



‘Is this a real library, or a museum?’

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Abstract:

When Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach visited Merton College Oxford in 1710, he wrote, ‘The library is in two rather dark corridors and has a fair number of books. I found that the manuscripts were among the other books,there were a few astronomical instruments in a press, for which the key was not available’. Uffenbach was a bibliophile and was typical of the sort of library visitor who probably knew more about the books in the Merton library than his unnamed guide.

The college is better prepared to receive visitors than it was in the 18th century, yet providing a worthwhile experience for non-academic visitors remains secondary to the college’s primary objective of providing for students and researchers. There are tensions between serving an academic community and the demands and responsibilities of increasing public engagement. In the past seven years, we have attempted to diminish this tension by enlisting members of the college themselves as interpreters and guides.

This paper will describe Merton’s approach to widening physical access to its historic library by involving both students and senior members of the college. I will also talk about initiatives undertaken by other college libraries to make their buildings and holdings more accessible to those who visit on-site, complementing electronic initiatives. The initiatives described are small in scale when compared with major national and university libraries, but they raise important questions:

In times when funding and space are scarce, can one justify maintaining historic collections in historic structures?

Can a library function as a museum and if so, is this wrong?

How can one meet the new needs of growing public outreach with a small staff and small budget?

What can librarians learn from colleagues in the museum and historic venues sectors?

This paper has at its core a case study, but one that raises issues relevant to many libraries with special collections old and new. Examples will be drawn from the historic libraries in Oxford and Cambridge.

Although public engagement is a current topic for discussion and an area of developing programmes in a number of special collections libraries, it is important to remember that visits to academic libraries by non-academics have been taking place for centuries. The Wren Library at Trinity College Cambridge for instance has been a destination for visitors since it opened in 1695.

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Uffenbach was a bibliophile and was typical of the sort of library visitor who probably knew more about the books in the Merton library than his unnamed guide. He was very different from many of those who visit Merton's historic library now. Today's visitors are more enthusiastic but less knowledgeable; most of them come not knowing what to expect but eager to see the inside of Oxford's oldest surviving library (in fact the oldest surviving academic library in Europe).

The college is better prepared to receive visitors than it was in the 18th century, yet providing a worthwhile experience for non-academic visitors remains secondary to the college's primary objective of providing for students and researchers. There are tensions between serving an academic community and the demands and responsibilities of increasing public engagement. In the past seven years, we have attempted to make this tension productive by using it as a catalyst for developing a programme that involves both students and senior members of the college as guides and as interpreters of collections. An additional benefit from this programme is that the college community has a greater appreciation of the treasure at its centre.

Merton College is very fortunate in having at its heart a library building dating from the 14th century with fixtures and furnishings that reflect both the medieval library and its refurbishment in the 16th century. Although the manuscript books are now housed elsewhere, the greater part of the early printed book collection is still in the historic library. The college has been offering guided public visits to this library for

a number of decades. Prior to 2003 these visits were provided by the chapel verger. He was knowledgeable and good with the public, although the tours had to fit around his working week (no tours at weekends, and he always took a lengthy summer holiday—both periods when visitor numbers were potentially highest.) At his retirement, the college decided not to replace him and to take a different approach to public visits.

Each year students apply competitively for positions as college guides. They work primarily in the summer vacation when the college offers three tours a day, seven days a week. The students are trained by the fellow librarian, the chaplain, the archivist and by at least one guide from one of the Oxford museums. They are expected to master a reading list and to be able to speak knowledgeably about the college history and major features, including the library, although they are free to develop their own itinerary and there is no set script. The skills of a good public guide go beyond being able to deliver a factually accurate 'lecture', and to address this aspect of the job, student guides are encouraged to attend a selection of other tours available in the city and must then analyse what makes a 'good' tour and a 'good' guide at a discussion session. Quality control is provided by more experienced guides and by those who trained them attending tours at random and providing feedback.

With respect to the historic library, guides are briefed about items that are displayed in changing exhibitions but are also encouraged to explore its holdings in areas that interest them. It is important to be able to explain to visitors what makes some of these old books and documents significant and how they are used by students and researchers today. Interestingly, very few of the 25 or so students who have been guides since the programme began were conducting research in the 'history of the book'. They are however all gifted intellectually (Merton is among the most academic of Oxford and Cambridge colleges) and many have developed an intensive interest in the history of the College and the Library. A side effect of the tours is to develop awareness of special collections and the history of the book among advanced students in other fields.

