is for Incunabula, which is a useful word to drop into the conversation if you want to see a few jaws hit the floor. It comes from the Latin and means swaddling clothes or cradle.

In library terms it refers to early printed (not handwritten) books, pamphlets and broadsides produced in Europe before the end of 1500, a date decided upon arbitrarily by Bernhard von Mallinckrodt who, in 1639, produced a pamphlet entitled De ortu et progressu artis typographicae – Of the rise and progress of the typographic art.

In it he uses the phrase prima typographicae incunabula (the first infancy of printing). By sheer usage the word ‘incunabula’ came to refer to actual books printed prior to 1500, rather than to the general concept – such is the power of popular usage when it comes to language.

It is, of course, one of those words like ‘agenda’, which is most often used in its plural form. An ‘incunable’, meaning one individual item, is the anglicised form and the Latin is ‘incunabulum’.

John Selden was a lawyer, antiquary, Member of Parliament, and, more to the point for the Bodleian, a book collector. Some 8,000 volumes form one of the most significant collections ever given to the Bodleian Library.

Other early references to the term ‘incunabula’ were made by Johann Saubert in his history of the Nürnberg Library (Historia Bibliothecae Norbergensis) which contains the first known catalogue of a collection of such books, and also by a Jesuit scholar, Philippe Labbé in his Nova Bibliotheca (1653). Cornelius à Beughem used the title ‘Incunabula Typographia’ in a sale catalogue issued in 1688.

Incunabula curator Dr Alan Coates, of the Bodleian’s Rare Books section, explained: “The cut-off date (the end of 1500) must have been chosen because it felt weighty and significant. You could pick up a book that was printed in, say, 1502, and not be able to detect any production differences to one printed in 1499.”

The Bodleian’s single major source of incunabula during the 17th century was the library of John Selden (1584-1654). Selden was a lawyer, antiquary, Member of Parliament, and, more to the point for the Bodleian, a book collector.

Some 8,000 volumes form one of the most significant collections ever given to the Bodleian Library both in its size and its range of subjects.

The collection included both eastern and western manuscripts, which Selden bequeathed to the Bodleian and printed books which were subsequently assigned to the library by his executors.

Prior to this gift the Bodleian’s collection had been relatively modest. Some incunabula had been given to Sir Thomas Bodley by benefactors to the library such as the Earl of Essex, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir John Fortescue and Sir Francis Vere, to name but a few.

As the Bodleian Library prepares for the opening of the £80m Weston Library in the autumn, Linora Lawrence continues her access-all-areas tour around this ancient and celebrated institution.
bulk of the collection later on in 1789, retaining only a few books for his personal use. Purchases from the Crevenna sale enabled the Bodleian to continue the process, started at the Pinelli sale, of buying early editions of classical texts.

Thomas Payne, the London bookseller, acted for the Bodleian at the sale, and the library spent £1,152 on the purchase of 93 incunabula. This put the library’s account into a considerable deficit and a flurry of fundraising was to follow.

Francis Douce (1757-1834), a collector, antiquarian and Keeper of Manuscripts in the British Museum left his collection of 15,000 printed volumes to the Bodleian.

The catalogue of the 5,600 plus incunabula held in the Bodleian was published by Oxford University Press in 2005. Entitled *A Catalogue of Books Printed in the Fifteenth Century now in the Bodleian Library* it runs to six volumes and has been cited as standing out among incunabula catalogues for its detailed listing of the contents of each edition being described.

You can see Alan Coates, one of the catalogue’s team of editors, on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNzlUBpmsnc) talking about the 1490 edition of the Malermi Bible (translated into Italian by the biblical scholar, Niccolò Malermi in 1471). The Bodleian Library holds the largest collection of incunabula in a university library and the fifth largest collection in any library in the world.

Other extensive collections are held in the British Library, the Austrian National Library in Vienna and in the Vatican Library.

John de Montins Johnson was born in Lincolnshire in 1882 but spent most of his life in Oxford attending Magdalen College School and then Exeter College, where he read Greats and then Arabic.

After two years working for the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior, he became a papyrologist and supervised excavations at Sheikh Abada which culminated in 1913 in his remarkable discovery of a papyrus of Theocritus some 900 years earlier than any other known manuscript of that author.

His career was, however, to be cut short by the outbreak of the First World War. Medically unfit for service, he returned home, where he took up an administrative post at the Oxford University Press.

