Unique crime collection giving insight into Whitechapel murders to be made public for the first time

The unique personal archive of the detective who led the hunt for Jack the Ripper - including a book in which he names the infamous Whitechapel murderer - will be made public for the first time after being given into the care of an independent museum.

The private collection of Metropolitan Police Chief Inspector Donald Sutherland Swanson has been entrusted to the National Emergency Services Museum (NESM) in Sheffield by the former detective’s family. The treasure trove lay undiscovered for decades until Swanson’s descendants discovered an enormous collection of over 150 individual objects; paperwork, photographs, letters, drawings and personal belongings.

Among them was what became known as ‘the Swanson marginalia’; a book, annotated by Swanson, in which he names the person he believed to be the infamous killer, Jack the Ripper. The marginalia is thought to be a unique artefact revealing unknown details of the case as well as theories and notes on what evidence the Metropolitan Police had gathered - all from the pen of the inspector charged with solving the case.

The marginalia, along with other items from the collection, will form part of a new exhibition, Daring Detectives & Dastardly Deeds, which will be revealed to visitors when the museum reopens on Wednesday 19 May. The exhibition, housed within NESM’s original Victorian cells, explores the intriguing history of 19th crime and punishment from the bobby on the beat to the emerging science of forensics.

The Swanson collection is thought to be one of the most detailed and significant of its kind. It includes official police paperwork and documents from a number of nationally significant criminal cases as well as Swanson’s own personal findings, theories and evaluations, arrest lists and the resources he used to solve some of his cases.

Holly Roberts, curator at NESM, says, ‘We are so proud to have been given the honour of caring for this outstanding collection, and to help shed light on the achievements of a remarkable man whose story has been largely forgotten.

‘This vast collection tells us an enormous amount about what it was like to be a detective in 19th century Britain. Even more unusually, there is so much of his professional career and his family and personal life, offering us a unique picture of what a prominent 19th century detective did in his work time and his down time. It is an amazing addition to our museum and to our new exhibition.’

Adam Wood, executive editor of Ripperologist magazine and author of the definitive biography of Swanson, helped to secure the collection for NESM. He said, ‘During my seven years of research into Donald Swanson’s life I realised that he had enjoyed an amazing career, much more than just his known involvement in the Jack the Ripper investigation. The 35-year period of the late Victorian era in which Swanson served was one of massive development for the Metropolitan Police, culminating in the dawn of
fingerprints. Perhaps more than anyone, it was he who epitomised the evolving Victorian detective, representing that era in the force's history.

'Although a modest man, he was feted in the national press of the day as one of the country's best detectives – and indeed he rose to become Superintendent of the CID at Scotland Yard, the top detective in the country – so it's astonishing that he is largely unknown today, whereas contemporaries such as Frederick Abberline are familiar names. From the discovery of the archive in the early 1980s the Swanson family have sought proper recognition of their ancestor's achievements, so it has been a joy bringing this to fruition by working with the National Emergency Services Museum to make the Donald Swanson collection accessible to all.'

Bill Swanson, a great-grandson of Donald's, said, 'The Swanson family is delighted that the career of Chief Inspector Donald Sutherland Swanson is being exhibited to the general public and will now be on long-term display for all to see at the National Emergency Services Museum, its best publicly-accessible home.

'It is clear from writings by his colleagues that he was held in the highest regard and this is a source of great pride to the family. It is hoped that the public will recognise this. In particular, of course, there is the notorious case of 'Jack the Ripper'. It needs to be remembered that the Whitechapel case was, at the time, just another of the many crimes to be investigated by Swanson and the Metropolitan Police.'

As well as forming part of the museum's new exhibition, NESM is also planning to digitise the collection and make it more widely accessible to researchers and historians. It is looking to begin several research projects around the Swanson archive in partnership with researchers and colleagues to understand what can be learnt from the collection and will be hosting a series of workshops, talks and special events to celebrate the Donald Swanson story.

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