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The Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive at the Dorset History Centre: Current and Future Plans

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Abstract

The archive of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland transferred on deposit from the Dorset Museum and Art Gallery (formerly the Dorset County Museum) to the Dorset History Centre in 2018. In this article, County Archivist Sam Johnston describes the Centre's work with the archive and the plans to bring about a project to fully catalogue the materials and make the archive available online for the first time.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; Valentine Ackland; Dorset History Centre; archives; catalogue.

This is very much a companion piece to the article written by Judith Bond (see pp. 32–40)¹ and is intended to bring members of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society up to date with the current status of the archive of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland (hereafter STW/VA Archive). The archive is now held at the Dorset History Centre (DHC).² I would like first to pay tribute to the excellent and time-consuming work carried out by Judith and her colleague Dr Morine Krissdottir. Their efforts have resulted in the creation of a substantial and detailed listing of what lies within the SWT/VA Archive. This is, however, only accessible to researchers as an Excel spreadsheet. Excel has many virtues, but it is not what archivists would call a catalogue – that is, a structured hierarchy of linked descriptions which explain both the content and the inter-relationship between different parts of the materials. Nonetheless

it provides a great platform from which we would like to create a project that will bring this cataloguing to fruition and open up the archive in a way that is not currently possible.

By way of background, I should explain how the STW/VA Archive came to the Dorset History Centre.³ The DHC, as its name suggests, is the county-wide archives and local studies service for Dorset, holding thousands of unique collections on paper, parchment and other media dating back to 965 AD and covering a huge range of subject matter. The service provides high-quality, environmentally controlled storage and has a conservator on the staff who oversees macro-preservation (in a strongroom environment) and undertakes repairs to damaged archival materials.

In recent years, the DHC has developed a strong working relationship with its fellow Dorchester-based institution, the Dorset Museum and Art Gallery (DMAG). In 2018, during the latter's major refurbishment project (£16.4 million), it was decided by the Board of Trustees that archival material would be better off transferred to the DHC where it could sit alongside similar collections, leaving the museum to focus on its objects and works of art. Three principal archives were



Figure 1. The STW/VA Archive located in the DHC repositories (Source: Reproduced with permission of the Dorset History Centre).

transferred to the DHC – those of Thomas Hardy, William Barnes and STW/VA (Figure 1). All three remain the property of the DMAG, but are managed by the DHC. The latter provides public access to collections in its searchroom and has a team of archivists and support staff, including a digitisation specialist whose role it is to increase public awareness and use of the archives wherever possible. Moreover, collections can be seen and accessed alongside a wide range of complementary material.

Since the principal STW/VA Archive arrived at the DHC we have been able to enhance its content and condition in four ways:

- 1) The DHC received a £12,000 grant from the National Manuscripts Conservation Trust to work on the three literary collections. Certain items from within the STW/VA Archive were conserved, including some sketchbooks and a series of handmade notebooks.
- 2) With the DMAG, in 2020 the DHC completed the purchase of a set of correspondence between Sylvia Townsend Warner and Elizabeth and Oliver Warner (Figure 2). This was made possible by grants from the V&A Purchase Fund and the Friends of the National Libraries (accession 11435).
- 3) The former director of the DMAG, Roger Peers, bequeathed to the DHC a set of letters received from Sylvia Townsend Warner, a friend and collaborator.
- 4) Sylvia Townsend Warner's former literary executor, Susanna Pinney, gifted a series of records relating to her involvement in the organisation of the author's papers (accession 12158).

The DHC viewed the three literary collections as priorities for access. The service started this process with the Hardy Archive. This is substantially larger than that of STW/VA and had a similar descriptive list provided via a spreadsheet. Working with our support charity, Dorset Archives Trust,⁴ a total of £70,000 was raised through grant aid and public donations, and we are currently six months into a project to catalogue the Hardy Archive which will appear online once complete in summer 2025. In essence, we wish to carry out the same process with the STW/VA Archive, building on the solid foundation provided by Judith and Morine's work. There are 85 boxes of archival material (Figure 3). We estimate that this will take an archivist around eight months to work through. In addition, working with the DMAG, we would like to link this to the cataloguing of linked objects at the museum – to ensure that the whole of the couple's Dorset-based legacy is properly recorded.

