An A-Z of the Bodleian

As the Bodleian Library prepares for the opening of the £80m Weston Library, Linora Lawrence concludes her access-all-areas tour around this celebrated institution.

W is for Weston Library – the new name for the refurbished 1930s building (previously called the New Bodleian) on the north side of Oxford’s Broad Street, opposite the Clarendon Building. It is named in honour of the Garfield Weston Foundation which has given a generous grant of £25m towards the £80m transformation. The 1930s library was 11 floors of bookstacks with reading rooms and offices round the central core.

The removal of the old stacks has freed up an exciting space within which architects, Wilkinson Eyre, under the leadership of director, Jim Eyre, OBE, have worked to their threefold brief:

- To create high-quality storage for the Libraries’ valuable special collections, which include the rare and unique manuscripts, books and maps that the Bodleian preserves for the international world of scholarship.
- To develop the Bodleian’s space for the support of advanced research.
- To expand public access to their great treasures through new exhibition galleries and other facilities.

The really exciting news for most of us lies in the third point of the brief, the expansion of public access. By the time the project is completed, the whole of the ground floor of the Weston Library will be accessible to the general public, including, of course, disabled access.

A new, colonnaded entrance on Broad Street will lead visitors into Blackwell Hall, a large entrance hall paved elegantly with Jura limestone and named in honour of another generous donor, Julian Blackwell, owner of Blackwell’s book shops.

There will be a lecture theatre with 119 seats, two exhibition galleries, a new shop, the Zvi Meitar Bodleian Shop, in addition to the existing one in the Old Schools Quadrangle and, a public café with seating capacity for 76 people. It will be called, unsurprisingly, The Bodleian Café and will be run by award-winning restaurateurs, Benugo.

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profits will go to support the libraries’ core work.
“We have opened up the ground floor area to create something comparable to an Oxford quadrangle, but indoors,” says Toby Kirtley, the Bodleian’s estates project officer.
Another good thing is that many of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott’s original features will be shown to much greater advantage in the refurbished building.
“The elevation of the tower can now be seen as Scott originally envisaged it,” Toby added.
“Interestingly, when the weight of the old 11 floors of stacks was finally taken out, the building floated up by six millimetres. The ground is clay and the clay expanded, although it has gone done again since the new stacks went in.”
Toby explained that secure storage space had been created on three floors below ground level giving 40 km of shelving.
Regular readers are already using the three new reading rooms, two of them named after their donors, Sir Charles Mackerras and Charles Wendell David, and the Rare Books and Manuscripts reading room on the upper floors.
There are open-shelf galleries, 2.5 km of them, holding some 85,000 thousand volumes and 27 study carrels. WiFi is, of course, available throughout.
There is a Digital Scholarship Centre with 15 seats and high-end equipment from Samsung including large, flat screen monitors for group research. There is also a Visiting Scholar Centre with ten studies, and four seminar rooms. Staff and readers have their own separate café, The Headley Tearoom, also run by Benugo, in a corner of the ground floor.
Although many books and manuscripts will come back gradually over the next 15 months, like evacuees returning home (some of the staff probably feel the same way) to the Weston Library, a large amount will now reside in the comfort of the new, state-of-the-art book storage facility at South Marston, on the edge of Swindon. From here they can be delivered within 24 hours of a reader making an online request.
However, many rare items which have long been in storage in their respective libraries are being gradually brought in to the Weston where they will be even more readily accessible. These include the Commonwealth and African Studies archives from Rhodes

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House Library, rare items from the Chinese Studies Library and the Oriental Institute Library and even material from the University Archives which has, until now, been stored in the Examination Schools on the High.
The Imaging and Conservation studios are now back in the Weston.
Toby said that the architects had again gone back to Scott’s original concept — which was to have the conservation workshops, offices and administrative hub on the north side of the building which is cooler and has indirect light — in other words the best scenario for conservation purposes. Curators’ offices are on the same floor which works well as they work closely with the conservators.
Imaging Services, headed up by James Allan, is the primary provider of photographic prints, paper prints from microfilm and digital files within the Bodleian Libraries.
The department also administers permissions to use these images in electronic and non-electronic forms.
The staff in this department combine expertise in, not only all aspects of photography, but also conservation techniques. This is essential given that they may find themselves handling anything from a newly published novel to an ancient, handwritten manuscript on any given day of the week.
One new occupant in the Weston will be the Admissions Office which will move from the Clarendon Building to office and waiting room space on the ground floor in the next two to three months.
There will be a public opening of the Weston Library on Saturday, March 21. On the opening weekend, the public will be able to go on special ‘behind the scenes’ tours of the building, attend talks and visit the new exhibition galleries where the Bodleian’s flagship exhibition, Marks of Genius: masterpieces from the collections of the Bodleian Libraries, will be on show from March 21 until September 20 (see page 127).
This free exhibition will include treasures such as Shakespeare’s first folio, the Kennicott Bible and a famous Aztec manuscript called the Codex Mendoza. Celebrations for the opening weekend will run on Saturday, March 21 (8am-6pm) and Sunday, March 22 (10am-

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X is for Xochipilli, the Flower Prince of ancient Mexico — who had a twin sister named Xochiquetzal. Their duties as Aztec gods and goddesses were many and are recorded in the Codex Mendoza which resides in the Bodleian Library.

