

# From Bodley's Librarian



Bodleian Library  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Sarah E. Thomas AB Smith, MS Simmons, PhD John Hopkins

The Bodleian Library  
University of Oxford  
Broad Street  
Oxford OX1 3BG  
United Kingdom

T: +44 (0)1865 277166  
E: sarah.thomas@bodley.ox.ac.uk  
www.bodley.ox.ac.uk

*Dear Friend*

June 2009

I am writing to let all those with an interest in the life of the Bodleian know how the Library is faring, and of our plans for the future.

## Change and continuity at the Bodleian

Some days at the Bodleian I feel as though I am swimming the length of an Olympic pool underwater without coming up for air. The experiences are both pressured and exhilarating, so much more so because they are part of a team effort to engage with some of the most compelling issues of our times. In many respects we are defining the Library for the modern age.

Not everyone is certain that the changes occurring are desirable. Recently at a college dinner I met an alumnus who is teaching classics at another university. When he learned I was Bodley's Librarian, he erupted into a passionate plea for the Bodleian not to go the decadent way of his university, where the library was over-run by noisy undergraduates, coffee drinkers and users of computers. Fortunately the dinner gong saved me from a response. Although we have not morphed our Oxford libraries into Internet cafes, there is an increasing groundswell for an environment that permits and even encourages conversations and group work, and one which integrates the most advanced technological resources, together with our traditional books and manuscripts.

It can be intimidating to be a 'New World' librarian in such an old and venerable institution as Oxford, where layers of past practice are burnished into a soft patina. Indeed, in the rare moments when I can read at the wooden desks in the profound tranquillity of Duke Humfrey's Library, with sunlight illuminating the jewel-like colours of the stained glass, I am resolute about preserving the sanctity of this Library in which there were readers before Columbus set sail in search of the Indies.

Our founder, Sir Thomas Bodley, and my predecessors balanced well the reverence for the past and the need to innovate. Bodley's philanthropic leadership restored and rejuvenated Duke Humfrey's Library, but he didn't hesitate to acquire and raze Catte Street houses in order to achieve his vision of the Schools and the Bodleian Library. EWB Nicholson, Bodley's thirteenth Librarian who served from 1882 to 1912, was a strong steward of the Library's collections, but introduced a novel classification scheme and a revolutionary mode of storage, the Gladstone shelving under Radcliffe Square. He also promoted women to high managerial positions, and correctly prophesied in 1897 that a woman might hold the top post "in a hundred years' time".

The story of the Bodleian is, therefore, one of change and continuity. Our libraries are indeed undergoing a transformation, most significantly as a result of the Internet and the rapid digitisation of the written record of our civilisation. Oxford's libraries make available to students and scholars across the University, and to any researcher with a reader's card, one of the most extensive catalogues of electronic resources in the world. Researchers and students are enthusiastic about the flexibility and convenience these digital journals and databases offer. An additional benefit derived from the Library's investment is that the print publications that are now available also in digital form are infrequently called. This means that not only can a higher proportion of requests be met immediately, but that we can contemplate relocating less-used materials to remote storage; though they will, naturally, continue to be made available for consultation in our reading rooms

when scholars want to consult the actual artefact. The effects of this digital revolution mean that we are beginning to re-conceive our space in the centre of Oxford as a result.

### **Transforming the New Bodleian**

In keeping with the vibrancy of intellectual life at Oxford, our city spaces will focus on the exciting connection of people and ideas. We'll have a variety of spaces to support contemplative reading and quiet research, as well as livelier places where people can come together for discussions and master-classes in the study of the book. The rejuvenated New Bodleian will become the essence of a modern special collections library, with well-lit reading rooms, seminar rooms where classes using books from our unparalleled collections can be held, and an auditorium for author readings and lectures. Exhibitions of treasures and topical interest will fill two spacious galleries. Below the welcoming public space on the ground floor will be environmentally controlled compartments for securing the Bodleian's rarities, including our four engrossments of Magna Carta, two copies of Shakespeare's First Folio, and the manuscript of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Thanks to the generosity of the Garfield Weston Foundation, whose £25 million gift was matched by funds from Oxford University Press, and thanks to the £5 million gift of Julian Blackwell, we have two-thirds of the funds in hand to commence a dramatic renovation of the interior of the New Bodleian Library in keeping with the expectations of modern scholars. Together with donations from other generous benefactors, the Library has raised almost £60 million towards the £75.6 million project cost, a remarkable achievement notwithstanding the considerable £16 million funding gap which we shall be looking to close in the next couple of years.

