

# The Librarian writes . . .



Our library, in common with others in the university system, introduced in August a new library management system which helps run our key services of book-borrowing and cataloguing. Thanks to sound planning and implementation at New College, staff coped splendidly to ensure there was a pause in circulation services of only five weekdays; indeed, implementation will have felt like seamless continuous service for most of our users. It was, nevertheless, a big undertaking with knock-on effects across almost all our activities, necessitating a heavy workload of additional training and learning on the job for us

all. Earlier in January I signed off a contract to acquire the Epexio archival management system to facilitate an online catalogue and associated images for our archives. An easily accessible catalogue to unlock for researchers in Oxford and beyond our rich archival holdings has long been a considerable gap in our provision, and the Archivist, Assistant Librarian, and helpful volunteers spent much of this year populating an archive catalogue with existing, upgraded, and new archive catalogue records. We expect now to launch the catalogue publicly during 2024, and it has the potential to provide a step change in our service.

Circulation has dipped this year (a general trajectory for academic libraries, albeit less steep at ours than at most), though we still loaned more books during Michaelmas Term 2023 than in 2022 (up from 2,841 to 2,885). Overall, the total number of circulating items (including renewals and in-house usage) amounted to 30,292 (2022: 34,018), a number that equates to around a third of our entire collection of books, modern and antiquarian. The physical library is, however, being ever more intensively used, with a 4.8% rise in the number of reader visits in 2023, some 78,079 (2022: 74,509). We purchased around 2,000 books, and the library is more popular than ever. While such an increase cannot continue indefinitely, it is heartening, and a credit to the dedication and expertise that all library and archives staff demonstrate day in, day out.

A user focus is the core of everything we do, and we have sought to assist our readers and researchers by means of a number of enterprises this year, including introducing special collections handling workshops, ensuring increased take-up of our library induction services (we are at our highest level ever), providing new ergonomic kneeling chairs in

the library, and taking care of our users by means of welfare initiatives, organised in exemplary fashion by the Deputy Librarian. These range from surprise Christmas book loans with chocolate, ‘Brew Monday’ in Hilary term, and the provision of manuscript colouring-in sheets and a library quiz.



*From an illuminated manuscript, generously donated to the library by Mrs E. M. Vale in 1983, which we had digitised in its entirety this year*

*Book of Hours, Flemish (1440–1460), New College Library, Oxford, MS 370, f. 12r*

We have taken good care of our collections too, with the construction in one of our archive strongrooms in the Muniment Tower of a new wooden press to hold 80 boxes of materials (thank you, Brendan Holmes, college’s gifted carpenter); and we have overseen remedial conservation work on 48 items from the library’s collections and two charters from the archives, much in-house low-scale scanning of images from our archives to facilitate access and preservation, and high-grade colour digitisation of nine more of our extraordinary medieval and post-medieval manuscripts, easily the finest such collection among all Oxford colleges. (This year’s college Christmas card featured a glorious image of the Holy Family, from our illuminated 13th-century Flemish book of hours with psalter.)

Improved environmental monitoring and data collection this year across all library and archives storage spaces have meant that we can exercise even more prudent and responsible stewardship of our priceless holdings. We were pleased in November when our archives – along with those of Lincoln College – became the first of any of the Oxford colleges to achieve Archive Service Accreditation status within The National Archives’ scheme. The panel’s noting in particular a ‘strong application from a service which has been developing at pace in recent years’, with ‘agile and responsive decision making’ and an ‘ambitious programme’ was especially encouraging.

Our collections of rare books and manuscripts put New College on the map, and this year saw 87 unique visitors (down from 90 last year) to consult these (across a far higher number of separate visits), and we brought some 532 rare books and manuscripts from our stores into the library – a 9.5% increase over last year’s 486.