This manuscript was commissioned by Antonio de Mendoza, first Viceroy of Mexico 1535-1550, for presentation to the Emperor Charles V of Spain. It contains, firstly, a copy of a lost chronicle of the Aztec lords of Tenochtitlan; secondly, a copy of the ancient Tribute Roll, listing 400 towns paying annual dues to the last Aztec Emperor, Moctezuma II; and thirdly, an account of Aztec life ‘from year to year’.

Xochi denotes ‘flower’ and comes from the Nahuatl word xochitl while pilli means either ‘prince’ or ‘child’. Xochipilli was the god of art, games, beauty, dance, flowers and song, plus agriculture, a responsibility which seems to have been shared with a number of other gods.

His sister’s name, Xochiquetzal, means ‘flower precious feather’ or ‘quetzal’ feather. She represented the epitome of feminine beauty and allurement and while she shared some duties with her brother — dance, music, singing and the care of prostitutes — she also looked after weaving, the making of luxury goods, magic and love spells plus added responsibilities for fertility and childbirth.

Aztec worshippers wore animal and flower masks at a festival held in her honour every eight years. Rather charmingly, marigolds are sacred to her.

There are five codices residing in the Bodleian. They are the Codex Bodley, recorded in the Bodleian’s first ever catalogue of 1605; the Codex Laud, presented by Archbishop Laud; the Codex Selden and the Selden Roll, presented by John Selden, a jurist and philosopher of the 17th century; and the Codex Mendoza which students of ancient Mexico make pilgrimages to see.

So, what is a codex? The word comes from the Latin caudex means ‘trunk of a tree’ or ‘block of wood’.

Before we had books we had short messages written on paper, vellum, papyrus, or really anything on which you could make a lasting mark. A longer document was written on a scroll which was one, long, rolled-up, piece of writing.

The first ever books put together were a revolutionary format, as innovative in their time as printing was to be in the 15th century.

They were, of course, hand-written but what made them different was that there were a number of pages, of whatever material, stacked and bound on one edge with covers of a thicker material than the pages themselves and they could be numbered.

Some were concertina-style inside their covers, but the ‘book’ style became increasingly popular, no doubt due to their sheer practicality.

The spread of the codex is often associated
with the rise of Christianity, which adopted the format for the Bible early on. First described by the first-century AD Roman poet Martial, who praised its convenient use, the codex achieved numerical parity with the scroll around AD 300, and had completely replaced it throughout the now Christianised Greco-Roman world by the sixth century.

Y is for ‘Yours sincerely’ – or ‘Yours truly’, or even, ‘Your obedient servant’. Many ways of signing off a letter have been employed over the centuries.

Not only does the Bodleian Library possess millions of printed books, it is also home to 100,000s of letters spanning centuries of written communication.

Before the invention of electronic forms of communication (telegraph, telephone, radio, Internet), letters were the primary form of social interaction at a distance (though sometimes the distance was only across the street!).

The Electronic Enlightenment Project (www.e-enlightenment.com), the brainchild of Dr Robert McNamee, director of the project, is in the business of making this vast store of correspondence available online for scholarly research.

Although there is an enormous amount of material within the Bodleian collections the Project has agreements with some 30 presses around the world and indeed welcomes letters from individual sources.

A wonderful treasure trove of letters came from a family who counted many clergymen among their forebears. The Barton stash of letters includes one from a member of the family who was crew on HMS Victory at the Battle of Trafalgar and wrote home describing the death of Lord Nelson.

So far the project contains letters dating from 1600 to 1900, with items from every continent except Antarctica (though there is mention of seeing icebergs in the far Southern Atlantic in some 17th-century letters).

The project is not just interested in famous names – there are letters to and from bakers, dance masters, criminals, con-men, reformers, refugees, more than 8,000 identified people with nearly 800 different occupations.

Robert McNamee has worked on the Canterbury Tales for the University of Oxford and on the works of Joseph Conrad for the University of Cambridge.

This was followed by collaboration with the Voltaire Foundation which resulted in the publication of 21,000 letters to and from the great philosopher. Following this success he was approached by the Mellon Foundation (they have to come to you, never the other way round) which was interested in creating a self-sustaining humanities project that would continue long after the grant ran out.

Fresh from the influence of Voltaire and the Age of Enlightenment, Robert’s present project came into being and has benefited from six grants over seven years.

To date the ‘complete’ collections published electronically, in addition to Voltaire, include those of Robert Boyle, David Hume, Adam Smith, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope.

Robert explains that all material is double keyed, which means two people key in the same document (this stage of the work is Continued on page 71
done in India) and if their work does not agree then the keyboard goes into lock-down until a supervisor checks the discrepancy.

