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Visiting the Bodleian Library

One of our most satisfying sight-seeing afternoons at Oxford came on a very warm day when we signed up for a tour of the Bodleian Library. In several places we had seen buildings identified as part of the Bodleian; it is tremendous, housing more than six million books in its various locations, most of which are not open to casual visitors. Because we knew that tours of the Library began in the Old Bodleian, we went to the building off Broad Street on Cate Street, because it really looked the oldest.



Wrong! It was the *New* Bodleian. It is probably more than three centuries old. We retraced our steps to Broad Street, entered a gate to an area that led past the Sheldonian Theater (for a smallish building it often proved to be next to or across the street from wherever we wanted to go: for instance, the Kings Arms Pub where we had delicious pub dinners a couple of times as well as part of Blackwell's Bookstore were across the street from the Sheldonian). Going past the Sheldonian we found the door at the front of the Bodleian leading into the Bodleian Museum shop, with its array of picture postcards, reproductions of significant documents, and other Bodleian memorabilia, including the obligatory tee shirts. We were directed into a large, impressive, almost empty room. It was part of the original Divinity School, built in stages during the fifteenth century, also serving as the site of the original Library until the number of books became too great for the space for two reasons: the addition of many handwritten manuscripts from donors and the advent of the printing press.

Waiting for our tour guide gave us an opportunity to examine the many fine details in the room and to regret the rule against any photographs. The stages of building over nearly a century reflect the opposing styles of two of its architects in the variety of highly decorated versus very plain details. The differences did not appear discordant to my untrained architectural eye because of the size of the room; I couldn't really see it all at the same time. On the sides adjoining the entry room were tall arched glass windows,

surmounted by a graceful stone vaulted roof, soaring above the windows; we found such obvious details delightful. Our guide, an attractive woman with a beautiful speaking voice, obviously very much in love with her subject, explained that her identifying pin was a reproduction of the room we were in, minus the additions. The windows had been stained glass originally, but, like so many other decorated windows in Oxford, had been destroyed during Cromwell's time. She pointed out that otherwise the room appeared as it had originally, including the elaborate sculptured stone figures in the ceiling, with over 455 bosses appearing at the intersections of the supporting arches and bearing the carved arms of the various benefactors of the room. Such fine detail is possible in this and many other Oxford buildings because of the nature of the sandstone which was native to the Oxford area. When it is first quarried it is soft and easily sawed and carved into intricate forms. It soon hardens into a durable stone only a somewhat darker yellow than its freshly-quarried state.



Christopher Wren designed the Sheldonian Theatre, a highly original form for its day. The room we were in was used, in fact still is, as a convocation site for dignitaries before they go over to the Sheldonian Theatre. In 1669 Wren designed a gothic door which was cut into the central window on the wall adjacent to the Sheldonian for easier access to the Theatre. Until the door was pointed out, none of us had noticed any discrepancy in the design. The room is now used largely for the gathering of the faculty and distinguished guests. I wish that I could remember more of the fine details of this room and others, but the details defied cataloguing and recalling.

We went into an adjacent room, the New Convocation House, also largely empty and just as beautifully ornate, where the candidates for degrees of Bachelor and Doctor of Divinity had been examined until a hundred years ago when written examinations were substituted for oral defenses. As the books housed in these rooms proliferated, the second stories were added, so skillfully again that the additions appeared to be part of the original building. The New Convocation House took on new meaning when we learned that it had been used for meetings of the House of Commons during Charles I's residence at Oxford; we were sitting on the benches occupied by the members of the House during that time.



We next climbed some stairs to the second floor to what proved to be the most exciting part of the old Library. It is called Duke Humfrey's Library because of his contributions of books and money to build it in the seventeenth century. We were not allowed to go into the vast room, close to the books, but were excited to see the stalls where scholars could examine the old books and to see many of the books themselves, including manuscripts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. During those early days when books were rare and difficult to replace, some of the precious volumes disappeared, causing a rule to be made, still in force today, that no book could be taken from the building. When Charles I took refuge in Oxford after his expulsion, hoping to regain his throne, Oxford was sympathetic to his cause but the rule was not relaxed for the king; Charles was not allowed to borrow any book for his private use.

The setting of the room, called the Arts End, was magnificent, with an elaborate arched ceiling and tall book shelves with recesses for scholars to study the books. The ceiling consists of panels painted with the arms of the University as well as those of Thomas Bodley at the intersections of the panels. The furnishing and decoration of that whole floor dates back to the beginning of the seventeenth century when it replaced the original fifteenth century furnishings which had deteriorated during the Civil War and because of the poverty of the University. The name for the entire Library came from Sir Thomas Bodley, who donated his considerable library and was responsible for its restoration and for installing the present tall book shelves, with innovative book presses which housed

the many books made possible by the printing press. The design is widely copied by libraries today. The ends of the presses have frames which were used for printed (originally manuscript) lists of the books contained in the presses, the first cataloguing of the books.



In the anteroom where we were standing, we could get close to - but not touch - some of the ancient books on shelves on each side of the room. Using the custom of the old Library, these folio volumes are shelved with their fore-edges facing out to prevent excessive wear caused by the chains fastening them to the shelves. Each ancient book bears a shelf number to identify it.

Bodley arranged the books according to the faculty or discipline on which they were based. There were folio volumes in Theology, Medicine, Jurisprudence, and Arts. The Library first opened its doors in November, 1602, and grew so fast that it outgrew the building in eight years. A copy of every book printed in England during that time and later was, by law, sent to the Bodleian, making it the national library well before the opening of the British Museum. Today there are catacombs under the Bodleian, housing shelves of books and stretching under Broad Street to connect with the other buildings. These, of course, have a carefully controlled climate.

As we stood in the Arts End anteroom, several of us noticed the open windows, allowing the damp English air to circulate about the old books. When we asked our guide about the deteriorating effect of the moist air, she said that the circulating air actually preserved the books better than a closed, dry atmosphere would. In more modern parts of the Library, air-conditioned air is humidified, carefully regulated to protect the books from drying. A group of Friends of the Library hope to air condition the entire Library to preserve its heritage.

Our guide pointed out a plaque on one of the open windows. It bore the name of a woman from the United States who wanted to have her name somewhere, anywhere, in the Bodleian. She happily supplied the money to add stained glass to the window and was rewarded with her name where she wanted it - in the Bodleian.

We stood a long time in that small anteroom gazing in awe at the large folio books and envying the occasional scholar who was privileged to pass by us into the sanctuary which housed the inner mysteries of the rest of the Arts End. I regretted that we couldn't view some of the ancient treasures, such as copies of the Canterbury Tales and Shakespearean folios. At some time during our tour, I was amused to become aware of my growing feeling of snobbishness about dates. Anything past the mid-seventeenth century began to seem alarmingly "new" to me. I couldn't help laughing at myself when I considered that, until my arrival in Oxford, I had considered that the seventeenth century in Virginia to be venerably old.

