

Managing Knowledge in the Techno-Sciences, 1850-2000

5-8 July 2010, University of Leeds

July saw the first international conference to arise from “Owning and Disowning Invention”; an AHRC funded collaboration between the Universities of Leeds and Bristol. The project explores knowledge management during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a period in which rapid scientific and technological innovation coincided with major debate on the role of patenting and the coining of the phrase “intellectual property”. With the objective of connecting historical accounts with contemporary discussions, the chronological landscape for the conference was expanded to cover the mid-nineteenth century to the present.

Graeme Gooday and Greg Radick of the Centre for HPS at the University of Leeds were the organizers and indefatigable hosts, and Devonshire Hall at the University provided an appealingly leafy setting, complete with impressive catering (especially the much needed hearty breakfasts) and an atmosphere that was friendly and vibrant. There was a strongly inter-disciplinary feel to proceedings; aside from the diverse group of historians in attendance, colleagues from law, philosophy, bioethics, business management and many other backgrounds were present. The conference also coincided with a symposium on intellectual property in the biosciences, organised by the White Rose Consortium, which delegates were able to attend. Consequently there was a real sense that the perplexing question of how intellectual property has been made (and unmade) can only be answered through a consolidation of resources across different areas of expertise.

The variability and fluidity of methods that have been used to control and own knowledge quickly became apparent. Papers were given on the construction of property around pioneering flights in the early twentieth century, software piracy in the 1980s, the relationship between priority of discovery and priority of publication and the use of trade secrecy in the brewing industry to mention just a few. The plenary lecture was delivered by Prof. Mario Biagioli, recently of Harvard but now moving to a new appointment at University of California, Davis. In a paper entitled "What has happened to 'discovery' and 'invention'? Intersecting the discourse of patent law and science studies", he explored the changing ways in which invention has been conceptualised. Patenting has historically been associated with a final material product of a process of invention, an equation which was well suited to the age of industrialisation. But as Prof. Biagioli argued, recent cases in the USA, where the patentability of non-material entities (such as diagnostic methods) is being hotly debated, point to the limitations in continuing to do so. The lecture was rounded off nicely with a reception in the rather magnificent surroundings of the University's Brotherton Library, where everyone gathered to drink wine; gaze in eerie wonder at locks of Mozart and Beethoven's hair and witness Simon Schaffer receive the BSHS Slade prize.

The conference concluded with a discussion about the direction in which the history of intellectual property in the techno-sciences might go. Further exploration of how it has been understood in the non-western world was one of the issues raised, as was the need to examine histories of copyright and trade marking in more detail. Ultimately the meeting provided scholars not only with the chance to engage with others working on similar subjects, but will no doubt prove to be a springboard for many future conferences and collaborations.