Taylor Institution Manuscript Holdings: Description (by Giles Barber, Librarian, 1970-1996)

Many of the letters and papers described in manuscript collection described in the above catalogue came to the Taylor Institution Library during the librarianship of the late Donald Sutherland (1951-1970). Some were acquired from dealers' catalogues or in the course of numerous visits to bookshops both in England and on the Continent; others came by gift, largely from the estate of Professor H.G. Fiedler, Taylor Professor of German 1907-1937. A selection was briefly exhibited at the Taylor Institution in 1970, to mark Mr. Sutherland's retirement. All items in the Summary catalogue are also listed in a card catalogue in the Library.

At that time Mr. Sutherland described the genesis of the collection as follows:

'The acquisition by the Library of manuscript and autograph material has depended over the last hundred years much on the interpretation by the Curators of the responsibilities of the Taylor Institution and probably more on the availability of funds. Faced with heavy pressure on their meagre income, some Curators, certainly before the introduction of modern research degrees, contended that the acquisition of all manuscript research material should be the concern of the Bodleian, though, as Sir Edmund Craster has pointed out in his 'History of the Bodleian Library 1845-1945', this view was obviously not shared by the Bodleian Curators at the time of the founding of the Taylor Institution. The Taylorian Curators did not hesitate to acquire manuscripts, autograph letters and incunabula whenever this was possible. Firth mentions '£500 was voted in 1890 for the purchase of manuscripts from the Phillips Collection, but the negotiations fell through.' The sum total of this material, however, did not amount to much. Benefactors such as Douce, Rawlinson, Tanner, Gough, Hyde and the other great names in the history of the growth of the Bodleian were conspicuous by their absence. In the 1950s, however, the situation was changed by Miss Fiedler's generosity in presenting, for addition to the Fiedler Collection already held in the Taylorian, many letters, valuable for German studies, purchased by her father. The subsequent decade saw further gifts of autograph material of a more general nature, principally letters received by the Peyton and Harding families (relations of Miss Fiedler on her mother's side) and concerned with political, musical and literary matters of their day. To these gifts in kind Miss Fiedler added a covenant to permit the purchase of supplementary rare books and autographs which would meet the demands likely to be made on the Fiedler Collection in the future. In this period, side by side with these generous donations, went the larger volume of acquisitions of French material, made possible by the Curators' decision to devote Zaharoff Fund accumulated monies to the purchase of rare French books and manuscript material. This was not an easy decision to take since the Zaharoff monies were never sufficient to permit the purchase of the really important expensive material which comes into (sic) the market even now from time to time. Such purchases as were possible therefore could only be the less important material of great French writers, artists, etc., or the more important work of 19th and 20th century secondary writers, which is, nevertheless, of definite value for research in these centuries. This then is the material listed here. It forms, of course so far, only a 'tête de collection', a beginning, and all research workers in the field will fervently hope that more money and more gifts will be forthcoming, to allow the ultimate expansion of this material into a valuable collection such as should be available in a unique specialist institution of the importance of the Taylorian.'