

Committee:	Date:
Culture, Libraries and Heritage Committee	27 May 2014
Subject:	Public
Great Parchment Book project receives Succeed Award	
Report of:	For Information
Director of Culture, Heritage and Libraries	
Summary	
<p>London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) in collaboration with several partners, including the Centre for Digital Humanities at University College London (UCL), has been engaged in a ground-breaking project to conserve, digitally reconstruct, transcribe and publish the Great Parchment Book, an iconic item in the archive of The Honourable The Irish Society lodged at LMA. The successful completion of the project was reported to this Committee at its meeting on 1 July 2013. It has recently been announced that project partners LMA and UCL have received a 2014 European Succeed Award which recognises outstanding contributions to the digitisation of textual content. The winners were selected from 19 nominations world-wide and, due to the high quality of the Great Parchment Book project, the Board decided to distinguish it with one of two Commendations of Merit.</p>	
Recommendation	
<p>It is recommended that the achievement of the award be noted.</p>	

Main Report

Background: History of the Great Parchment Book

1. In 1639, after prolonged proceedings in Star Chamber, Charles I claimed as forfeit the Irish estates of the Irish Society and the City companies in Northern Ireland. A Commission under the Great Seal was instituted to survey the forfeited estates, consolidating all contracts and particulars of the affected rental lands and enrolling their details into one volume. The resulting book, which is lodged with the Society's archives at London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), therefore includes invaluable information about the County of Londonderry in the early 17th century. The book was apparently passed to the Irish Society when it was reconstituted by Charles II in 1662. (Archive reference CLA/049/EM/02/018).
2. A fire at Guildhall in 1786 caused extensive damage to the historical collections of the Irish Society, destroying a large proportion of the 17th century material entirely, and causing dramatic 'shrivelling' and fire damage to the vellum pages of the Great Parchment Book. This important document therefore had been unavailable to historians since this date.

Background: Physical condition of the Book

3. All the folios were fire damaged with severe overall cockling and, on most, shrinkage of at least one edge. Where the shrinking had occurred, the parchment was very stiff and slightly transparent and the text had shrunk too. On some folios, the cockling was so severe that the parchment folded in on itself, meaning that substantial areas of text were not visible.
4. At LMA the surviving 165 folios of the volume were stored loosely tied into bundles equating as far as could be determined to the passages dealing with the particular lands of the different Companies and of the Society. They were all classified as 'unfit' and could not be consulted by members of the public.

Project

5. The Irish Society agreed in December 2009 to approve the project to restore the Great Parchment Book subject to external project funding being obtained for (a) the physical conservation of the Great Parchment Book, (b) the creation of a surrogate version of the book and (c) its display in 2013. It was envisaged that the project would lead to the recovery of as much of the text of the Great Parchment Book as conservation science would allow, through both the physical conservation of the folios, and digital surrogacy and interpretation. It was hoped that the project would form the centrepiece of the City of London's contribution to the process of commemoration of the Plantation of Ulster. If the results (or at least partial results) could be available by 2013, the 400th anniversary of the charter of Londonderry, the volume and accompanying digital resource could take centre stage in the planned exhibitions in Northern Ireland.
6. LMA was awarded a grant by the National Manuscripts Conservation Trust (NMCT) in 2012 for a short term project to conserve the Great Parchment Book with match-funding from Derry City Council. The aim of the project was to document thoroughly the format and condition of the Great Parchment Book; investigate the treatment options for the project; carry out tests and develop workable methods to open out the parchment sufficiently to facilitate digital imaging; to carry out and fully document the treatment; train other conservators at LMA; publish the results of the conservation project; and contribute to the dissemination of the wider project as a whole. The work was completed in September 2012.
7. On the digital imaging, LMA entered into an agreement with the Centre for Digital Humanities at University College London to sponsor a research engineer on the Engineering Doctorate in Virtual Environments, Imaging and Visualisation programme for four years. The engineering doctoral student, Kazim Pal, began work in September 2010 at the start of the 2010/11 academic year. Most of his first year was spent completing the taught element of his course, but in his second year he turned his attention to research and imaging. Following on from the conservation, he carefully photographed each folio in order to create a digitally enhanced image. At the same time he also worked on

software to enable selected text to be flattened as it is being read. The ground-breaking interactive method UCL and colleagues at ETH Zurich have developed to digitally restore severely damaged historical parchments based on their work on the Great Parchment may be seen in a video at <http://web4.cs.ucl.ac.uk/staff/t.weyrich/projects/gpb/parchflat.mp4>. Work at LMA to digitally flatten and upload all the improved images using the method developed by UCL is about to get underway.

