



History of the Bodleian

Introduction

Oxford's libraries are among the most celebrated in the world, not only for their incomparable collections of books and manuscripts, but also for their buildings, some of which have remained in continuous use since the Middle Ages. Among them the Bodleian, the chief among the University's libraries, has a special place.

First opened to scholars in 1602, it incorporates an earlier library erected by the University in the fifteenth century to house books donated by Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester. Since 1602 it has expanded, slowly at first but with increasing momentum over the last 150 years, to keep pace with the ever-growing accumulation of books and papers, but the core of the old buildings has remained intact.

These buildings are still used by students and scholars from all over the world, and they attract an ever-increasing number of visitors, for whose benefit this guide has been written.

History of the Bodleian Library

The first library for Oxford University – as distinct from the colleges – was housed in a room above the Old Congregation House, begun c. 1320 on a site to the north of the chancel of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin. The building stood at the heart of Oxford's 'academic quarter', close to the schools in which lectures were given. The library was built with funds supplied by Thomas de Cobham, Bishop of Worcester, but was still unfinished when he died in 1327. The room, which still exists as a vestry and meeting room for the church, is neither large nor architecturally impressive, and it was superseded in 1488 by the library known as Duke Humfrey's, which constitutes the oldest part of the Bodleian complex.

The occasion for moving to a new building was the gift to the University by Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester, younger brother of King Henry V, of his priceless collection of more than 281 manuscripts, including several important classical texts. These volumes would have made the existing library desperately overcrowded, and in 1444 the University decided to erect a new library over the Divinity School, begun in about 1424 on a site at the northern end of School Street, just inside the town wall. Because of chronic shortages of funds the building was still unfinished in the 1440s, and the library was not begun in earnest until 1478; it was finally opened ten years later.

Duke Humfrey's library survived in its original form for just over sixty years; in 1550 it was denuded of its books after a visitation by Richard Cox, Dean of the newly-founded Christ Church. He was acting under legislation passed by King Edward VI designed to purge the English church of all traces of Roman Catholicism, including 'superstitious books and images'. In the words of the historian Anthony Wood, 'some of those books so taken out by the Reformers were burnt, some sold away for Robin Hood's pennyworths, either to Booksellers, or to Glovers to press their gloves, or Taylors to make measures, or to Bookbinders to cover books bound by them, and some also kept by the Reformers for their own use'.

Oxford University was not a wealthy institution and did not have the resources to build up a collection of new printed books to replace those dispersed. In 1556, therefore, the desks were sold, and the room was taken over by the Faculty of Medicine.

The library was rescued by Sir Thomas Bodley (1545–1613), a Fellow of Merton College who had travelled extensively in Europe and had between 1585 and 1596 carried out several diplomatic missions for Queen Elizabeth I. He married a rich widow whose husband had made a fortune from trading in pilchards and, in his retirement from public life, decided, in his own words, to 'set up my staff at the library door in Oxon; being thoroughly persuaded, that in my solitude, and surcease from the Commonwealth affairs, I could not busy myself to better purpose, than by reducing that place (which then in every part lay ruined and waste) to the public use of students'.

His money was accepted in 1598, and the old library was refurnished to house a new collection of some 2,500 books, some of them given by Bodley himself, some by other donors. A librarian, Thomas James, was appointed, and the library finally opened on 8 November 1602. The first printed catalogue followed in 1605; a new edition of 1620 ran to 675 pages.

In 1610 Bodley entered into an agreement with the Stationers' Company of London under which a copy of every book published in England and registered at Stationers' Hall would be deposited in the new library. Although at first the agreement was honoured more in the breach than in the observance, it nevertheless pointed to the future of the library as a comprehensive and ever-expanding collection, different in both size and purpose from the libraries of the colleges. More immediately it imposed an extra strain on space within the building, which was already housing many more books than originally foreseen; new gifts of books made the lack of space ever more acute. So in 1610–12 Bodley planned and financed the first extension to the medieval building, known as Arts End.

Bodley died in 1613 and, on the day after his funeral, work started on the building of a spacious quadrangle of buildings (the Schools Quadrangle) to the east of the library. Bodley was the prime mover in this ambitious project, but most of the money was raised by loans and public subscription. The buildings were designed to house lecture and examination rooms ('schools' in Oxford parlance) to replace what Bodley called 'those ruinous little rooms' on the site in which generations of undergraduates had been taught. In his will Bodley left money to add a third floor designed to serve as 'a very large supplement for stowage of books', which also became a public museum and picture gallery, the first in England. The quadrangle was structurally complete by 1619, but work on fitting it out continued until at least 1624.

The last addition to Bodley's buildings came in 1634–7, when another extension to Duke Humfrey's library was built; still known as Selden End, after the lawyer John Selden (1584–1654) who made a gift of 8,000 books which were housed there, it stands at the far end of the Divinity School, over the Convocation House, the meeting room for the University's 'Parliament'.

The library was now able to receive and house numerous gifts of books and, especially, manuscripts: from the 3rd Earl of Pembroke in 1629, from Sir Kenelm Digby in 1634, from William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, starting in 1635, and from many others. It was the collections of manuscripts, as much as those of books, which attracted scholars from all over Europe, irrespective of whether or not they were members of the University of Oxford; a tradition which the Bodleian still keeps up (undergraduates, on the other hand, were rarely admitted until quite recent times).

Another tradition, still zealously guarded, is that no books were to be lent to readers; even King Charles I was refused permission to borrow a book in 1645. But the number of users should not be overestimated; in 1831 there was an average of three or four readers a day, and there were no readers at all in July. With no heating until 1845 and no artificial lighting until 1929, the Library only opened from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the winter and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. in the summer.

