



Queens'
College
Library - a history

Clare Sargent



Queens' College Library

The Library at Queens' occupies most of the North side of Old Court: the Old Library in the original library room of 1448; the undergraduate collection housed in the Old Chapel, constructed in 1448 and most recently remodelled in 1993. Old Court was constructed as part of a coherent building programme at the foundation of the College in the years 1448-9 and is the earliest example of vernacular building in brick in Cambridge. It shows the ideal behind a fifteenth-century college: library, hall and chapel, with accommodation for fellows and a master's lodging, and the great gatehouse guarding the world of learning. The architect/mason was probably Reginald Ely, who also designed the contemporary University Library and began the work on King's College Chapel.

1448: the Old Library

Queens' is one of very few colleges which had a room specifically designed to house a library at this early date. The room lies on an east-west axis, with one row of plain glass windows looking south onto Old Court, to use the maximum available light, and windows on the north side which originally looked onto the buildings of the Carmelite friary. The stained glass now in these latter windows was purchased from the friary at its suppression in 1537, and now represents one of the finest collections of fifteenth-century English roundels extant¹. The internal design of the room relates closely to conjectured reconstructions of the contemporary University Library, with ten two-tier reading lecterns arranged to stand out from the walls². The bookshelves now in use are made from these lecterns which originally rose to a height of c.5 ft but were adapted over the centuries to changing methods of book production and storage; the locations of the chain-bars and the positions of the sloping reading desks are still traceable.

1472: Andrew Docket's Inventory

The system of chaining books at Queens' differed from most known examples of chained libraries, such as Hereford Cathedral or Trinity Hall, in that it was designed for the reading of manuscript books laid flat on the lecterns, rather than printed books stood upright on shelves. This layout allowed room for no more than 20 volumes on each double lectern: a maximum capacity of 200 volumes. An inventory attributed to the college's first President, Andrew Docket, indicates that the Library had reached capacity by 1472: it lists 270 items, apparently all manuscripts³.

No book from that inventory now exists in Queens', the majority vanished before John Leland's survey of libraries of the kingdom for Henry VIII in 1538. Leland lists 44 titles for Queens', one of the largest of the contemporary Cambridge lists. However, at least one volume still exists from the fifteenth-century collection, bequeathed by Hugh Damlett, Fellow, in 1475-64 :Josephus'

¹ Wayment 1994

² Oates 1986

³ Searle 1864

⁴ Searle 1867-71; Arnould & Massing, 1993

Antiquitates Judaicarum, printed c.1470 in Germany, bound by the Flemish bookbinder Guillebert de Meese.

1511-13: Erasmus

The size of the College Library shown by the two inventories reflects the position held by Queens' in the world of learning in the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, reflected in the presence of the Humanist scholar Erasmus who was invited to make Queens' his Cambridge base by his associate John Fisher, President 1505-8. Erasmus' influence on Queens' is shown in the books of his colleagues still in the collection. The most tangible gift - the bequest of a complete set of his own works - never came to pass: Queens' Library was deleted from the second draft of his will. The Library does now have a representative collection of Erasmus' works, but these have been gathered over the centuries in a series of attempts to fill so glaring a gap. The earliest such acquisition is a copy of the Greek New Testament which had been the property of John Lasky, close friend of Erasmus, and is bound in a contemporary Polish binding with his initials J.L. - an extremely rare item in British libraries.

The Humanist flavour of Queens' collection was further enhanced by gifts of books from the library of Simon Heynes, President 1529-1537, whose books were bound by the Cambridge bookbinder Garret Godfrey and presented by Thomas Yale, Vice-chancellor of Canterbury, in 1562, and most spectacularly by the gift of Sir Thomas Smith's Latin and Greek books in 1577

upon condition that they chain them up in the library or do distribute them amongst the fellows such as will best occupy them'

Failure to comply with these instructions would have meant the removal of the collection to Peterhouse. The Smith collection, originally some 90 volumes, represents the greatest single collection from the library of one individual now extant for Renaissance England.

1612: lecterns into bookshelves

By 1612 the library had grown from its Reformation low of 44 volumes to contain some 340 accountable titles, possibly considerably more, most of these being printed books. These were essentially acquired and curated in the same way as the pre-Reformation library had been. That is, they were the gifts of individuals and reflected that individual's personal taste or scholarship, or appreciation of the needs of the College: they were not necessarily those books which the college would have chosen, although the majority of them were extremely recent publications when they were presented. They were shelved on the lectern cases in a fifteenth-century manner - flat, very crowded, and chained.

