

Opportunities lost, and space wasted, at the Bodleian Libraries

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IN August 2015 the Bodleian Libraries moved its Bibliography Room (consisting of a printing workshop and seminar space, with a collection of specimens and *realia* for teaching use) from its temporary home in the Story Museum into a room in the Old Schools Quadrangle. Before the move, at a meeting with Richard Ovenden (then Deputy Librarian) on 1 September 2010, it was agreed that when the Room was transferred back to the Bodleian after the remodelling of the Weston Library it would occupy the old Exhibition Room in the Old Schools Quadrangle, a space which was just large enough to accommodate all its resources (with a footprint of around 100 square-metres). However when the time came for the move, Bodleian management resiled from this commitment and placed the Bibliography Room instead in a smaller room, some 65 square-metres in size. Management also went to some lengths to deny at this time that there had ever been an agreement to use the old Exhibition Room, and that the room allocated was significantly smaller than needed.

At this time I was Superintendent of the Bibliography Room—an honorary position—and tried to persuade the Libraries' management to assign a larger space, ideally that originally promised. But my appeals were met first with hostility and then with indifference. I resigned as Superintendent, and have been campaigning since to improve the situation of the Bibliography Room, to undo the damage done in 2015, to the Library's relations with me and, much more importantly, to what had been a major resource for the Bodleian, for teaching, both within and beyond the University, public engagement and outreach, and revenue generation, with the potential to do a good deal more in all these areas.

To be specific about the damage caused to the Room by its new situation, the main result of its smaller size is the obvious corollary that class-sizes, and indeed any event or activity held in the Room, must now be smaller; one of the presses, an eighteenth-century common-press which formerly had a vital part in teaching, was moved to the Visiting Scholars Centre in the Weston Library and has hardly been used since (except as a table for drinks); and the room has also lost a good deal of furniture, including all its chairs (which were used for seminars and have been replaced by small stools, which are hardly appropriate for all users of the room or for anything more than brief periods of sitting). There are other changes which can be observed since the move, notably that, compared with the period 2010–2015, fewer events are now held in the Bibliography Room (rechristened the Bibliographical Press), less commercial and semi-commercial printing is undertaken, and some of the teaching resources of the room have been removed. These are not wholly effects of the smaller size of the room, of course, but also of its ethos and management.

Hoping to improve matters, I prepared a proposal for

the re-establishment of the Bibliography Room in a larger space and with more resources. This went first to the tier of management in charge of the Weston Library, then to the Libraries' 'Round Table' of senior management, then to the Library's Curators, and was finally circulated to all Libraries' staff. At each stage of management the proposal was snubbed. The Curators read my document, and I know some were sympathetic to it, but they declined to consider it formally. As a result of approaching the Curators I was able to discuss the matter again with Chris Fletcher, Keeper of Special Collections, who rejected my proposal summarily, citing statistics on the use of the room which he said disproved my case that use had diminished (when I later saw these statistics I found that this was not true). Following the general distribution of my proposal last spring I was summoned to a meeting with Chris Fletcher, and the Library's Employee Relations Advisor, and told that my use of a Bodleian e-mail account to circulate my proposal was in breach of the University's rules, and that the proposal was itself in breach of the Data Protection Act and should be withdrawn. This last I agreed to. At the meeting I again stated the case for the improvement of the Bibliography Room, and offered a compromise solution. This appeal was rejected outright by Dr Fletcher, who stated that management would not consider any of my proposals and was entirely happy with the Library's running of the Room and use of its space resources. The details of my proposal, the statistics quoted and the responses received, are available on my website at www.paulwnash.co.uk/gobbo.

Arising from my proposal, I have three main concerns about the present situation, which I would like the Bodleian Libraries to address. Firstly the Bibliography Room is in too small a space. Secondly it is under-resourced as a teaching facility and no longer contains the Gibson Collection of teaching materials. Thirdly there are two large spaces on the Bodleian's central site, spaces which would be ideal for a restored Bibliography Room, that are shamefully underused by the Libraries at present. The first concern needs little more comment, I think. A larger Bibliography Room (that is to say one which is as large as it was until 2010) would have the capacity for more and, more importantly, larger classes as well as seminars of all sorts (not confined to those relating to bibliography and printing-history), could accommodate again the eighteenth-century common-press, have space for expansion of its type-stock and other equipment, and space properly to store the large collection of wood-type which was presented to the Room in 2013 and which remains largely in boxes (usable, but not easily so). The wooden press which now stands in the Blackwell Hall at the Bodleian, and is used for public demonstrations and keepsake printing, was not previously in the Bibliography Room and was brought out of storage in 2015; it serves its public purpose very well in its present location.

