

LSE saves Women's Library from closure

London School of Economics steps in to rescue Europe's most extensive collection of women's history amid funding fears

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The Women's Library, rescued by the LSE, is home to artefacts including a bust of Josephine Butler and a Fawcett campaign T-shirt. Photograph: Teri Pengilley

The Women's Library, the oldest and most extensive collection of women's history in Europe, has been saved after being threatened with closure over funding issues.

The London School of Economics and Political Science has successfully bid for custodianship of the collection, whose future was under review after the London Metropolitan University announced it could no longer maintain it.

But campaigners signalled disappointment that the collection, which comprises books, magazines, pamphlets, posters, suffragette banners and other artefacts charting women's issues over four centuries, will be forced to move from its purpose-built building in Aldgate, east London.

Founded in 1926 by the leading suffragist Millicent Fawcett, the collection has evolved into Europe's leading source of documents relating to every aspect of women's lives, including women's rights, suffrage, sexuality, health, education, employment, reproductive rights, the family and the home.

One of its most intriguing and popular exhibits is the return portion of a train ticket from Victoria station in London to Epsom, which was among the personal effects found on Emily Wilding Davison, the 41-year-old suffragette martyred under George V's horse at the 1913 derby, and which raises the question of whether she intended to kill herself that day.

Professor Craig Calhoun, director of the LSE, said: "It is of vital importance that strong historical collections are maintained and I am proud that LSE has been able to step in to

keep the Women's Library open.

"There are numerous synergies between the Women's Library collection and LSE's existing holdings. Combined, they will undoubtedly make one of the best international collections for the support of research on women's lives and gender issues."

The LSE said the move would bring together for the first time the papers of Baroness Seear, former chair of the Fawcett society. The open collection will be housed in a new reading room connected to an exhibition space.

Ten years ago the collection was given a heritage lottery-funded building in Aldgate, having been locked away in a dusty vault for much of its long life.

Max Watson, the London Met Unison union representative said the fight would continue to retain the collection in Aldgate. "We have been campaigning for three elements: the staff, the collection and the building to be kept together. While two out of three ain't bad, we are very disappointed the LSE elected to take the collection out of its purpose-built current home. And we are seeking urgent talks with them.

"The current building is beautiful, designed by award-winning architects and built with the original facade of the East End washhouses. The East End has historical links to some aspects of the suffrage movement, and was where Sylvia Pankhurst was based.

"Women deserve a library of their own, and the fourth floor of an already existing library doesn't do it justice."

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