

Transforming the Bodleian Law Library, from the ground to the roof.

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Introduction

The Bodleian Law Library (BLL) opened in 1964. The library is housed in the St Cross Building which is Grade II* listedⁱ. The BLL space, apart from a few minor alterations, remained unchanged until 2010. From 2010 to 2020 the BLL underwent a transformation as three building projects were undertaken. The three projects were all planned independently of each other but their cumulative effect has been to transform the physical space of the BLL whilst retaining its original architectural style.

The three projects were:

1. 2010: the ground floor was re-purposed to allow the Bodleian's collection of Official Papers to move from the central site to the BLL.
2. 2014/2017: a major refurbishment of the St Cross Building resulted in a large-scale reconfiguration of the BLL's space.
3. 2019/2020: a new roof, including roof lights, was installed.

I was appointed as Bodleian Law Librarian in January 2018 but from 2004 to 2017 I held the post of Information Resources Librarian so have been involved, to a varying degree, in all three projects. This article will review the three projects and assess the impact on the BLL.

2010: Ground Floor

Since the 1960s the Bodleian Libraries Official Papers collectionⁱⁱ had been stored over two floors in the underground basement at the Radcliffe Camera. Plans to move the collection to the BLL had been discussed since the late 1990s as it was felt the law and OP collections would complement each other. The impetus for the move came in 2010 when the History Faculty Library had to be moved into the Radcliffe Camera at short notice; this coincided with a plan to completely refurbish the underground basement area. With only three months' notice, the Official Papers collection had to move. This meant that not only did the move have to be planned and executed but space had to be made in the BLL. At the BLL the only space available for the Official Papers collection was on the ground floor. This floor was closed to readers as half of it held a store of books that belonged to the central Bodleian, and the other area was closed off and used by the Law Faculty.

The ground floor space was not big enough to house the entire Official Papers collection so the Official Papers Librarian, Hannah Chandler, undertook a review to identify what could be moved off-site. Approximately 1,000 metres of Official Papers material had to be relegated to the closed stack, a sizeable proportion of which was low use official gazettes from Europe. All the relegated material had to have their catalogue records upgraded as well as each physical item needing a barcode so that it could be added to the holding records. The next stage was for the Official Papers Librarian to plan the move of over 2,000 metres of Official Papers material into the BLL. Whilst this work was underway at the Radcliffe Camera, at the BLL a team of book movers was decanting books from the ground floor to offsite storage. As part of this process, we found various law materials that we had to relocate elsewhere in the library.

The BLL already had a small section of rolling cases and the same supplier was used for the new Official Papers shelving to ensure the same look. Much time was spent by Hannah Chandler and Ruth Bird (the Bodleian Law Librarian at the time) in working out how to maximise the available space and to ensure that the shelving was flexible enough to store the many over-sized volumes. The mobile shelving was installed quickly without any problems. The area was then carpeted, in contrast to the cork flooring used elsewhere in the library.

The new Official Papers Reading Room was formally opened on 18 November 2010ⁱⁱⁱ. Since the project's completion, we have been able to remove duplicated official papers from the BLL's collection which has helped to release much needed shelf space. Additionally, the BLL used to buy duplicate copies of relevant publications already held in the

Official Papers collection and we were able to cancel these duplicate subscriptions to save money. The ground floor of the BLL is now open to all readers to use rather than being a closed book store. Included in the Official Papers collection is a full set of bound UK Parliamentary Papers dating from 1800 and the depository collection for the United Nations, the BLL is the only library in the UK to have this material currently on open shelf.

2014 to 2017: Major refurbishment

In 2011 the Law Faculty undertook the first phase of refurbishing the St Cross Building when they converted the former Economics and Statistics Library in to a new teaching space called The Cube as well as seminar rooms and staff offices^{iv}.

In 2014 it became apparent that the plans for the next stage of refurbishing the St Cross Building were becoming a reality. Ruth Bird, the Bodleian Law Librarian, oversaw the project for the BLL and did the most amazing job, keeping all the inter-connecting aspects of the project moving forward together.

The plans meant that the BLL would lose three of its wings; the wing areas housed the physical collection, study carrels, an IT Room, and a Graduate Reading Room. To compensate, the library would gain the rest of the ground floor from the Law Faculty and rolling cases would be installed. However, even with rolling cases, the physical collection would still need to be reduced by 15% (approx. 75,000 volumes) and the remaining collection re-organised to fit the new space. Incorporated in to the design were plans to improve accessibility to the library as well as the creation of new student spaces and staff offices.

