

A History of the theological Libraries in oxford¹

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The city of Oxford is the birthplace of one the most renowned universities of the world, the university of Oxford and has been an important centre of religious activity in Britain. Its influence on history through the university was incalculable in the realms of culture, politics and religion.³

Oxford is a relatively small in size with just 45.5 km² but contains more than 100 libraries which connected to the university, and further research libraries associated with other institutions. Greatest by far is the Bodleian with a 400 year's history. This second largest library after the British Library in the UK is the university's principal library and one of the oldest libraries in Europe. Under its umbrella the Bodleian comprise the Bodleian Libraries group, which includes 30 further research, faculty, departmental and institutional libraries, such as the Philosophy and Theology Faculties Library (PTFL). The Bodleian Libraries together have the biggest academic library system in the UK and hold more than 12 million materials.⁴

Distinct from the Bodleian Libraries, 27 other libraries of various sizes and specialities are also spread around the city. They are independent from the Bodleian but make use of the Bodleian's library management system. Examples include the libraries of the university's Museum of Natural History and the Oxford Union Society.⁵

The University of Oxford consists of 39 colleges and 6 permanent private halls. Every college and PPH in Oxford also has its own library, some modest and some grand; these total 45 libraries in all. Just as the college are separate from the University, the college libraries are not part of the Bodleian. However, they serve the same clients, and most use the Bodleian's library management system.

The three distinctive religious domination changes which happened in the course of the British history have shaped a way of these various libraries came into being, developed, adapted and transformed in Oxford. From Catholic Administration to the exclusiveness of Church of England and finally to an inclusive national organisation, the transition of governing power over the University has carved out the fate of the University, colleges and libraries with shaping the teaching and research syllabus.

Firstly, Roman Catholicism triumphed from the 13th century and Oxford became one of the leading centres of Christian scholarship, so the birth of medieval libraries was strongly rooted in Roman Catholic foundations and their scholastic tradition was deeply reflected in the library holding composition. These medieval libraries were naturally erected in three different places where intellectual activities were prominent: monasteries and priories; colleges; and the university.

The medieval libraries in the religious houses by friars held the finest books⁶ but the life was relatively short-lived compared to those in the colleges and the university due to the abolition of the

¹ The full version of this article will be published in the BETH Festschrift (2022).

² The librarian at Wycliffe Hall, University of Oxford.

³ V. H. H. Green, *Religion at Oxford and Cambridge: A History c.1160-c.1960* (London: SCM, 1964), 11.

⁴ The University of Oxford, "Libraries," <https://www.ox.ac.uk/research/libraries> [accessed March 18, 2021].

⁵ The University of Oxford, "Map of Oxford libraries," <https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/subjects-and-libraries/libraries> [accessed March 18, 2021].

⁶ Richard FitzRalph, quoted in Andrew Atherstone, *Oxford: City of Saints, Scholars and Dreaming Spires* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2008), 21.

monasteries in the 1530s. The libraries were closed, and their books were scattered or absorbed into private libraries.⁷

All the early colleges such as University, Balliol, Merton, Exeter and so on originally began as small Christian communities, often founded by celibate priests with a strong sense of Christian faith.⁸ Provision of books which connected to the Oxford curriculum was primarily by means of gifts and donations rather purchases.⁹ Books were often chained to the lectern desk or kept in a loan chest.

Considering the University was originally an ecclesiastical body, it was predictable that a church and churchman played a vital role in the creation of the University's first Library. It began from the 1320s when Thomas Cobham, Bishop of Worcester, supplied funds and his extensive collection of manuscripts for the University to build its own congregation house and a small room to house his collection, adjoining to the University Church of St Mary the Virgin.¹⁰

From the 1530s the protestant Reformation brought great changes in the religious landscape and life of England. In 1581 the University promulgated to subscription to the royal supremacy and the Thirty-nine Articles to officialise the monopoly of the Church of England and this turned the library world upside-down by determining the dissolution of libraries in religious dwellings of the monks and friars and the University's second library Duke Humfrey. Where there were many monasteries and convent libraries left empty, new college libraries and the surviving libraries' expansion filled the void. During this period, more and more libraries were built with an introduction of the stall system instead of desk shelving. Their collections flourished by the influence of classical humanism, the new Anglican Church and the revolution of printing.

Thomas Bodley opened a new library for the university in 1602 with about 2,000 volumes and managed to reach an agreement with the Stationer's Company of London in 1610 for copyright depository privilege. Bodley wanted his library to continuously prove resources not only for the university, but also for the scholarly world by make it a reference library with changing books. The chains were removed in the 18th century.

In the middle of the 19th century, when the rise of secularism swept across Western Europe, Oxford was under pressure from new rival educational institutes. The University Reform Act of 1854 ended religious subscription to Anglicanism. By secularization and anti-clericalism, when University and colleges transformed themselves from Anglican seminaries to national higher education institutions these libraries also grew to multidisciplinary academic libraries. They preserved their medieval manuscripts and western incunabula, forming the founding stock to transform into modern libraries by diversifying their collections. Proportionally the size of the theology holdings shrank significantly whereas other disciplines grew substantially. Nevertheless, the theological collection is treasured as a rare, extraordinary heritage with historical significance.

As a result of all these changes, in terms of theological libraries their future was, at first, deemed to be very bleak, given the advancement of secularised culture and the development of the scientific mind, a decline of interest in religion, and the rationalism of the time. However, Christians raised up against erosion of the Christian faith in Oxford. Their way of continuously maintaining the Christian

⁷ E. Leedham-Green & T. Webber "Introduction", in *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland: vol 1 to 1640*, ed. Alistair Black and Peter Hoare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3

⁸ Andrew Atherstone, *Oxford: City of Saints, Scholars and Dreaming Spires* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2008), 12.

⁹ Bodleian Library, "The 13th-16th Centuries".

¹⁰ Brockliss, *The University of Oxford: A Brief History*, 17; Geoffrey Tyack, *Bodleian Library University of Oxford: A History*, (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2000), 3; Green, *Religion at Oxford and Cambridge*, 13.

tradition was to be found new theological colleges within the university.¹¹ Various religious groups wanted to provide new resources for ordinands and church men in Oxford, and thus new theological libraries started to spring up such as Regent's Park College Library and the Angus Library and Archive. Anglo-Catholic movement had a direct effect on creating four Anglican theological libraries in Oxford during this period: Keble College library, Pusey House library, St Stephen's House Library and Rippon College Cuddesdon library. Two evangelical libraries were also founded: the Wycliffe Hall library and St Peter's College library.

Currently 15 libraries there continue to operate as theology libraries. In addition to six PPH libraries and the PFTL, these are the Angus Library and Archives within Regent's Park College (1927); the Crowther Mission Studies Library within the Church Mission Society (CMS, relocated in 2007); the Leopold Muller Memorial Library for Hebrew and Jewish Studies (relocated in 2014); Pusey House Library (1884); and libraries of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (1997), the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (1985), Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS, 1983), Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History (OCMCH) within Oxford Brookes University (relocated 1959 and renamed in 2007) and Oxford Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies (CMCS, 2008).

What of the future for the theological libraries in Oxford? As the university of Oxford has been the most distinguished centre of scholarship internationally, it is still drawing new openings and the relocation of historically valuable theological libraries, and so the future of theology libraries looks promising in Oxford especially with news of potential new theological library near Oxford. Watch this space.

¹¹ Green, *A History of Oxford University*, (London: Batsford, 1974), 153.