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# Selling centuries of history through innovative design: the development of commercial operations in the Bodleian Library 1985 - 2005



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## **THE FOUNDER'S IDEALS**

At a time when the SCONUL Newsletter has recently recognised the need to rebrand itself to truly reflect its audience and purpose, I was approached to pen an article on the Bodleian Library's developing alter ego in the twenty-first century as a product driven, brand led visitor destination and international trading concern – a place of greeting card, stationery and quality gift item fame. How did this happen? What were the core reasons behind the developments and how successful has the library been over the past twenty years in combining commercial concerns and scholarly service?

Historically, the founding, restoring and furtherance of the library has relied on the vision of its supporters and staff. In the sixteenth century, Sir Thomas Bodley showed himself to be the very embodiment of early marketing in his desire 'to stirre up others mens benevolence, to help to furnish it with bookes'. He sought to engage and inspire the great and the good to give generously to his cause. The library was to be a national archive and an international research facility.

Today the Bodleian continues to perform these functions to a widening audience as Sir Thomas Bodley intended. Patronage and profile are even more necessary now than they were in the library's early years. In order for the library to maintain its status, to serve the scholarly community and to widen access, the support of the curious onlooker, the future scholar and the casual visitor is a valuable resource that has not been overlooked.

#### COMMERCIAL AWAKENINGS

In the mid 1980s, active readership card figures for the Bodleian stood at 32,000 at a time when casual visitors to the library's great free public room, the magnificent fifteenth century Divinity School, were 200,000 per annum. Visitor numbers to the Divinity School, (which was located just beyond the small shop selling scholarly publications, postcards and slides), had been recorded annually for many years, so providing a basis for further analysis. Library tours with restricted numbers conducted by volunteers were operating successfully, this initiative coming from the then library Secretary, Dr Charles Mould. The library was a place of absolute architectural and scholarly fascination and the heart of the university to most non readers who chanced upon it. It oozed the Oxford wow factor of mystery and myth but had not yet thought it appropriate or needful to engage fully with the visitor.



The Bodleian was, and still is in part, a hybrid; it is neither fish nor foul when being considered as a visitor destination. It does not have an on-site staff-educational officer for public outreach yet its sole reason for existing is to provide education. It is not in the public domain in the way of a museum or gallery but has a few free public areas by choice and occupies an area in Oxford that Pevsner describes as 'unique in the world'. The polite signage in the external Quadrangles requests 'Silence Please' but visitors engage in animated



dialogues in the public spaces which echo unavoidably up to the reading rooms. The library has the most stunning and vast collections to match any museum but for reasons of conservation, security and research remits, the bulk of these are not available for public viewing. The library receives operating funds from key educational grants and yet has continued to experience a shortfall in its required funds for several years.

The library recognised the need to address these schizophrenic elements within its character and tease out a sensible and solid solution to accommodate the large non reader audience that continued to wander through its gates.

#### CONSULTANTS, JARGON AND MISSION STATEMENTS

The complexities of managing an external brand, educating visitors about the collections, enhancing the on-site potential and increasing financial resources were picked up by the inspired personality of Joanna Dodsworth, Bodleian Library publications officer from 1979 to 2001. Following trends in America, the UK tourism industry was beginning to react to the increased expectations of their international visitors. Around this time, other major heritage sites in the UK were developing what we now term as more sophisticated *visitor offers*, parading their *unique selling points or USPs* through bespoke product, interactive educational elements and brand focus... and so the jargon of this unrealised potential hit the Bodleian in a series of commissioned consultancy reports. These looked at establishing a long term commercial objective, making recommendations for the improvement of the on-site retail and outlining additional methods of income generation going forward. The library's core remit was not to be compromised, only heightened throughout the process and the revenue gained was to raise the profile for wider fundraising issues. The Publications Department evolved into Marketing and Publishing and a mission statement was developed to secure this focus which read:

*To produce and market products and publications which reflect the Bodleian's standing as a research library of international scholarly status and world renown and to generate revenue in order to support the furtherance of the library and its core remit.*

This mission statement was to act as a reference point not only to the new department but also as a way of explanation and justification to the understandably suspicious element of librarian colleagues who viewed money making on

site dimly. The potential changes needed to be communicated as benefiting the academic cause completely. The key recommendations within the report compiled by the Pentos Retailing Group in 1989 included the researching of competition in Oxford to establish where the Bodleian could offer unique services to the visitor, an appointment of a professional retail manager to oversee the on site shop and the collation and retention of copyright of all photographic images from the in-house studio. It highlighted the need for internal co-operation from the curatorial staff, exhibition coordinators and image sources to ensure that the retail factor complemented strong elements in the collections and pinpointed key events on-site.

