CHAPTER 9
Richard Ovenden, Bodley’s Librarian, University of Oxford

Introduction
The Bodleian Libraries are a collection of approximately 30 libraries that serve the University of Oxford, i.e., including, most famously, and one of the most beautiful libraries in the world, the Bodleian Library itself, as well as many other faculty and subject libraries. Together, the whole Bodleian Library systems hold over 12 million printed items, as well as numerous other objects and artifacts. The Bodleian Library is sometimes considered a showcase of examples of printed books and other literary publications from every single significant period in English history dating all the way back to the Saxon Era. Because of its unparalleled history and beautiful architecture, The Bodleian Library has been used as a location for many films and TV dramas, including The Golden Compass, Brideshead Revisited, Another Country, The Madness of King George III, and two Harry Potter films. Overseeing the library system of such a historic university is Richard Ovenden, who became Bodley’s Librarian at the University of Oxford in 2014. Prior to joining the Bodleian Libraries, Ovenden worked at Durham University Library, the House of Lords Library, the National Library of Scotland, and at the University of Edinburgh, where he was responsible for Collection Management within the Library, for Special Collections and Archives, and for the University Museums and Galleries. In 2003 he became Keeper of Special Collections and Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian Libraries and in 2011 was appointed Deputy Librarian. In the following interview, Ovenden discusses the “organic” organizational structure of this ancient library system, as well as his unique perspectives on the distinctive pedagogical approaches between the US and UK undergraduate students, that have shaped the way libraries deliver their services.

Could we begin this interview by first introducing yourself—for example, your professional training and educational background, what did you study at university, and do you come from a family of librarians?

My name is Richard Ovenden, and I am Bodley’s Librarian, which is the senior executive officer of the Bodleian Libraries at the University of
Oxford. I was an undergraduate at the University of Durham, where I read economic history. I stayed on to work as a graduate trainee at the University of Durham Library, which I did for a year. I then went to University College London, where I completed a Master’s degree in Library, Archive and Information Studies at the same time. I then worked for 6 months as a Research Assistant for a historian.

I then took a professional library post at the House of Lords Library, where I was doing a mixture of general library duties with political research for active members of the House of Lords. I was there for 3 years, before moving to the National Library of Scotland in the Books Department. I was a curator—again, doing a mixture of acquisitions, cataloging, exhibition work, supporting research inquiries. I ended up as head of the department there before moving to Edinburgh University—first as Head of Special Collections and then as Director of Collections. There I was responsible for moving the library together with the university museums and university gallery.

Could you tell us more about the setup of the House of Lords Library and the services? You were saying that you were doing research for the members of the House of Lords—could you also describe the format and nature of the research?

The Palace of Westminster, which is where the UK Parliament sits, has two chambers of parliament: one is the House of Commons and the other is the House of Lords. When I worked there the House of Lords had not really changed for a long period of time. It was made up of hereditary lords—those who inherited their titles from their fathers. There were also “life peers” who were appointed just for their lifetime to the

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1 University of Oxford—Homepage. Available from http://www.ox.ac.uk/.
2 University of Durham—Homepage. Available from https://www.dur.ac.uk/.
3 Durham University Library—Homepage. Available from https://www.dur.ac.uk/library/.
4 University College London—Homepage. Available from http://www.ucl.ac.uk/.
7 Edinburgh University—Homepage. Available from https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/activities/postgraduate/.
peerage. Both houses of parliament had libraries, which supported the legislative program that goes through both houses of parliament. In the House of Lords, we were a smaller department, so there were approximately 15 staff. We acquired books, journals, and newspapers for supporting whatever issues might arise, but the main focus was working with peers speaking in the House of Lords chamber on whatever legislation was going through parliament at the time.

