

Far left:
Kieran Hammond, first year English Literature student, Homerton
"I'm researching how the use of gloves in Shakespeare relates to contemporary discussions on chivalry."

Left:
Chris Bell, Chief Library Assistant, Legal Deposit Department
"Unpacking our weekly delivery from the Agency of the Legal Deposit Libraries - each delivery brings plenty of surprises."

Shelf lives

Words **Lucy Jolin**

Photographs **Charlie Troman and Marcus Ginns**

'The library didn't only contain magical books, the ones which are chained to the shelves and are very dangerous. It also contained perfectly ordinary books, printed on commonplace paper in mundane ink. It would be a mistake to think that they weren't also dangerous just because reading them didn't make fireworks go off in the sky. Reading them sometimes did the more dangerous trick of making fireworks go off in the privacy of the reader's brain.'

Soul Music by Terry Pratchett



Right:
Research Associate, Sanskrit Manuscripts Project, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
"This is a Nepalese manuscript from 1645, containing a collection of Buddhist legends called One Hundred Stories of Glorious Deeds."

Right:
Sue Adams, Masters student in Genealogical, Heraldic and Paleographic Studies at the University of Strathclyde
 "For my thesis, I'm combining genealogical sources like the census with tithe maps, to figure out where people owned land."



Far right:
Mark King, second year PhD student in Medieval History, Pembroke
 "These are several volumes of the Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society."



Yes, a chance encounter over a book about Dostoyevsky did indirectly lead to my marriage...

It is 1912 and a normal working day for the staff of the Cambridge University Library. As they do every week, crates of printed matter have arrived for their perusal: the Legal Deposits

After putting aside the academic material, staff sort the books, magazines and papers by size and put them into cardboard boxes. These are not important state papers, the diaries of a well-known novelist or learned academic journals. Rather, they range from The Victor Rapid Record Selector ("to help you choose your records more expeditiously and with greater satisfaction") to The Scholar's Catechism on Arithmetic and General Knowledge (typical entry: "What is a gamp?").

In 1934, these boxes of apparent rubbish – but which must be kept, by law – are moved to the new UL building. They are put in the Tower, where they stay until 2006, when a new academic and popular interest in the minutiae of 19th-century life helps to spark the Tower Project. By the end of this year, Tower Project researchers will have catalogued all books in the tower published up to the end of 1920. They are a treasure trove for historians – a perfectly preserved record of reading. These books, leaflets and magazines were not important then. But they are now. It is just one reason why libraries matter: they exist for the past, the present and the future.

The boxes still arrive at the UL: more than a hundred of them every week, containing around 1,600 books and 1,500 periodicals. Who knows what the readers of 2012 will make of them? Each consignment is a snapshot of whatever happens to be published in the UK that week – everything from Java for Dummies to Spot's First Walk.

"Which will remain in perfect condition," says Marjolein Allen, Head of Reader Services. "No child ever gets to chew our Spot books. This material is not something we'd buy as an academic library. But it is part of our heritage, so we look after it for ever – we never throw it away."

But libraries are more than simple depository. They exist in our imaginations and memories as much as they do as places of serious academic endeavour, as Nick Langley (Fitzwilliam 1974) and still a regular UL user points out. "As a red-brick grammar-school boy, I found the University environment of the mid-70s pretty alien – which may have been partly warranted, and partly because of a chip on my shoulder," he recalls.

"The waits after you'd filled in slips and before the librarians brought your books seemed horribly long, especially to someone feeling hyper-self conscious and out of place, surrounded by people who seemed to fit in. I wonder how many of them were feeling just the same? I still use the University Library regularly, and have been struck by how helpful they are now."

The Library evokes nostalgic memories for Dom Banham (Clare 1987). He says: "I was once wandering around the UL and found a section filled with books on the history of firework making, complete with contemporary engravings of firework-related incidents – often the untimely and explosive demise of a famous factory.