In 1612 the lecterns were converted into bookshelves. The chains were removed from all volumes, and never again used, and the books stood upright for the first time, with the spines facing inward in a manner typical of the seventeenth century. The top of each case was surmounted with a carved decorative band, now raised to the ceiling after further heightening of the shelves in the eighteenth century. The joiner was Andrew Chapman, well-known for his work elsewhere in Cambridge at that time. There are records of payments for the

workmanship but not for the purchase of wood, which may have been the gift of Humphrey Tyndall, President 1579-1614. This was the first piece of reconstruction, but there are continuous records of small amounts of joinery work throughout the seventeenth-century, best exemplified in a slightly larger bill from 1671 *paid for altering the shelves to fit the Polyglott* [Bible. 8 volumes].

1631: buying books, giving books

The re-organisation of the bookcases was complemented by major gifts of books from Humphrey Tyndall himself, and from Henry Hastings, Earl of Huntingdon. A donor's book established in 1631 to record such bequests included a survey of all existing books, beginning with Yale's gift of 1562. Gifts are recorded in almost every year of the seventeenth century, and large libraries were donated by several fellows which were not recorded at all. The largest and most interesting gift was the 600-700 volume library of John Smith, the Cambridge Platonist in 1652. This included books on history, geography and travel, medicine, theology and Rabbinical writings, but especially mathematics and astronomy, mostly from continental presses. This library was described by a contemporary as a *noble company of books*.

Extensive records for purchases also exist for this period, which show the acquisition of some 1200 volumes throughout the century, in all formats: folio, 4to, 8to, 12mo, in quires, in parts, by subscription, bound and through term catalogues. Books were usually bought from London, but some Cambridge booksellers were used, in particular Cornelius Crownfield. We can, therefore, postulate a library of at least 3500 volumes by 1700, possibly as many as 5000, an increase of 10 times over the known 340 volumes of pre-1612.

1700: the benefits of poverty

The eighteenth century saw a great decline in the number of undergraduates and resident fellows at Queens', and an equivalent decrease in the wealth of the College, which was further exacerbated by an over ambitious re-building programme. This resulted only in the completion of the Essex Building, abutting Silver Street Bridge, the remodelling of the Hall and Chapel, and a certain amount of modification of such features as window surrounds. The slow recovery of the College's finances over the next two centuries has proved both a bane and a great benefaction to its Library.

It became the fashion in the eighteenth century to rebind all books in a collection to a uniform style. Queens' was spared this fate by poverty, and undoubtedly the greatest treasures now in the Library are the bindings, many of which are contemporary or near contemporary with the volumes they encase. These include four twelfth century bindings which retain techniques of binding structure which had been thought to exist only in twentieth century theoretical reconstructions.

A recent discovery within a sixteenth century Queens' binding was a sheet of the earliest printing by Cambridge University Press: Pliny's *Historia naturalis*,

printed by Thomas Thomas in 1583, a discovery which was made after the Press's 400th centenary celebrations in 1984⁵. Other bindings of note include the work of Caxton's binder, of Grolier, of Garret Godfrey, and several local Cambridge bookbinders. Fortunately all of these had received the minimum of intervention until recently, when the College joined the Cambridge Colleges Conservation Consortium, a joint project founded by Corpus Christi, King's and Downing Colleges. The Consortium shares resources and expertise and provides access to the most experienced and up-to-date conservation techniques in the country. A full survey of all bindings has now been made, with detailed attention to manuscript volumes and incunabula, and work will progress over the next few years to repair and conserve, but most of all to record and study, Queens' outstanding collection.

1777 Hughes and 1820 Milner: the pamphlet collections

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the Library received two collections primarily containing ephemeral material. The first of these was the entire library, c.2000 volumes, of David Hughes, Fellow 1727-1777. His library was particularly rich in pamphlets and tracts and contains many items which are now extremely rare. Hughes' collection is complemented by the library of Isaac Milner, President 1788-1820, which contained 3000 volumes. Milner was Lucasian Professor of Mathematics and as a leading member of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England, a close friend of William Wilberforce. His library contained the majority of contemporary tract and pamphlet publications relating to the Low Church and Methodist Movements of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and a specialist collection of key works from the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. The discovery in 1991 of the inventory of Milner's original library has resulted in the possibility of reassessing the nature of mathematics studies in Cambridge in the later eighteenth century. This had been thought to be extremely stultified with little contact with contemporary European mathematics. Milner's library, however, contained works from all the leading French analytic mathematicians of the time, including LaGrange, Lacroix, Poisson, Monge, Malus and Gauss⁶.

