

# The Librarian writes . . .



2024 has been a most productive and rewarding year for the library as we achieved much developmental work to enhance and expand our service offering and outstanding collections. We aim above all to be both responsive and proactive in terms of our readers' needs. Around 31,000 items in total were used by readers, a high figure for a library our size, and we acquired 392 books to fulfil purchase recommendations from readers (the largest number ever) out of a total of over 1,900 books added to stock. Our biennial library survey in Hilary Term revealed positive feedback from the 35% of college's students (biggest uptake yet) who responded. There is high satisfaction with the library, and especially with its staff, with 74% of respondents 'strongly' agreeing that staff are helpful (up from 70% and 62% in the two previous surveys). This is encouraging, and indicative of the lengths we seek to go to assisting our readers. Comments, indicative of a range, were particularly heartening:

*It's such a friendly, homely place. I truly feel so comfortable in there! I struggle to study at home, and so I am in the library almost every day - I don't think I would still be on the course without it!*

*Thank you so much for all the time and effort you put into supporting New College students - my friends and I talk all the time about how thoughtful you are for student needs!*

*Just really appreciate the speed at which Library staff resolve concerns - particularly book orders!*

*Thank you for your help and for creating and maintaining a really welcoming space. The library is a very big factor when I think about why I love New College.*

Our student welfare initiatives are very well-received, this year's surprise Christmas book loans service especially so, with the highest take-up we have had. As expected, results also revealed that students still primarily value core, 'traditional' library services of silent study space, printing/scanning/copying, and academic collections. Areas identified for improvement resulted in the library's defining 12 key

actions, which we have successfully addressed. Service improvements over the year included an increase to opening hours implemented in October (with the library's now opening at 7 am each day); a new loaning service for chargers and adapters; a replacement of the unpopular yellow lighting in the library with improved quality, white, and softer LED lighting (more energy-efficient too); a well-devised treasure-hunt for new students; better library inductions across the first two weeks of the academic year; a well-received offering to new undergraduates of notebooks illustrated with images from one of five volumes from our manuscript and rare book treasures; and a Freshers' week exhibition which saw a 12% increase in visitor numbers over 2023. Most notably, after two years' preparatory work, we launched a new online archives catalogue to open up our archival collections. These days catalogues available only in printed format are increasingly considered unfit for purpose, and often languish unused; online catalogues are required and expected, by students and researchers alike. We expect our catalogue will considerably facilitate research, while lunchtime walking history tours of college buildings continued to help ensure the visibility of our archives holdings.

Our exhibitions programme remained popular, reaching 1,323 visitors in college – the highest onsite total ever. It included treasures and other exhibitions for the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association, for Benefactors' Day, to support a Green Templeton College lecture on New College archaeologists Sir Leonard Woolley and Sir Max Mallowan, for our Hong Kong Summer School students, for the New College Society, for the Open Day for Parents and Guardians of First Year Students, of medieval manuscripts for a group of visiting librarians from the US, of Wycliffite and related manuscripts and books in connection with Wycliffe Hall, of archival documents relating to William of Wykeham to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the Founder's birth, of library manuscripts for the Oxford University Society of Bibliophiles, as well as four large-scale exhibitions. *Muses in the Library and Archives of New College* (in July) was our well-attended contribution to the Oxford Festival of the Arts, *Mythical and Monstrous: Fantastical Creatures at New College Library* (June) was a fabulous display of largely medieval manuscripts, and the most recent in our series of subject-themed library exhibitions were *Medicine & Anatomy* (February), and *Sacred: Christian Theology in New College Library* (November), the latter taking place aptly in our wonderful college chapel, attracting visitors from far afield.