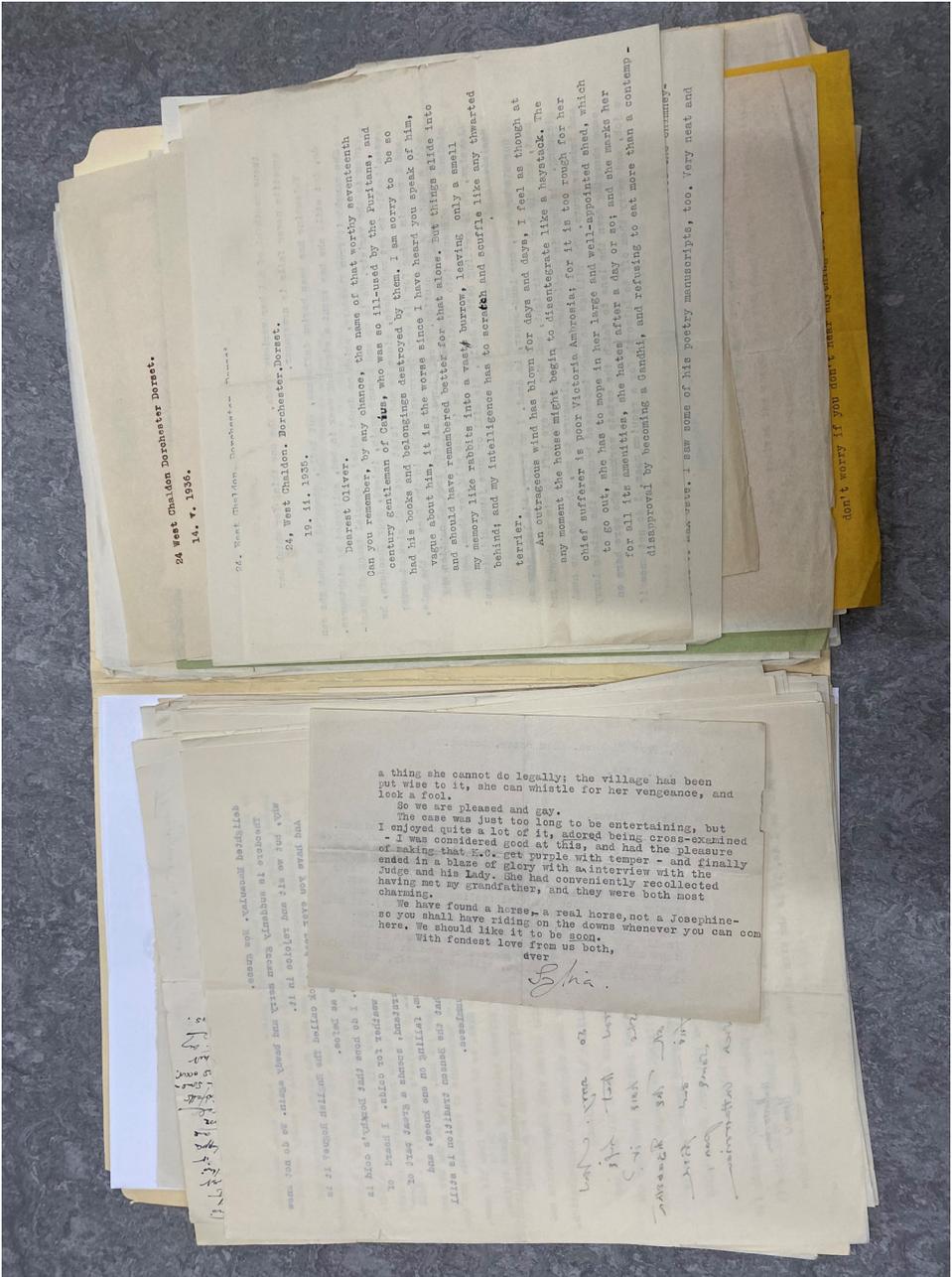


Figure 2. Detail of Warner's correspondence with Elizabeth and Oliver Warner (accession 11435) (Source: Reproduced with permission of the Dorset History Centre).



Figure 3. Portrait of Warner by Doris Ullman, ca. 1929 (Source: Reproduced with permission of the Dorset History Centre).

