

AHRC PHD STUDENTSHIP

The Geographical Museum: Making Knowledge through Objects



RGS Polar exhibition, Lowther Lodge, 1946-7. (Image courtesy of RGS-IBG)

Royal Holloway, University of London and the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) invite applicants for a fully funded AHRC PhD studentship commencing October 2024, approved under the Collaborative Doctoral Award scheme.

The studentship – funded by the Techne AHRC Doctoral Training Partnership – will support PhD research at Royal Holloway, University of London on the artefact collection of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), its past role and potential uses in the context of object-centred humanities research and engagement in museum settings. The successful applicant will have the opportunity to adapt the project according to their own interests and to work across academic, heritage, and archival contexts.

The project will be supervised by Professor Felix Driver (Royal Holloway, University of London), Dr Sarah Evans (Research and Collections Engagement Manager at the RGS), Professor David Gilbert (Royal Holloway, University of London), and Dr Katherine Parker (Cartographic Collections Manager at the RGS). The student will be expected to spend time at both Royal Holloway and at the RGS, as well as becoming part of the wider cohort of Techne-funded students and the PhD cohort at the RGS. The student will have the

opportunity to undertake placements at the RGS or elsewhere. The studentship can be undertaken on either a full- or part-time basis.

We encourage the widest range of applicants for this studentship and are committed to welcoming those from different backgrounds and non-standard pathways. Applicants should have a Master's degree in a relevant subject or be able to demonstrate equivalent experience in a professional setting.

Project Overview

The research for the project will consider the history, current and future role of the artefact collection of the Royal Geographical Society, including the history of the Society's museum, which occupied the main hall at the RGS for fifty years but whose history has yet to be written. Intellectually, the project originates in the 'material turn' within the arts and humanities, which has forged such fruitful connections between geography, archaeology, art history, anthropology, global history and the history of science while also highlighting questions of museum practice.

The PhD project will build on research in various fields, including: (1) the history of colonial-era exploration and encounter, understood through objects including commodities, specimens and artefacts; (2) cultures, economies and networks of collecting in the modern period; (3) museum studies, including curatorship and exhibition understood as forms of research practice ('museum as method') and the literature on object-based learning; (4) studies of object biography, object trajectory and provenance, especially in relation to community engagement and knowledge repatriation. The project will consider fundamental questions about the role of objects in the making of geographical knowledge in the colonial era and the challenge of reinterpreting these objects today.

The core aims of the project are:

- To provide the first systematic account of the RGS artefact collection (c.1,000 objects), mapping its history, provenance, documentation and uses.
- To consider the historical role of artefacts and specimens within exhibitions organized or supported by the RGS.
- To examine the history of the RGS museum, established in Lowther Lodge in 1913 and continued until the 1960s, in the wider context of twentieth century museological practice.
- To explore the actual and potential role of object collections within the Society's current strategies of public engagement, research and education.

The project will draw on object-centred research methodologies as developed in a number of fields, such as cultural geography, museum studies, history and anthropology, including collections-level mapping and item-level object biographies. These typically involve working between objects and museum archives in order to contextualise processes of object accession, management, cataloguing, storage, exhibition and circulation. However, the project also requires critical reflection on the classification of objects as 'artefacts' not simply on the basis of their material qualities but also their functions in museum display. Indeed, this is crucial to understanding why some objects, such as an 1822 oil portrait of an Inuit woman or a 1950s Aboriginal bark painting, were catalogued as 'artefacts'.

Historically-informed critique of the structure of the RGS Collections can generate new insights, as demonstrated by research at Royal Holloway on colonial-era Indigenous maps, understood as artefacts of encounter. The RGS artefact collection itself has yet to receive substantial attention from researchers (with the exception of specific work on scientific instruments and a small number of relief models). Yet the RGS museum, abandoned as a relic of the imperial age, continues to haunt contemporary attempts to reanimate the Society's collections.

The student will become part of the collections research team at the RGS. The project will include excellent opportunities for public engagement, in the form of blogs, public talks and/or temporary exhibits at the Society, and contributions to the preparation of learning materials and research guides on the object collection.

Details of Award

The Techne CDA Studentship will fund a full-time studentship for 3.5 years (42 months), with an option to extend this by up to a further 6 months for placement/career enhancing activity. Students must submit their thesis within their funded period.

The award includes a full maintenance grant for both home and international students. The National UKRI Doctoral Stipend for 2023/24 is £20,622/year, inclusive of London weighting. Figures for 2024/25 will be available in Spring 2024.

