



Ways into the Collection: The 'Human Interface'

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Research Skills Series

Ways into the Collection: The 'Human Interface'

Dr Alison Newby

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Research Skills Series

In a previous post we looked at the kinds of **questions we need to ask ourselves** before engaging with a resource such as the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre (AIU Centre), and we learnt that there are three ways into the collection:

- **Databases** (including subject area resource lists)
- 'Human Interface' (speaking to the librarian and/or Collections Access Officer)
- **Serendipity** (just going in and browsing)

This time I'll be looking at the 'Human Interface'.

The 'Human Interface' with any library or archive comprises those individuals whose role is to take care of the collection, answer questions from users, find information, or give advice regarding the materials the library or archive contains. In relation to the Centre, subject area resource lists and databases can produce raw data about materials which might be relevant to a topic, but interacting with a knowledgeable human being (in writing or face-to-face) opens up a whole new level of insight. Such an individual can give guidance tailored to what you in particular want to know.

In this post, I'll be giving insight into who the Centre's human interfaces are and how they can smooth our way into the Centre's resources. So you'll be able to dip in to find what's particularly interesting to you, I'll be covering the subject in the following sections:

1. Introducing the Centre's 'Human Interfaces' – Hannah Niblett & Ruth Tait
2. Ruth Tait's insights into the strengths of the Centre and its collections
3. Ruth Tait's advice on how to prepare for consulting the 'Human Interfaces'

1. Introducing the Centre's 'Human Interfaces' – Hannah Niblett and Ruth Tait

The Centre has two main human interfaces, both of whom can deal with a whole variety of questions and requests, but whose areas of specialisation differ. Currently these individuals are:

- Hannah Niblett (Collections Access Officer)
- Ruth Tait (Senior Library Assistant)

Hannah Niblett (Collections Access Officer)

Hannah's role is to coordinate and develop the Centre's academic engagement work, proactively promote the collections, and reach out to new research audiences. You might contact her in the first instance if you're a university teacher, lecturer, or researcher in the early stages of your project.



Hannah Niblett (Collections Access Officer)

Hannah has an MA in Critical Theory, and is part way through a second MA in Museum Studies, so is well placed to examine critical frameworks and understands that there are multiple ways of 'reading' cultural texts and heritage collections. She uses this understanding to help make the Centre's collections relevant for many different academic disciplines. A fascination with 'hidden voices' means she also has a keen appreciation of the value of the Centre's collection of oral histories.

Hannah counts her particular expertise as being in collections and their uses, rather than the specific subject matter of the Centre's collection (which in her opinion is more Ruth's area of specialisation). Therefore, whilst she does engage some new collection-users and is able to give an overview of the library and archive, most users (both academic and non-academic) would normally go directly to Ruth, who ultimately supports those who first approach Hannah as well.

Ruth Tait (Senior Library Assistant)

Ruth has a deep knowledge of the library as well as much of the archive, having been responsible for book and some archive processing, the upkeep of the library, and ensuring the collection can be used with ease. Ruth is normally located in the library reception area, where she's supported by other members of staff, who can also help with general inquiries.



Ruth Tait (Senior Library Assistant)

Ruth's knowledge enables her to trace the links between collections, as well as between collections and books, whilst (importantly) she also understands the significance of the collections in terms of the communities they reflect. This is due to her lived experience as someone whose own family history brings together those of numerous communities which have migrated to the Manchester area in the past. She has lived and breathed the heritages the Centre's collections seek to preserve, and provides insight into the 'lived history' of what the collection covers.

Ruth has a BA in Sociology with Social Policy, and an MA in History (focusing on local Manchester history), ideal subject specialisations for understanding how the Centre's materials relate to a whole range of issues and events that have affected different communities. She can give expert advice on what is available relevant to any particular project, why a certain collection might be useful, and exactly what to focus on in that collection to fulfil specific requirements. This advice can be tailored to individual academic and project needs.

2. Ruth Tait's insights into the strengths of the Centre and its collections

When I asked in a recent interview what she thought were particular strengths of the Centre, Ruth listed the following:

- ***The Centre has a deep and rich local history collection.*** As a record of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) presence in and around Greater Manchester (as well as the North of England generally), it has no parallel. The archive builds on the local history section of the Centre's library, with a particularly rich and varied oral history collection which includes representatives of a whole variety of communities that settled in the Greater Manchester area over the decades. The oral history interviews have been transcribed so they can be read, but users can also listen to recordings of the interviews themselves. This adds a whole new dimension to our understanding. 'Hidden voices' can be fully heard, and their spontaneity gives life to the Centre's collection as a whole.
- ***The Centre's archive and library are in the same location,*** and given the library is of compact size, its subsections are all physically close together. This differs from most libraries, which keep archives quite separate from the book collections (often in different geographical locations), and have subsections scattered throughout extensive buildings. In the Centre it's very easy to check out a whole range of race relations-related subjects and types of resources in a relatively short time, and without needing to move between buildings.
- ***The Centre's resources are subject-based in organisation, and the materials are very simply referenced.*** This makes the reference system easy to understand and use, and it's possible to check out a whole section of books on the same subject very easily.
- ***As the main 'Human Interface', Ruth understands both the archive collection and the library,*** meaning that in relation to any particular subject, she can bring together materials from both. This is unusual. The archive illuminates the book collection, and Ruth can bring to bear her own insights in

drawing out the interweaving of books with archives relating to particular subjects to help enrich your project or research.

- ***Ruth can advise on which materials in what quantity would be necessary for producing a particular project.*** Having completed her studies only recently, and whilst working full time, she understands how to produce essays, projects and dissertations under pressure, as well as the depth of primary and secondary sources a whole range of projects may require.

3. Ruth Tait's advice on how to prepare for consulting the 'Human Interfaces'

You can just go into the Centre and have a chat with Ruth, though to meet with Hannah it would be best to phone in beforehand to make an appointment, as she is often out and about. To get the most out of the conversations, Ruth advises you do the following first:

- Have a look at the [Centre's website](#) to get a feel for the kinds of resources on offer.
- Check out the [Subject areas](#) page of the website to see if the subject area you're interested in is covered.
- Check out the [Archive collections](#) page of the website to get an overview of the collections available.
- Read the blog post '[Ways into the Collection: Databases](#)' and try out some database searches so that where possible you've made a start in identifying the kinds of material you want to look at.

So, that's my introduction to the Centre's 'Human Interfaces'. I invite you to come along to benefit from their expertise, and my thanks to Ruth Tait for her cooperation in producing this post.