Within the library, an exhibition drawing from our Seton-Watson collection of rare and ephemeral printed materials relating to early 20th-century Central and Eastern European history and politics was a notable



Coronation of the Virgin  
 Flemish Book of Hours (possibly Utrecht), c. 1525–1550  
 New College Library, Oxford, MS 323, f. 118v

16th-century manuscript Book of Hours (Use of Rome) donated to the library in 1693 by London merchant Henry Howell, son of Thomas Howell, bishop of Bristol 1644–46

© Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford  
 Photograph by Colin Dunn

reach of our social media platforms, Facebook, Instagram (now with over 1,500 followers), and X (over 2,000 followers, with posts garnering 210,000 impressions over the year). Our *Curators' Choice* video series enjoyed its most popular year to date, with over 12,000 views, and we published two more issues (containing 19 scholarly articles) of the college's well-regarded scholarly e-journal, *New College Notes*, which is being accessed more and more.

The richness of our collections is exceptional, even by Oxford standards, and helps us put on a good show. One of our principal responsibilities is to continue to build on our collections, and to create needed special collections of the future. We acknowledge with grateful

success. In addition, we staged various small 'pop-up' themed displays of library and archives materials for show-and-tell and similar activities – as well as two inaugural showcase events. One was on our beautiful Books of Hours in February, in collaboration with TORCH (The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities), the other in March on our early printed legal books for a 'Legal-Literary Imagining' workshop organised by the university's Centre for Early Modern Studies. 2024 also saw the library provide online exhibitions for the very first time. *English Literature Through the Ages* was launched on our website at the beginning of the year, followed by *Geometry and Astronomy* just before the close of 2024. These complement the growing



*Manuscript prayer book in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, 1809–1810  
New College Library, Oxford, MS 383, ff. 1v–2r  
Described in full in ‘MS 383 and Margoliouth’, New College Notes 22 (2024), no. 6*

thanks the 60 generous donors who have given books or funds to the library this year. Special collections work featured heavily in this year’s activities. We fetched 478 rare books and manuscripts from our stores and into the library for use, assisting 88 unique visitors (slightly up on last year). We have been fortunate to acquire three more splendid manuscripts for our collections (each written up in *New College Notes*). These are the autograph copy of the murder mystery novel *When the Wind Blows* (1949) by our alumnus ‘Cyril Hare’ (Alfred Alexander Gordon Clark), a holograph manuscript volume of largely unpublished literary material, mostly penned in 1785 by New College botanist Charles Abbot as a dedicatory gift to the college’s Warden, John Oglander, and a beautiful, portable manuscript prayer book in Arabic and Ottoman-Turkish of 1809–1810. This we acquired in 2024 to mark the return to the college of Arabic as an undergraduate subject, this acquisition marking the pinnacle of the library’s building up largely from scratch a working modern collection