The growth of the collection slowed down in the early eighteenth century when the library, like the University as a whole, entered into a somewhat somnolent period; no books at all were purchased between 1700 and 1703. Yet the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw a spate of library-building in Oxford. Most of the new libraries were built by the colleges, but the finest of all, at least from an architectural point of view, was the brainchild of an individual, Dr John Radcliffe (1650–1714), perhaps the most successful English physician of his day. He left his trustees a large sum of money with which to purchase both the land for the new building and an endowment to pay a librarian and purchase books.

The site eventually chosen was to the south of the Schools Quadrangle, in the middle of a new square (Radcliffe Square) formed by the demolition of old houses in School Street and Catte Street and bounded by All Souls and Brasenose Colleges and the University Church. Here, between 1737 and 1748, the monumental circular domed building – Oxford's most impressive piece of classical architecture – went up to the designs of James Gibbs, and it was finally opened in 1749.

For many years the Radcliffe Library, as it was called until 1860, was something of a white elephant. It was completely independent of the Bodleian, readers were few in number, the heterogeneous collection of books served no obvious purpose, and the first librarians displayed a strange reluctance to add to it. Matters improved in the early nineteenth century, when a collection of books on medicine and natural history was gradually amassed: something celebrated by the publication of the first printed catalogue in 1835.

Meanwhile the Bodleian's collections had begun to grow again. Successive pieces of legislation made the agreement with the Stationers' Company more effective, so that by 1842 the library could concentrate its purchases on manuscripts and foreign books, secure in the knowledge that new books published in England would be deposited free of charge. Gifts of books and manuscripts continued to be made, notably that of 18,000 printed books (including 300 incunabula – books printed before 1500) and 393 manuscripts from the bequest of Francis

Douce in 1834. In 1849, six years after the publication of a new catalogue in three folio volumes, there were estimated to be 220,000 books and some 21,000 manuscripts in the library's collection.

The Bodleian was not only a collection of books and manuscripts; it also housed pictures, sculptures, coins and medals, and 'curiosities': objects of scientific, exotic or historical interest, including even a stuffed crocodile from Jamaica. Old pictures show these eclectic collections in different parts of the present library buildings, but especially in the gallery on the top floor of the Schools Quadrangle.

In 1755 the collections were augmented by the Countess of Pomfret's gift of a large part of the Arundel Marbles, the first collection of antique statuary to be formed in England. They were housed in two of the ground-floor rooms around the quadrangle no longer needed for teaching. Starting in 1788, the rooms on the first floor were given over to library use, including the storage of manuscripts, and with the opening of the University Galleries – now the Ashmolean Museum – in Beaumont Street in 1845 the marbles were transferred to a more suitable setting, as were seventy pictures from the top-floor gallery.

This left more space for storing books, which was further increased in 1859 when the University agreed to relinquish the last of its ground-floor lecture rooms; they were rehoused in 1876–82 in the new Examination Schools in the High Street. With its completion the whole of the Schools Quadrangle was at last in the hands of the library, save for two rooms in the tower in which the Oxford University archives were kept.

A further increase in space came about in 1860, when the Radcliffe Library was taken over by the Bodleian and renamed the Radcliffe Camera (the word camera means room in Latin). The upper-floor library became a reading room, used mainly by undergraduates, who had been admitted to the Bodleian since 1856, and the ground floor was turned into a book-stack (it was converted into a second reading room in 1941). Thus the library acquired its first major addition of space for readers since the building of Selden End in 1634; by the beginning of the twentieth century an average of a hundred people a day were using it.

The medical and scientific books formerly kept in the Radcliffe Camera were moved to new premises in the University Museum in South Parks Road; they were later transferred to the adjacent but much larger Radcliffe Science Library, built to the designs of Thomas Graham Jackson, architect of the Examination Schools, in 1897–1901.

By the end of the nineteenth century the Bodleian's book collection was growing by

more than 30,000 volumes a year, and the number of books had reached the million mark by 1914. To provide extra storage space an underground book store was excavated beneath Radcliffe Square in 1909–12; it was at the time the largest such store in the world, and the first to use modern compact shelving. But with both readers and books inexorably increasing, the pressure on space once more became critical, leading some members of the University to propose moving the library to a more spacious site elsewhere, as was done in Cambridge when its new University Library was built in 1931–4.

This did not happen, however, and in 1931 the decision was taken to build a new library, housing book-stacks for five million books, library departments and reading rooms, on a site occupied by a row of old timber houses on the north side of Broad Street. The new building went up to the designs of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, architect of the Cambridge University Library, in 1937–40.

The building of the New Library allowed some rationalisation of the older buildings to allow more space for the growing numbers of undergraduates, graduate students and visiting scholars. The former gallery on the top floor of the Schools Quadrangle had already become a reading room (the Upper Reading Room), and the former schools on the floor below, long used for book-storage, now became the Lower Reading Room, leaving the ground floor for offices.

In 1960–3 Duke Humfrey's library underwent a major restoration, including the refacing of its decaying, blackened façades in Clipsham stone, along with those of Selden End and Arts End; the refacing of the rest of the Schools Quadrangle followed in 1964–8.

In 1975 new office space was acquired in the Clarendon Building, built for the University Press in 1712–13, and occupying the crucial site between the Old and New Libraries. Thus the whole area between the Radcliffe Camera and the New Library – the historic core of the University – came into the hands of the Bodleian.

In 2011 work began on the New Bodleian to redevelop it into the Weston Library. This new space with its public hall, exhibition galleries and café opened to the public in March 2015 and represents a new era in the Bodleian's life both as a world class research library and a cultural hub at the centre of Oxford.

Bodleian Library
Broad Street
Oxford
OX1 3BG
bodleian.ox.ac.uk