

Out of Hours Exhibition

Scholar, Courtier, Magician: The Lost Library of John Dee

Royal College of Physicians, London,
18 January 2016–29 July 2016

MASTER OF DIVINE SECRETS

A visit to the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) is always a pleasure — Denys Lasdun's marvellous building at the south-east corner of Regent's Park is full of portraits and historical gems — and until the end of July there will be even more to delight the mind and the eye, in the shape of this fascinating exhibition. John Dee was a 16th century magus, court physician to Elizabeth I, mathematician, necromancer, and more than likely a highly connected spy.

Dee was born in London in 1527, and studied mathematics at Cambridge, where he was a founding fellow of Trinity College. He entered the Royal Court fairly promptly, initially under Queen Mary I. Even at that early stage his inclination towards the occult was apparent, and Mary, who had about 300 people suspected of sorcery put to death, arrested Dee for witchcraft in 1555, and he was lucky to survive and stay at Court. When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558 Dee's prodigious learning was put to practical use — his mathematics were employed in helping the English fleet to navigate the high seas, and his less conventional abilities were called on by Dudley, Earl of Leicester, to identify the most auspicious date for Elizabeth's coronation.

For the next 20 years John Dee seems to have concentrated on three things — travelling extensively in Europe, amassing a matchless library of scholarly works, and engaging in the dark arts. His European

Sketch of Ship, annotation by John Dee to Volume II of Collected Works of Cicero. Photograph by Mike Fear. Copyright Royal College of Physicians.



John Dee Performing an Experiment Before Elizabeth I by Henry Gillard Glindoni, 1852–1913. Copyright Wellcome Library, Wellcome Collection.

travels were amazing — Dee was present at the coronation of Maximilian II, King of Hungary, in 1563 and, later, had an audience with Rudolph II, the Holy Roman Emperor. He received an honorary medical degree from the University of Prague, although he never qualified as a physician. His extensive European networks probably explain why he was sent to Germany by Dudley and one of Elizabeth's other courtiers, Walsingham, to collect intelligence. His library ran to over 3000 volumes, a number of which are displayed in this exhibition, and contained 16th century treasures including works by Ovid, Archimedes, Cicero, and Ptolemy, mostly signed and annotated by Dee. He read widely on medical matters, with a particular focus on leprosy, gout, and syphilis.

Dee's more supernatural activities were predicated on two things — his (unsuccessful) search for the philosopher's stone and his belief that he could understand the universe only by learning the original language of God, to do which he needed to converse with angels. Dee put a lot of energy into these conversations, employing mediums or 'scryers' to interpret for him. One of his most sinister scryers was Edward Kelley, who was said to have the ability to raise spirits from the grave.

What must have been a glittering career came to a sad end, although one with a silver lining for the RCP. Dee had left for his last European tour in 1583 and, when he returned some years later, he found that his library had been illegally disposed of by his brother-in-law, Nicholas

Fromond. Fromond probably passed them on to a shadowy individual called Nicholas Saunder, who went to considerable lengths to erase Dee's signatures from the flyleaves of many of his books, as demonstrated in the display cases in the RCP.

However, in the next century, Saunder's collection, stolen from Dee, found its way into the possession of Henry Pierrepont, the Marquis of Dorchester, and forms the core collection in the College's beautiful Dorchester Library.

John Dee's legacy has been substantial, if difficult to trace over the centuries. His work on navigation and cartography was the driving force behind the expansionism of the Elizabethan period, and he was probably the first person to conceive of, and use, the phrase 'British Empire'. His promotion of the study of mathematics outside the universities laid the foundations for their application to the everyday work of mechanics and artisans.

Dee died in poverty and obscurity, but remains a tantalising figure — probably the inspiration for Prospero, *Doctor Faustus*, and Ben Jonson's *Alchemist*, and the subject of one of Peter Ackroyd's best books, *The House of Doctor Dee*.

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<https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/events/scholar-courtier-magician-lost-library-john-dee>

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