The first stage of the project was to decant part of the collection to the Bodleian's Book Storage Facility (BSF) located at Swindon. As the project progressed, we also had to temporarily move two large collections to other libraries in Oxford to allow enough space for the building work to take place and to manoeuvre the collection in to its new order.

To decant materials to the BSF, every single item had to have a barcode. This was problematic as very few items in the BLL were barcoded. As I was the Information Resources Librarian at this point, I managed the barcoding work. Barcoding began in June 2014 and continued for a year. Items identified for offsite storage were low use titles that were available electronically. We recruited a team of people to work on the barcoding project. To enable the fast barcoding of materials the Bodleian Systems Team had devised two processes – one was called ReBar and the other was RetroBar. We had little material that we could put through the ReBar process, as this relied on items that were already barcoded, so most of the work was done via RetroBar. The process was fast and straightforward; the Systems Team would generate Excel spreadsheets in to which the Barcoding Team would scan the new barcodes of each item. The spreadsheets were then manipulated by the Systems Team to create items in the library management system, Aleph.

The Barcoding Team were also responsible for packing the materials to be shipped to the BSF. When the totes containing the materials arrived at the BSF they would then be checked in to the inventory system and stored by size. At the end of the barcoding work, 1,200 metres of material had been moved to the BSF. The barcoding work also meant that we had upgraded a considerable number of catalogue records and improved holding information.

The building work began in August 2015 with preparatory work. This was a quiet period as plastic hoardings were erected inside the library, external scaffolding was installed, and a contractor's compound was set up on part of the car park. As the weeks went by and work got underway the noise levels increased. Pressure from the student and academic body as well as local people meant that the noisy work had to be pushed to vacation time. This resulted in a whole shift of the project timeline which inevitably caused delays.

The building work was far noisier and more intrusive than we ever anticipated. The BLL remained open during the project with readers using the library in, what at times, were extremely difficult conditions. Whilst the building work was ongoing, a team of people were moving the physical collection. 4,000 metres of rolling cases had been installed on the ground floor. On the first-floor old metal shelving was removed and replaced with wooden shelving from the lost wing areas. The collection was then moved in to place.

By the time we reached June 2016, the staff offices were no longer available for use so we relocated to the new IT Room that had been created on the ground floor. We set up a temporary entrance on the ground floor for use by readers. At this stage, the project was in its final phase and the noise level at times was overwhelming.

When we reached August, we closed to readers for six weeks with a BLL presence based at the Social Sciences Library next door in the Manor Road Building. This meant that we could offer a fetching service for readers as well as dealing with reference enquiries.

In early September, the BLL re-opened although minor works were still ongoing. The works were completed by the time the new academic year started in October although snagging works went on for several months more.

The refurbishment had resulted in a brand-new entrance configuration as well as three discussion rooms, a seminar room, a large IT Room, and a smaller IT room, and a Graduate Reading Room^v. A new lift was installed which meant for the first time all four floors of the library were open to all readers. The library's Wi-Fi system had been upgraded. Staff had new offices, a staff room, and a Packing Room where deliveries could be unpacked and sorted before being taken to the new "Work in Progress" Room. The layout of the physical collection was changed whilst still adhering to the underlying principle of the BLL that as much of the physical collection should be accessible to all readers on open shelves.

Post 2017

As the months went by, the staff noticed that the library felt warmer than it had done in previous years and we started to receive comments from readers that the library was too hot. Trying to find a solution proved impossible. Finally, the Chair of the Law Library Committee sent a letter to the Estates Department and asked them to investigate.

The BLL had a long history of leaks from the roof into the library so the solution from Estates was that a new roof was required. The proposal would mean an end to the leaks and help with the internal temperatures. The plans for the new roof included an automated louvre system which would vent heat from the library along with new glazing for the roof lights; the roof lights cover the central section of the main Reading Room allowing natural light through to the library.

The project was progressing well until we learnt that the bids generated by the tendering process were too high. The project was shelved in May 2019. This was highly frustrating for everyone.

2019/2020: The Roof Project

With the project shelved, we thought that we would hear nothing further. Then unexpectedly an email arrived saying that the project would start on 4 August 2019 and that the project would run for the first two terms of the academic year 2019/2020 rather than running through the summer vacation as originally planned.