The award pays tuition fees up to the value of the full-time home UKRI rate for PhD degrees.

Note for international applicants: where an international student is successful, Royal Holloway will make an additional tuition fee award, wholly covering the difference between the home and the international tuition fee, meaning that no additional fees are payable.

Further details of AHRC studentships can be found on the [UKRI website](#).

The successful candidate will be a Techne DTP student and will be required to attend mandatory events as part of their studentship terms and conditions with Techne. Please see the Techne website <http://www.techne.ac.uk/> for more information.

Eligibility

This studentship is open to both home and international applicants.

To be classed as a home student, candidates must meet the following criteria:

- Be a UK National (meeting residency requirements), or
- Have settled status, or
- Have pre-settled status (meeting residency requirements), or
- Have indefinite leave to remain or enter.

Further UKRI guidance can be found [here](#)

- Applicants should ideally have, or expect to receive, a Master’s-level qualification by the time of taking up the appointment or be able to demonstrate equivalent postgraduate-level experience in a professional setting (including museum curatorship and related work in the cultural and heritage sectors). Candidates should have been trained in disciplines where object-based research and learning is important, such as anthropology, material culture studies, cultural geography, art history, museum studies or science and technology studies. While not essential, some prior experience of museum-based work would be welcome.
- The studentship offers a distinctive opportunity to develop skills in object-based research within a unique and internationally significant collection. As such, students should demonstrate their interests and aptitude for exploiting the unique possibilities of a studentship that will allow them to develop career-enhancing skills in heritage and public engagement, and to contribute to the cultural and intellectual life of both institutions.
- As part of our commitment to challenging the under-representation of Black and Global Majority students amongst doctoral researchers, we particularly welcome applications from applicants who identify as POC, BAME and/or part of Black and Global Majority racial and ethnic groups.

All applicants must meet [UKRI terms and conditions for funding](#).

Project details and how to apply

Please include in your application:

- Your CV
- A cover letter (1,500 words max.) explaining why you are interested in researching this topic, including what you would bring to the project and how you think you would develop it to reflect your own interests and expertise
- A sample of writing. This could be a piece of academic writing (e.g., an MA dissertation); or a text written in the course of any current or previous employment or voluntary/community work.
- Candidates invited to an online interview will be asked to supply a transcript of their university-level grades.
- The successful applicant will be expected to apply formally through Royal Holloway’s doctoral school following notification of the interview outcome.

All prospective students are strongly advised to first make informal contact with the lead supervisor, Professor Felix Driver (F.Driver@royalholloway.ac.uk)

Please send your application documents to F.Driver@royalholloway.ac.uk by the deadline of **15th January 2024**.

Closing date: 15th January 2024

Interview date: 23rd January 2024

Candidates notified: 24th January 2024

The successful candidate will work closely with the project supervisors to revise the proposal, taking into account the interests of the student, and submitting the revised proposal to the Techne consortium by **21 February 2024**. A final decision on funding will be received from Techne by 26 April 2024.

Further Information

- For informal enquiries about the project, please contact Professor Felix Driver (F.Driver@royalholloway.ac.uk)
- For information or queries about the Royal Holloway application process, please contact techneRHUL@royalholloway.ac.uk

For further information about the research environment at Royal Holloway, see [Royal Holloway's Centre for GeoHumanities](#) website.

The **AHRC Techne consortium** is comprised of Royal Holloway, University of London; Brunel University, London; Kingston University; University of Brighton; University of Roehampton; University of the Arts London; University of Surrey; University of Westminster.

The **Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)** is the UK's learned society and professional body for geography. It is home to a [nationally designated collection](#) (over 2 million items) of maps, atlases and globes; artworks (paintings, watercolours, drawings and sketches); photographs and films; books and journals; archives (manuscripts, letters, diaries, field log books); artefacts and more. These Collections are global in their extent and particularly rich for the colonial era, documenting the history of modern geography, exploration, travel and encounter.

In recent years, the Society has been actively involved in initiatives to open up these Collections to researchers and public audiences. This has involved a series of digitisation programmes (most recently the Wiley Digital archives), research-led collaborations (including as members of the AHRC CDP programme and as partners in AHRC-funded projects), and engagement with diasporic community partners.

For further information about previous AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Awards and Collections-based research at the RGS, see [RGS research and collections webpages](#)