This enables the text to be searched which cannot be done with the original hand-written letters. It also ensures a high degree of accuracy.

A favourite character of Robert's is Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800) who was a patron of the arts, an author in her own right having written a serious study of Shakespeare, and who was the unofficial 'Queen of the Blue Stockings'. She and her husband winterted in London where her salons became famous and were attended by the nobility, artists and authors. She even organized literary breakfasts. Elizabeth came from a well connected family as demonstrated by a letter from her dated March 3, 1742, to the Duchess of Portland – note the lavish signing off:

Madam,
If I had been ill when your Grace's letter arrived it would have cured me. I am infinitely obliged to you for your kind concern, but am sorry I awakened it by my remissness; my head has been aching very much for three days, that really I was unfit for anything but an easy chair in the chimney corner . . . . . .

I am, With the greatest gratitude, and Affection, and love, Most obliged, and faithful

Robert said: "Everyone's letters are equally important, whether they be noble lords and ladies or soldiers and shopkeepers."

He does indeed have letters in the collection from a French tripe seller involved in a legal dispute which is surprising on two counts, first of all, the fact that she could read and write and secondly, that is was in French.

"Yes," said Robert, "language is no barrier. We are equally interested whatever the language the original letter employs, and we are gradually providing translations of letters into other languages."

The most recent letters in the collections date from 1917, but this date will soon be superseded as more material is received and processed.

Z is for Zoology – the department of zoology and within it sits a little jewel in the Bodleian's crown – the Alexander Library of Ornithology. In ornithological terms it is one of the foremost reference libraries in the world. Under the guardianship of the Alexander Librarian Sophie Wilcox revealed that it holds extensive collections of 19th and 20th-century books, pamphlets and periodicals, and an archive of ornithological notebooks and diaries. It is an international resource with visitors coming from far and wide to consult the collections which cover, not only ornithology, but also natural history, conservation, ecology and behaviour.

The library was founded in the 1930's on the personal collections of Wilfred Backhouse Alexander, who was indeed its first Librarian having previously been the first Director of the Oxford Bird Census (the predecessor of the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology), but it was not until 1947 that the library was named in his honour.

One of the most fascinating stories to emerge from this library comes from its Prisoner of War Diary Archives.

A group of like-minded POWs, held captive during the Second World War, found themselves incarcerated together in several prisoner-of-war camps. John Buxton and Peter Conder met initially whilst imprisoned at Ollag VII C in Laufen Castle during 1940.

Together they formed a birdwatching society and held informal lectures, whilst the watching and recording of bird activities became, for them and several of their fellow prisoners, one of the keenest of their few pleasures.

It is quite remarkable that men like John Buxton, the teacher of the group whose love of the countryside was also reflected in his poetry, together with Peter Conder, later a director of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) – were later also flung together in Ollag VII B near Warburg and Ollag VII B at Eichstatt.

They were joined by John Barrett, later a conservationist, author and broadcaster and George Waterston, who went on to establish Fair Isle as a bird observatory and founded wildlife tourism with osprey nestwatch at Loch Garten.

Sophie is pleased to add that, as well as holding their POW field notebooks, the library also possesses Waterston's manuscript, Breeding Biology of the Wynecke, complete with camp stamps.

John Buxton became friendly with one of the camp guards and managed, through him, to get in touch with Erwin Stresemann, the German naturalist and one of the outstanding ornithologists of the 20th century, who sent him bird rings to use in the camp (to ring individual birds to aid identification) and some other useful literature, including the scarce third volume of Niethammer's Handbuch der Deutschen Vogelkunde, now here in the Alexander Library.

Using data gathered while in captivity Buxton later wrote The Redstart, one of the most acclaimed natural history books of the 20th century.

Edward Lear (1812-1888) is perhaps best remembered for his Nonsense books of preposterous rhymes and sketches loved by generations of children. But, it should not be forgotten that he was a man of overwhelming talent who produced, in addition to his Nonsense books, more than 300 landscape oil paintings, some 9,000 watercolours, hundreds of ornithological lithographs and natural history illustrations, five published travel journals, six unpublished manuscripts, a dozen published songs, and many thousands of letters.

The Alexander Library is fortunate in owning one of Lear's best works which he began publishing when he was only 18 years old – Illustrations of the family of Ptiliidae, or parrots (1832), which contains 42 lithographic plates drawn from life.

This book was a centrepiece of the 2012/13 Lear exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum and was warmly praised by Sir David Attenborough at the press launch.

Today, much of the material within the collections is received via donation or through exchange schemes.

The library enjoys a close relationship with the British Ornithologists' Union and books which have been reviewed within its journal, The Ibis, are subsequently deposited in the Alexander Library. The library also houses the British Falconers' Club Library.

Z is also for Zeitgeist – the spirit of the times. More to the point is the spirit of Thomas Bodley which surely lives on, and must be more fulfilled than ever as his desire to share knowledge is set to widen further than ever before for the general public through increased access, tours, talks and exhibitions to the Bodleian Library.