8. The third element of the project was the transcription and encoding of the text using standard-based methodologies to capture information to enable sophisticated online presentation and searching of the document contents. Following the award a grant from the Marc Fitch Fund towards the transcription, LMA recruited a palaeographer, Dr Patricia Stewart, to transcribe and encode the text. She also worked with the Centre for Digital Humanities to test their software. This work was also supported by donations from eight of the Great Twelve livery companies whose estates are recorded in the Great Parchment Book.
9. The encoding of the text has enabled comprehensive online searching of the document and LMA is very grateful to the Irish Society which gave £5000 towards the Great Parchment Book website. The design and development of the website was undertaken by a commercial company with which LMA worked very closely to produce the unique website www.greatparchmentbook.org. On the website, the text and images are displayed alongside each other, and users can choose whether to view an encoded or modern transcription, and between the original or enhanced images. The text is searchable as free text, or by personal name, place name and company, and it is possible to browse through the book or display a particular page, making it accessible to a wide range of users from academics to local and family historians. The website went live on 29 May 2013, in time for the press launch of the exhibition **Plantation: Process, people, perspectives** in the refurbished Derry Guildhall, which opened on 10 June 2013. The website is a central feature of the exhibition which has also featured an original folio of the Great Parchment Book. Both the website and the exhibition have been very well received: the exhibition has received nearly 325,000 visitors to date and the website has received over 50,000 page views since it was launched.
10. The project has been publicised through a blog which has attracted interest from around the world. The website has attracted significant public attention. One of the highlights was a blog post by the First Minister of Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Peter D Robinson MLA, "I cannot praise the work of the LMA & UCL highly enough. In completing this mammoth project they have succeeded in opening a veritable treasure trove of information relating to a most significant period in the history of Ulster [...]". Further supportive comments, many of which can be found on the blog, have been received from a range of people around the world including local historians in Northern Ireland, family historians in Australia, the City livery companies involved, the Irish Society and other funders and supporters. The blog is now embedded in the website and LMA staff are continuing to post updates on the project. The project has also been promoted at events such as an international digital humanities conference at

the University of Nebraska, United States of America in July 2013 and a history conference in Belfast and Derry in September 2013. Folios of the Book were also displayed and shown to the President of Ireland on his visit to Guildhall for the State Banquet in April.

11. Looking to the future, LMA is running a Great Parchment Book Day on 25 July 2014 which will not only tell the Great Parchment Book story, but also look to the future and explore accessing historical documents through innovative technologies. Alongside this, LMA is exploring the possibility of developing its role as a centre of expertise for the conservation, imaging, and digital flattening of distorted parchments using UCL's digital platform, and engaging in collaborative partnerships with other institutions holding such documents.

Succeed Award

12. LMA and UCL are delighted to have received a 2014 European Succeed Award for the Great Parchment Book project. Succeed is funded by the European Union and promotes the take up and validation of research results in mass digitisation, with a focus on textual content. You can find further information about the awards at <http://succeed-project.eu/succeed-awards>. The winners of the 2014 awards were selected from 19 nominations world-wide and, due to the high quality of the Great Parchment Book project, the Board decided to distinguish it with one of two Commendations of Merit. Further information can be found at <http://succeed-project.eu/succeed-awards/awards-2014>.

Conclusion

13. The Succeed Award Commendation of Merit recognises the international significance and ground breaking nature of the project, particularly in conservation and digital imaging, and has served to enhance both the City's reputation and that of LMA. It is evident that the results of this work by LMA and UCL will be of longer term benefit both to LMA and to other institutions holding damaged parchment and LMA hopes to build on this new area of expertise in the future. The digital imaging and transcription also provides a lasting resource for historians researching the history of Northern Ireland in local, national and international contexts.

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