I would be asked on very short notice to conduct background research—for example, on how many single parents paid a gas bill in a certain part of the country. At the time when I was there, when Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister, the public utilities were nationalized. The legislature was put through parliament, and there were many debates about the details of those programs. We were supporting peers who wanted to speak for and against those programs in the House. I learned a lot, and the research could be on any topic. There were also some private matters that the members of the House of Lords may have been pursuing that had nothing to do with the legislative program, and you had to do some background research to help them. It was very interesting. I learned how parliament worked, how politicians work. I felt that I wanted to get back into a research library and in academic libraries. The work I was doing in the House of Lords was very short term, and I wanted to make a contribution that would have a longer impact.

Can you describe your current responsibilities as a University Librarian at the University of Oxford?

I am responsible for one of the largest special library collections in the United Kingdom. It is also one of the largest academic libraries in the world—perhaps after Harvard University. Our annual budget is approximately £45 million. We have 540 full-time members of staff, 29 physical library sites, and we acquire 300,000 collection items per year. We are also a legal deposit library so, like many national libraries elsewhere in the world, in the United Kingdom, we are responsible for dealing with the legal deposit of national publications—this responsibility is spread over six libraries: five in the United Kingdom and one in the Republic of Ireland. That means that we acquire physical books, journals, and newspapers published in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland free of charge directly from publishers. That process was extended to electronic publications in 2013. We are now putting a system in place across the six legal deposit libraries to allow us to collect, preserve, and make available electronic publications.
It seems that the British Library\textsuperscript{10} is already doing the job of being a legal deposit. Why is Oxford also doing the same?

It’s not just the University of Oxford. The responsibility is shared across the British Library, the National Library of Scotland, the National Library of Wales,\textsuperscript{11} Cambridge University,\textsuperscript{12} Oxford University, and Trinity College Dublin.\textsuperscript{13} Some of that is ancient history, so the Bodleian Library\textsuperscript{14} was actually the first library to have the privilege—going back to 1610, when one of my predecessors made an arrangement with The Stationer’s Company to essentially receive a copy of every book published by their members. That process was extended to other libraries in 1710 with the Copyright Act of Queen Anne. So, we have this 400-year tradition here in Oxford of legal deposit which is much more established than the other libraries. The system works very well because it allows different parts of the country to have access to major collections. Even when the Republic of Ireland was created in 1922—the legal deposit tradition continued.

In terms of your current responsibilities, would you say that most of your time is put into strategic planning or managing the overall operations or fundraising?

My role is very much divided between strategic planning, operational management, contributing to the management of the university as a whole, and resourcing issues—whether that’s lobbying for more resources within the university or philanthropic fundraising: I spend about 20% of my time on that. Then, there are international aspects—the collaboration between different libraries. Some of this is between legal deposit libraries in the United Kingdom, and some of it is with international institutions. We have some significant programs: one with the Vatican Library and one working with colleagues at the University of Michigan for many years. So, we have many international collaborations as well.

Can you give us a brief introduction of the University of Oxford and the library services? What makes the library and its services so unique?

\textsuperscript{10} The British Library—Homepage. Available from \url{http://www.bl.uk/}.
\textsuperscript{11} National Library of Wales—Homepage. Available from \url{https://www.llgc.org.uk/}.
\textsuperscript{12} University of Cambridge—Homepage. Available from \url{https://www.cam.ac.uk/}.
\textsuperscript{13} Trinity College Dublin—Homepage. Available from \url{https://www.tcd.ie/}.
\textsuperscript{14} Bodleian Libraries—University of Oxford—Homepage. Available from \url{http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/}.
Oxford is the oldest university in the United Kingdom, and the oldest university in the English-speaking world—it dates back to the end of the 12th century. The university’s library, as such, began in the Middle Ages and was established in a major way in the middle of the 15th century with a gift from Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. In the Reformation of the 16th century, those books were dispersed, and the library was ransacked. A man named Sir Thomas Bodley came and redeveloped the concept of the university library in Oxford. Soon after the new institution was formed in 1602 and known as the Bodleian Library, thanks to a major donation by Sir Thomas Bodley. Just over 400 years later, in the year 2000, a number of departmental faculty libraries were brought together with the Bodleian Library in an integration to create the Bodleian Libraries. We became a library system across the university in subjects from anthropology to zoology as well as the historic research library of the Bodleian. That is the system that I am responsible for today.

