

Institution: The University of Oxford
Unit of Assessment: UOA33
Title of case study: From private religion to public interaction: The Oxford Faculty of Theology and the Panacea Society
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The Panacea Society was an inward-looking religious community formed in Bedford in 1919. In 2001 a few reclusive members remained – some of the last representatives of a religious sub-culture dating back to the 1790s. Since 2001, members of the Oxford Faculty of Theology have been instrumental in advising and enabling this Society to evolve from a closed religious group into a charity funding social and educational initiatives and a public museum explaining apocalyptic religion to general audiences. Oxford-based researchers have produced notable academic outputs through discoveries in the Panacea Society archives; findings which shaped and informed the new museum.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The Panacea Society was a twentieth-century manifestation of a persistent and extensive English religious tradition, generally termed ‘Southcottianism’ – after one of its founding prophets, Joanna Southcott (1750-1814). Centred on beliefs in direct divine inspiration and an imminent millennium, Southcottianism evolved a complex theology and attracted thousands of adherents in Britain, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. As a tradition, it exhibits abundant features common to forms of utopian and apocalyptic religion found across diverse centuries and historic contexts. Movements of this kind often guard their most dearly-held beliefs from the uninitiated, leaving few public records of their identities, social experiences, or complex theological developments. As a religious culture of this kind which was discovered intact, with a vast archive of manuscript and rare print material spanning two hundred years, the Panacea Society offered a rare opportunity to examine the dynamics of religious formation and affiliation in microcosm, and explore aspects of how heterodox religions spread, evolve, divide and decline.</p> <p>Dr Jane Shaw, then of the Oxford Faculty of Theology, first visited the Panacea Society in 2001 with an interest in researching their history. The Society had been established in 1919 by a group of women led by a messiah figure, Mabel Bartrop, and developed into a sizeable religious community anticipating the apocalypse in the turmoil of interwar Britain. Following their messiah’s death in 1934, the Society sustained its communal life for decades, yet by 2001 was no longer recruiting members. Initial dialogue between the Society and Dr Shaw involved access to their archives. Once the scope and condition of this historic material became apparent, negotiations led to the Oxford Prophecy Project, funded by the Society for the purpose of cataloguing, preserving and researching the archives.</p> <p>The Oxford Prophecy Project was convened by Dr Shaw and Prof. Christopher Rowland in the Oxford Faculty of Theology, 2003-2010. Dr Shaw’s research in the history of religious experience and feminist theology led to her biographical study of the Panacea Society itself, centred on their female messiah Mabel Bartrop, known as ‘Octavia’. Prof. Rowland drew on his diverse interests in early Christianity and interpretations of the Book of Revelation to explore comparative aspects of millennial religion, while also preparing a theological study of Joanna Southcott’s contemporary, the visionary engraver William Blake. Besides these lead researchers, the project included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Deborah Madden (on project 2003-08 as postdoctoral researcher), who produced the first intellectual history of the popular radical prophet, Richard Brothers. • Dr Philip Lockley (on project 2004-09 as research assistant and doctoral student), who undertook the task of cataloguing the extensive Panacea Society archives and produced studies identifying their significance in revising existing historical and theological understandings of nineteenth-century millennial religion. • Dr Susanne Sklar (on project 2003-07 as doctoral student), who provided an innovative reading of the theology of William Blake in the light of visionary religious traditions. Dr Sklar’s 2012 publication was based upon her research at Oxford. • Gordon Allan (on project 2003-08 as part-time research assistant), who shared his unique expertise in Southcottian theology and global archive collections with project colleagues. <p>The Prophecy Project represented the foremost centre for study of the Southcottian millennial</p>

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tradition in the world, recovering diverse dimensions to its history, development and theology.

Following the conclusion of the Prophecy Project, Dr Lockley undertook a further project in the Oxford Faculty of Theology, 2010-12. This not only provided further innovative insights into the international nature of modern millennialism, but also brought together the full research findings of the Prophecy Project and presented them in an accessible style for the public in the Panacea Museum, Bedford, opened in August 2012.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Christopher Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010 Available on request.

Selected Review: “[This book] will become a landmark study. ... Rowland combines acute theological perception with sustained readings of William Blake’s art that indicate his extraordinary hermeneutical achievement and significance for contemporary Christian theology.”

David Jasper, *Theology*, 115(2) (March/April 2012), 149-50.

Jane Shaw, *Octavia – Daughter of God: the story of a female messiah and her community*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011 Available on request.

Selected Review: “Beautifully researched and written, based on the remarkable archives of the Panaceans, this book is exemplar of a critical, yet deeply sympathetic, biography of a religious community.” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 64:2 (April 2013), 434-5.

