labels were devised (Figures 2 and 4) not only to provide information at various levels but also as a technique to introduce colour and variety to the display. Concise captions indicated the significance of each item and full details of sources were provided, the latter being quite appropriate in the case of the particular audience.

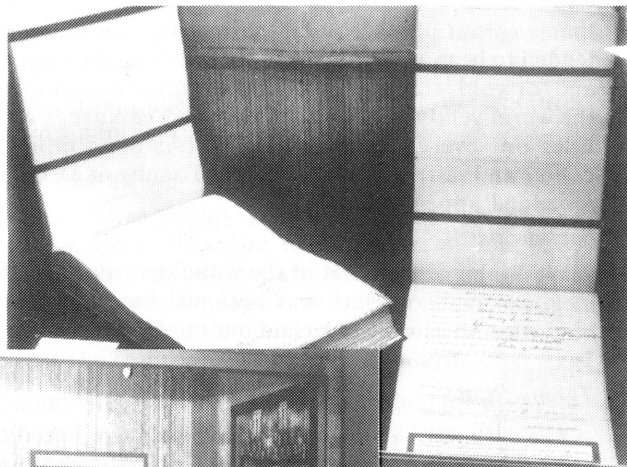
1) Leather citations — strips of thin maroon leather, 2.5 cms wide and 35 cms long were gold blocked in 12 point *Times Italics Capitals* by the University Printery to show the series identification. Five of these labels were produced for major series, and these can be re-used in subsequent displays. The idea was to drape them over the appropriate items.

2) Computer type-set labels using *Century Schoolbook medium*, set 20 points on 22 points condensed to 18 points letter width across a measure of 55 picas, were produced for explanatory captions as well as for more specific identifications. The appropriate place for the label was determined in the 'mock-up' and carefully measured. The labels were then produced to fit exactly the required spaces. The result was a set of easily read labels of high quality yet fairly minimal cost. The copy was mounted on the maroon cardboard with a 5 mm border of maroon on all four sides.

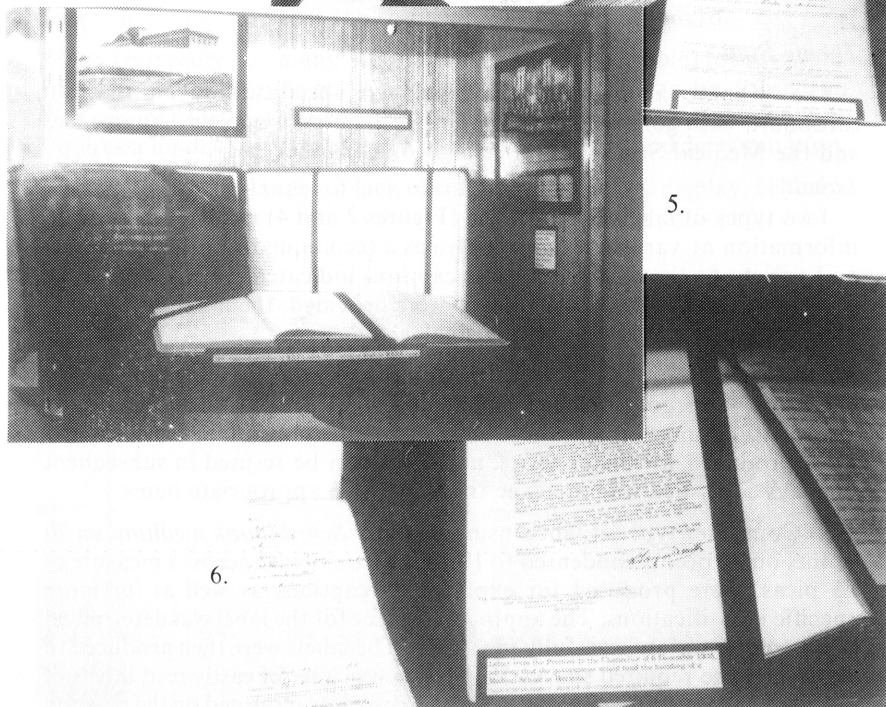
Fastenings

A supply of 9 mm wide soft maroon gros-grain ribbon was obtained. This was used to gently secure pages in bound volumes so they could be displayed open (Figure 4). After trying several methods the ribbon was self-pinned behind and this worked well. On one item it was also used to suspend the back of the volume and the slit shelf tracks proved an asset in this regard. Maroon velvet ribbon 1.5 cms wide was used to mask a variety of conservation problems and served as a bookmark on open volumes.

4.



5.



6.

4. Gros-grain ribbon, self pinned behind, was used to gently secure pages in bound volumes so they could be displayed open. The two types of labels were used together in this corner of the display.

5. Technique of using another item in the same series to cover a blank page, to prop back an open volume and to provide material identification to the display.