In addition to that, in Oxford, the thing that makes it unique is that there are college libraries. There are 38 Oxford colleges which are all independent institutions within the university, and they each have their own library. Those libraries are available for the most part principally to all of the members of that college. We provide an online catalog system and access system that covers all of the libraries in the university and the vast majority of them. The online system offers a single search mechanism to discover all of the books, journals, and electronic materials that are available in collegiate universities. Obviously, in the world of electronic journals, we supply networked access to about 85,000 titles, which is shared with the college libraries as well as the Bodleian.

What is the current size of the collections at the Oxford Library system? Also, would you be able to give some of the highlights of the collections and services?

The Bodleian Libraries just surpassed our 12 millionth printed book last year, and we are marching fast toward 13 million. In addition, we have about 25 km shelving of manuscripts and archives. There are also various other categories of material such as printed ephemera, maps, and music. The colleges, between them, have several million books. We don’t know exactly how many because they’re not all cataloged. However, our database, which has significant college holdings, contains around 15 million records.

Of the highlights of the Bodleian’s collections, we have major holdings of unique materials: for instance, we have over 10,000 medieval manuscripts. We have significant holdings of over 7000 early printed
books and incunabula. We have major holdings of non-Western material: early Chinese books, early modern Chinese books, and electronic material. We have significant holdings from South Asia—particularly in Sanskrit and other South Asian languages. We have one of the largest collections of Hebrew and Jewish manuscripts and printed materials. Then, of more modern European and British materials, we have the papers of seven prime ministers of the United Kingdom and major collections of individuals in politics in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, including the papers of the Conservative Party itself. We have holdings of many NGOs such as Oxfam, archives and papers of many important writers such as J. R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis and the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Our holdings in Special Collections, particularly in rare books and modern materials, is one of the defining aspects of our library as well as being a very large library of modern material with significant electronic holdings. We also have a large collection of unique materials.

Could you describe the staffing structure of the University of Oxford library system?

We have a mixture of devolved libraries which cover particular subjects in-depth, so we have specialist libraries in all fields. We have libraries in science and social sciences, and humanities. But we also have strong central teams ranged around three major directorates: Administration and Finance, Academic Library Services, and Digital Library and Collection Management. We have a large central team of staff doing acquisitions, cataloging, and processing. We also have a major storage facility where many of our acquisitions—particularly, legal deposit acquisitions—go straight to our offsite store. Other books are spread around the libraries in central Oxford. Then, we have our digital library team who supports our online catalog, our discovery service, our institutional repository and our research data repository, and our digitization activities in various applications around digital access. We have a strong department supporting all of those activities such as the subject teams, the digital library, human resources, finance, accounts, etc.

Could you describe your typical day at work? Or is there ever a typical day?

One of the things about my role is that it’s varied. I tend to be an early riser, so I like to come into the office fairly early. It’s a quiet time, so I can get lots of my email done or work on correspondence or reports. Around 9 o’clock, the meetings begin—I spend most of my day either chairing management meetings here in the library or chairing meetings around special projects—for example, the project with the Vatican
Library. I’ll also spend time attending meetings concerning the rest of the university’s affairs. I do a fair amount of travel to international library meetings or conferences. Tomorrow, I will travel to New York for a mixture of meetings with US foundations, private donors, and benefactors, and to discuss projects with other institutions in the United States.

*When you tell others that you are the head of one of the world’s leading universities such as Oxford, do they have some kind of image of how you are like?*

I think that different people have different expectations depending on who you’re talking to. Older alumni of the university will have a particular picture of the Bodleian depending on when they attended or the subject they studied. Sometimes people will associate us with our historic buildings. For others, contact with the Bodleian has been completely online using our digitized collections. We were one of the original partners with Google and their mass digitization activities, and there are huge amounts of Bodleian materials available online. We’ve also been doing a lot of work on our exhibitions and public project planning. Lots of members of the city of Oxford may have walked in to see one of our exhibitions.

