

The Archives of The Cremation Society

I am Danielle McAloon, a Project Archivist at Durham University employed on a Wellcome Trust-funded Cremation Society project which began in July 2017. The project reached its conclusion in December and during these six months I have been sorting, weeding and cataloguing the Society's Archive.

As I'm sure many readers will be aware, the Cremation Society has played a pivotal role in the establishment, development, legislation and promotion of cremation since its foundation in 1874. The Wellcome Trust project has enabled us to document and make accessible this comprehensive history of cremation in Great Britain. The collection also offers a fascinating insight into social history and we consider it invaluable for research into a number of different areas.

The first deposit of records arrived from the Cremation Society in the 1990s and were catalogued shortly after. This largely contained administrative records such as annual reports and minutes; financial records such as annual accounts and ledgers; and printed items such as books, journals, articles and propaganda leaflets. Interestingly, there is also a substantial series of clippings; these are usually bound volumes of collected articles, letters and information about cremation and disposal of the dead more generally. These are fascinating, not only because they show us the development of cremation, particularly in terms of propaganda of social acceptance, they also offer a

Letter from the London Necropolis and National Mausoleum Company to The Cremation Society regarding arrangements between the two, 21st February 1890

cultural insight into technological and medical developments, of urbanisation, sanitation, environmental and social concerns. This deposit also included some 19th century correspondence from the Society's founder Sir Henry Thompson to other members of the Society.

In 2015 another 40 banker's boxes of documents arrived from Maidstone to fill our strong room shelves here in Durham. Processing such a substantial number of records is no small feat, so there the documents sat until the Wellcome Trust funding provided for a dedicated member of staff to give them the attention that they deserved.

When I arrived in 2017 the accession had received very little attention. The boxes had been selected and briefly labelled by a colleague on site at Maidstone. My first task, alongside extensive research about the history, function and processes of the Society was to work through each box and acquaint myself with the papers and make a basic list of the