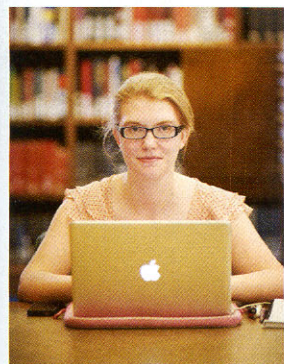
"None of this was in the least bit helpful to whatever purpose I had originally gone there for, but I have still vivid memories of reading some fascinating accounts."

And they are more than just information hubs. "Libraries are intriguing, important, delightful, controversial places with wonderful pasts and interesting

Right:
Henrietta McBurney Ryan,
Keeper of Fine and Decorative
Art, Eton College
 "I am looking at the two-volume
 set of Mark Catesby's *The Natural*
History of Carolina, Florida and
the Bahama Islands."



Far right:
Reverend Brian Mastin,
affiliated lecturer with the
Faculty of Asian and Middle
Eastern Studies
 "I'm consulting the *Persepolis*
Fortification Tablets - texts from
 the Persian Empire, written in
 Elamite - for various grammatical
 features."



Above
Bodil Isaksen, third year
undergraduate in Land
Economy at Queens'
 "I am revising development
 economics for my finals."

futures," says Professor Simon Franklin, of the Department of Slavonic Studies and Head of the School of Arts and Humanities.

"But it doesn't do to be overly sentimental about them. I think that we can no longer get by with a slightly cosy notion of libraries. Yes, I went to the local library as a child, there was story time on Saturday and that was very important and exciting. Yes, a chance encounter over a book about Dostoyevsky did indirectly lead to my marriage. But people have so much more access to so much more information in so many different ways now. The time when the library was the only access to the world of knowledge is not there any more. It would be foolish to pretend that it was."

However even in the future, there will still be the dusty boxes. He says: "The digital zealot notion – that libraries are going to be completely redundant, that we will simply have everything on a handheld device and all these great buildings can be converted – is turning out to be equally misguided. It's a utopian or dystopian vision of the future which is as off-centre as the over-rosy view of the past."

So the argument over whether the smell of old books trumps the feel of a shiny new Kindle is long over. Why not have both? These days libraries such as the UL are at the forefront of marrying print and digital, using the one to complement the other. Take the recent project by the UL to digitise Sir Isaac Newton's papers. The digital archive received 29 million hits in its first 24 hours online. 'For the first time in the Library's history,' says Anne Jarvis, University Librarian, "we do not know who our readers are. We do, however, have extraordinary new opportunities to engage directly with a worldwide audience. Communication remains critical, but it now takes different forms. We inform our readers

through social media and they increasingly access our catalogues and collections online. This is therefore a very exciting time for the Library and its staff."

And the fact that Google can now pull up Newton's archive actually strengthens the case for libraries. The reason why those documents can be made available online is that they have spent the last 400 years being carefully cherished and preserved – in a library. (In fact, many papers were so delicate that they needed to be restored before being digitised.) "Nobody else has that responsibility," says Professor Franklin. "Not Google, not Wikipedia, not governments. Nobody else has to think in those long terms."

The digital, he points out, is an adequate substitute for the object, "but it should never be mistaken for a total substitute. If we look at our screens, we assume that everything is the same size and texture, and that a manuscript miniature is exactly the same as an enormous mural because it all fits on to your iPad. And objects are important not just as holy relics – though there's an element of that – but if one is talking about serious knowledge, rather than just information about something, then one has to work with the objects themselves."

And it is those objects that remain at the heart of the library, for all the undoubted convenience of an online catalogue of more than eight million cards and the lure of shiny screens.

"Occasionally, you find a book which has been in library since the 19th century and it's just the book you need, and you open it to find that nobody has even cut the pages," says Professor Franklin. "One might say, what an extraordinary waste to have a book there that nobody is going to read for another 150 years. On the other hand, what a wonderful justification – suddenly, this book has meaning."

Left:
(From left to right) Deborah
Fardell, Senior Conservator;
Shaun Thompson, Bindery
Supervisor and Lucy Cheng,
Book and Paper Conservator,
 who says: "I'm working on
 fragments that are part of the
 Jacques Mosseri Genizah
 Collection, a treasure trove of more
 than 7000 Jewish manuscripts."