Susanne Sklar, *Blake's 'Jerusalem' as visionary theatre: entering the divine body*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012 DOI: [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199603145.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199603145.001.0001)

Selected Review: “The strength of this full-length study of Blake’s greatest work... lies in its combination of close reading of the primary and many secondary texts with a passionate engagement with the poet’s redemptive aim... [This study] is well grounded in examination of Blake’s sources and influences as well as of his many bêtes noires... The structure of the book too is meticulous.” *Journal of Theological Studies* (2013) 64:1, 315-8.

Deborah Madden, *The Paddington prophet: Richard Brothers’s Journey to Jerusalem*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010 Available on request.

Philip Lockley, *Visionary religion and radicalism in early industrial England: from Southcott to Socialism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013 DOI:

[10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199663873.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199663873.001.0001)

Selected Articles

Gordon Allan, ‘Southcottian Sects from 1790 to the Present Day’, in Kenneth Newport and Crawford Gribben (eds.), *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Waco, 2006). Available on request.

Jane Shaw, ‘A Modern Millenarian Prophet’s Bible’ in *Radical Christian Voices and Practice*, ed. Zoe Bennett and David Gowler, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012. DOI:

[10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199599776.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199599776.001.0001)

Philip Lockley, ‘Who was “the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott”? : Millenarianism in early nineteenth-century England’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 64:1 (Jan. 2013), 70-95. DOI:

[10.1017/S0022046911002569](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046911002569).

Key grants awarded to Oxford Faculty of Theology

Prophecy Project (2003-10)

Grant Sponsor: The Panacea Society, Bedford

Value: £753,000

Postdoctoral Project in Millennial Religion (2010-12)

Grant Sponsor: The Panacea Society, Bedford

Value: £70,444

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The Oxford Prophecy Project proved a catalyst for the Panacea Society’s surviving members to re-

orientate their aims as a funding body towards greater public engagement. Members of the Oxford Faculty of Theology played crucial advisory and practical roles in this process of re-orientation. Former members of the Prophecy Project, Jane Shaw, Christopher Rowland, and Gordon Allan, were each appointed as trustees by the then surviving members, on the basis of working relationships established during the research project and their proven interest in the history of The Panacea Society and its antecedents. As trustees, Dr Shaw, Prof. Rowland and Mr Allan have since aided the evolution of the Panacea Society into a modern charity (now The Panacea Charitable Trust) with a deliberate concern to engage in grant awards for projects with social and health benefits to wider society, in addition to research in higher education [i]. Allan and Lockley have been central to a further initiative to open up the historic site of the Panacea Society in central Bedford to the general public by turning several buildings into a permanent museum exhibition (The Panacea Museum) explaining both the history of the Society and wider millennial and utopian religion to a public audience [ii].

A foundation of the Oxford research project was the organizing and opening of the vast archives of the Panacea Society's own history, and its substantial materials relating to other modern religious movements. Through cataloguing these archives, distinctive themes in the Society's story and elements of its preceding tradition were brought to prominence. These not only informed the academic works produced in the Prophecy Project, but, through the influence and encouragement of project members, provided a thematic basis for the Society's choice of new funding purposes as a charitable body. One such theme is mental health. Mabel Barltrop, the founder of the Panacea Society, had once campaigned for greater compassion and openness in the treatment of mental health patients, following her own experience in an Edwardian asylum. Since December 2010, the Panacea Charitable Trust has established a unique policy of block grants to the Bedford Council for Social Services with a particular concern for mental health services. These have been administered by the Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation (BLCF), whose chief executive states: "BLCF feels that this programme has been highly successful to date...The Foundation feels that it has been allowed the flexibility to make awards to groups that support mental health issues that other funders may not see as being in that category...We feel that the return on investment where almost 2,500 people have been supported to date is of great benefit to the town of Bedford and its residents." Examples of how funded groups have assisted individuals include: a teenager with a rare disability and trouble with expressing his feelings and frustrations overcoming depression and gaining confidence through a theatre project; and building the self-esteem and social skills of a bullied school refuser who, after being absent from school for three years, now has aspirations of going to university. Another instance involved a new mother dealing with grief and post-natal depression who had also recently fled domestic violence. Her referral was urgent and the service co-ordinator was able to offer intensive support immediately thanks to this funding [1].