1827: a complete library

With the addition of these two large collections, and of smaller donations throughout the preceding years, the Library was considered almost complete, and a catalogue published in 1827. Designed by Thomas Hartwell Horne, this incorporated a revolutionary approach to the classification of learning. Horne's catalogue lists all the books grouped by subject: thus all books of medicine are listed together, further subdivided under diet, infectious diseases, anatomy and so on. He arranged the titles within each group in their relationship to each other as part of the growth of knowledge. All pamphlets dealing with a single controversy are placed together, with different typefaces to indicate the stance taken by each author -

In this and the subsequent pages of the present section, the attacks of

⁵ McKitterick 1992

⁶ Wright 1991

Popish writers *are distinguished from the Defences of Protestant Divines, by being printed in the Italic character.*⁷

A major pitfall in using Horne's catalogue is that he also listed all those books which it would be *desirable* for the library to own to complete its collection on any one topic. That he could consider such a listing is indicative of the almost definitive nature of the collection at this date. Horne's catalogue is still in use, but will shortly be superseded by a recataloguing project commenced in the late 1970s, which will become available on-line on Cambridge University Library database.

The twentieth century saw a great change in undergraduate teaching, which resulted in a new venture: the War Memorial Library. Two major gifts also require special mention: the Kennett Library and the Jack Cohen Collection.

1932: the Kennett Library

The Kennett Library is a collection of Oriental texts and related materials bequeathed to the College by Robert Hatch Kennett, Old Testament and Semitic scholar, in 1932. The collection was originally housed in the present Law Library, which still contains plaster casts of inscriptions. The collection is on loan to the Oriental Studies Faculty Library to whom all enquiries should be addressed.

1993: the Cohen Collection

The Cohen Collection consists of all the books of Jack Cohen, translator and scholar of contemporary Latin American literature, history and politics. The Collection contains an outstanding number of signed first editions from such poets as Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz, and extremely rare private publications of poets from Cuba and Venezuela. There is also a representative collection of LP recordings of poets, including Gabriel Garcia Marquez, reading their own works, produced in Cuba during the 1970s. The catalogue of the Cohen Collection is available on-line via Cambridge University Library⁸.

1948: an undergraduate library

Throughout the nineteenth century the Library grew, spilling over into adjacent sets, and onto island cases, which so obscured the historic nature of the bookshelves that two major studies of chained libraries were unable to discuss the lecterns with any degree of accuracy⁹. By 1948 the situation had become critical, and the stock which a century earlier had been considered complete had failed to keep pace with the rapid growth of new disciplines such as engineering, social sciences, English literature, and the increasing importance of academic achievement for undergraduates. The College recognised the need for an entirely new library, both reading rooms and stock. They also agreed that such a new venture would be the most fitting War Memorial for those members of the College who gave their lives in the Second World War. The Old Chapel next to the Library and unused since 1891, was selected as a suitable site.

⁷ Horne, 1827, p.218

⁸ Sargent & Cook, 1994

⁹ Willis & Clark, 1886; Streeter, 1931

1448-1948: the Old Chapel

The foundation stone for the College was laid beneath the Chapel in 1448: it was excavated and recorded during the alterations of 1948. A license to celebrate divine worship was granted by the Bishop of Ely on 12th December 1454.

The College records contain many entries relating to the original fittings, furniture, vestments and plate, but little concerning the building. Orders issued during the Reformation provide some clues: the walls were decorated - an order of May 1548 ordered them to be whitewashed; there was a high altar and at least two side altars serving as chantry chapels - in 1559 a smith was paid *for taking down the highe aultare*; the organ was removed in 1570, although replaced at least twice, in the 1660s and in 1858.

In 1643 William Dowsing, the iconoclast, recorded his work at Queens'
at Queens' College

Decemb. 26

we beat down 110 superstitious pictures, besides cherubims and ingravings, where none of the Fellows would put on their Hatts in all the time they were in the chappell, and we digged up the steps for three hours and brake down 10 or 12 apostles and saints within the Hall.