#### DOCUMENTING THE DRIVING FORCES

With the large amount of visitors pouring in through the doors each year, the library needing to identify systematically the specific reasons for their interest, to quantify its markets. This in turn would give the data on which to build a new product identity for the shop. The library employed local expertise in the Tourism and Leisure Studies Department at Oxford Polytechnic (now Oxford Brookes University) to undertake the market research.

Over the peak period in summer a series of visitor surveys were carried out to establish the on site visitor profile.

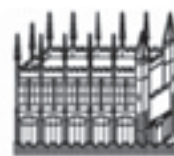
Information on the socio-economic profiles, attitudes and facility usage of both visitors and readers was carefully documented to establish what people would expect to purchase at the Bodleian shop. Some of the basic questions posed were: Why do visitors come to the Bodleian? Does it represent the university? Is it an interest in the library and books themselves? Is it the history and architecture of the buildings or is it simply somewhere to go? What is the role that the shop plays in this visit? It was interesting to note that the primary reason for visiting Oxford was for the buildings. The Bodleian has the most varied and famous selection in the city centre, including the first rotunda library, the architectural icon of Oxford, the Radcliffe Camera. However it soon became apparent that a large proportion of our visitors who chanced upon the library quadrangles were unaware of where they were or what purpose the library serves within the university. (Oxford University signage had a reputation for being ridiculously discreet and therefore was missed by most people. This has since been rec-

tified to some degree towards the end of the last decade.)

The location of the existing shop at the main entry and exit point to the library, although not ideal from a size and security viewpoint, did however guarantee the strongest capture area for passing impulse purchases. This coupled with the lack of alternative sales accommodation meant the shop would remain where it was. A new professional retail manager was installed as per the recommendations from the original consultancy. The next hurdle was for the Bodleian shop to analyse the market research to define its brand and what it represented to customers. This would make decisions on product offering easier and provide clear boundaries.

#### AN UNCOMPROMISING BRAND WITH UNIQUE STRENGTHS

The market research revealed a seasonal mix of readers, school parties, local trade, overseas visitors and university members, thus presenting an eclectic year round merchandising plan. This diversity called for broad price bands accommodating different degrees of spending power; low value items for school parties clearly separated from higher priced items for visitors and local trade with a few expensive replicas or *trophy* items. By the early 1990s, the library had identified basic stories or themes on which to build its product ranges using unique images from the collections including architecture, Oxford and brand logo as being obvious and safe starting points.



**Bodleian Library**  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

The library logo designed by David Gentleman and inspired by the sixteenth century John Bereblock illustration depicting the Divinity

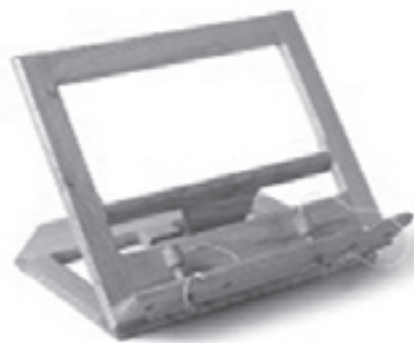
School and Duke Humfrey's Library, translated well on ceramics, clothing and stationery. Visitors sporting Bodleian clothing and free shopping bags with this recognisable motif gave the library a great spin-off – a walking advertising campaign, so fulfilling part of the original intention to raise awareness and reach a remote audience.