After many emails and a meeting with the various stakeholders, it was agreed that the project would go ahead. The driver was that funds were now available to pay for the work and if the funds were not committed to a project, they would be lost. The Estates Team also agreed to look at various other smaller problems that we had so that the disruption could be contained to the project's lifespan rather than more work being needed in the future.

Central to the project was the creation of a crash deck over the Reading Room, essentially a false ceiling, which would be supported on scaffolding. Above the crash deck the roof lights and roof would be removed. A temporary roof would be erected to protect the library and an external staircase would provide access. A large hoist would move all the materials between the ground and the roof. The hoist would be located directly outside the staff offices. To protect staff from the noise we took over the Graduate Reading Room on the ground floor and turned it in to a large staff office. We also had to plan to open a temporary entrance for readers when the internal scaffolding was erected and then taken down.

The crash deck created a forest of scaffolding poles inside the library all covered with yellow foam. Externally an extensive scaffold was built around the roof area. There was one major problem: for several weeks, the hoist kept failing its loading test; the St Cross Building is faced with a soft brick and the hoist would not hold in the outer layer

of brickwork. The hoist was essential for the transport of materials. Eventually the hoist was attached to the internal structure of the building. Then the autumn storms arrived and work was further delayed.

Once these initial problems were overcome, work was fast. In November I visited the roof with one of my colleagues, Ben Spiers, and found a full-scale demolition exercise underway. The temporary roof was more solid than expected, it had been heat treated to wrap around the roof area. Under the cover of the temporary roof, numerous contractors were busy demolishing the roof and removing rubble. After viewing the demolition site, we moved down to the level where the crash deck had been built across the library. Under the roof lights, there is a wooden structure which the Project Manager always referred to as the “egg crates”. The crash deck had been installed under the egg crates. This meant that where there was space, a person could stand up on the crash deck but to move between each “crate” they had to shimmy underneath the wooden wall. In this area the contractors were removing wooden panels, many of which were water damaged, and replacing the panels with new ones; each panel had to be individually made as they all fitted together like a jigsaw.

Excellent progress continued to be made all through the winter. In early 2020 we started detailed planning for when the scaffolding – inside and outside – would be removed and for when the library would formally be handed back.

By early March we had notified everyone that the BLL would be closed the morning of the 16 March whilst we set up a temporary entrance on the ground floor that would be used by readers during the Easter vacation. We opened the temporary entrance as planned at 1pm on Monday 16 March. That afternoon we heard we had to close the BLL due to the coronavirus situation. We closed at 5pm.

For a week staff worked on in the library as did the contractors. The contractors were being affected by the coronavirus situation with numerous people self-isolating or ill but the scaffold removal could not be left half undone. During this week I had a few brief glimpses of the new roof lights. The library closed at 5pm on Monday 23 March and all library staff were sent home although the contractors were permitted to continue with their work. I did not return to the BLL until 4 September.

It was a curious situation, working from home and not being able to see the project through to its end. Instead, I had to rely on emails and photographs from the contractors. The work was finished just slightly later than planned at the end of April 2020.

When I returned to the library I was impressed. The newly glazed roof lights meant that you could see through to the sky. The boards of the “egg crates” were white, everything looked pristine and clean. However, the new roof had some problems and it started to leak. This was problematic as access to the roof, now that the external scaffolding and staircase had been removed, was difficult. In early March 2021, the contractors reported that the problem was to do with some screws that had not sealed properly. The problems were fixed at the end of March but then more leaks appeared. Fortunately, this problem has been identified as a small fault with an adhesive bond on the flooring of the roof and this has been repaired.

The roof project means that we now have a water-tight roof which has several layers of insulation. The roof lights allow through natural light and are double-glazed and UV protected. The automated louvres vent heat from the library. The roof area has been fitted with refurbished light fittings which allow us more flexibility in lighting the central section of the Reading Room. New smoke sensors have been installed within the internal roof area. The internal decorations have brightened up the library considerably. Externally the brick work has been cleaned and re-pointed which has made the lines of the building much sharper.

During the roof project, the Estates Department has been generous and made good their promise to look at problems we had. As a result, they installed new lighting controls in a large staff office to allow flexibility with the lighting arrangements; ventilation improvements have been carried out in a staff office and in the seminar room; hard flooring has been laid to replace a water damaged carpet; new acrylic carpeting has replaced wool carpets that were attracting moths; a new disabled ramp has been installed at the main fire exit; and a brand-new auto-opening door mechanism has been installed on floor 1.

