

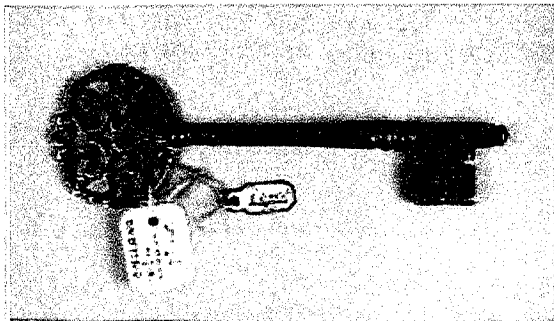
Finding the Key: The Parsons Collection

by Chris Wingfield, researcher, 'The Other Within' project, 2009

The website produced as part of the 'Other Within' project is <http://england.prm.ox.ac.uk>.
For information about the project see <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/englishness.html>

Finding the Key: The Parsons Collection

by Chris Wingfield, researcher, 'The Other Within' project, 2009



The 1000th key collected by Catherine Parsons: 1951

Photo: Elin Borneman, Pitt Rivers Museum

The collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum include 828 English keys donated in 1950 by Catherine E. Parsons as part of a collection of locks and keys that totals 1149 items. Just under three quarters of Parsons key collection, made between 1895 and 1948 is from England, and this is perhaps unsurprising given that Parsons is best known as a local historian and folklorist of Cambridgeshire. The first keys were collected from Parsons' family home at Horseheath in Cambridgeshire. According to the Pitt Rivers Museum annual report for 1950-51, the Parsons collection was the most important accession of the year and though chiefly European also contained 'examples from Japan, India, and North Africa, including some interesting keys of the Coptic period from Egypt.'

This donation from Parsons appears somewhat out of the blue since she is not associated with any other donations to the Pitt Rivers Museum either before or after that time. Given Parsons' close association with Cambridgeshire, it might seem surprising that she did not donate her collection to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology or the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. It is perhaps most surprising that the keys did not go with the rest of her collection to the Cambridge and County Folk Museum, of which she was a founder, and the first honorary curator.

Unlike the collections in the Folk Museum, this collection includes keys from many different countries, and so makes it obviously suited to the Pitt Rivers Museum. It is the manner of its arrangement, showing the technological development of the key over time across the world that makes the collection particularly suited to the museum. It was a mode of collecting well-suited to the museum's founder General Pitt Rivers, as was its subject matter.

A clue to the connection with the Pitt Rivers himself is given in the 1950-51 annual report which stated that :

It will be remembered that this subject was among the special interests of our Founder, whose book 'On the Development and Distribution of Primitive Locks and Keys' was published in 1883. We are particularly grateful to Miss Parsons for her most generous gift, which so worthily carries on the tradition.

This connection however is not purely accidental. A letter in Pitt Rivers' archive, at Salisbury Museum, shows that Parsons attempted to make contact with Pitt Rivers near the beginning of her collecting activities, and towards the end of his. A letter sent on 9th November 1899 from Bartlow Station, Horseheath, Cambridgeshire reads:

Dear Sir

For the last few years I have been much interested in the history of keys & have appreciated your "Development and Distribution of Primitive Locks and Keys" to the full.

Starting a small collection of keys of my own, I have spent a considerable time in searching for information whereby I might classify it. Now it occurs to me that the results of my efforts may be of use to others who have a similar interest in Keys. Therefore I am arranging drawings of Keys with authentic dates, & collected from varied sources, chronologically from the Roman Period in Britain up to the 18th Century; Can you kindly give me any assistance in the way of references of Keys to which an Authentic date may be attached. The weakest period is, of course, from the 11th - 13th centuries. The greater part of my examples for this period I have had to take from the S.S. seals, stonework, & similar sources.

Please pardon the liberty I have taken in troubling you!

Yours very truly

Miss Catherine P. Parsons

A note written on the letter, presumably by Pitt Rivers' secretary states that a Post card was sent on 24th November 1899 to say the General was ill. He was to die shortly afterwards, so it is unlikely that Catherine Parsons ever heard back from him. It seems likely that for Catherine Parsons, the connection in her mind between the collecting of keys and General Pitt Rivers may have led to her deciding to donate this collection to the Pitt Rivers Museum when she was nearing the the end of her own life.

Reprinted with permission

The website produced as part of the 'Other Within' project is <http://england.prm.ox.ac.uk/>
For information about the project see <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/englishness.html>