In 1925 he was appointed Printer to the University of Oxford. Charged with modernising the whole of the printing side of the press, Johnson had his work cut out for the first few years in his post but, with new systems safely embedded by the early 1930s, he found time to, in his own words, “make a little museum of common printed things to illustrate at one and the same time the historical development of our social life and the development of printing.”

He called it the Constance Meade Collection of Ephemeral Printing after his first benefactress.

During the Second World War Johnson had to keep the press running with, inevitably, a reduced staff and was also responsible for the security of the surrounding area.

He was awarded an Honorary DLitt in 1928 on his completion of the printing of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and was made an Honorary Fellow of Exeter College in 1936. He was appointed CBE in 1945 for special services during the war.

After retirement, Johnson continued to work on his collection for the following ten years until his death in 1956.

John Johnson is buried in Headington Cemetery and his headstone (cut by David Kindersley in 1991 to replace the original which was badly eroded) proclaims him as Printer to the University of Oxford and Distinguished Collector of Printed Ephemera.

The collection moved to the Bodleian Library in 1968 where it was renamed in memory of this remarkable man who assiduously collected what others thought expendable and simply threw away.

Johnson surely achieved his desire to build a representative collection and would surely have surpassed his wildest dreams if he could have known that in the 21st century the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera would be widely regarded as one of the most important collections of printed ephemera in the world and the most significant single collection in the UK.

Ephemera are items (usually, but not always, single sheet) which were produced for a specific purpose or event. They would normally be discarded when no longer current, so surviving items give us insights, sometimes unexpected, into the daily lives of our
John Johnson was born in the reign of Queen Victoria but Julie Anne manages his collection in the digital age.

A recent project — ProQuest’s *The John Johnson Collection. An Archive of Printed Ephemera* provides access to 67,754 scanned items. More than 11,200 Popular Prints are available online, along with more than 22,400 items from advertising, 22,700 entertainment ephemera and over 1,500 items from crimes, murders and executions.

As well as having two blogs, the collection is on Twitter (@jcol ephemera) and Pinterest – more followers are always welcome.

Are they still collecting? The answer is a resounding ‘yes.’

Recent significant donations include Trinity College alumnus John Fraser’s collection of propaganda postcards and, in 2012, Richard Ballam’s collection of board and other games. Both collections are currently being catalogued.

Julie Anne said: “We also collect intensively ephemera from national and international events – recently the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee and the Olympic Games. A focus during the next few years will be ephemera generated by the centenary of the First World War.”

The original collection is not primarily local but there are local gems; particularly among the advertisements, some of which can be seen in the online exhibition called A Nation of Shopkeepers.

Oxford ephemera are also a current collecting priority, especially advertisements, catalogues, compliments slips or paper bags from Oxford shops, which have themselves become so transient.

Oxford University Society term cards and programmes are also welcome. Donations in these areas can be sent to Julie Anne Lambert at the John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library.

Please check first before sending any other material.

Further information about the Collection and links to digital projects and social media can be found online at: www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/johnson

relating to the export of works of art.”

Fundraising and seeking external funding for joint projects is an ever-present part of his job, for example, a grant from the Welcome Trust is currently funding the processing of the recently acquired Oxfam archive. All this is over and above fundraising work done by the Friends of the Bodleian.

“A Keeper is a protector,” said Chris. “He or she must make materials accessible but, at the same time, protect them; he must deliver content to the academic community, but also keep it safe; he must promote awareness of what is available, but guard how it is accessed.”

Bearing all this in mind, is very keen on physical exhibitions, seeing them as an excellent way to expose materials at the same time as keeping them very safe behind glass.

Books and manuscripts are bought, often at auction, donated or left as a legacy to the Bodleian. “This is always an interesting area,” says Chris, “we have had to go through every bookshelf in some houses, on occasions when someone has stipulated in their will that the Bodleian has first choice of any of their books.

“We do reserve the ‘right to weed’ because space is at a premium and we are often likely to have duplicates; but more often than not one finds much of great value. It is a great help when people leave lists from which to work.”

Chris is particularly keen on poetry.

He said: “The Bodleian collections range from fragments of Sappho (a Greek lyric poet, born on the Island of Lesbos between 630 and 612 BC) to postcards of modern writers such as Philip Larkin.”

