Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury, the co-founder of All Souls College (with King Henry VI) in 1438, decided that the College should have books and a library from the very outset. In its first years, the College set about accumulating a good all-round working collection for those working in the higher faculties of theology, law and medicine, although the Statutes envisaged that Fellows would study only arts, philosophy, theology, and law. Other subjects came also to be represented through donation and acquisition, among them the history of England and Italian humanism.

Fellows of the College left books to the Library from the very beginning: a donor of importance was the bibliophile bishop Dr James Goldwell. By the end of the fifteenth century, the library consisted of about 250 manuscripts and 100 printed books; this number was to increase gradually over the next century through purchases and gifts.

Unlike the Chapel, which lost its organ, reredos and service books during the turmoil of the Reformation, the Library emerged more or less unscathed, and under Elizabeth I found a new champion in the form of Warden Robert Hovenden (1574-1614).

He drew up a new catalogue in 1575, erected the beautiful plaster barrel ceiling in what is now the Old Library, introduced more capacious book presses, and commissioned a full set of maps of the College’s estates.

During his Wardenship, the College acquired books through gifts in lieu of monies from tenants: this accounts for the first fine binding known to come into the College’s possession.

During the seventeenth century, the College continued both to buy books and to receive donations from Fellows, of which the most substantial was that of Dudley Digges, who bequeathed over a thousand books and pamphlets, including English literature. These and other additions made the shortage of space yet more acute. This was solved by a providential legacy of £10,000 received by the College in 1710 from Christopher Codrington, sometime Fellow. He bequeathed his own library of 12,000 volumes, and stipulated that £4,000 of his bequest should be used for the purchase of books. The remaining sum was for the construction of a new library, whose buildings, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor, were erected between 1716 and 1720; but it was to take until 1751 for the interior to be fully furnished and ready to accommodate books.

In that year a Library Committee was set up, and a new vision of the Library emerged, in which it retained its ancient specialisations in law and theology, and developed its holdings in the classics, history, travel and topography, belles-lettres and natural history. It came thereby to resemble more a gentleman’s reference library than that of a College. William Blackstone, the great Common Lawyer (Fellow 1743-62), who was also a keen student of architecture, probably caused the College to purchase nearly five hundred drawings from the office of Christopher Wren (Fellow 1653-61), in 1751, as well as other rare publications on the subject of architecture.

Armed with the best reference books on historical bibliography of the day, the Library Committee set about acquiring monuments of early printing, both English and foreign. Notable donations came from other Fellows: Ralph Freman in 1774, and, in 1786, Luttrell Wynne, who had inherited his great uncle’s fine collection of manuscripts and books. Around this time Dr Daniel Lysons donated the so-called ‘Amesbury Psalter’, the College’s finest medieval manuscript.

Purchases included ‘modern’ European literary classics in the most sumptuous editions, and natural history.
From the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the library fund dwindled in size, and fewer books were purchased; in compensation, some donations of note were received from Fellows: seventeenth- and eighteenth century Spanish books from P.F.Hony, and Persian manuscripts from Mrs Heber, the widow of Reginald Heber, sometime Fellow and Bishop of Calcutta.

The Shahnama, showing the execution of Siyavush

These donations added to the diversity of the collections. The College was roused from a period of quiescence by the Royal Commission of the 1850s, and by the energetic figure of Warden Anson (1867-1914). In his time, a new reading room was built for use by all members of the University, and opened in 1867; the specialisation in law and history was reasserted, and the Library supplied with works relating to current politics and public administration. Other notable events include the inventory of the College archives by C. Trice Martin in 1874-7, and several important donations, including the papers of Sir Charles Vaughan, a major source of information about the Peninsular War and the United States of America in the 1820s, J.A.Doyle’s great collection of Americana, and two collections of military history. These donations once again created problems of space, which were alleviated by the construction of a bookstore in 1909, and its extension in 1952. In more recent times, the greatest bequest has been the collection of neo-Latin poetry and epigraphy of Warden John Sparrow.

By the late 1990s, it became clear that work was required on the fabric of the Library, and the project of rewiring, rebuilding the bookstack, providing controls of temperature and humidity to modern standards, equipping a dedicated space for conservation and establishing a number of electronic work stations was begun. This was completed in 2002.

As well as books, the Library is guardian to a number of other objects: a death mask of Christopher Wren, a pietra dura table, the reading desks and steps commissioned by Blackstone, and memorabilia of T.E. Lawrence.

The Library is open to recommended graduates and undergraduates of the University, and to bona fide scholars. Applicants are required to supply two passport-sized photographs, and a form (available from the Library website) signed by their tutor.

Opening hours:
Monday – Friday: Term: 9:30 – 6:30
Vacation: 9:30 – 4:30
Closed August and September

Further information:
www.all-souls.ox.ac.uk/library
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