Start up capital was built into very modest budgets and the gradual increase in specialisation of products derived from the collections grew largely as a result of reinvestment from the sale of suitable off the shelf products which had a high turnover. The product choice was to be steered away from book buying as Oxford already supported a flourishing general and academic book

market and the Bodleian would not be able to compete on this level. General appeal off the shelf stock was carefully selected from suppliers after close inspection of the local competition including the Ashmolean Museum, the University Shop and the high street tourist trade. Niche markets were identified for product type, style and imagery. Products derived from museum art, mainstream popular designs and unofficial university merchandise were not included for sale. They could be bought elsewhere locally. Visitors to the library should be presented with something fresh, and they were.

The Bodleian print room found itself producing quality letter paper detailing Oxford engravings from the collections on its small offset litho press. This was followed shortly afterwards by bookplates with one colour woodcut designs.

Every product was developed with quality and design factored in as standard and supported local and national suppliers. Every unusual means available was used to add value to the product; certain products carried *Printed at the Bodleian Library, Oxford!* Concentrating on the bibliophilic potential within the library brought new trophy products into the mix. Museums and galleries had Egyptian cats, statues and details from the great masters to translate into replicas. Using local craftsmen, the Bodleian responded by developing the Bodleian bookrest, an exact copy of those formally used in Duke Humfrey's Library followed by the replica of the Bodleian Windsor chair, the originals having been made for the Curators of the library in 1755. Delving into the collections, it soon became apparent that far from not having enough raw material to draw on to follow the mission statement, the challenge would be to narrow down the options.



#### ONCE UPON A TIME..

By 1995, the shop had many new ranges to offer the visitor, each one telling a story drawn from

library history, personalities or collections. The innovation and quality of cultural product development in the UK was rapidly overtaking the United States. The emergence of the more subtle branding through derived product using detail elements from the collections opened up a wealth of opportunity for the library to develop further its commercial reputation for the more unusual,



quirky and design-led giftware. The architectural theme gained two hanging grotesques, exact copies of those found in Duke Humfrey's Library and hanging over the Great Gate exterior, *Speak softly* and *Rudeness*, proving that the humorous definitely sells. Not only did the buildings provide inspiration for gifts such as the Radcliffe Camera bookends, designed with all the elevations to scale by former architect turned model sculptor Timothy Richards, but the concepts within and around the entrances served to provide ideas for the more recent contemporary Silence Please range. Do eggcups sell in a library shop? They do if they demand *Silence Please* at the breakfast table and are made in England from good quality bone china!



Attractively designed provenance explaining the relationship of the product source image to the collections was attached to all products alongside the very recognisable logo. Relevance to the archives is essential to the appeal of each item produced. The context and story behind each bespoke gift elevates the product from the ordinary, adds value and gives it Bodleian uniqueness. Themes were chosen for their timelessness; the readers' oath repeated aloud by every reader and staff member on joining the library with its pledge not to bring into the library or kindle therein any fire or flame can be seen printed on sturdy book bags, linen tea towels and state of the art mini flashlights.



The Opie collection of children's literature, acquired by the library in 1988, became the inspiration for one of the largest gift ranges in the Bodleian's

portfolio which focused on nineteenth-century book covers and spines as a graphic image. A die-cut card range was released sporting snappy English titles such as *A girl of distinction or 300 things a bright boy can do*. Carefully sequenced children's cloth covered titles were photographed and the resulting mini library called *Victorian books*. This idea spawned gifts from magnets to mouse mats and the colourful timeless appeal of the image gave the library an opportunity to enter into long term licensing partnerships. Other attractive book titles were chosen and given a similar treatment; cookery, English literature, sports and hobbies, the genre culminating in the



*Christmas bookshelf* Christmas card which sold 4225 packs in one season. This repeat book design style lends itself well to giftwrap and a recent project, *Hobbies bookshelf* has sold over 85,000 sheets worldwide within two years and been used to cover a licensed gift range by a leading stationery company.

The concept of using the physical appearance rather than the contents found within books and manuscripts was carried through in 2003 by focusing on sixteenth and seventeenth century European book bindings to produce silk scarves, ties, and beautifully crafted journals at higher price points aimed at the general gift market.