Materials discovered in the Panacea Society Archives, together with the broader academic research findings of the Oxford Prophecy Project, each directly informed the most significant initiative for public engagement undertaken by the Panacea Charitable Trust: the Panacea Museum. While the Panacea Society has long been part of the modern culture of Bedford, its history and activities have been largely unknown. Even though millennial religious movements and wider apocalyptic sentiments are phenomena well recognised in public discourse, they are frequently misunderstood in theological, sociological, and historical terms. Indeed, the insights of academic research in this field are only rarely communicated to audiences outside academia, thus proliferating misconceptions. In the period 2010 to 2012, under the guidance and expertise of the named members of the Oxford Faculty of Theology, the Panacea Charitable Trust sought to rectify both these situations. In addition to its other funding programmes, the Trust established a permanent exhibition seeking to inform and educate a general audience in the variety of apocalyptic and millennial forms of Christianity in the modern period.

The Museum opened on the site of the original community campus of the Panacea Society in August 2012. It combines a series of rooms and buildings restored to their appearance in the 1930s – when the religious community was in its heyday – with an extensive exhibition presenting the research of the Oxford Prophecy Project. All the text panels and many exhibit labels were

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written by Philip Lockley, as was the museum guide book, complemented by comments by other members of The Prophecy Project [iii]. The museum explores not only the role of prophecy and millennial expectations in the Christian religion, but also claims to religious experience, psychological responses to faith and doubt, and the role of symbol, ritual, textual interpretation and charisma in religious groups.

The Museum opening has received significant coverage in the local press. Several articles, such as those in 'Bedfordshire on Sunday' [iv] and the 'Castle Quarter' [v] recognize the extent to which the Panacea Society has been a long-standing 'mystery' for Bedfordians, and now pay tribute to this mystery being 'revealed' in the museum. The museum was also reviewed on the Religion in Museums website, being described as "a fascinating new museum of religion" with some "most remarkable exhibits" [vi]. The new Panacea Museum is now recognized to form a part of Bedford's 'cultural quarter', so called because the Bedford Museum, the Cecil Higgins Gallery, and the John Bunyan Museum all face the same street. Negotiations have now begun with these institutions and the Bedfordshire Museums Outreach Officer to secure accreditation for the Panacea Museum. In line with its charitable educational aims the Trust has, since 2011, contributed to a grant supporting the first professional curator at the next-door John Bunyan Museum and Library [vii].

The Museum is staffed entirely by volunteers, and is therefore only open by appointment or on advertised open days. In the first 12 months, the museum has attracted 23 pre-booked visits from community groups and held 7 open days. The total number of visitors is 1890, including the following audiences and constituencies:

- Staff from local and regional museums and archives services
- Local History societies
- Community and educational groups, including several branches of the Women's Institute, G.O.D. ['Growing Old Disgracefully'], University of the 3rd Age
- Local school groups – St Thomas More School; Biddenham Upper School:

Feedback from visitors is overwhelmingly positive. Comments written in the Visitors' book or recorded elsewhere indicate a strong level of interest, a sense of surprise at learning so much, and appreciation for how complex ideas are presented in an accessible way. As one visitor writes: "Better presented than the V & A" [viii]. Email feedback includes similar points: "We had a super day and really enjoyed ourselves. I can't fault the Museum at all - everything is so well presented with great interpretation and well-pitched text panels for context." [2]. Questionnaires distributed to a few visiting groups elicited comments such as "Very well put together. Interesting insight into the history of Bedford" and "I would have to come back again to take it all in" [3].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Testimony

- [1] Written statement from the Chief Executive of BLCF
- [2] Email feedback from museum visitor
- [3] Visitor questionnaire response

Other evidence sources

- [i] <http://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/Showcharity/RegisterOfCharities/CharityFramework.aspx?RegisteredCharityNumber=227530&SubsidiaryNumber=0>
- [ii] <http://panaceatrust.org/the-panacea-museum/>
- [iii] The Panacea Museum Bedford. A Souvenir Guide. (Bedford: the Panacea Charitable Trust 2012) http://panaceatrust.org/wp-content/plugins/page-flip-image-gallery/popup.php?book_id=3
- [iv] <http://www.bedfordshire-news.co.uk/Features/New-chapter-in-history-of-The-Panacea-Trust-02112012.htm>
- [v] http://free.yudu.com/item/embedded_reader/799044/Castle-Quarter-April-2013?refid=149099pg28;
- [vi] <http://religioninmuseums.wordpress.com/2013/01/17/a-new-museum-of-religion-the-panacea-museum/>
- [vii] <http://www.bedfordshire-news.co.uk/Lifestyle-and-leisure/First-professional-curator-announced-for-museum.htm>
- [viii] Visitor feedback from Museum on file