The story of forestry in Oxford begins with the Royal Indian Engineering College at Coopers Hill, Windsor, a training college for the Indian civil service, which established a school of forestry in 1871. The Coopers Hill school moved to Oxford in 1905, with its director, Sir William Schlich, and its library, largely his personal collection. It included a complete set of the earliest forestry periodical Kritische Blätter für Forst- und Jagdwissenschaft (1822-1879).

Schlich was a noted German forester who had served as Britain’s Inspector-General of Forests in India and later became a British citizen. Schlich with his grandson, the composer Humphrey Searle.

International collaboration was fostered by the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) which originated in 1892 in Germany. By 1906 it had formed an International Committee on Forest Bibliography, agreed that it should use the 'bibliographical system of Melvil Dewey', and that a permanent secretariat of forest bibliography should be established in Switzerland.

Literature from 1750 to 1900 was to be recorded in a published book, and from 1900 on in a card catalogue, with additions published in a 'quarterly magazine'. Subscriptions were taken to fund the work, which was about to begin when the First World War intervened. Discussions did not resume until 1922, by which time inflation had put paid to the original funds.

Oxford won, and agreement was reached in 1923 to set up the Imperial Forestry Institute as a central training school with direct Government funding. It was however entirely synonymous with the School of Forestry, with the same director, staff, library and premises (adjacent to the Department of Agriculture in Parks Road), but now with formal responsibility for the ‘external’ work it had in fact been doing informally since 1905.

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Under his direction, the library, now a depository for the forest reports being generated across the Empire, mostly by former Oxford students, began a programme of cataloguing and indexing, very advanced for its time.

Troup invented his own classification, used in a card catalogue of books, reports and reprints and also for shelf arrangement. The catalogue suffered from idiosyncratic abbreviations and a curious policy of omitting author’s initials in headings, but nevertheless remains a treasure trove of early forestry materials much used by forest historians; it has found its way on microfilm to many corners of the globe.

Troup recognised that what was really needed was a record of the contents of the mass of journals and reports the library was acquiring, and some means of relaying this information back to the forest officers in the field. So in 1934 the library began producing the **Current monthly record of forestry literature**, a detailed analytical index of articles, including everything the library acquired, distributed throughout the Empire. Every entry was also added to the library card catalogue. Troup’s classification proved too broad for this level of indexing, and at this point the Institute’s European heritage came to its rescue, in the form of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO).

Eventually, in 1938, the School and Institute were merged as the Department of Forestry.

The university, with IUFRO’s support, decided to invite the abstracting organisation Imperial Agricultural Bureaux (IAB) to set up a Forestry Bureau in Oxford, taking over the Current monthly record and developing it into an abstracting journal. This was agreed and the Imperial Forestry Bureau (IFB) was duly set up, initially located in the Bodleian Library, and began publishing the Record in 1938.

The new classification became known all over the forestry world as the ‘Flury System’ and authors began to publish Flury numbers as ‘keywords’ on articles. At Oxford the system was immediately adopted for the Current monthly record and the card catalogue. The Record was very well received but it soon became apparent that it was unsustainable with the library’s one-and-a-half staff. The university, with IUFRO’s support, decided to invite the abstracting organisation Imperial Agricultural Bureaux (IAB) to set up a Forestry Bureau in Oxford, taking over the Current monthly record and developing it into an abstracting journal. This was agreed and the Imperial Forestry Bureau (IFB) was duly set up, initially located in the Bodleian Library, and began publishing the Record in 1938.
Ideas of creating a permanent secretariat for forest bibliography were finally ended by the Second World War and the role fell by default to the IFI/IFB who, working with the Forest Products Research Laboratory at Princes Risbororough and with other Oxford libraries, performed the role of clearing house and cataloguing centre originally envisaged for the secretariat.

From the start all material received by the library was passed to the Bureau for abstracting, and all material received directly by the Bureau was donated to the library after abstracting. Consequently every item held by the library was included in Forestry Abstracts, a unique one-to-one relationship which continues today.

The arrangement was formalised by IUFRO which adopted a recommendation that ‘authors should generally send a copy of their work to Oxford for abstracting’, and although this has no legal force it was, and still is, widely recognised.

ODC was used as a shelf arrangement and in the catalogues at Oxford, and like its predecessor, the Flury system, was also used by authors on their articles. This practice still continues, incidentally, in Eastern Europe and some other parts of the world.

A revision of ODC as the Global Decimal Forest Classification (GFDC) is now in progress.

