
Chancery Lane Library and Information Services Centre

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BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Accommodation at the Strand Campus of King's College has been cramped and unsuitable for many years. College had been looking for a solution to this problem, needing to create more lecture and seminar space, more staff offices of a reasonable standard and better social space for students. The Rolls Estate, home of the former Public Record Office and a Grade II* listed property, was put onto the market in March 1998. College had previously looked at the building in 1995 as a possible home for the School of Law, but had decided the space was not suitable. However, on being told that the Crown Commissioners were again looking for an occupant, College seized the opportunity to provide a single home for the four separate Strand libraries and the Rare Books and Special Collection operation, which had been out-housed at Hampstead for several years. It was hoped that, by moving the libraries off site, space would be created to enable the development of a new School of Social Science. In addition, space would be freed up for scientific laboratories, more postgraduate students could be recruited, attracted by the better library provision and general accommodation, and that, as a by-product, research quality might also improve.

BUILDING HISTORY

The building was opened in 1856 and was designed by James Pennethorne, a pupil of Regency architect John Nash. The fire of 1834 which destroyed the Palace of Westminster was still in living memory and this building was the first fire-proof building to be designed, with a cellular structure, cast-iron doors and shelving uprights and slate shelves, all designed to withstand any outbreaks of fire. No artificial light was allowed in the store rooms, meaning windows had to be as large as possible, and there was

no central heating. Any outbreak of fire would be contained within a single cell and would be unable to spread. Each cell weighed 90 tons and floors rested on wrought-iron beams and girders supported on brick arches.

Of the public search rooms, the Round Room has a domed ceiling, decorated with painted zinc motifs. This ceiling and a painted zinc ceiling in the entrance hall are thought to be the only two examples of such work in the UK. The technique was popular in France at the time. Both are being restored and will be in areas accessible to all library users.

Further wings were added in the 1890s to accommodate staff offices, committee rooms and the PRO's own staff library. These areas were designed by Sir John Taylor.

SPACE AND COSTS

The additional 18,000 square metres at the Rolls Estate would provide adequate space for library expansion, and at the time of the first discussions,



Clock tower that originally housed the water tank for the entire building and now contains study carrels

it was also a possibility that another part of the University might actually have been planning to merge with King's, bringing its library with it. The move of the libraries would render the space at Hampstead free for redeployment or sale, and the space freed at the Strand, in the region of 5,000 square metres, would enable redesign and redevelopment of that space to provide much needed facilities.

The College bid of £9.5 million secured the building on a long lease at a peppercorn rent for 125 years. Initial estimates judged the fabric and repair costs to be in the region of £11 million, including a separate sum of £1 million for IT provision and fitting out, which was not assessed in any detail in the early stages. It was agreed that donations and grants would cover this £11 million and so a major fundraising appeal was set in motion. Final costs are expected to be in the region of £32 million. Much of this increase has been due to the extra repair and restoration work needed to preserve some of the special features of the building.



An original cell as used by PRO, the shelves being made of slate

THE WORK STARTS

Senior library staff visited the building in summer 1998 and it was hard to believe that such a Gothic building could be transformed into the light and attractive environment we required, which would allow students to access the latest in electronic information sources alongside our not inconsiderable print sources. (The building's nickname of Alcatraz stuck when a group of visiting American law academics also commented on the likeness, without being aware of the nickname.)

The initial lack of a full College brief for the project caused some problems along the way, but enabled Library Services staff to look ahead and make estimates, projections and wants lists to enable service provision to be improved and developed for the future. Bringing together all four Strand libraries had been an aim for the past 20 years. Some staff had been long enough in post to remember more than a dozen small subject libraries on site and had gradually seen that number reduced over the years. However, it had not been possible to identify a suitable area of space at the Strand to plan for complete integration. Meanwhile the merger with UMDS had

led to the development of two new Information Services Centres at the Guy's and Waterloo campuses, where library and IT services for students could be provided from a single location. This development made the Strand provision seem even more lacklustre. However, provision was further complicated at the Strand, where Computing & IT Services would actually be faced with an extra site, since there is still a requirement to leave some C&IT provision at the Strand, rather than concentrating services at one location.

It soon became clear that College's initial idea of leaving as little unchanged within the building as possible would not provide the sort of accommodation necessary for students in a twenty-first century library environment. Original slate shelves, whilst ideal for storing manuscripts, were so heavy as to need two members of staff to adjust one. Narrow passages between shelves and winding open ironwork staircases would not meet modern safety regulations or user needs. Moreover, the requirement for a minimum of 1,200 networked reader places proved impossible without major structural alterations.



The Gothic architecture of the building

DETAILED PLANNING

Consultations with College academic staff, students and the library staff themselves began a long process of identifying the areas of improvement we wanted for our service. Trying to realise those wishes has taken patience, an understanding of what could and what could not be achieved in the building and a long process of making adjustments and alterations to achieve as much as possible within the building's own constraints. English Heritage and the Crown Estates have had particular requirements relating to the building and its adaptation for use. There has been a constant need to balance their requirements with the actual needs of our users, who will be those actually using the building for the foreseeable future. In some cases we have been able to reach an agreed and acceptable midway point that will prove satisfactory for all concerned. Other areas have proved more contentious and it remains to be seen how much this will affect the ease of use of the building in future years.