22 Fellows and the President of the College, Edward Martin, a supporter of Archbishop Laud, were ejected at this time and replaced with Commonwealth nominees. The *superstitious pictures* were the medieval stained glass windows of the chapel and hall: miraculously the Carmelite roundels in the Library survived. The broken windows were replaced with plain glass. In 1858 the chapel interior was reconstructed and new glass designed by Hardman placed in some of the windows. These were later dismantled, three placed in the new chapel, the rest kept in storage in the College. The small lights remaining are probably all from this period.

The ground was licensed for burials and Andrew Dockett, the first President, requested in his will dated 1484 that

his body should be buried in the choir of the chapel, in the place where the lessons are read.

The floor has been replaced several times since then, most notably in 1643, 1773, 1848, 1948 and 1993. In 1773 the building was remodelled by James Essex and a new brick burial vault constructed. A visitor recorded in his diary

Every old and modern tombstone being taken up from the floor... In the middle was sunken a square vault... in the finest bed of gravel I ever saw. A few leaden coffins were lit upon, but for whom, I believe is not certainly known.
[Cole mss]

Excavations conducted in 1948 failed to find any traces of vaults other than the one constructed in 1773, which houses the coffins of those two great benefactors to the library, David Hughes and Isaac Milner, and Henry Godfrey, President 1820-32.

In 1992 the floor was surveyed by non-destructive radar techniques, preparatory to the reconstruction of the War Memorial Library. The survey revealed the presence of a structure near the East end. During the course of the building work this was uncovered and proved to be a small, single burial in a brick vault. The new floor was constructed with an access panel to allow this vault to be studied in the future.

All wall memorials and a floor brass dedicated to Andrew Docket's secretary were removed to the new chapel in 1891.

In 1772-4 the building was re-modelled to conform to the classical style, under the direction of James Essex. This was part of the planned re-building of the entire College, which finally resulted only in the Essex Building, and in the re-modelling of the Chapel and Hall and windows in Old Court and Walnut Tree Court. A series of College orders survives from this period

16 Mar. 1773: Agreed in refitting the chapel to make a vault underneath for burying in

12 Apr. 1773: Agreed that the new pavement in the chapel be of Ketton stone with black dotts

5 July 1774: Agreed to new pave the Chapel-passage with Yorkshire stone ... and to wash the plain parts of the cieling and walls of the chapel with Naples yellow

A flat plaster ceiling was also constructed which remained in place until 1845 when a new roof of oak was built in exact imitation of the medieval roof, restoring the colours and gilding as closely as possible. This was repainted by the College staff in 1981, retaining the colour scheme. In 1993 the classical panelling of the ante-chapel was repainted in a modern equivalent of Naples yellow.

In 1858 the entire interior was again remodelled by George Bodley in a style which foreshadowed his work on the present College Chapel¹⁰. However, despite the alterations, compulsory attendance at chapel, coupled with a rapid growth in College membership, meant that the old building could no longer accommodate the College. In 1891 George Bodley's new chapel came into use, and the Old Chapel was dismantled. The fittings were dispersed: the stalls given to Little Eversden Church, and the reredos to the newly constructed St. Mark's Church, Barton Road, Cambridge. The building was left unused for over fifty years, despite an abortive plan in the early 1930s to convert it to residential sets, occasional use as a lecture room, and more frequent use as a furniture store.

¹⁰ Bodley, 1858

1948: the War Memorial Library

Work began on the new War Memorial Library in 1948, to a design by Sir Alfred Richardson, and was completed in 1952. The bookstock for the new library was small, consisting primarily of volumes donated by fellows and past members, and a number of nineteenth century items from the existing library. The whole was catalogued, labelled and prepared for use by the library clerk and a team from the University Library, who completed the entire work in less than three months. The move from the Old Library was not popular with all undergraduates:

On moving into the new library
a protest

Atmosphere once gave our betters
Thoughts enough for thousand brains
Dons gave alphas, genius sparkles
In their work that still remains

Atmosphere inspired essays,
Guided pens across the page;
Atmosphere was background music,
Manna to a golden age.

Manna of this kind fed Fuller,
Brought Erasmus to these shores
And sustained the tongue of Harding
On so many, many floors.