On my second point, I would like to see the teaching aids removed from the Room in 2015 (including printed specimens, examples of books in unfolded sheets, early illustrations of printing presses, and a woodcut block) returned. These items can still be consulted in the Weston reading rooms or, by special arrangement, seminar rooms, but not used in the Bibliography Room for teaching. This is very much against the principle of teaching-collections laid down by Strickland Gibson and others in the years after the War (see *The Bodleian Library record* VI:6 (September 1961), pp. 645–653). More importantly, however, I believe that the Gibson Collection itself, which was once kept in the Bibliography Room should be returned. Its removal was in no way connected with the recent down-sizing of the Room (it occurred in the early 1990s, because of the perception that the collection was at risk due to poor security, and that it was not being used for the purpose for which it was intended, due to lack of use of the Room for any purpose at that time; the removal of the collection was not, in my view, an appropriate solution to these problems, and certainly exacerbated the second). The Gibson collection was created as a bibliographical teaching tool, and was enlarged by donation on that basis. Its significance lies in its value as a series of bibliographical lessons, in printing, type, illustration, imposition, cancellation, binding, paper etc. The items in the Gibson collection were always intended to be handled, to be passed round at seminars and used in hands-on teaching, and not as archival objects. The collection was put together for this one end—to have books and ephemera, available for teaching, which were outside the Libraries' archival holdings and so could be shown to students and visitors, and handled in a manner which the Libraries' other collections obviously cannot. I believe Gibson, John Johnson, Lars Hansen, Herbert Davies, Don Mackenzie, Michael Turner and others who created, expanded and used the collection over the years would be horrified by its current inaccessibility and lack of use, and by the Library's failure to respect the wishes of those donors who have given items to the collection explicitly for teaching use. An account of the establishment of the Room and its collection by Lars Hansen was published in the TLS (4 January 1952, p. 16) and would perhaps provide educational reading for Bodley's managers. It concludes with the sentence 'In whatever way the collection expands one may be sure that the present ease of access and examination will be fully preserved, for this has already proved to be of the greatest value'.

I would like to see the Gibson collection moved from the bookstack to a locked cabinet in the Bibliography Room, the keys to be held by the Superintendent (to preserve security as far as is necessary). The collection should be 'opened', so that further teaching specimens may be added, as was the original intention. It should also be properly catalogued in the University's SOLO system (at present it is only partially catalogued, largely using records extracted from the old pre-1920 catalogue). If the Library was willing to move and open the collection, in order to offer a quid-pro-quo, I offered to undertake the cataloguing myself, to antiquarian standards, in my own time. Predictably perhaps, no reply was received to this offer.

The two Bodleian spaces mentioned above are the old Exhibition Room and the current Centre for Digital Scholarship. The former was, of course, originally intended for the Bibliography Room. But in 2015 it was

unused, and remained unused for a further four years. The reason was no doubt that the old exhibition cases and accompanying air-conditioning could not be removed until funding was in place for this work. One could argue that the Library's managers should have been prepared for this well before 2014, when new exhibition spaces opened in the Weston Library; but they were no doubt so involved in the planning and fundraising for that happy redevelopment that plans for the Old Library were out of sight and out of mind. In 2018 the exhibition cases were finally removed, and this would have been an ideal moment for the Bibliography Room to have been moved in (from its current position, elsewhere in the Quadrangle). However, the Library chose to use this space instead for a 'New Readers' Breakout Space' (newspeak for a common-room) incorporating a 'Pod' (newspeak for a self-contained office) in which disabled readers could be interviewed. I suggest that a readers' common-room is the last thing the Bodleian needs (and its levels of use since opening seem to bear this out), while the 'Pod' could have been accommodated anywhere else on the ground-floor of the Quadrangle, including the room now occupied by the Bibliography Room, as well as the smaller one next to it. I fear the redecoration of this space and the erection of the 'Pod' must have been expensive for the Library. The installation of the Bibliography Room there would have cost considerably less, and proved, I suggest, a much better use of that space.

The current Centre for Digital Scholarship in the Weston Library has, I am afraid, hardly been used at all since it was opened in 2015. This is a large room (more than 100 square-metres) currently supplied with many desks bearing computers. The lack of use of this space is in no way a reflection on the Co-Ordinator of the Centre, who did the best job she could with the resources available, but found that many of the events she could organize were better held elsewhere. Since her resignation in 2018 the Centre has not been used at all for its intended purpose, although it has been used sometimes for unrelated meetings, by staff taking advantage of the space. It seems to me that the plan to give such a large area in the Weston Library to the Centre for Digital Scholarship was misconceived, and a smaller space (such as that currently occupied by the Bibliography Room) would be more appropriate. Both these spaces—the old Exhibition Room and CDS—currently represent, I think, a serious waste of the Bodleian's valuable resources of space. There are a dozen core library functions which could make proper use of these spaces. But the Bibliography Room is, in my view, the most deserving, since it was compressed and stripped in 2015, when a great opportunity was missed to perpetuate and, at a vital moment for the Bodleian, expand the Library's printing-related activities, its classes and workshops for the University, visiting students and school-groups, outreach to the public at large and children in particular, and commercial work.

This problem is, I recognize, a small one in comparison with some of the others currently affecting the libraries of Oxford, including the threat to the continued existence of the Radcliffe Science Library and of the Language Centre Library. But it is, nevertheless, a significant one which I should like to bring to the notice of the University, after more than three years of failed attempts to negotiate with the Bodleian's current management.