Anyone connected with the University will be familiar with the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), Britain’s foremost museum relating to the history of the countryside. But the University’s collections—museum, library, and archive—are richer than most people would imagine, and cover a wide range of subject areas.

**Hidden treasures**

The collections are available for consultation by anyone via the Special Collections reading room, and many of them are catalogued online. Three of the University’s collections—MERL, The Beckett Collection, and The Archive of British Publishing and Printing—have been officially designated as being of national and international significance, but treasures abound elsewhere as well.

Here, Guy Baxter (pictured), the University Archivist, picks his top ten hidden treasures in the University’s rich collections.

- **My first choice is in fact the oldest archival document held by the University:** a charter of Henry II to the Abbey of St. Sauveur-le-Vicomte, issued at Westminster sometime between 1155 and 1158. This manuscript is complemented by a comprehensive collection of photocopies of images and transcripts of the charters and other acts of the Angevin Kings of England, including Henry’s sons Richard the Lion-Heart and King John.

- **William Penn (1644–1718) built a very different empire from that of Henry II.** An early Quaker persecuted for his religious beliefs, Penn went on to found the colony (now a US State) which still bears his name, Pennsylvania. Amazingly, this letter from 1701 survived in the papers of Britain’s first female MP Nancy Astor, herself an American with an interest in her country’s history. Penn himself died just a few miles from Reading, in Ruscombe near Twyford.

- **This design by Owen Jones (1809–1874) was recently part of a selection of images being considered for merchandising.** No one is sure whether it is for a tile or for some stationery, but in my opinion its striking beauty is not up for debate. Jones was a remarkable designer, influenced by a wide range of styles, including the Alhambra Palace in Granada, which he studied intensively. He is perhaps best known for his work on the Crystal Palace and for his extraordinary reference book for designers, *A Grammar of Ornament*, which is on display at Special Collections in Summer/Autumn 2013.

- **The University’s large collection of material relating to the history of local biscuit manufacturer Huntley & Palmers is a source of many visual delights.** As well as enjoying the colourful packaging, I also find the records of the business and of the extensive factory very interesting. This map demonstrates the vast area of central Reading occupied by the company. Seed firm Sutton’s (whose detailed archive is also here) had extensive works nearby. Appropriately, the archives are now held in a house given to the University by Alfred Palmer, one of many examples of the family supporting the University over the years.

- **One example of the Palmers’ generosity was the donation of the land for the London Road campus.** This photograph from around the turn of the last century shows that there has been very little change to the University site, but a vast difference in terms of transport—note the tramlines and overhead lines. I sometimes ponder this image as I sit in traffic on London Road. Trams continued to run along London Road until 1939, and it was not until 1947 that the University expanded onto Whiteknights Park.

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WH Smith is one of the most familiar names on Britain’s high streets and railway stations. The company, started in London in around 1790, is noted for its development of news distribution, including the use of railways as the network expanded, the establishment of platform bookstalls, and diversification into printing, publishing, recorded music, DIY and even television. The company’s rich archive has been at Reading since 2011, and includes this iconic ‘Newsboy’ image.

Ladybird books were first produced during the First World War by Wills & Hepworth, a jobbing printer. Initially they were simply children’s story books but after the Second World War the firm started to produce educational books which increased sales enormously. Remarkably, the price stayed the same at 2s 6d from 1945 to 1971, a feat achieved by strict production rules and increasingly large print runs. This item, from the 1958 title Shopping with Mother, is part of the University’s collection of 700 boxes of original artwork and proofs, and is a particular favourite of mine.

In my selection, I could not ignore the historical records deposited by Ransomes, Sims & Jefferies Ltd at MERL. The archive is notable for its diversity, extensive coverage of the firm’s products and activities, and not least its time span, ranging from the late eighteenth century to the present day. Ransomes of Ipswich were a leading firm of agricultural engineers and a major exporter. These hand tinted machinery drawings were made to illustrate publicity material and to show customers – in the days before photography – what the product would actually look like.

2013 marks 60 years since the first production of Samuel Beckett’s play Waiting for Godot. As the holder of the largest collection in the world of material relating to Beckett (1906–1989), the University has been keen to celebrate the milestone. This image, which shows the cover of the programme for the first performance (at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris), was displayed at a special event in the Department of Art in April. I love the challenge that the performing arts present to archivists – we can never go back to the actual performance, but we can, I hope, capture something of its essence. Striking items like this one can only help us to summon up the spirit of the past.

I love this photograph by John Tarlton of Highland ponies stalking in Inverness-shire. Tarlton (1918–1980) is currently the subject of an exhibition at the Museum of English Rural Life which displays the full range of his remarkable countryside photography. This was, in many ways, the hardest choice when deliberating my top treasures, because the photographic collections at MERL are enormously deep and rich (there are well over a million items) and because I have known them for so long.

‘This photograph was the hardest choice when deliberating my top ten treasures, because the photographic collections at MERL contain over a million items’

Find out more at: www.reading.ac.uk/special-collections