

The Devon and Exeter Institution: A User Guide

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The Devon and Exeter Institution (DEI) was founded in 1813 by a group of around two hundred gentlemen from the city, 'for promoting the general diffusion of Science, Literature and Art, and for illustrating the Natural and Civil History of the county of Devon and the city of Exeter'.¹

Originally, it was a combination of a small museum and subscription library, with a number of scientific and artistic artefacts (many of which were de-accessioned to establish the Royal Albert Memorial Museum); it settled into its current existence as a library and reading room by the end of the nineteenth century. The Institution now consists of a library of approx. 40,000 volumes, prints, maps and pamphlets in a Grade II* listed Tudor and Georgian building in the Cathedral Close. Two large libraries contain the collection, surrounded by a refreshment room, offices and reading rooms upstairs. Exeter University took over the day-to-day administration of the DEI in 1972; a number of items from the DEI are therefore available to be viewed under the University's library catalogue, although this by no means covers the entirety of the collection. The DEI became an Educational Charitable Trust in 1989. There are diverse themes within the collection which are typical of early 19th century collections. As well as the library itself, the DEI organises lectures and film viewings both for its members and the general public. It enjoys close links with Libraries Unlimited, the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, the South West Heritage Trust and the Cathedral Library and Archive. It is a member of the Association of Independent Libraries. Tours of the roof (undergoing refurbishment as of summer 2016) and the library are available on Wednesdays from 1-4pm.

Using the DEI

The Institution is located at 7 Cathedral Close; from the outside it is an unassuming building, with a small brass plaque on the door giving its name. Students can gain initial access to the library by filling out an application form on the DEI website (<http://www.devonandexeterinstitution.org/>). They should then present their UniCard on their first visit to the DEI in order to validate their application. From then on, it is a matter of

¹ <http://www.devonandexeterinstitution.org/>

following the procedure below like non-student users of the library. The DEI is open on weekdays from 9.30 until 5.00.

In order to enter, students will need to press the buzzer on the left-hand side of the door. A member of staff will then open the door from the inside. All users of the DEI are required to sign in and out, giving their name and company; for Exeter students this will obviously be the university. It is useful if you can give your student number as well as your name, as this helps the staff identify how many students are using the DEI. Due to the large number of irreplaceable items in the collection, no food or drink may be consumed in the two rooms that make up the library itself. The Courtenay Room, towards the back of the building, is available for users to eat in. Lunches, tea and coffee are available to buy here. Only pencils may be used in the library itself, rather than pens, again due to the uniqueness of many of the items.

Notable items

- A huge collection of newspapers stretching back to the nineteenth century, including both national publications and local ones such as the Devon & Exeter Gazette and the Exeter Flying Post. This collection of local newspapers is a unique collection of primary sources for the last few centuries
- An almost-complete run of the Illustrated London News, offering a primary source for most of the major historical events of the last two centuries, including the Crimean War and the First World War
- A wide selection of fiction and non-fiction works by local authors, some of which are available for purchase
- A comprehensive collection of works relating to the South West, including maps, journals and books. Again, some of this is available to buy from the DEI
- A selection of maps from the early 1800s onwards, offering a variety of scales and dates. Many of these are useful for comparative purposes, covering the same area in different eras. There are also more subject-specific maps, such as a collection focussing on geology
- A significant collection of archival material relating to the Courtenay family, the principal aristocratic dynasty of Devon and Exeter. Members of the Courtenay family were closely involved with the early years of the DEI, with the 10th and 11th Earls of Devon both serving as its President in 1823 and 1863 respectively
- The Edward Ashworth Archive – a collection of architectural prints and drawings from the nineteenth century. Like the material on the Courtenay family, this collection is unique to the DEI
- A number of Street Directories from the nineteenth century onwards, which are extremely useful for any genealogical research or work on a specific individual. The collection also includes the Navy Lists, Army Lists and a variety of clerical directories

The Devon and Exeter Institution is a rare example of an Enlightenment collection in its original setting, and is a very important resource for Exeter students. For further information on the Institution, its contents and programme, please contact the Programme Manager, Emma Dunn (emmadunn@devonandexeterinstitution.org) or the Librarian, Anne Howard (anne.howard@devonandexeterinstitution.org).