#### **PRINTED IN UK, SOLD EVERYWHERE**

The success of any product placement is absolutely dependent on the *right time, right place, and right price* mantra.

Using in-house IT resources in the early 1990s, the Bodleian developed the first web shopping opportunity within an educational site in the UK. Card ranges were selling well and allowed for a distribution mark up on reprints, so attention turned to the wider UK market. Taking small shared stands at the London Book Fair, Museum Stores Association in the USA. and Museum Expression in Paris increased awareness of the Bodleian range and forged new business contacts. The selection caught the eye of a specialist card and stationery importer in 1995 and following careful negotiations, our American distribution commenced. In

2001, a review of the wholesale operation led to a honing down to best selling lines and the establishing of a three year plan to break through into the Japanese, European and Australian markets effectively by 2004. In August 2004, an Australian distributor was on board and within three months had sold 13,000 cards to his niche market outlets. Maruzen, the Japanese booksellers, opened their Tokyo flagship store in the autumn and Bodleian product was predominant as a sub brand of their newly designed Oxford section. This bought a need to review our international trademarks and copyright status and to update our registrations accordingly. Protecting the brand both in the name and logo of the Bodleian is vital so that its usage remains tightly controlled and avoids the potential for outside companies to gain financially by association.

Alongside the growth in international wholesale, the mail order catalogue grew in five years from a very modest publication to a themed advertising tool. Mail order has been a valuable means to supplement other income gained from retail and wholesale. Timing the catalogue drop for September gives the library an average 11% take up rate due to the appeal of Christmas gift and card ranges. The catalogue can be requested via our current website, through the shop and can be picked up at specific visitor hot spots around the city centre.

#### **GREEN LEPRECHAUNS, FIZZY DRINKS AND ICE CREAMS?**

Taste is very subjective. Consumers are fickle. As a heritage retailer, the temptation to stray from the path of good taste, to stoop to the lowest common denominator of consumer buying habits, is not an option. Our sales team now consists of seven full time equivalent posts dedicated to the production, marketing and sales worldwide of excellent Bodleian product. They continue to demonstrate sensitivity to the history, function and purpose of the library and tailor the requirements to make money within these tightly defined boundaries. Some years ago, Joanna Dodsworth gave the following response when challenged as to the library's conservative approach to product development:

*The shop could sell green leprechauns, fizzy drinks and ice creams and no doubt double its profit overnight. Money is not the sole objective of our business. We have a duty to maintain the integrity of the library.*

We continue to endorse this uncompromising philosophy. Financial wars might be won by taking

the dumbing down route, but the battle to educate and inspire would most definitely be lost.

#### EXHIBITIONS, EDUCATION AND LIFESTYLE

Crossing the threshold of the new century has meant updating the product catalogue to mirror our competitors' manoeuvres and has challenged us to introduce the consumer to more unusual images, the stories behind which would never be encountered in the high street. Enter the lifestyle product. In the summer of 2004, a range was successfully introduced to support the ground breaking work achieved on the *Book of curiosities and marvels for the eyes*, a recent manuscript acquisition of immense academic importance. The manuscript was the central feature of the Bodleian's summer exhibition. For the first time, the library sought to bring difficult academic concepts and images into a popular framework. Many of the national museums have been doing this with resounding success for many years but for a library with limited financial resources and a historically non mainstream exhibition schedule, this was a first. It is an exciting concept when an image carefully chosen from an early medieval manuscript undergoing research for the first time, can be innovatively translated through design to create a domestic product becoming part of everyday life in people's homes. The significance and history is captured so that all can appreciate the colour, form and relevance to our society today. The result was the *Medieval harbour* themed gift selection using a Tunisian harbour building motif originally compiled in 1020-1050 and copied in the thirteenth century.



