



Royal College
of Physicians

Scholar, courtier, magician: the lost library of John Dee

18 January – 29 July 2016

An exhibition exploring
one of Tudor England's
most extraordinary and
enigmatic figures.

Free
entry

Mon-Fri 9am-5pm
Evening events and weekend tours

www.rcplondon.ac.uk/johndee

Regent's Park, London NW1 4LE



Explore the lost library of John Dee, and discover the fascinating story of Elizabeth I's 'conjurer'.

In his public life, Dee was an outstanding polymath. He served Queen Elizabeth I at court, advised navigators on trade routes to the New World, travelled throughout Europe and studied ancient history, astronomy, cryptography and mathematics.

But Dee has always been best known for his private study of angels and alchemy. Possibly an inspiration for Shakespeare's sorcerer Prospero, Dee famously attempted to contact spirits and discover the philosopher's stone. His alchemical pursuits and 'angelic conversations' continue to fascinate, over 400 years after his death.

Dee built – and lost – one of the greatest book collections of his day. Today the Royal College of Physicians holds more than 100 volumes that were stolen from Dee during his lifetime: they are on display for the first time. This exhibition explores Dee's life and legacy through these books, as tantalising glimpses of his thoughts emerge from their heavily annotated margins.

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John Dee, 1557

Who was John Dee?

John Dee was one of Tudor England's most intriguing – and complex – characters. Many details of his life are uncertain, but we can begin to understand his character and beliefs through his diaries, his own published books, and from his hand-written illustrations and annotations which survive in his library.

Dee collected books by many authors on wide-ranging subjects. His library reflects his extraordinary breadth of knowledge and expertise, and provides clues about his interests and intellectual pursuits, including his explorations into the world of the occult.

Scholar

Dee studied and taught classics at Cambridge University. His greatest fascination was with mathematics, which he taught from his home in Mortlake. He wrote a preface to Euclid's *The elements of geometrie*, in which he claimed to have unlocked mathematical secrets, writing: 'I disclose the wonderfull mysteries, by numbers, to be atteyned vnto.'

'that excellent Physitian,
Doctor John Dee'



Courtier

An imperialist with powerful patrons and contacts, Dee used his knowledge to advise the royal court. He gave navigational guidance to Elizabeth I's sea captains and was consulted on astronomical, astrological and medical issues. Contemporaries and later historians speculated that he may also have been a spy.

Alchemist

Dee had a lifelong obsession with alchemy, in particular the quest for the philosopher's stone, which could turn base metals into gold. He built laboratories for alchemical experimentation at his home in Mortlake, Surrey.

Doctor

Dee knew a great deal about medicine, and he personally advised Elizabeth I on her health, but he was not a qualified or registered physician, and he never undertook a formal doctoral degree. Despite this, he was referred to as 'Doctor Dee' from as early as 1563, an acknowledgement of his medical knowledge and of his great learning in general.



Johannes Dee.
Anglus
ndinensis.
Aet. 54.
67.



‘Dee ... chiefly bent
his Studies to the
Mathematicks; in
all parts of which
he was an absolute
and perfect Master.’

The lost library of John Dee

John Dee assembled one of the greatest private libraries of 16th century England. He claimed to have owned over 3,000 books and 1,000 manuscripts, which he kept at his home in Mortlake, Surrey.

While Dee went travelling in the 1580s, he left his library and laboratories in the care of his brother-in-law, Nicholas Fromond. But according to Dee, he ‘unduely sold it presently upon my departure, or caused it to be carried away’.

Dee was devastated by the ransacking of his library. He managed to recover some items, but many remained lost. We know today that some of Dee’s books came into the possession of Nicholas Saunder, a former student of Dee’s.

Saunder’s collections later passed to Henry Pierrepont, the marquis of Dorchester: a devoted book collector. Dorchester’s family presented his entire library to the Royal College of Physicians after his death in 1680.

Research has shown that today the RCP holds more than 100 books that previously belonged to Dee: the largest single collection of his books in the world.





‘Conjurer of wicked and damned Spirites’

Magician

In 1555 Dee was arrested and imprisoned, accused of ‘conspiring by enchantments to destroy Queen Mary’. He survived and was reinstated as a court adviser by Elizabeth I, but his reputation suffered. Despite academic successes, his finances remained precarious for the rest of his life.

Dee strongly defended his reputation, but in his later career he did indeed experiment with magic and the occult. He practised alchemy and used a medium (or ‘sryer’) to attempt to communicate with angels. He also began collecting objects for divination; magical objects long believed to have been Dee’s are on display in the exhibition, on loan from the British Museum and the Science Museum.



John Dee’s crystal, Science Museum, London, Wellcome images



Gold magical disc © Trustees of the British Museum

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**Usual opening hours: Monday – Friday,
9am – 5pm, please note that opening times
may vary – check online before your visit.**

Library, Archive and Museum Services
Tel: +44 (0)20 3075 1543
Email: history@rcplondon.ac.uk
www.rcplondon.ac.uk/johndee

Step-free access. Closed: weekends, public holidays and
for RCP ceremonies – see website for details.

Groups of six or more can visit the RCP by appointment
only. Please email and we'd be delighted to advise you.
The RCP is a busy conference venue and only groups led by
RCP staff can explore the building.

Location: 5-minute walk from Great Portland Street and
Regent's Park underground stations; 10-minute walk from
Warren Street underground station.

Events

Dee late: rediscovering the lost world of John Dee 10 March 2016

A special evening opening including a
performance of *The alchemist's daughter*,
a play inspired by Dee's daughter, Katherine.

Dee late: inside Dee's miraculous mind 9 May 2016

Experts Benjamin Woolley, Deborah Harkness
and Katie Birkwood explore the fascinating
world of John Dee.

Guided walking tours

Encounter physicians, conjurers and quacksalvers
on the streets of London.

Weekend tours

Join us for curator tours and a chance to explore
the exhibition out of hours: check our website for
details.

Book events:

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@RCPmuseum #JohnDee



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