We have been anxious to provide an improved range of study environments for students and staff alike. All Strand libraries were cramped, in serious need of redecoration, and in many instances, full. Our new premises allow for spacious study desks. Some have screens and some are more open. In addition, there are five group study rooms for work when students need to collab-

orate, individual study carrels, including those in the Clock Tower, now renamed the Sir John Hackett Postgraduate Study Centre, three PAWS (Public Access Work Station) rooms and four training rooms where staff can train users in information skills and use of electronic materials. It is hoped that the balance of these areas will be suitable for the future. In some respects we have been constrained by what the building can accommodate. In particular, we may be short of sufficient group study rooms. The cellular shape of the study areas may, however, enable some of these to be zoned for group study if more such space is needed.

None of this provision would have been possible without the bold decision of the architects, Gaunt Francis Associates, to press for opening out and creating interconnecting corridors within and between the cells, improving access, creating a lighter and brighter atmosphere and removing many of the dead ends and dark corners. It also became clear that the existing mezzanine floors would have to be removed, and the requirements for reader places and stock would mean that modern mezzanine floors would have to be installed in as many areas as the planners would allow, to give adequate floor space.

Having placed the requirement for reader places at the top of the list, shelving was of similar

importance, as we needed to move around 12,000 metres of stock from the Strand and all the stock from Hampstead. We also needed to allow space for expansion, notwithstanding the increase in information available electronically, particularly in the areas of humanities and law, where books are being added at a growing rate and external collections have recently had to be turned down because of space shortages. Expansion space for the next 25 years was factored into the original requirements. Unfortunately, as so often happens with new buildings, this is one area where we are somewhat disappointed with what has been achieved. 25,000 linear metres (15 miles) of shelving have been installed. Approximately 14,000 metres is open access regular shelving: the remainder is rolling stack, the majority of which, excepting the Rare Books and Special Collections areas, is also accessible to users who can browse materials long hidden in closed access stores at the Strand or Hampstead.

Some expansion space was lost by the College decision to incorporate a café within the building. (Looking ahead, the café could also be moved outside the building at a future point and this space re-used for library materials.) However, the café will improve facilities for users, making it feasible to spend longer periods within the building and thus to capitalise on the improved environment provided. In addition, the building has required an extra plant room, which took up an entire extra cell, with the loss of a further 1,000 metres of shelving. English Heritage has also insisted that two cells remain intact, with original shelving. Fire regulations required that a new staircase be built on the north side of the building. In total, the possibility of shelving being installed in 10 cells on the Lower Ground Floor and six at other levels, has been lost, causing the total shelving installed at this stage to be well over 10,000 metres less than initially anticipated.

NEW FEATURES

The building has also imposed its requirements on us, and in many instances this should lead to an improvement in services for users. The size and complexity of the building has dictated the need for proper security and porter staff whose presence should improve safety, maintain a better environment for study and free up ISS staff to perform the duties they have been trained to provide. The size of the building has also necessitated installation of CCTV throughout. A professional signage system has been required and whilst adapting the College's house style to fit a single use building has been difficult, the end

result should provide a more uniform style and an effective wayfinding system for this complicated building. Other new features include a walk-in short loan collection area, where users can browse to find suitable materials, a multi-media area, allowing CDs, vinyl records, videos and DVDs to be kept together, adjacent to suitable playing equipment, and a separate desk for enquiries. Whilst the use of some parts of the building have still to be finalised, we hope that the decision to house our Humanities reference collection in the newly named Maurice Wohl Round Reading Room will enable students to use that material in situ and experience the splendour of the architecture. This room is reminiscent of the old Round Reading Room in the British Museum. We look forward to occupying this room once its ceiling has been repaired. The Weston Room (formerly called the Rolls Chapel, although the actual chapel was demolished in 1895) has still to be completed and this space will be of interest to visitors to the building. Used previously as a records store, then as a museum from 1902 (housing the famous Domesday exhibition in 1986) and more recently as a microfilm reading room, College will seek to ensure that its use is sympathetic to its history. An unusual mosaic floor from 1898 has been discovered during the restoration work and this will be exposed and restored as part of the work currently being undertaken.

By adding the Chancery Lane Library & Information Services Centre to its three other modern Information Services Centres, King's College 'will have re-provided virtually all of its IT and Library facilities within the five year period 1997 – 2002' (*Analytic Account: Continuation Audit* February 2000). It has ensured that its students have splendid accommodation in which to access the ever-increasing wealth of information, now available in both printed and electronic format.

Library Services staff are enjoying working in such a splendid building and, whilst we are still running tours for King's College users who missed the first round of tours or who are based on other sites, we are also pleased to entertain groups of interested library staff from elsewhere. Most important, the project will be seen as a success if students find the environment enables them to study in unusual and inspiring surroundings. The most encouraging comment received so far has been from former Law School Student Society President, not known for the frequency of his visits to the library in his first and second years, who commented 'this building makes me want to work.'