When the New Bodleian is formally re-opened in five years' time, it will bear a new name, The Weston Library, in recognition and gratitude of the Foundation's gift, the largest donation received to date in the Bodleian's history and one of the leading gifts to *Oxford Thinking: The Campaign for the University of Oxford*, which aims to raise a minimum of £1.25 billion. I was delighted that I could make this announcement in front of Guy and Charlotte Weston, who were our guests of honour at the twenty-first Founder's Luncheon, the Library's annual opportunity to celebrate and thank our most generous donors and supporters, held in

March on the closest available Saturday to the birth of Sir Thomas Bodley.

### **Keeping pace with our growth**

Despite our admonishing signs – *Silence, Please!* – that pervade the realm of the Bodleian, we are anticipating much more activity in the coming months throughout Oxford's libraries as we introduce some long-anticipated changes to improve our services to our 65,000 registered readers. Our libraries, even in the digital age, are continuing to acquire astonishing numbers of currently published books, maps, and music, approximately 300,000 annually, the majority thanks to our national status as a library of legal deposit. When we add to this the archives of leading figures such as Roy Jenkins, whose papers will come to us shortly, or Alan Bennett, whose generous gift of notebooks and diaries began arriving at the Bodleian last autumn, we create an almost insatiable demand for proper storage.

Before we can celebrate the transformation of the New Bodleian, therefore, much needs to happen. In a complex series of moves, small armies of people will shift millions of volumes in our libraries in order to protect them and to locate them where our readers will find them most useful. Many rare books and manuscripts will have a temporary home at the Radcliffe Science Library, where we shall establish a special collections reading room during the period when the New Bodleian is closed for renovation. The large closed-stack holdings from the RSL will transfer, ultimately, to our new book depository. As the scientific journals that are the staple of academic research have gone electronic, demand for consultation of the printed issues has dwindled, and we can move these very low-use volumes to storage outside Oxford.

### **A new Bodleian book depository (at long last)**

The remaining overflowing collections currently crammed into the New Bodleian will be dispersed, some to new open-shelf locations, but most to a new, high-density storage facility based just outside Swindon. For several years the Library has been held back in achieving some of its goals of integration and improved services because it could not obtain planning permission to construct a facility on Osney Mead, a short drive from the central libraries. Now, by rethinking the way in which we shall provide excellent service, we shall be able to break this logjam. The guiding principle will be to keep the most requested items, based on

user borrowing patterns, close at hand; and to store our 'legacy collections' (those that represent print publications with digital surrogates; a large proportion of our legal deposit holdings, which stream into our libraries at the rate of over 3,000 items per week; and other voluminous but infrequently called materials) in an efficiently designed repository. With the purchase of this site, we anticipate that the new storage facility will become operational in 2010.

Meanwhile, there are exciting plans afoot to create a Humanities Library which will serve as the foundation for the integration of the humanities faculties in the new quarter the University is developing in central Oxford, between Somerville and Green Templeton colleges. English, History, Philosophy, and Theology are all slated to move in Phase I, targeted for 2012/13. Almost one million monographs will form an interdisciplinary collection that will fill the modern facility alongside comfortable spaces for reading and research. You can read more about this exciting project here: [www.ox.ac.uk/roq/humanities.html](http://www.ox.ac.uk/roq/humanities.html).

### **Improving our research collections**

Paralleling this intense development of our physical spaces is a drive to expand our research collections.

One of our hallmark collecting areas is in the papers of British politicians. Not only do we have the archives of six prime ministers, but we hold an estimated one-third of 20<sup>th</sup>-century British political papers. Today, however, 'paper' is a loose description. When Barbara Castle donated her archive to the Bodleian, she delivered several hard drives. We now have emails, websites, and other digital documents, all replete with the challenges of the Internet Age that reflect the difficulty in capturing the look and feel of online communications, the problems in preserving these rather ephemeral formats over time, and the uncertainty about being able to read these historical records even a decade after they were produced.

Fortunately, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is funding a Bodleian project, futureArch, to develop a system which enables the Library to collect, manage, preserve and deliver to researchers these complex collections of papers and digital materials, and facilitates improvements to reader services by providing access to archives in digital form.

More traditional, but no less significant, was the Bodleian's recent successful appeal to save for the nation the manuscript score of the earliest known opera in the English language, Cavalli's *Erismena*, dating from the 1670s. Originally sold last year to a private buyer in California, an export bar was placed on it owing to the manuscript's 'outstanding significance for the study of the history of music in the UK'. Thanks to the wonderful efforts of a host of generous supporters making gifts both large and small, we were able to raise the £85,000 required in just two months. *Erismena* is now safely in the Bodleian, and generating a great deal of interest among opera scholars and enthusiasts for new research that will be shared with the world.

