

The Librarian writes . . .



This has been a record year for the library. Usage of our collections and services continues to rise – bucking some national trends for academic libraries – and this is heartening for all colleagues in the Library & Archives, who work hard to try to deliver excellence. 2020 and 2021 statistics for the library were outliers owing to Covid (when physical building closures were required), though demand was high for new services which we created for remotely-delivered provision over those two years; and we have retained and carried forward our popular ‘Click & Collect’ as a service improvement. Other service improvements include extending library opening hours by 5½

hours every day during vacation periods, and in the latter part of the year we implemented a substantial increase to advertised opening hours for access to our archives, from two to five days per week

In 2022 we loaned 8,752 items (an increase of over 30% on last year), processed 20,292 loan renewals (a 45% increase), and recorded 4,974 in-library usages (i.e. reference-only) of books from the shelves, amounting to 34,018 modern book and other item usages throughout the year. This figure amounts to around half the total number of modern collection items we hold. Our collection is valued and used intensively by our students and other readers. There were 74,509 reader visits to the library (2019: 67,779; 2018: 60,104; 2017: 57,405), with 4th week of Trinity Term our busiest. During peak periods, and increasingly during other times as well, the library is full to capacity, and this despite our increasing overall seating by fourteen places back in 2019. We were a little surprised to see book purchase requests from students increase this year too over 2021 and 2020 figures; they rose 5% over last year, when students had been very reliant on our remote delivery to them of bookstock.

Unsurprising, and reflective of the importance of our world-renowned special collections, was the return to high demand for access to our rare books and manuscripts by external readers. But the scale once again surprised us a little; clearly 2020 and 2021 had resulted in even more pent-up need to work with unique and rare materials in our collections than might have been imagined. Over 500 rare books and manuscripts were consulted during the year, a high number even taking into account the known strength of our holdings, and we assisted with the publication of research and dissemination of knowledge through several projects, including one at Cambridge University’s Fitzwilliam Museum to examine in forensic detail our glorious copy of Peter Apian’s *Astronomicum Cæsareum* (1540)

Our flourishing outreach, promotional, and wellbeing initiatives may well be driving up demand for our collections and services. We hosted large displays and smaller ones to enhance college and other events, including those for Benefactors' Day, the Courtauld Institute, Freshers' Week (our first ever, and a joint endeavour across the library and archive), New College School, the Oxford Bibliographical Society, Oxford librarians, the Oxford Preservation Trust (for 'Oxford Open Doors'), and the Oxford University Society of Bibliophiles. Subject exhibitions were hosted on Botany and Zoology, English literature, ethnic diversity to accompany the annual College Commemoration Service in Chapel, and on LGBTQ+ themes for a college LGBTQ+ alumni and allies celebration.

Our most popular exhibition was the one we hosted as part of the nationally acclaimed Oxford Festival of the Arts summer programme, on its theme 'Around the World in 80 Ways' – the first time we have taken part in this high-profile programme, and a wonderful opportunity to showcase the linguistic and geographical variety of our special collections. In total, some 921 visitors came to our library exhibitions in 2022, an encouraging figure given the preparation and work involved. Mini-displays in the library entrance hall also marked Black History Month, International Women's Day, Islamophobia Awareness Month, Mental Health Awareness Week, Pride Month, and Trans Awareness Week.

This year saw the Covid-delayed launch of not one but two books in our New College Library & Archives imprint: a scholarly and facsimile edition by Fellow Librarian, Dr Will Poole, of a 1639-imprint Wykehamist play from our collections (and a manuscript prototype), Richard Zouche's *The Sophister*, and *Righteous Anger: Celebrating the Anti-Racist Activism of Michael and Ann Dummett*, spearheaded by the Warden. New College Fellow Professor Sir Michael Dummett and Lady Dummett were the subject of one of the exhibition displays in our two museum-grade cases in the Upper Reading Room to accompany the book launch; the other two that year picked up on our botany and zoology treasures again, and also on the donation of an important collection of books by alumnus David Mann, marking the tenth anniversary of his death.