On a practical level, these guided tours do not make money for the college. They are offered at a rate of £4 per person, and for security and safety reasons each group is limited to no more than 8 people. The student guides are paid an hourly rate, but they could easily make more money at other part-time jobs. As guides however they have the opportunity to learn about the history of the library and college, which has as just noted proved a considerable if informal incentive, and enjoy privileged access to special collections. As they become more experienced they may also be chosen to guide groups of official college guests and academic groups. Since the college began employing student guides attendance at public tours has been growing slowly, and requests for group visits have markedly increased (the total number of visitors in

2010-11 was 3030, up c 30% on the previous year). Without the cohort of student guides library staff would not be able to expand the number of tours offered to such an extent.

At the same time that the student guides were established, attention was also directed to more 'informal' visits to the library that have for generations been provided by senior members of the college for their personal guests. The 72 fellows of the college continue to have the traditional right of access to the college library at any time and can also bring personal guests into the old library. Even in the middle ages there were concerns about whether this practice posed problems for the security of the collections. On the other hand the privilege of access to the historic library also brings the advantage of establishing support for the library and its special collections within the internal college community. All fellows now receive a brief guide to the library and its collections. The Fellow Librarian gives new fellows a personal introduction to the library early in their first year, including instruction in the safe handling of bound volumes in addition to preservation and security procedures. Visits to the library by fellows and their guests are now recorded, and these have also increased in number (in 2010-11 fellows and their guests accounted for 479 visitors, an increase of 150% on the previous year). The increase in support by the fellowship for the library, for preservation projects and other activities involving the special collections has justified the time spent in providing these individual introductions and the risks that come with such relatively wide access to historic collections. Taken together, the establishment of the student guides and individual introductions to the historical library for fellows have broadened and deepened engagement with the historic library and special collections not only among the wider non-academic public but also within the college itself.

Merton is not the only university college that has been exploring new ways of making its historic library buildings and collections accessible to the public in recent years. To take just one example, Corpus Christi College Cambridge recently refurbished the famous Parker Library, home to some of the most important collections of manuscripts and early printed books in England. As at Merton there was a desire to provide guided tours without increasing the workload of a small library team. The Fellow Librarian at Corpus Christi College, Dr Christopher de Hamel, established a relationship with the Cambridge City Tourist Office so that a group of city guides (Blue Badge Guides) could be informed about the Parker Library and its holdings. These special trained guides now offer weekly tours of the Parker Library. Although library staff are present during these visits, all the organisation of the tours (bookings, payment, assigning guides etc.) is handled by the Tourist Office. The fees for the tours are split between the college and the Tourist Office. Although the scheme has not been running long enough to look for statistical trends, anecdotal evidence indicates that the tours are very popular, and

the college has strengthened ties with an important civic organisation while introducing more regular opportunities to visit this special library.

This short talk has looked at only one type of public on-site access: the guided tour. If rising numbers of participants are an indication, the programmes just described appear to be successful, but investigating how best to judge the qualitative success of such programmes is another challenge, and one that needs more attention. Although the initiatives at Merton and at Corpus Christi Colleges are small in scale when compared with those of major national and university research libraries, they raise important questions relevant for many libraries with historic settings and special collections:

In times when funding and space are scarce, can one justify continuing to house historic collections in historic structures without sharing these collections as widely as practicable?

Can a library function as a museum, and should librarians be seeking to learn more from colleagues in museums and historic venues?

How can one develop programmes for new communities with limited staff and budgets and still meet the needs of core users and primary funders?

How can the risks of wider access best be managed?

What should we be doing to investigate the effectiveness of programmes to widen public engagement?

Colleagues in libraries throughout the world are posing these questions and developing responses. A recent thesis by Naomi Herbert Tiley ('Rare Sited: A mixed methods study of community engagement in special collections in Cambridge University colleges' MSc thesis, Aberystwyth University, 2011) provides a thought-provoking examination of community engagement through discussions within the cohort of Cambridge College libraries. Similar discussions among diverse types of special collections libraries, sharing problems and solutions, will bring benefits far beyond the walls of particular libraries.

'Is this a real library or a museum?' The question in title of this paper is one that I hear from visitors to the Merton College Library but also occasionally from members of the college. Sometimes the tone is mild confusion, sometimes it is intended as a not entirely uncritical challenge, and even after years of replying this is a question that makes me pause, perhaps because it is not an either/or situation, but a symbiosis of mutually reinforcing functions.

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