Manna of this kind seems lacking
In their work that still remains.
History seems more dead than Fuller,
"Humanist" an unknown phrase.

Neon lights in all their harshness,
Kill each intellectual spark;
Vacant eyes have lost all focus
On walls that boast no dirty mark.

Varnished chairs and varnished tables,
Odd Picasso's on the wall,
Lino floors and iron cases
Help the scholar not at all.

Spiders' webs seem gone forever,
Gone the dust we used to know.
Nothing stirs to contemplation,
Genius here has failed to grow.

O, give us back our Library,
Its ageless dust that genius bore,
That these hygienic days might be
Distinguished days once more.

Roderick Wilson, *Queens' College Dial*, 1953.

1993: the re-construction

Richardson's design was severely truncated in execution, and suffered from wood and steel rationing. Since 1951 the style of undergraduate study and student numbers have changed beyond recognition. The library of 1951 no longer fulfilled its task. Detailed planning to re-construct the library began in 1990, although aspects of the re-construction were first mooted in the 1970s. The overall scheme comprised two main structural elements: to insert a mezzanine floor; to replace two staircases with one staircase. And three environmental elements: to renew heating and lighting systems; to update furnishings; to introduce computers.

A College library needs to be robust, to be ergonomically efficient, to encourage concentration whilst not stifling imagination, to be a common property for all members of the College, and to be the academic flagship of the College. The brief for the architects, Julian Bland and John Bailey, was to interpret all these elements into a building which could be constructed and open to undergraduates within six months of its initial closure, and which would deal sympathetically with its past as a chapel and its role as a war memorial.

The new structure was created inside the shell of the building as a ship is inserted into a bottle, touching the walls in as few places as possible. Materials were chosen to emphasise light and create a welcoming atmosphere. All surfaces are of American white oak, which encases fully adjustable bookcases. All floors are carpeted with the exception of the entrance area, once the ante-chapel, which has been repaired in York stone and retains monumental slabs as a reminder of the building's past.

Re-construction of the building allowed close study of that past, which was recorded photographically at every stage. The decision to re-open a window covered up by panelling in the eighteenth century revealed the most surprising find: a late sixteenth century wall-painting of a series of arabesques in red ochre on a yellow ochre ground, last described in 1773

[Tuesday 30th March 1773]... the West end [of the Chapel] was enlarged and a curious painted room above the Entrance into it converted into a Gallery for the master's Family... when the Wainscote was pulled down, they found the sides all covered with Coats of Arms on the Wall in Water Colours, as I apprehend, for I did not much observe them, being the Arms of all the Sees in England and all the Colleges in both Universities, except Sidney College. Emmanuel as there: so I suppose it was painted between the years 1584 and 1596. [Mss Cole, ii, 13-18]¹¹.

The wall-painting was conserved and placed behind a shutter of glass.

Design team

College: Robin Walker; Clare Sargent
Architects: Julian Bland; John Bailey
Contractors: Morris Preston, Sawston
Structural Engineers: Peter Dann & Partners
Mechanical & Electrical Engineers: Keith Pitts & Ass.
Conservator: Tobit Curteis

¹¹ Willis & Clark, 1886

The future: the Provenance Project

The Provenance Project was initiated in 1991 using voluntary helpers. It is a systematic survey of all books in the Old Library, listing previous owners, and reconstructing not only the history of Queens' library but also the libraries of individuals which went to make it up - most of whom were obscure fellows of the College who none the less contributed to the academic climate of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The most interesting pattern coming to light at present is the movement of individual books among a small group of fellows in the 1640s-1670s - a movement sometimes accompanied by acrimonious discussion: on the flyleaf of *Poems of the Matchless Orinda* -

This book I bought, H.J. [Henry James, President 1675-1717]
Did you by God, R.B. [Richard Bryan, Vice-President]
in the gutter margin, obscured by the end-paper -
Lau. Catelyn his book [Chaplain & Vicar of Oakington]

The Project has also identified the previously unknown shelf-labelling system in use in the mid-seventeenth century, which in tandem with study of the purchase records will allow reconstruction of the curatorial practices of a complete seventeenth century library: the only known such study¹².

It is planned to make much of the information available on the national Renaissance Libraries Database, a research tool for all involved in the study of cultural and intellectual history.

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¹² Sargent, 1994-5