A new building for the IFI and IFB in South Parks Road, planned before the outbreak of war but constructed after it, was opened in 1950 by Princess Margaret. Commonwealth countries donated timber for furniture, floors and panelling throughout the building; species and donors are identified by wall plaques, making the whole building including the library a kind of museum of wood, and a very attractive (if inflexible!) space.

The International Bibliographical Committee was revived after the war as the Joint FAO/IUFRO Committee on Forest Bibliography, demonstrating the importance both IUFRO and the newly-formed Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations attached to forestry information. It undertook further work on classification and after ‘prolonged and earnest deliberations’ finalised the new Oxford system of decimal classification for forestry (ODC) officially adopted by IUFRO and FAO in 1953 and published by IAB.
1964 saw the creation of an in-house microfilm unit, funded by the Ford Foundation. Between 1964-67 about one third of the collection was microfilmed. Originals were offered to other libraries or disposed of. The programme ran for over 30 years and produced 4000 reels of 35mm microfilm of library stock. These are available for purchase, and can be read, purchased or digitised in the Library.

Restructuring in 1995 provided the Library with a staff of 8, three of whom were externally funded by a contract with the newly established Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) in Indonesia, which, initially having no library of its own, bought all its services from Oxford. However, by the end of the contract in 1998 CIFOR had become self-sufficient; the loss of those funds combined with other financial pressures placed the future of the library in doubt.

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The libraries of the three departments of forestry, botany and agricultural science were merged over a period of ten years, eventually emerging as the Plant Sciences Library in refurbished accommodation in 1995.

During the 1980’s major organisational changes occurred at Oxford as the original undergraduate degree in Forestry gave way to new degrees first in Agricultural and Forest Science (1980) and then Pure and Applied Biology (1985), and finally Biological Sciences in 1993. The Departments of Agricultural Science, Botany and Forestry were merged in 1985 to create the Department of Plant Sciences, with the Oxford Forestry Institute (OFI) as a semi-autonomous unit within it, running a successful MSc course.

In 1987 abstracting operations moved from Oxford to CAB International’s new HQ at Wallingford, Oxon. New IT links and a formal Agreement with Oxford University ensured continuity.
In 2000, following a full review, the university agreed to continue to support forestry information and preserve the collections, transferring management to the newly-formed Oxford University Library Services (OULS). This ensures long-term security and continuing development, with central services for preservation, digitization and archival storage.

The name Oxford Forest Information Service (OFIS) was adopted for the forestry activities of the Plant Sciences Library, and in 2001 a new 5-year MoU with CAB International was signed, to continue existing activities and develop new areas of collaboration.

Also in 2000 OFIS began indexing forest related web sites for the AgriFor (Agriculture, Forestry and Food) section of the BIOME gateway of the UK Resource Discovery Network.

By Oct 2005, AgriFor was serving some 13,500 successful requests daily.

A tutorial for Agriculture, Forestry and Food for the Resource Discovery Network’s Virtual Training Suite was prepared by CABI in 2002.

OULS has signed an MoU with GFIS as an information provider, and it is intended to develop OFIS in full co-ordination with GFIS.


A task force set up in 1998 developed a prototype GFIS (www.gfis.net), essentially a tool to facilitate cross-searching of participating institutions’ databases, which was launched at the World Forestry Congress in Quebec in September 2003 and is now being taken forward into a production phase under the aegis of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (an interagency partnership supporting the work of the United Nations Forum on Forests).

Today the library receives around 2000 current serials, about 1900 of which are donated. It collects in all languages, and abstracted material is retained permanently. The total collection is now around 200,000 items.

In 2005, the Plant Sciences, Zoology and Geography & the Environment libraries became part of a new grouping, Information Services in Bio- and Environmental Sciences. This includes Oxford’s special collections in anthrology, taxonomy and forestry. The Oxford Forest Information Service continues to provide a specialist ‘view’ of these collections, which have much in common.

A web version of TREECD: Forest Science Database (www.forestscience.info), updated monthly, was introduced in 2003.

Available to subscribers anywhere in the world, most documents listed in Forest Science Database can be obtained from OFIS, and links to full-text services are also included.

Many complex issues surround interoperability and cross-searching of bibliographic databases, let alone the ‘hard’ datasets to which GFIS also hopes to provide access. These were explored in a conference Information Interoperability and Organization for National and Global Forest Information Systems organized by IUFRO at the World Forestry Congress 2003, and addressed in the EU-funded project Network for a European Forest Information Service (NEFIS); OFIS and CABI have contributed to both, and the topic is likely to dominate agendas for some years.

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