

The Librarian writes...



For the library, 2020 has been about agility, responsiveness, and proactive strategy. We adapted rapidly to extraordinary circumstances, and the library flourished by delivering content and services in new ways, which sought always to place the reader at the very centre of our focus. During the first wave of the pandemic, we repurposed our service offering and our website, particularly towards online content and services. We transformed our loans service into a postal loans service, and introduced a 'home-delivery' book purchase request service for our students and academics, to ensure continuity of provision irrespective of where in the world they were working. Both services were heavily accessed:

around 850 books were despatched to students at the height of the pandemic alone. Very quickly, we were receiving feedback from students that spoke of their sense of thanks and relief that their studies could continue to be well-supported by their college library. In the words of three New College students—an undergraduate, a Master's student, and a DPhil student: 'I speak on behalf of all the students when I say we are really grateful for all the support New College Library is providing'; 'I can tell you how grateful everybody is to you for keeping this going; it has saved our studies, and established a much-needed contact point with the college we left'; 'off to read the books that have just arrived from the indefatigable New College Library' After a period of temporary closure, during which we delivered all our services remotely, we reopened the physical building with a trio of services, 'Browse & Borrow', 'Click & Collect', and 'Stay & Study', which were at the forefront of library provision in Oxford over 2020. A Covid-secure environment and service operation were paramount for us, along with the determination to serve our readers well, despite the challenges. Both required from us an innovative approach. We utilised up-to-date book quarantining protocols to deliver the best combination of safety and accessibility to our physical collection. Consequently, the value of our physical collection and the physical spaces we provide were even more fully recognised this year, also in part due to the heavy restrictions on accessing books and space within the Bodleian Libraries.

Prior to the first lockdown, we delivered an exhibition of our Classics treasures which drew much praise, and which featured magnificent rare books, manuscripts, archives, photographs, and coins. The college's collection of Greek and Roman coins is held on deposit in the Ashmolean Museum, and this was the first time in over one hundred years that the college had had its coins back on its site and on display. When we reopened the library, we transferred part of the exhibition to our display cases in the Upper Reading Room. Other collections displays over the year included those highlighting Black History Month and LGBT+ History Month. Also prior to lockdown and travel restrictions, we worked with colleagues from

Oxford and Durham universities on ultraviolet and multi-spectral examination and photography of some of our most important manuscripts.

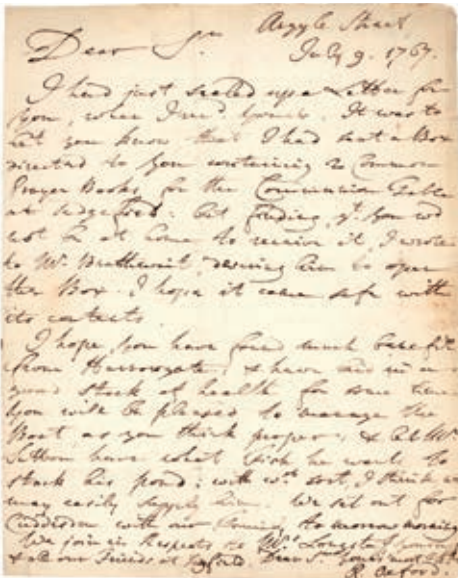
Other outreach work continued over the year. Working alongside colleagues in the chapel and IT, we delivered a ‘New College Reads To You’ podcast series, which is continuing into 2021. Our starry array of New College alumni and fellows provided 34 superb readings over the course of the year, which also served to help the library establish or strengthen relationships with important writers and notable old members. A New College Library Fund was set up in 2020, initially to help fund the new ways in which the library was supporting our students. It has since been repurposed to support purchases to our teaching and research collections, to sustain our digitisation and conservation activities, and in particular to add to our world-renowned special collections. We are grateful to all who have contributed so generously with financial gifts, and to the thirty individuals who have given books to the library this year. Notable acquisitions have included the gift of over twenty books (in author-signed copies) written and donated by our alumnus Professor Irfan Habib, one of the foremost historians of South Asia. Another has been our purchase at auction of a very rare first edition of perhaps the only New College play from the age of Shakespeare to survive in its entirety, *The Sophister* (1639) by lawyer and college fellow, Richard Zouche (1590-1661), thanks to the generosity of Dr Mark Byford, sometime Salvesen fellow. We have also much increased our efforts to purchase important copies of books by or once belonging to eminent New College alumni.