*Could you describe your leadership and management style?*

I think that I’m an inclusive manager in that I hear what my senior staff have to say on certain topics, and I like to see myself as being consensual. My chairing style is to allow everybody to have their say and try to persuade a meeting to come to a consensual view on a particular issue rather than having conflict and resentment. I have been encouraging a data-driven approach for more informed decision-making. And also, I encourage the library to be more self-sustaining financially—that is one of the more challenging things for a research library. Our financial future is dependent on our ability to sustain our different income streams over a long period of time. So, building our endowments, building a variety of income streams, being entrepreneurial, having a focus on philanthropy—things that will have us in good stead as we go through the challenges of the coming years.

*In terms of fundraising work carried out at the University of Oxford, compared to your US counterparts—would there be any major differences or similarities between the both?*

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I think they would be both quite similar. The major Ivy League libraries, which are quite similar in many ways to the Bodleian, have a different approach in that they began their process of creating their own endowments earlier than other Western or European libraries have done. My counterparts in the Ivy League libraries already have significant endowments, but they also put a lot of effort in and are very skilled at fundraising for particular projects around innovation or for acquiring collections. The focus at the Bodleian is much more fundamental—about securing sustainable sources of income for the core activities of the library. We have a much lower endowment base than many of the Ivy League libraries.

University of Oxford versus University of Cambridge versus Harvard University and Yale University—the student users’ needs, expectations, and attitudes toward their own university libraries—how are they different from each other?

This question is too broad to answer succinctly. The pedagogical approaches are very different in the United States from the United Kingdom at undergraduate level, and there are other cultural differences too which affect the way libraries deliver their services. But the fundamental needs of information sources, information skills, or study spaces are actually quite similar. And increasingly we have an international student body with more exchange at the undergraduate level than, say 20 years ago. So libraries are having to adapt to offer services that are similar to those in other libraries. Twenty-four-hour services are one example of this, starting in the United States and becoming popular in the United Kingdom. The needs of graduate students are far more similar, and there is even more international exchange at graduate level. This causes a problem for UK libraries, whereas US libraries, with bigger budgets, typically have greater research resources and show more technical innovation at an earlier stage.

What scholarly and professional associations are you a part of, and how do they inform you in your work?

I am a member of CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals). I am also a member of the Bibliographical Societies of London, Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh, all of which have sustained me intellectually for a very long time. I am a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and of the Royal Society of Arts and recently was elected to the American Philosophical Society, the oldest learned society in North America, which connects me to scholarship more broadly.
Which part(s) of your job as the Bodley’s Librarian do you find most rewarding? What is the most frustrating?

The most rewarding part of my role is the interaction with scholars at all levels, whether undergraduates or senior scholars. They are who we serve and partner with, and their research is so intimately connected with the work of the library that you cannot help but be curious of, and inspired by, the research that goes on in a place like Oxford. The most frustrating part of my role is the perennial issue of not having enough resources to fulfill our mission—the struggle for more resources takes up a great deal of time which could be better spent on delivering our mission.

If a young man is inspired to become a librarian as a career, and comes to you for advice, what would you say to him/her?

I would encourage them! They need to have experience of working in a library, preferably more than one, to see which aspect of library work interests them most. It really helps to have an interest in scholarship at some level, ideally in a particular disciplinary area.

Any other interesting stories concerning your professional life as a librarian that you wish to share with the readers?

There are great many stories: too many to single any one out. All that I can say is that life as a librarian is constantly rich and interesting and there has never been a dull week!

Richard Ovenden, Bodley's Librarian. *Credit: John Cairns.*

The Treasury, exhibition gallery, Weston Library. *Credit: John Cairns.*