Well-received welfare initiatives over the course of the year included bibliotherapy and surprise Christmas book loans for students and staff; and the quality of our reader services across the board continues to improve. Our social media channels go from strength to strength: by the close of the year we had over 1,250 Twitter and approaching 1,000 Instagram followers, and our best year to date of 'likes', retweets, and post reach. One of our Facebook posts was picked up by the university, resulting in 1,700 'likes' for this one alone. Our 'Curators' Choice' video series is a growing source of attractive content on our collections, as is the college's e-journal we edit and produce, *New College Notes*, which came out in two issues this year, publishing some twenty-one research articles or learned notes promoting the rich history of the college and its wonderful collections, and building too a growing institutional knowledge of our holdings. Archives palaeography classes



Frontispiece design by Dante Gabriel Rossetti from Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market and Other Poems', 2nd edition (London: Macmillan, 1865); New College Library, Oxford, RS5310
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were also a welcome new initiative. A beautiful image of the Annunciation to the Shepherds from our early 16th-century Flemish illuminated book of hours (MS 323) for this year's Christmas card reminded friends and alumni of the strength and beauty of our special collections.

Our collections do indeed define our library and archives, and this year saw 2,052 book acquisitions, an increase over last year's 1,701. Much effort is also

directed to ensure that we build on our collection strengths by acquiring notable copies of modern antiquarian materials relevant to the college, and – where funds permit – other early printed book and occasional manuscript and archive purchases too. Indicative of the variety of our holdings are the 1903 Torpid Head of the River crew rudder which we accessioned, a 1711 copy letter of the Bishop of Winchester relating to a Winchester College dispute, two literary manuscripts of poetry by celebrated Greco-Roman antiquities collector, alumnus Edward Perry Warren (our most significant manuscript acquisitions for some time), and important printed items by or relating to our alumni from the 18th century to today. Highlights include a copy of John Evelyn Barlas's *Bird-Notes* (1887) (only two other copies are known in the country, at the British Library and the London Library), an inscribed copy of John Galsworthy's first published book, an early 19th-century popular three-decker novel *Confessions of an Oxonian*, a beautiful first edition second issue copy of *Caprices* by 1890s' poet Theodore Wratislaw with a New College provenance, works by Oxford Professor of Poetry, Alice Oswald, and fine copies of books by Dryden, Coleridge, and Christina Rossetti. We received book donations from a total of 55 donors, including a sizeable gift of German books from Professor Karen Leeder, and we completed the cataloguing of the Professor Laura Marcus bequest. The accessioning of the New College School archive also represented a major acquisition with tangible research potential and benefit to college.

Our staff are our other major asset, and I am indebted to all members of the team for their enthusiasm, expertise, and ingenuity. We bade farewell at the beginning of the year to Archivist Jennifer Thorp, with our gratitude on her retirement for her hard work, dedication, and all that she has achieved. Shortly thereafter we welcomed Dr Michael Stansfield from Durham University as Archivist & Records Manager, and have begun work towards creating an online catalogue for our outstanding archival collections, which we hope will bear some fruit in 2023. We aim to continue work towards robust online exhibitions, and to continue momentum from a feasibility study for a library extension, which will be a longer-term aim. We shall retain our focus on our readers and researchers in order to drive improvement, as we develop collections and services we believe our readers will value and rely upon. We ran our second full-scale library users' survey, which received a 7.5% higher response rate than the first: 89% of respondents agreed with the statement 'Overall, I am satisfied with New College Library', of whom 47% strongly agreed (up from 29% last time). We try to listen to our readers, and we implemented a raft of ten library service improvements in response to results. Feedback was constructive – and very gratifying, perhaps none more so than: 'I think the library is a wonderful place. A beautiful 'haven' for quiet time to research, a great resource, a treasure trove of historical MS and artefacts, and, perhaps above all, staff who are friendly, knowledgeable and love what they do and transmit that.'

Christopher Skelton-Foord - Librarian

