



Profile

Richard Ovenden

From graduate trainee at Durham University Library to Librarian at one of the UK's most prestigious libraries, the Bodleian at the University of Oxford, Richard Ovenden has had a fascinating career. *Insights* took the opportunity to invite him to fill in the gaps and to share his experiences at 'Bodley'.

Inevitably, the first question on any interviewer's lips has to relate to the weight of responsibility that comes with being Bodley's Librarian, so your Editor was keen to understand the unique pressures that come with the role. Richard responded enthusiastically, 'The post is an ancient one – the first librarian was appointed in 1600 and I am the 25th – so there is a historic aspect to the role which one is constantly conscious of ...', before adding, '... the scope and importance of the collections, and the surroundings of the library – its ancient and beautiful buildings and the atmosphere of the University – also add to the sense that one is responsible for a "national treasure" and not just a university library'. It is this unique position that weighs most heavily on Bodley's Librarian. 'Because of its "treasured" status, the Library is very much in the public eye. Making mistakes and making changes are often commented upon in the press, and opposition to changes is never hard to find. This makes management more difficult than it might be in some other libraries.'

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The role of Bodley's Librarian is a hugely prestigious one, so your Editor wanted to know what has led Richard to this exalted position. 'I started off as a graduate trainee at Durham University Library,' said Richard, humbly, '... then did the Dip Lib/MA at UCL and worked as a research assistant for a historian at Birkbeck College editing a 17th-century manuscript'.

From here, his career took off, heading towards more lofty positions. 'I then got a full-time job at the House of Lords Library before moving to the Special Collections Department (though it was not called that then) at the National Library of Scotland as a curator. I moved

12 in 1999 to Edinburgh University Library as Head of Special Collections and then became Director of Collections (adding the museums and Talbot Rice Art Gallery to my portfolio), and had a brief spell as Acting Deputy following the tragic death of Ian Mowat.' It was in 2003 that Richard made the move to Oxford to take up the post of Keeper of Special Collections, becoming Associate Director in 2006, then Deputy in 2011, and, of course, Bodley's Librarian in February 2014.

Even summarized in a nutshell, Richard's career looks impressive, so your Editor wanted to find out what particular things have stuck in his mind, whether good or bad. With a smile, Richard replied that there are '... too many (in both categories)!', before spotlighting a few examples.

'Taking a very precious Islamic manuscript to an exhibition in New York a few weeks after 9/11 was something I won't forget. Being responsible for two major building projects – the Bodleian Book Storage Facility and the Weston Library – have been incredible experiences, mostly for working with teams of amazing and inspiring colleagues.' With a sense of humility, he added, 'I have been really lucky to have worked closely with some great library leaders as bosses: Ian Mowat, Reg Carr and [Sarah Thomas](#); a low point was certainly Ian's untimely death. Finally, building collections and developing services for researchers of all kinds, at all of the libraries I have worked in, has been – and continues to be – the most richly rewarding part of my career in librarianship'.

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In looking back over his varied career, Richard reflected, 'I think one learns so much through the experience of working in different roles, at different levels in organizations, and at different institutions ... I have enjoyed all of my jobs – being on the information desk at the House of Lords Library or shelving books at Durham – [and these] have all helped inform my approach to libraries. I hope I can draw from the well of experience in all its varied aspects, and not forget what it is like to be a shelve!'.

It is clear that Richard is keen to stay in touch with all levels of staff within the institution, but the HE (higher education) sector in the UK is a rapidly changing sector, so he was asked what he believes to be the major challenges that will affect the community over the next few years. With little hesitation, he replied, 'The rapidly changing policy environment, driven by political agendas – everything from open access to immigration and funding – will all affect libraries in some way'. In expanding on that original thought, he went on to add '... Also the sense that HE is being opened up to competition from commercial providers. Finally, the sense that the public at large has a stake in the content and services of great libraries like the Bodleian – part of the widening participation agenda that is increasingly important at places like Oxford'.



Richard outside the recent free 'show-stopping' exhibition, Marks of Genius, in the new Weston Library exhibition galleries

13 Looking closer to home, your Editor asked whether the financial pressures affecting other HE institutions in the UK are having the same far-reaching impacts for high profile institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge. 'In a word, yes,' replied Richard, unequivocally. 'Although our budgets are bigger, so is our expenditure.' He went on to add, 'Cuts mean buying fewer books, restricting services, not filling posts, delaying conservation, all things that are hard to do, and which one would rather not do'. It is clear that making these tough decisions is a part of his role that Richard does not relish. However, he added, 'We are lucky in Oxford to have other income streams to call on, but these take a great deal of time and effort to build up and maintain'.

'Although our budgets are bigger, so is our expenditure'

With pressures like that in the job, it is important to be able to get away from work and take a well-earned break, and Richard does this with his family. 'My family is the centre of my life.' He explained that doing things with them – going to exhibitions/music/theatre, travelling, cooking – is his way of relaxing.

'My family is the centre of my life'

Back with the day job, Richard has undertaken work with the Digital Preservation Coalition and the Google mass digitization project, which clearly demonstrates a commitment to a digital future. However, representing a Legal Deposit Library, with print holdings of over 12 million items, brings its own distinct challenges, so your Editor asked Richard how he sees the Bodleian's collection management strategies developing over the coming years. Without hesitation, Richard replied, 'Digital will become an increasing part of what we do in every area of the Bodleian's activities. Our collection strategies will have to continue to adapt to the changing publishing environment, including open access'. In addition to these challenges, he noted, '... we have non-print legal deposit to deal with (together with the other Legal Deposit Libraries) and digital preservation will become a bigger and bigger issue for us as more of our content moves into digital form and requires preservation arrangements that are increasingly complex and costly. More collaboration will undoubtedly feature as a solution – in part – to these problems'.

And so the time came to end the interview. Your Editor finished by asking what Richard sees as his major achievement during the early part of his tenure as Bodley's Librarian. He singled out '... bringing our famous Selden Map of China to be the centrepiece of the University's first alumni reunion in Asia, held in Hong Kong in March of that year [2014]. The map was also on public display for some months afterwards and became a talking point in Hong Kong'.

With that, your Editor thanked Richard for taking time out of his day job to talk to *Insights* and wished him continued success.

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