6. Another way of covering a blank page in an open volume on display. This casual arrangement took time and patience to set up. A length of velvet ribbon (right) was used as a bookmark but also helped disguise a minor conservation problem.

The use of polyester film bands as often recommended was examined, but discarded for a number of reasons including problems of use and lack of colour. (The ribbon had the added advantage of providing a clear page marker when needed.)

Props

Items from the same series were used when height or angle props were needed. This provided the added bonus of being able to display spine or cover labels by way of identification, and also added to the aesthetic appeal of the display (Figure 5).

Mylar encapsulation

The two plans had been encapsulated with mylar as part of their conservation treatment and this made it easier to fasten them to the back of the cabinet (Figure 3). Individual mylar jackets provided some protection and rigidity for single papers and in one 'fan' (see Layout below) to enable us to get some height into the documents. (On the negative side the use of mylar can lead to problems with reflections, more evident in the photography rather than in viewing the display itself.)

Layout

The layout was carefully planned to ensure maximum use of the space without the display appearing to be crowded and to give each of the four sub-themes a spatial unity. A number of different approaches were taken with bound volumes to solve the problem of what to do with the blank left hand side of an open volume. A focal item, the original letter from the Premier advising the approval of government funds to build a Medical School, was draped at an angle beside the minutes of the first meeting of the newly established Faculty (Figure 6). Another item in the series of degree examination registers, beautifully labelled on the front cover, was used to identify and support the volume from the same series which was open for display, and it hid the blank page at the same time (Figure 5). In another case an early photograph of a foundation staff member was displayed on the non-relevant side of an open publication, the University Gazette, which featured the tribute to the same staff member on his retirement (Figure 7).

Single papers are often difficult to display in an interesting way. Maroon cardboard backing boards were used in two 'fan' displays, which utilised a variety of paper sizes, and formats (Figure 7).

Time Allocations

Preliminary planning	1 day	(1 person)
Mock-up	1 day	(2 people) *
Lead up work	1 week	(2 people)
Setting up the display	1 day	(2 people) *



7. Below — Items were displayed on maroon cloth on the base of the cabinet. Related records were used as props. Above — Part of one of the 'fans' of documents which utilised a variety of paper formats and sizes.



8. View of portion of the subsequent display, showing similar display techniques and re-using the basic equipage.

Display duration	5 days	
Dismantling the display	½ day	(2 people) *
Record return	½ day	(1 person)

* Time including travelling time.

Evaluation

I made a daily 'round' to check on the display and this, together with the other activities in which I had a part, gave me ample opportunity to be a quiet observer. There were many verbal and a few written comments on the display.

Audience Reaction

The audience's reaction can be neatly categorised into two groups — those that dutifully looked into the case and passed on to another display and those who had an obvious reaction to it. In the latter group only one person was highly critical, telling me that nice, big photographs were what interested people not all these documents which meant nothing. In contrast most of the other comments were quite effusive. The nostalgia value engendered by the display was quite apparent. A Foundation Professor of the Faculty, retired and living overseas, who had visited for the occasion, now signs himself Doug (Living Fossil) Lee and has recorded that he experienced some shock when he saw his signature — on the first presentation list of medical graduates — ensconced in a glass case as an historical artefact giving a new connotation to the term 'living fossil'!

Archival Outreach

As an exercise in archival outreach I would judge it a success. Although I was preaching to a captive audience, many sought me out to discuss not just the specifics of the display, but the role and value of the University Archives and archives in general. Some interesting records have since been transferred to archival custody. The University Archives has become part of the information network for the medical group. For a 'lone-arranger' in a small archives in a large institution such a display provides a much needed opportunity to break out of the mould of a 'back-room person' and share one's work as the vital link in the organisation's corporate memory.

Personal

It was a most useful exercise in professional self development and has set a precedent for the University Archives — we have established a service network which can be utilised again quite easily. I felt it was a coming-of-age for the University Archives, a remote outpost of the university community whose role and potential have been little understood and poorly measured. Above all, however, the audience was obviously well pleased. And there is something uplifting about seeing old eyes light up in amazement and recognition, faces smile with memory and happy conversations spring up between colleagues all generated by showing but a

few pieces from the vast store of historical raw material. For me it was the most rewarding archival activity I have undertaken for several years.

Postscript

Since the major part of this article was written, another display has been staged, in a different part of the University (Figure 8). This was approximately the same size but took significantly less time to plan and organise because the equipage, network of facilities and display standards had been established. I feel confident that we can now produce a reasonably-sized archival display for a specific purpose or function in less than a one-person week.

Acknowledgements

The photographs used in this article were taken by Geoff Acland-Bell and by Graham Jurrott, the Medical Photographer Audio-Visual Services University of Queensland. The assistance of the General Photography Department of the University is also gratefully acknowledged.