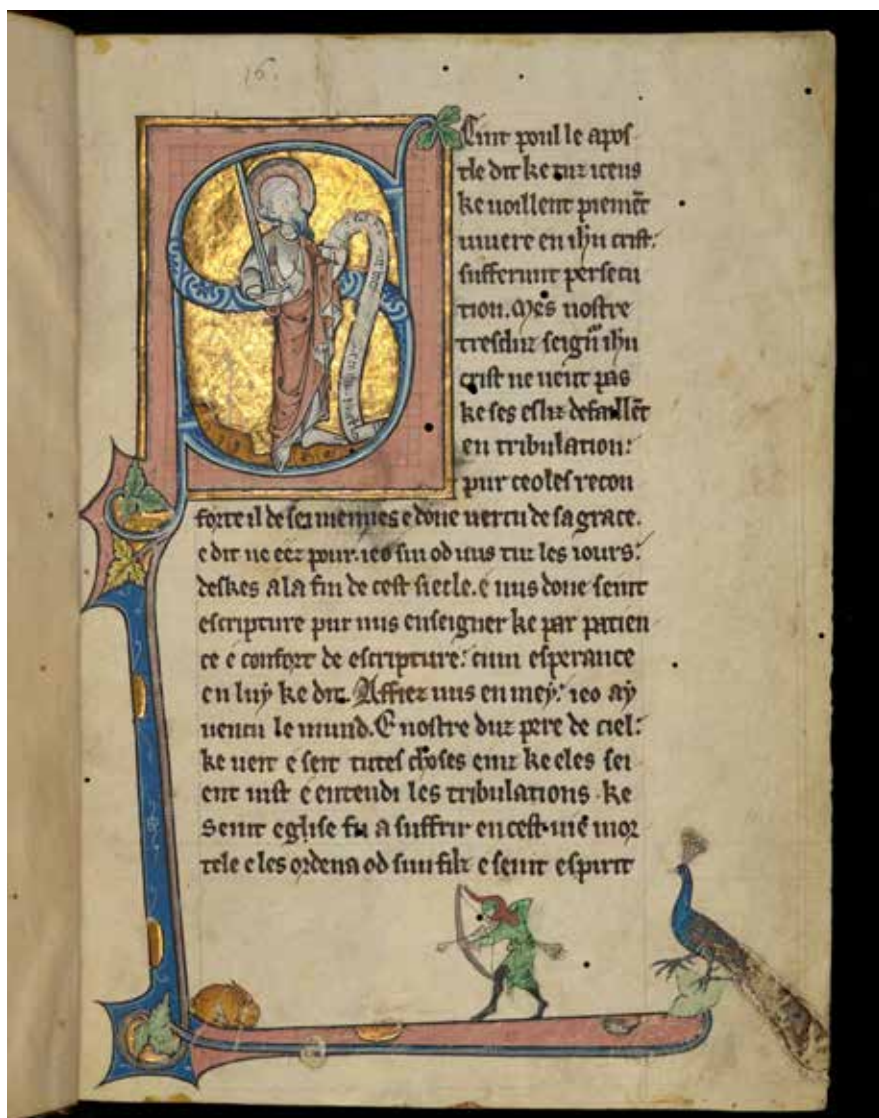
of materials to support our new students. Notable archival acquisitions included papers relating to alumni Duff Cooper, 1st Viscount Norwich and to Sir Harry Kottingham Newton. Other notable printed acquisitions included three 16th- and early 17th-century volumes by one of college's foremost theologians, Thomas Stapleton, very rare 17th- and 18th-century imprints by other alumni, and notable copies of late 18th-century to 21st-century books by a range of New College writers, including Francis Mundy, William Somervile, Ned Warren, James Laver, and contemporary bestselling novelists. The need for additional collections storage space is becoming increasingly urgent though: staff carried out two major book moves, including one involving one of our offsite storage areas, in order to create space needed for new acquisitions.

Colleagues also worked hard to implement and embed Alma, the university libraries' core library management system, and we were the second college to complete a stocktake on the new system. Alongside in-house low-scale scanning of images from our archives, we also refocused resources to make faster headway with our major digitisation programme, an expensive and intensive process, resulting this year in the full digitisation of eight more of the library's glorious manuscripts, along with some important and historic library and archives catalogues and inventories. We require high-quality colour digital surrogates (for access and preservation purposes) of all 383 manuscript volumes from the library's celebrated holdings, and much remains to be done. This, along with the financial means to build our collections even more successfully, and of course the much-needed library extension, remains our hope for the future. It continues to be a pleasure to serve our readers, and to work with a talented and enthusiastic team of colleagues. I shall leave the final word to one of our students, this time a postgraduate, responding to 2024's library survey:

*I am hugely proud of being a New College alumna and current student, and a major part of that is because of the library, the helpful, friendly, and incredibly knowledgeable staff.*

*Christopher Skelton-Foord – Librarian*





Showing a historiated initial S and St Paul with sword and scroll – in the lower margin an archer, with a peacock behind him, shoots at a crouched rabbit

From an illuminated manuscript digitised in its entirety this year; probably once owned by King Henry V's maternal grandmother, Joan (1347–1419), wife of Humphrey de Bohun, 7th earl of Hereford, it was donated to the library in 1588 by College Fellow, Thomas Martin

Anglo-Norman Apocalypse (1300–1310)  
 New College Library, Oxford, MS 65, f. 1r

# Donors Giving Collection Items and Financial Gifts to the Library 2024

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