2021: Where are we now?

Within the space of ten years the BLL has undergone a physical transformation which complements the original 1960s design. Rolling cases on the ground floor have maximised our shelving capacity; new student spaces allow group work to take place; improvements in accessibility have opened the library and its collections to all readers; the Wi-Fi system has been upgraded; and library staff have more comfortable offices with plenty of room to store and process printed materials. The biggest change in my view is the new entrance which allows us to greet readers as they enter the library and say farewell when they leave, this is in marked contrast to the pre-2016 days when staff could not easily see who was entering and leaving.

Conclusions

All three projects have had an impact on the BLL staff. The move of the Official Papers collection meant three new members of staff joining the BLL's team. This has meant both teams have had plenty of opportunity to learn about the other collection. The 2016 refurbishment united the staff in the face of adversity, there was a sense that we were living through this noisy, dusty large-scale project that was turning our working world upside down, but by supporting each other we got through what was an immensely difficult time. We were keen that people learnt from our experiences and we talked to other library staff in Oxford who were facing refurbishment projects in their libraries.

During the refurbishment project the Bodleian Law Librarian seconded one of the staff, Ben Spiers, to work on the project. This meant that for the roof project I had a staff member with a great deal of experience of building projects which was invaluable. By the time we had to prepare for the roof project, the staff were ready, we knew how to handle nine months of noise and dust. It was a pleasant surprise that bar a few problems it was not as bad as any of us feared. There were occasions when the noise was unbearable but we would contact the contractors and they would stop and carry out the noisy work at another time. For the roof project we benefitted tremendously as the project was managed by someone from University Estates. The Project Manager and the main contractors were willing to meet with me and colleagues on a weekly basis to answer any questions that we had and to deal with any issues. The Project Manager also arranged two meetings for staff to explain about the project which was very helpful.

Each project also meant that we learnt how to manage the organisation of each subsequent project. The OP Project informed the book moving aspects of what happened during the 2016 refurbishment as we already had experience of book movers and the logistics of books moving in and out of the BLL. Setting up the temporary reader entrance in 2016 helped when we had to repeat this for the roof project.

Communication with readers during 2014 to 2016 was a hugely important task and we set up a blog to keep people up to date with progress. It was during this project we realised how much readers appreciate free ear plugs so we made sure that there were plenty of ear plugs available during the roof project! For the roof project we used Instagram and an internal newsletter to keep people updated.

Having been involved in two of the projects at the Bodleian Law Library and managed the third one, I have learnt that primarily you must always think of the impact on any building or refurbishment project on your readers and library staff. Continuing to offer library services whilst extensive building work is taking place is a decision that needs a great deal of thought. Consideration must be given to staff morale and well-being, as well as how appealing readers will find the space to use. I have also realised the importance of good working relationships with the contractors and to be explicit about expectations around noise and dust. Finally, building projects can and do overrun and it is important to be ready for this.

WORD COUNT: 3909

ⁱ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1369496> accessed 14 May 2021

ⁱⁱ <https://libguides.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/opd> accessed 14 May 2021

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://wayback.archive-it.org/6780/20210202015042/https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/news/2010/2010-nov-18> accessed 14 May 2021

^{iv} <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/about-us/about-faculty/st-cross-building> accessed 14 May 2021

^v For further information on the refurbishment please refer to Margaret Watson's article which gives an excellent overview of the project. Margaret Watson, "All change at the Bodleian Law Library [2018] November/December Information Professional 32-35

ABSTRACT:

This article reviews three different building projects undertaken at the Bodleian Law Library (BLL) between 2010 and 2020. The three projects were all undertaken independently of each author and have transformed the BLL. The article discusses each project, explaining the work undertaken and the impact. This is followed by a summary of the impact of the projects and lessons learnt.

BIOGRAPHY:

Helen Garner was appointed as the Bodleian Law Librarian at the University of Oxford in January 2018. Previously Helen held the post of Information Resources Librarian. Prior to working at the Bodleian Law Library Helen worked as a librarian in the City of London at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer and White & Case. Helen was a member of the Editorial Board for the 5th edition of the Moys Classification Scheme published in 2012.