Looking forwards to 2021, we aim to reprioritise work to produce a catalogue of our collections of manuscripts—one of the University’s great collections—and to develop our publications programme. We have been able to plan and initiate a couple of new titles for the imprint that we established in 2019. The library produced during 2020 two further issues of the college’s open-access e-journal, *New College Notes*, whose prominence and usage are growing. With the temporary closure of the physical library throughout 2020 and the restrictions the pandemic placed on some of our operations, a meaningful comparison using our performance indicators, over the full year for services across the board, is not possible. However, the number of times articles in *New College Notes* were accessed increased this year by 24% over 2019 (and by 64% in comparison with 2018). Despite the unprecedented challenges of 2020 and the new difficulties in getting books into the hands of our readers, the number of books borrowed from the library in Hilary term 2020 was still over 5% higher than the number recorded for 2018, and only slightly lower than our figure for 2019. (Hilary is the only term that can offer something approaching meaningful comparison, given library closure and nationwide disruption.) Perhaps robust figures are due both to the increasing regard with which the library is held, and to our efforts in marketing our services. I have been enormously gratified—if, to be honest, more than a little surprised—to see visits to the library actually increase once again this year. Hilary term 2020 saw 20,769 visits, compared with 17,532 for Hilary 2019 (an 18% rise), and 15,390 for

Hilary 2018 (a 35% rise). This is an extraordinary increase for a year such as this, but is testament to the value the college library adds to the college's academic mission and to the student experience. As would be expected, our social media channels have been even more important this year than last. The number of our follows on Twitter increased by 70% this year, and the amount of reactions to our Facebook posts has increased by some 525%, the latter down to the success of 'New College Reads To You' and the attractive content we have sought to produce for it.

Our primary challenge for next year will certainly be ongoing core service delivery and maximising access to our collections, as the pandemic waxes and wanes in ways yet unknown. But I am hopeful that, with the team of dedicated and committed staff who work in the Library and Archives—irrespective of the staff furloughing we must continue to manage into 2021—we shall be able to achieve much more. I hope we shall continue to innovate, and embed the college library at the very heart of the college's academic endeavour, and enable it to be one of the key components to strengthen the college's renown and the relationships it nurtures with its students, fellows, alumni—and scholars worldwide.

Robert Lowth and Randal Keynes



Letter from Robert Lowth 9 July 1767

In November 2020, I was delighted to receive into the library the most significant, sizeable donation or bequest of early printed books made to us for at least the past century, if not longer. Thanks to the considerable generosity of our alumnus, the conservationist Randal Hume Keynes, OBE, FLS (b. 1948)—author of the bestselling biography of his great-great-grandfather Charles Darwin—we now have a collection of over 250 volumes by and relating to Robert Lowth (1710–87). Sometime fellow of New College, and bishop of London and Oxford Professor of Poetry (1741–51), Lowth was also offered (though he declined it) the archbishopric of Canterbury. A Biblical scholar, known for his work on the Book of *Isaiah* and on the nature of Hebrew poetry, Lowth also wrote



Randal Keynes in his home in London standing in front of part of his collection on Robert Lowth

a celebrated *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) which went through many editions, as well as a *Life* (1758) of our college's founder, William of Wykeham, the copyright in which Lowth gave to New College. This major donation will become a special named collection in the library, bearing the shelfmark 'Keynes'. Randal Keynes set about his collecting and recording of Robert Lowth editions in an exemplary manner, and the collection is predominantly in very fine condition, with some attractive bindings, and interesting and valuable associations, including those relating to Randal's grandfather, the eminent bibliographer Sir Geoffrey Keynes (1887–1982). There is much to be discovered in this collection, most of which will come to light only during the course of its cataloguing, which will constitute an extensive project for the library. I am grateful for the ongoing help and advice Randal is providing, and it has been an enormous pleasure to get to know him.

Just a matter of days after acquiring this spectacular gift, I found myself bidding successfully at auction for a collection of 32 autograph letters (1763–80) by Robert Lowth to the Reverend William Longstaffe (1733–1806) of Durham. This is believed to be the second largest collection of letters that has come down to us representing a correspondence between Lowth and another person; the largest is the one between Lowth and his wife Molly, in the Bodleian. Our collection is important in showing the working and personal relationship between Lowth—who relocated to Durham in 1758 as prebendary of Durham Cathedral and rector of Sedgely— and his curate and friend Longstaffe, who managed his affairs in County Durham, as well as shedding light on other areas of Lowth's ecclesiastical and family life.

Annie's Box, Randal Keynes's moving and outstanding biography of Darwin, focuses on Darwin's daughter Annie (1841–51), who died at the age of ten—'she must have known how we loved her; oh that she could now know how deeply, how tenderly we do still & shall ever love her dear joyous face'. Robert Lowth wrote a moving Latin epitaph on his own daughter Mary (1755–68): 'Cara Maria, vale! . . . / Cara, redi, læta tum dicam voce, paternos / Ejà age in amplexus, cara Maria, redi'. It is heartening and fitting that Lowth's letters have found a permanent home in New College Library. And the college library is profoundly grateful to Randal Keynes for such a munificent gift of books, so transformative for our collections. At a stroke, the library has become a major research repository for the study of one of our distinguished alumni and an important figure in eighteenth-century England, Robert Lowth.

Back cover illustration:

The *Rota nova* is found—in full, partial, or fragmentary form—in only four manuscripts; the fullest version is the one held in the Library of New College, Oxford.

A wheel of fortune—Guido Faba, enthroned at the top, receives a wing from an angel. The text refers to ‘wings’, representing sections of intellectual progress. Around the circumference of the wheel are three figures, one ascending, one falling, and one cast off below the wheel.

New College Library, Oxford, MS 255, f. 1r
‘Incipit ala prima que angelica dicitur’

Guido Faba, *Rota nova* (The New Wheel)
Spain, c. 1275–1300

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Photograph by Colin Dunn



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