#### Is there anybody out there?

Developing new partnerships and becoming involved in allied associations is essential for any institution to remain in touch with its customers. In 1994, Marks & Spencers featured Bodleian product in a prime high street window for two weeks to show its support for the University and the part it plays in bringing consumers into the city centre. More recently, Oxford town and gown collaborate as part of the proactive Oxford Marketing Group which aims to attract visitors to Oxford and the Cotswolds by publicising the diversity represented by the partners; hotels, theatres, heritage attractions, golf clubs, family fun etc. Benchmarking with likeminded expertise particularly when external economic and political factors adversely affect the bottom line is invaluable. The

library also continues to benefit tremendously from its long term membership of A.C.E. (Association for Cultural Enterprise, formerly M.T.A) which focuses on networks, training and resources for all income generating disciplines within the cultural sector. In 2004 that the library received the Annual A.C.E. award for Best Derived Product Range from a collection in the UK against brisk competition. Membership of the Museum Stores Association of America ensures regular contact with other professionals in the USA., a marketing opportunity and an ideas exchange.

#### Wizards, weddings and websites

In 2001, management of the 35 volunteer guides, tour and facility hire bookings was amalgamated into Marketing and Publishing and the renaming of the department to Tourism and Trading followed to reflect this increased remit. The hitherto scholarly publishing programme entered a new and exciting commercial phase as part of the Communications and Publishing Department. This department has now merged with Tourism and Trading to form Bodleian Commercial Operations, bringing all revenue streams together. In 2003 came the development of a Bodleian digital audio tour, with new exhibition interpretation and visitor services desk as an addition to the ever popular guided tours.

A prime city centre location with awe inspiring interiors deserved to be explored more fully for hiring potential. For the past three years, the Divinity School has been host to a variety of corporate and private clients ranging from the Oxford Literary Festival, graduate presentations and publishers' conference dinners to private receptions and dinner parties. Oxford registry office has expressed interest as to the suitability of the site at weekends for weddings and celebratory events when the library is closed. The library has been used very successfully as a film location for several decades. Between 2001 and 2004, four major filming projects were secured, the most well known of these being the Harry Potter series. Managing the understandable interest this created presented another challenge to the library. Once again a policy of no compromise and an appropriately worded press release stated that the library saw the hosting of a film which had encouraged children to return to reading as an immensely positive factor. Unlike many Harry Potter venues, the Bodleian took the decision not to sell licensed Warner Brothers merchandise and references to the film on site are minimal. All filming petitions are carefully assessed and any that do proceed are monitored vigorously to minimise the impact

on the daily routines. Summer 2005 will see the launch of a new website, [www.shop.bodleley.ox.ac.uk](http://www.shop.bodleley.ox.ac.uk) which will include over 200 Bodleian bespoke products and pages advising on tours and room bookings.

#### **MEASURING, MANAGING AND MONITORING**

The Bodleian continues to reassess its provision for all who use it, both readers and visitors. Technology allows us to measure the success of most commercial ventures and to review, forecast and plan effectively for the future. Next year holds new possibilities for relocation and remodelling of the shop plus extended opening hours. These modest initiatives run in parallel with the Oxford University Libraries Capital Campaign to raise £40M for eight new regeneration projects. The commercial operations team are accountable as custodians of both the Bodleian brand and the service levels to visitors on and off site. The list of key stakeholders for the future now extends to product distributors, customers worldwide browsing the web and even children seated in cinemas. Accessibility has become the new watch word and Oxford University is determined to respond accordingly. The Bodleian's alter ego will continue to work alongside the readers' resource, supporting and providing a controlled outlet to engage the interest of the non reader. The thought that the library represents a twenty-first century working community situated in the original fifteenth century rooms where internet connections are channelled imperceptibly through ancient bookshelves, will continue to inspire and amaze.

Sir Thomas Bodley welcomed visitors to his library so that they would be encouraged to become benefactors. The Benefactors Register was laid open in the Old Library, Arts End for this very purpose. In his first draft of statutes Bodley refers to the Register

*..wherin also the munificence not onely of great and honourable personages, but of others of meane and vulgar calling must be respectively remembred... and withal to be exposed, where it may be still in sight, for every man in viewe, as an eminent and endless token of our thankfull acceptance of whatsoever hath bin given; and as an excellent inducement for posteritie to imitate those former good examples.*

He would have approved of the unnumbered benefactors the library has gained worldwide through the creative commercial presentation of his library and its collections.