In July 1922 I was in Whiteley's Bargain section (where I was already buying blocks of writing paper ruled feint), and on the stationer's counter I saw some Ordnance maps. I bought one of Essex, because I did not know Essex even by map. The green marsh spaces on the map, and the blue creeks, and the marsh names, pleased me. On August Bank Holiday, ~~as I could not go to the Brit. Mus.~~ I went to ~~Southend~~, took a bus out of the town to a name on my map, and spend a long slow day walking about. I came to a creek, running slowly, and beyond it was an island with a white horse on it and some farm-buildings. This was the genesis of The True Heart. Later that summer I went to Drinkwater St Laurence, again by my map, and spent a month in the marshes, walking, reading Freud, writing poetry, reading Villon, writing (I think, a play about sin-eating). All the landscape of The T.H. comes from that summer: the wild orchard, the sea-wall, the saltings, Dannie (except the winter church, which I passed on a walk with David Garnett, near Dengie, a couple of years later) The second farm was made up from the country near Maldon, and a little from by Dunmow.

In 1924 I was thinking enough about writing (I had begun Lolly Willowses then) to say to Pea Howe that it would be a good exercise to take a folk song or a fairy story and re-tell it. This idea was the beginning of Eleanor Barley ~~which I did not finish~~ and of The True Heart, a re-telling of Cupid and Psyche ~~which I did not finish either~~. But as far as the scene in Dannie churchyard and the return was written at this time, on blocks of writing paper ruled feint.

In 1927 I went for the summer holiday to Box Cottage in Wiltshire, and there I went on with The True Heart, revising the first pages; but I ~~did not get going with it till I was back in London.~~ It was after writing the cockerel scene that I went out for William's midnight walk under an umbrella, obsessed with my storm; to discover presently that it was a mild warm autumn evening. The scene in Bovent Garden and Buckingham Palace were written at Penally, the following summer, and I finished the book that autumn, the childbed pages being written on the same night ~~after Oliver and I had taken Dorothy to life in~~. Other material was the card of cab-fares in London, from the Tomlin's hall; the True Secret, which I have never seen, but my mother talked of it; my chow, William; Geoffrey Sturt for Constantine Melhuish; the frozen birch-trees which came out of Kensington Gardens; Mrs Acates (Sukey's letter, the chow being called Master Muff, and some of Sukey's traits, and her build and colouring); and marsh ways and people learned about from my landlady at Drinkwater St Laurence, Mrs May - who also supplied a good deal of Mrs Leake in Lolly Willowses. Prudence had something from my unpleasant nurse Florence Gregory. Sukey's own earliest feeling about marshes was my own, dating from childhood, and perhaps Great Expectations - and which must have had a good deal to say in my choice of the map of Essex from the bargain ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ counter.

The vignette was drawn for me by Ray Garnett, the choice of a tea-pot being mine.

My chow
C

Figure 4. Warner's typescript notes on *The True Heart* (Source: Reproduced with permission of the Dorset History Centre).

We know from previous cataloguing projects that when material is searchable and locatable online, the use of a collection increases. This sounds like an incredibly obvious thing to point out, but it is also true to say that acquiring a budget to undertake cataloguing projects is not easy. There are very few funders that will support this work, in spite of its importance in opening up collections to the wider world. The documenting or cataloguing of collections – which is really the best means of understanding their content and value – is rarely a priority for funders of heritage and academic research. More positively, there is already considerable interest in the STW/VA Archive – from academics, writers and students. We are confident that when detailed descriptions of the archive are able to be found online, interest will only grow and use of the collection both in person here in Dorchester (Figure 4) and also via digital copies will increase. In addition, there will be the opportunity to digitise parts of the archive and make them available online (copyright notwithstanding) and also to link to other institutions holding material created by or pertinent to Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland.

At present we are considering various options as to how to acquire funding for the STW/VA Archive project, working in close concert with the DMAG and other interested parties. We would welcome any suggestions from members of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society and will ensure that we keep the Society informed of our progress in this important endeavour.

Note on contributor

Sam Johnston is the County Archivist in Dorset, a role he has held for 15 years. Prior to that, he worked in Plymouth, Cornwall and London. He was educated at the universities of Manchester and Aberystwyth.

Notes

- 1 Judith Bond. 'The Archive of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland'. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 24, no. 1 (2024), pp. 32–40. <https://doi.org/10.14324/STW.24.1.03>.
- 2 <https://archive-catalogue.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/records/D-TWA> (accessed 12 November 2024).
- 3 <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/libraries-history-culture/dorset-history-centre> (accessed 12 November 2024).
- 4 <https://www.dorsetarchivestrust.org> (accessed 12 November 2024).