

The Nichols Archive Project

The letters, diaries and business papers of three generations of the Nichols family - John Nichols (1745-1826), his son John Bowyer Nichols (1779-1863) and his grandson, John Gough Nichols (1806-1873) are a mine of information for the eighteenth and nineteenth century British book trade, antiquarianism and social life. The printing house which John Nichols inherited in 1777 from his former master and partner, William Bowyer the younger was one of the largest in London. It went back to the late seventeenth century and continued as a family concern until 1939. The Nicholsons printed and edited many of the great county histories of the Georgian period and their own scholarly interests ranged wide, including literary biography, local history, bibliography, genealogy, art and sculpture, the cultural life of the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts and the collecting of autograph letters. Most important of all was the *Gentleman's Magazine* which they owned, edited and printed between 1778 and 1856. The voluminous correspondence which it generated put them at the centre of a national network of antiquaries, bibliographers, collectors, artists, engravers, authors, printers, booksellers and book binders.

John Nichols's son and grandson made use of his correspondence and manuscript collections in completing *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century* and *The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First* which Nichols had left unfinished at the time of his death. They arranged his papers as they went along, annotating and incorporating them within their own vast correspondence and papers collected in the course of their own research. In particular, John Bowyer Nichols meticulously preserved and organised hundreds of his family's letters and papers and mounted them in a series of nineteen albums called 'Family Records' that document the family's personal affairs from the birth of John Nichols in 1745 to about 1850. John Nichols' daughter, Anna Susannah Nichols (1788-1853) shared her father's interest in autograph hunting and used her father's duplicates and discards to form her own collection. Her niece, Mary Anne Nichols (1813-1870), daughter of John Bowyer and sister of John Gough Nichols, continued the Nichols tradition by adding more and more items to her own large collection from family papers, by exchange with other collectors and by purchase in the salerooms.

It was inevitable that the archive would not remain intact forever. Sales of Nichols books and manuscripts began shortly after the death of John Nichols in 1826 and continued with two sales of John Bowyer Nichols' library and manuscripts at Sotheby's in 1843 and 1864. After John Gough Nichols' death in 1873 his own library and manuscripts were sold off in further Sotheby sales in 1874, 1879 and 1929. Then, in 1951, part of Mary Anne Nichols' enormous autograph collection, bequeathed to her nephew, John Bowyer Buchanan Nichols, at her death in 1870, also went under the hammer, scattering most of the remaining Nichols papers far and wide. But, for all that, Sotheby's did not sell everything, and material has been turning up ever since in libraries, archives, private collections throughout this country and in America.

My own interest in the Nichols family and their papers began in 1982 when, as an undergraduate, I lighted upon a small volume of pocket diaries covering the years

1823-1834 in the Flask Bookshop in Hampstead. I found myself introduced to late Georgian London through the eyes of a girl between the ages of ten and twenty-one, whose family regularly entertained writers, artists, printers, journalists and antiquaries. It did not take long to discover that she was Mary Anne Nichols, granddaughter of John Nichols, a printer with connections with Stationers' Hall, biographer of Hogarth, friend of Johnson and county historian of Leicestershire - but who, until then, I had never heard of. As I transcribed and indexed these diaries I began to find out about John Nichols and his family and this, in due course, led me to the major collections of Nichols papers now held by the Bodleian Library, British Library, Beinecke Library at Yale University, the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington DC and the Butler Rare Book Library at Columbia University in New York. From these repositories I began to learn more about the Nichols family's business affairs, their scholarly interests and their wide network of friendships. In 1995 eight hitherto unknown volumes of Nichols Family Records appeared at Bonham's auction house. They were subsequently acquired by the Bodleian Library. The following year my research led me to discover many thousands of Nichols papers that had remained, untouched and largely unknown by scholars, in attics, cupboards, sock drawers and even wicker hampers in private homes across England.

In 1996, after some fourteen years working on the Nicholsons and excited by these new discoveries of Nichols papers I established the Nichols Archive Project with generous grants from the Bibliographical Society and Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society and encouragement from friends, colleagues and members of the Nichols family. It provides an analytical guide to the tens of thousands of Nichols letters, diaries and documents now scattered world-wide among over a hundred libraries and private collections. It uses a Microsoft Access database to make them accessible and enable us to piece together both sides of a correspondence long separated and reconstitute epistolary 'conversations' between members of the book trade, antiquaries, family and friends. With details of nearly 21,000 letters and papers now on the database (2026), it is a significant research tool helping to rebuild and virtually reunite this important archive of literary and antiquarian history..

The Nichols Archive Project is of value to anyone interested in the Nicholsons, their printing business, their research or their wider contribution to the world of scholarship between the mid eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. The database consists of detailed calendars of each letter, preserving the original order of the private collections and using the reference numbers allocated by public repositories but allowing them to be arranged in a variety of ways - letters to and from one correspondent or those between two people can be arranged in chronological order, and papers in a public repository or private collection can be arranged in order of reference number or alphabetically by sender. Each letter is calendared in detail to include all personal names mentioned in the text, titles of books or articles, research topics and place names. This permits 'free-text' searches to be made for a name, book or topic across the database as a whole and is particularly useful, for example, in tracing the course of production of a book that passed through the Nichols press or in tracing the contribution of John Nichols to a particular work, such as Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*. Free text searches for words familiar to bibliographers - sheet, type, plate, block, binder, revise, press, engrave or apprentice, for example - find hundreds and sometimes thousands of letters relevant to these topics. The database can also be used to study heraldry or autograph collecting; to

identify anonymous contributors to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, or assess the impact on the Nichols' lives and business of the fire which, on the night of 8 February 1808, destroyed their printing house and warehouse in Red Lion Passage, Fleet Street.

There are links from the database to full transcripts of such longer documents as diaries which John Bowyer Nichols kept as a young man in London in the 1790s, Mary Anne Nichols' pocket diaries from the 1820s, her travel journals recording her visits to Leicestershire, Oxford and Europe later in the nineteenth century and the catalogue of John Nichols's topographical library prepared by his daughters after his death. There are also links to a Union Index to the thousands of people named in the Nichols's private letters and to a detailed Chronology of the lives, interests and achievements of the Nichols family between the birth of John Nichols in 1745 and the death of his grandson in 1873. This Chronology draws upon their letters and papers to provide yearly details of their engagements, health, meetings, dinner parties, business affairs and research projects as well as an itinerary of their social visits and travels further afield. It also lists all the titles that the Nichols family were associated with, either as printers or as booksellers and their known contributions to the *Gentleman's Magazine* and other periodicals.

The Nichols Archive Database and the transcripts and research documents linked to it are constantly growing but together they are already proving to be a most useful resource. The database is soon to be made available online, but anyone is welcome to consult it by appointment with me at Surrey History Centre in Woking, where I am Heritage Public Services and Engagement Manager. Regular updates of news and progress are also posted on the Project's pages hosted by the Centre for English Local History at the University of Leicester:

<https://le.ac.uk/english-local-history/about/collections/julian-pooley>