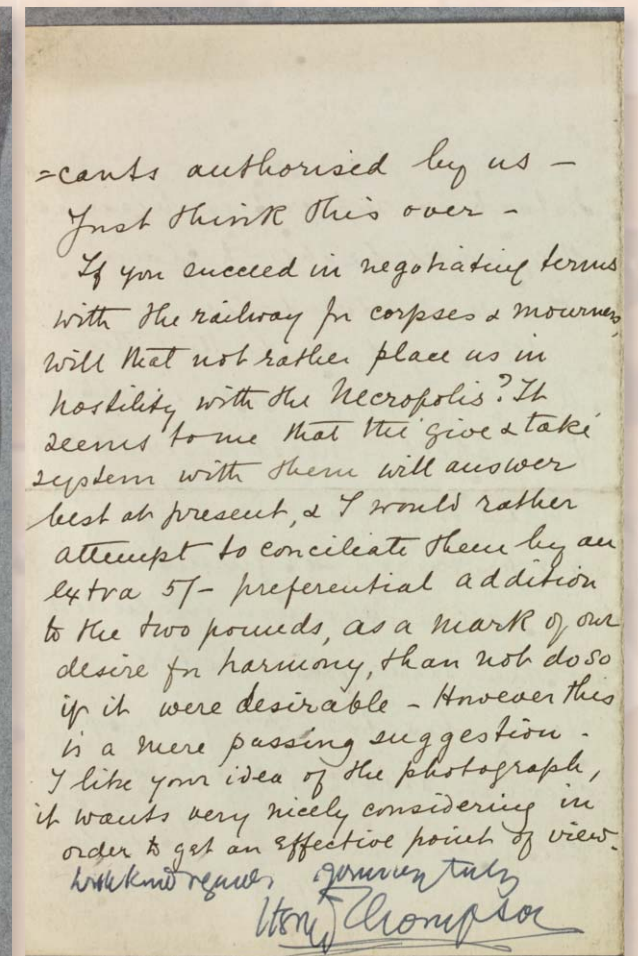
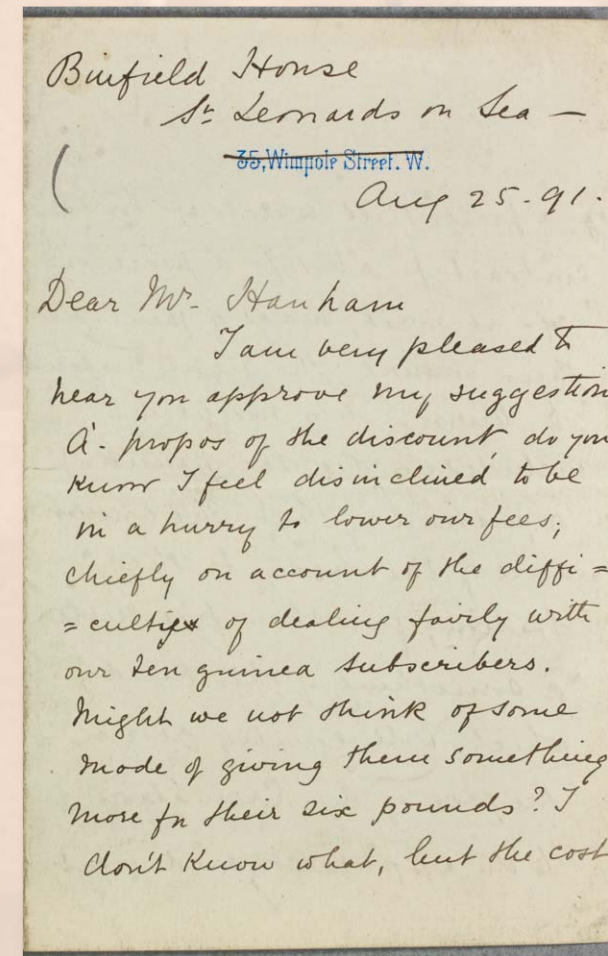
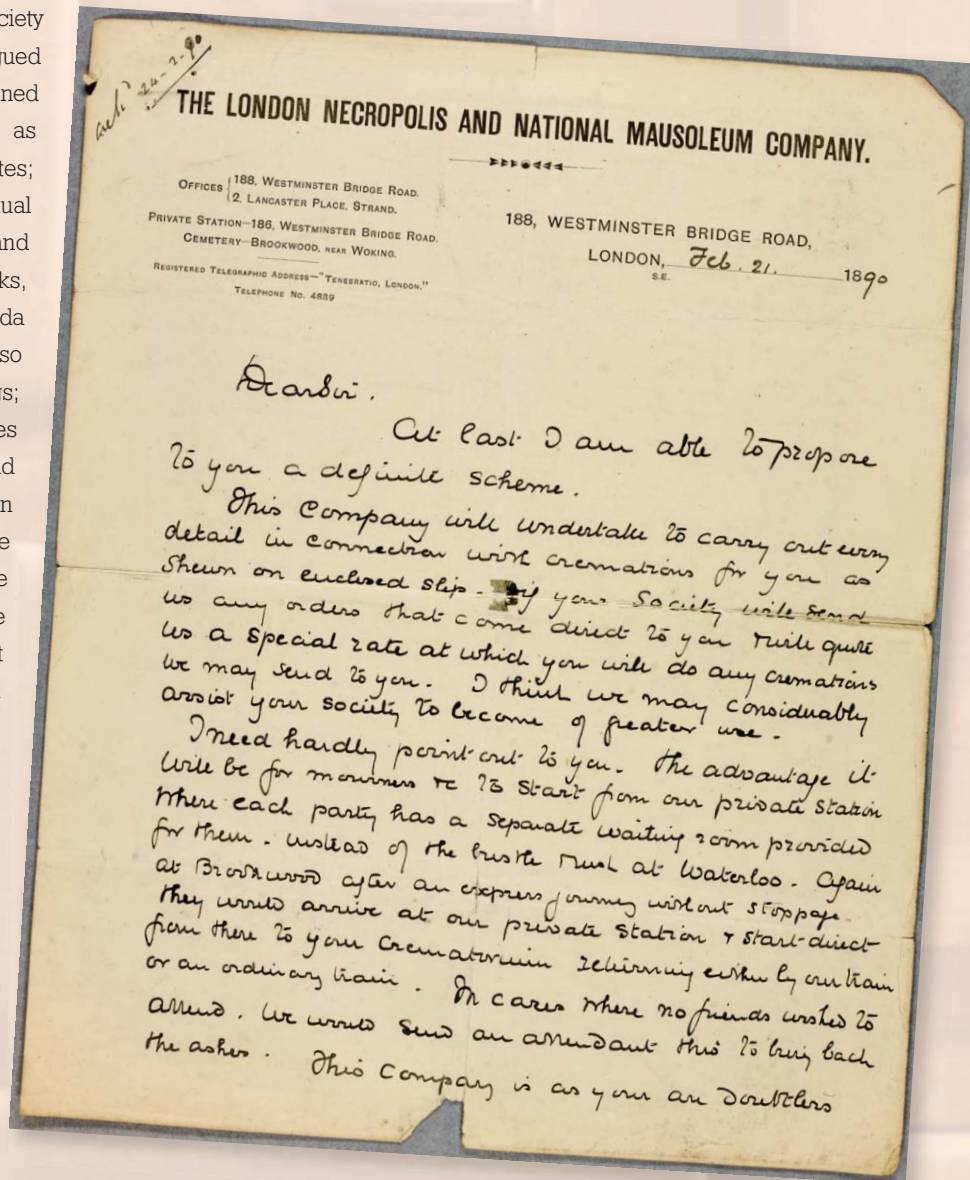
contents. From there I re-sorted records in accordance to the earlier catalogue whilst, of course, repackaging everything into acid-free boxes.

These records are largely 20th century, many of which complement and extend the earlier deposit of material. In addition there is a large proportion of both International Cremation Federation and international correspondence which emphasises the scope of the Society and demonstrates a worldwide impact on the cremation movement. Of particular interest are topical correspondence files which document everything from the acceptance of cremation in the Roman Catholic Church to the impact of the architecture of crematoria.

The scope for research is enormous. The records illustrate the change in social perceptions towards burial and cremation and, embedded in the history of the Cremation Society, there is the ongoing story of the disposition of the dead, not only in this country but worldwide. In the background there is history on a grander scale; as Europe descended into WWII, overseas correspondence dwindled and, following the end of the

war, we have a story of how societies functioned or ceased to function. There is the individual effort to establish cremation in private correspondence. There are the changes to our funeral rituals, in the architecture of buildings and structure of funeral services. Correspondence and information about a variety of organisations give an insight into bereavement services, options for disposal and remembrance. Environmental impact on how we dispose of our dead is another topic thoroughly questioned by the Society which, has had an impact on the development of legislation. There is such potential within these papers; they have been a fascinating archive to work with.

The catalogue is now available online at http://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ark/32150_s1vh53wv73c.xml and documents can be accessed at Durham University's Palace Green Library. Anyone interested or seeking further information can contact me on danielle.mcaloon@dur.ac.uk
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Letter from Sir Henry Thompson to J C Swinburne Hanham regarding Cremation Society fees and benefits, 25th August 1891