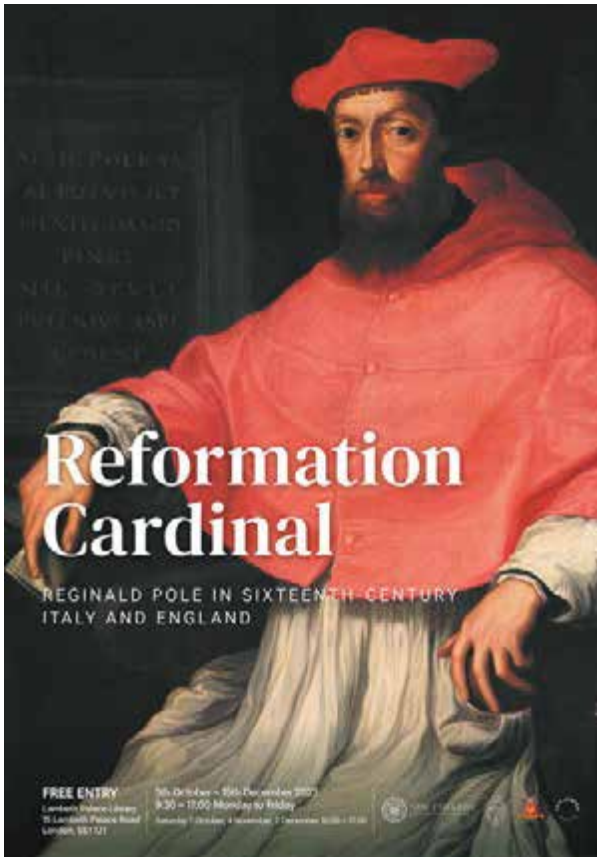
We devoted more time and greater expertise this year to acquisitions (including more work with donors), exhibitions, events, and promotion relating to our special collections. Notable acquisitions included a 1564 Louvain imprint by New College Jesuit theologian Thomas Harding, rare 17th- and 18th-century British historical and theological imprints written by other alumni, 18th-century literary imprints also penned by New College writers, rare Third Reich German printings, photographic and autograph diary collections of two alumni who both died in 1949, important, exquisite copies of books by John Fowles, and first-edition copies of works by illustrious 19th-century writers Charlotte Brontë, Lionel Johnson, Thomas Love Peacock, and Sir Walter Scott. We are grateful to some 61 individual donors (2022: 55) who have generously given collection items and monetary gifts (some of significant value). 1,776 visitors came to our exhibitions, a 93% increase on last year’s 921; and this figure does not take into account the small-scale ‘pop-up’ and impromptu showings of rare books, manuscripts, and archives which are also part-and-parcel of what we do. The library’s communication channels flourished, with our best ever year for likes, shares, and reach on X, Facebook, and Instagram. Content showcases our beautiful special collections, and aims to inform and entertain. Our #AdventAlphabet calendar postings 1–25 December of gorgeous initials from our illuminated manuscripts and early printed books were a great hit, probably our most successful social media campaign to date. And our ‘Curators’ Choice’ video series, spotlighting extraordinary individual rare book, manuscript, and archival items, had clocked up 4,100 viewings by the close of the year.

A notable highlight has been partnering with Lambeth Palace and

the Venerable English College, Rome to curate an exhibition featuring our rare books and manuscripts, *Reformation Cardinal: Reginald Pole in Sixteenth-Century Italy & England*, running from October till December at Lambeth Palace Library in London. With books and documents from all three institutions, plus some from the Bodleian, our focus was the life and turbulent times of Cardinal Reginald Pole (1500–1558), England’s last Roman Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury. This has been, I believe, the only occasion the library has put on an international exhibition of this scale in a location beyond Oxford. It received favourable notices from national outlets including *The Times* and the *Catholic Herald*, and was enhanced by a richly illustrated book of the same name published under New College Library’s own imprint. The following month (November) saw us publish our fifth book in that same imprint (established in 2019), *The Great Pillar: The Political Career of Lord Thurlow 1731–1806*, a biography

featuring images from the college’s renowned collection of James Gillray satirical prints. The quality, scope, and reach of *New College Notes*, the college’s e-journal which I edit, also continues to grow, and this year saw 18 scholarly articles published over two issues, including our milestone 20th issue.

We acquired two more exhibition cases, bringing the total to four, enabling us to put on yet more interesting and varied displays in the upper reading room, notably ‘Queer Love & Literature’, and



*Reformation Cardinal exhibition poster*

an exhibition marking the 60th anniversary of *The Collector*, the debut novel of alumnus John Fowles (1926–2005), who alongside Nobel literary laureate John Galsworthy is the most significant fiction-writer the college has nurtured. Among many exhibitions over the year, particularly well-received were those of library treasures for Benefactors' Day, one for an Open Day for parents and guardians of first-year students, and another for our Freshers; one of music manuscripts; another of items relating to Medieval and Old English and the college's sometime English tutor, Christopher Tolkien; and two very successful ones, *Maleficia* (in June) of magical, astrological, and witchcraft texts, and *People's Stories* (July) within the Oxford Festival of the Arts summer programme, attracting on one day alone over 300 visitors. Again this year mini-displays in the library entrance hall focused on celebratory days in the calendar, and on awareness weeks for welfare issues and to champion diversity and tolerance. We also put on weekly displays of archival documents during Hilary Term, while lunchtime walking history tours of college buildings by the Archivist remained firm favourites.

Work in the library is fulfilling thanks to the appreciative readers we serve, our congenial and talented team of staff, skilled good-natured colleagues in college, and our resolve to get things done. I enjoyed opportunities to speak on Radio 3's *Early Music Show*, to facilitate a memorial lecture event at The British Library, and to plan an upcoming conference in Austria. By the time this *Record* appears, the library's first online exhibition will feature on our burgeoning webpages, and I shall look forward to launching our archives catalogue, and hopefully, after preliminary planning this year, more fruitful endeavour to finance, and in time bring about, a much-needed library extension.

*Christopher Skelton-Foord* – Librarian

# Donors Giving Collection Items and Financial Gifts to the Library 2023

- The Lord Charles Aldington
- Dr G M V Alexander
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- Mr Peter Burke
- Professor Jay Cassel
- Mr Francis Coles
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- Professor Johannes Vogel
- Professor D R P Wiggins
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# Back cover

From a Cistercian manuscript, an eleven-line initial G, depicting in green and red a bearded Venerable Bede standing in bishop's vestments, a book in his left hand, his right hand raised in blessing, the dove of the Holy Spirit on each shoulder whispering in his ears

Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (1150–1175)  
New College Library, Oxford, MS 308, f. 5r [detail]

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