### **'The Future of the Library'**

The landscape of the University is changing, and so is that of Oxford's libraries. For some years, libraries have been engaged in debates about the impact of new information technologies on their services. Oxford co-hosted, with the government funding body, the Joint Information Systems Committee, a conference on 'The Future of the Library' in April. While universities once measured the greatness of their libraries by the number of buildings and books, today the focus is on the reader and our ability to meet the reader's needs through a variety of services, including electronic resources, access to unique collections, and expert staff.

At the dawn of the digital era, it was popular in the media to speculate on the demise of libraries. Today, almost two decades after the introduction of the World Wide Web, likened by some to be as revolutionary as Gutenberg's press, libraries are thriving. They are active physical and virtual spaces for learning and collaboration. They are seizing the power of the new technologies to reach out on a global scale, even as they enhance local services for students and scholars.

### **Continuing to serve the 'Republic of the Learned'**

Indeed, in the turbulent and often somber times in which we are living, the Library is an inspiration and a testimony to the endurance of ideas and to the people and institutions that generate and preserve them. For over four centuries, the Bodleian has welcomed scholars to engage with the texts it has stewarded for them and for coming generations.

Today, we continue this great tradition, and we expand it through our innovations and by reaching out to a wider audience; for example through our annual participation in World Book Day in March, when we showcased reading by female monarchs with books belonging to four medieval and Tudor queens – St Margaret of Scotland, Queen Eleanor of Castile (first wife of Edward I), Queen Katherine Parr and Queen Elizabeth I – in addition to the manuscript of Alan Bennett's *The Uncommon Reader*.

I want especially to mention some bright lights in which all can share:

- Our most recent exhibition, *Hallelujah! The British Choral Tradition* – surveying the history of choral music in Britain from Middle Ages to the present day and its extraordinary contribution to our shared cultural heritage – was a spectacular success, with its run extended by popular demand: it finally closed on 9<sup>th</sup> May having been enjoyed by over 25,000 visitors. A virtual exhibition will live on online: [www.ouls.ox.ac.uk/bodley/about/exhibitions](http://www.ouls.ox.ac.uk/bodley/about/exhibitions). It is to be succeeded this month by *An Artful Craft: Fine and Historic Bookbindings from the Broxbourne Library and other collections*, which will open to the public on 12<sup>th</sup> June, and will run alongside an exhibition of the best entrants to the

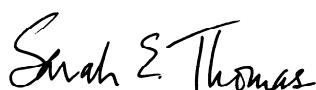
International Competition of the Designer Bookbinders, organised by the Bodleian and generously sponsored by Mark Getty. Our exhibitions attract almost 100,000 visitors annually, with numbers increasing each year.

- For those of you who want to keep up with some of what's happening in the Bodleian on a regular basis, take a peek at The Conveyer, the blog of the Bodleian's Centre for the Study of the Book. Personally, I'm not a big fan of blogs, but this one is a delightful sampler of notes and images contributed by Bodleian staff. Learn about peep shows, rubrication, bookrests, bindings and much more at <http://theconveyor.wordpress.com/>.

- In February, I joined a throng of guests commemorating Darwin's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday to view a selection of manuscripts and books assembled for the occasion in the Divinity School. A first edition of *The Origin of the Species* from the Bodleian was on display, as well as a just-discovered Darwin letter that had been found tucked into the fifth edition. To share our collection with the world, we had, through our partnership with Google, digitised the Plant Sciences Library's *Origin*, available now at <http://books.google.com/books?vid=OXFORD:301043408>

I appreciate very much your continued interest in and support for the Bodleian and Oxford's libraries. The gifts, both large and small, of our benefactors collectively make an enormous difference to the Library's ability to provide the services that sustain Oxford's academic and research endeavours. I look forward to hearing from you about any ways in which you might wish to help the Bodleian Library remain the pride of the University in the future, and hope that we shall have opportunity to meet in Oxford or elsewhere soon.

Sincerely yours,



**Sarah E. Thomas**  
Bodley's Librarian &  
Director, Oxford University Library Services

***A selection of forthcoming events at the Bodleian in 2009 ...***

**12<sup>th</sup> June (to 31<sup>st</sup> October):** Bodleian summer exhibition, *An Artful Craft: fine and historic bookbindings*, opens ... **12<sup>th</sup> June (to 31<sup>st</sup> July):** *Bound for Success*, showcasing the shortlist and winners of the Sir Paul Getty Bodleian bookbinding Prize ... **28<sup>th</sup> July – 9<sup>th</sup> August:** The Globe at the Bodleian: *The Comedy of Errors* ... **25<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> September:** Oxford Alumni Weekend ... **30<sup>th</sup> November:** Bodleian winter exhibition, *The Hebrew Manuscript: meeting place of cultures*, opens. Please contact [development@bodley.ox.ac.uk](mailto:development@bodley.ox.ac.uk), or phone 01865 611552 for further details.