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Chris Fletcher’s panelled office, located off the Upper Reading Room of the Bodleian, is a traditional room — but it houses new technology. Apart from books, a computer with a large screen dominates the desk.

“My job is very practical in many ways,” he explained. “I spend a lot of time reading e-mails” Having said that, he has made time over the years to write two books. The first was A Thousand Years of English Literature (British Library 2003, An updated and expanded edition came out in 2012) which chronicles the life and work of more than 100 best-loved British writers and an autobiography of an author he admires greatly: Joseph Conrad The British Library Writers’ Lives (OUP 1999).

He is also a member of the Oxford Bibliographical Society and sits on the Council of the Friends of the Bodleian.

There is a wooden plaque carved into one of the wooden panels in a recess of a window in Chris’s office looking out over the Old Schools Quadrangle. It depicts a mermaid, a sailing ship and the words Non Dormit qui Custodit (He who looks after things does not sleep). Chris Fletcher thinks this is entirely appropriate for a Keeper of Special Collections.

K is also for Kings — in the shape of royal patronage. In 1605 James I visited the Bodleian Library and was greatly taken with it. He had, of course knighted Bodley the year before and designated the library as being that of Sir Thomas Bodley.

Extremely complimentary remarks were made by King James, who said that he had often had proof from the university of the fruits of talent and ability, but had never before seen the garden where those fruits grew and whence they were gathered.

His Majesty was moved to offer the pick of whatsoever precious and rare books Sir Thomas Bodley, on examination, might choose to carry away. Furthermore he promised that the grant be made under seal to ensure its execution.

Although the grant was passed under Privy Seal there are very few books in the library that can be linked to the royal collections.

The King went on to say that were it to be his fate at any time to be captive, he would wish to be shut up, could he but have the choice, in this place as a prison, to be bound within its chains, and to consume his days amongst its books as his fellow in captivity. The library, at that time, held books written in some 30 languages.

The statue of James I, set in the Tower of the Five Orders, looks down on the Old Schools Quadrangle and his beloved library that clearly captivated his imagination.

The prequel — the back story — should be mentioned here.

Some 54 years earlier — in 1550 to be precise — Edward IV’s Royal Commissioners swept down on Oxford in frenzy and set about breaking up the library that had been built between 1480-1488.

The beautiful Divinity School was stripped of all its contents, shelves and benches were sold for the value of the wood, stained glass windows were smashed, two turrets containing stone staircases to Duke Humfrey’s Library on the first floor were broken up and, worst of all, books and manuscripts were sold for scrap value or destroyed.

Mathematical books and the Gospels in Greek were burnt in the superstitious belief that the devil could conjure up from such things as a diagram of a triangle or a Greek symbol.

Duke Humfrey’s manuscripts suffered the same fate, despite the fact that the Duke had been the younger brother of Henry V.

The Divinity School was laid bare with rain leaking in through the roof.

When Thomas Bodley undertook to restore the library he was starting from all but nothing.

Charles I is known for two things relating to the Bodleian Library. One is his attempt to borrow a book despite the strict ‘no borrowing’ rule. No doubt his firm belief in the divine right of kings convinced him that he alone could do such a thing. He was tactfully but firmly refused.

The second thing was a sensible suggestion which he made when standing on the roof of the Bodleian — namely that the area which is now Radcliffe Square should be cleared.

Charles II is remembered for holding parliament in the Convocation House, an event which allowed the ascent to the throne of James II, who remarked on that fact when he held a banquet in Selden End, the extended far end of Duke Humfrey’s Library, just before his deposition.

George VI and Queen Elizabeth’s visit to open the New Bodleian Library on the opposite side of Broad Street in 1946 is the next notable royal event. Unfortunately, the ceremony is remembered for what went wrong.

As the royal hand turned the key in the lock of the grand front door it broke and a locksmith had to be sent for — causing much delay before the door could be opened.

Kings elect have attended dinners in the Radcliffe Camera twice in history.

In 1815, the then Prince of Wales played host at a dinner to honour the victors of the Battle of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington and Marshal Blücher.

The library, of course, had no kitchen and food was relayed from Brasenose College by dismounted Dragoon Guards forming a human chain to pass the food from hand-to-hand.

In 1988 HRH the present Prince of Wales attended a dinner to mark the 500th anniversary of the opening of the original university library.