
From cloisters to COPAC: cathedral libraries and the higher education community

Keith O'Sullivan

Librarian, Canterbury Cathedral Library

Tel: 01227 865288

E-mail: librarian@canterbury-cathedral.org

Hallowed, dimly lit portals, with antiquarian, heavy and learned tomes, sometimes chained and more often than not covered in dust: cathedral libraries, it is fair to say, have a certain image. They have certainly, as the sale of its pre-1800 collection by a cash-strapped Truro Cathedral in 2006 again demonstrated, been vulnerable to marginalisation by their owners. As Patterson put it in a survey of this sector some twenty years ago, they are 'all too negotiable' assets.¹ While a cathedral's archive may stake a claim to be the record of the life of that institution, its library – if incarnated separately as an assemblage of bound, usually printed, books – risks being seen as more peripheral, a series of incidental acquisitions. The launch of the 'Save Canterbury Cathedral' initiative last year, which aims to raise £50 million for the restoration of the cathedral's fabric, and the low profile accorded to this department within said launch, brought into sharp focus the painful truth that libraries don't make much money.

Yet while it is true that that the financial contribution in such an enterprise must inevitably be modest, the Canterbury Cathedral Library is far from irrelevant. Of 6,000 visitors to the joint archives and library reading room in 2006, 1,400 accessed library materials. Some 760 of these were undergraduate and postgraduate students from the University of Kent. Further, the library provided seminar and workshop facilities for 8 lecturers and 350 students from both Kent and Canterbury Christ Church Universities. These figures were a record. They reflect an evolving reality for cathedral libraries in a secular age and in particular the nature of their relationship with higher education providers.

At Canterbury, survival-driven cross-sector partnerships have been the modus operandi for years. The cathedral's library, which has a book stock of about 52,000 volumes, has operated joint reader services and exhibitions with the cathedral's archives staff, who have been employed not by the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury but by Kent County Council since 1989. Through the cathedral librarian, the Dean and Chapter also share responsibility with Christ Church University for the running of the St Augustine's Library. This newer library, which opened in 2003, was a unique joint venture between the two organisations, envisaged as providing a support centre for teaching and research in theology in Canterbury, as the heart of the Anglican Communion.

Most prominently, the Dean and Chapter entered into an agreement with the University of Kent in 1990. This arranged joint funding of the post of cathedral librarian and aimed to define the relationship between the cathedral and university libraries. The university agreed to both part-fund the professional librarian post and to provide contacts and support, including honorary senior membership of its own library staff for the incumbent. In return, the Dean and Chapter were to ensure that their library was made available to university members. The Cathedral Library's telnet-based catalogue was integrated into the university's 'Voyager' library management system in 2001, and all new acquisitions since have been catalogued on the university's online public access catalogue (OPAC). The agreement also provided for an advisory committee that was to meet at least once annually. This is chaired by the Canon Librarian – the cleric awarded nominal rather than professional responsibility for the library in ecclesiastical matters – and includes the chair of the university's own library (now information services) committee, its head of library services and one other member of academic staff nominated by the university.

Variations of such an arrangement can be found at other cathedral libraries. Durham Cathedral Library has a close relationship with Durham University Library. The cathedral's library is allowed to use Durham's electronic systems for cataloguing and circulation and has access to its facilities and expertise, especially in conservation. Conversely, all members of the university are automatically members of the cathedral's library. They have special access to the cathedral's historic collections of about 300 manuscripts and 20,000 early printed books, and also borrowing rights to the modern collections in its Archdeacon Sharpe

Library (whereas Canterbury's holdings are all for reference use only). A similar working pattern is in operation at York Minster, with over 100,000 volumes the largest cathedral library in England. The University of York obtains free access and borrowing rights for its members by means of a contract that is renewed annually, and by provision of a full-time librarian.

The reasons for such close partnerships are not hard to fathom. Cathedral libraries have had an active role in the preservation and dissemination of knowledge in their communities since at least the post-Reformation period. Both Edward VI and Elizabeth I issued injunctions for cathedrals to maintain libraries for the use and education of chapter members, and for the wider education of their host cities. This heralded centuries of sporadic growth in the size of collections of printed books – Canterbury has some 15,000 pre-1800 volumes – and their use by the laity. The attractions for universities lie not just in ready access to often rare incunables and other early printed material, but in the very breadth of subject matter represented. Holdings in cathedral libraries represent the often diverse intellectual and leisure interests as well as the professional pursuits of their former owners: they are not merely collections of Bibles. At Canterbury, for example, there is a strong local history presence, which is fairly typical of the sector. However, this library is also rich in texts on wider national history, travel, literature, botany and herbalism. Uniquely, it holds a nationally significant collection of over 400 eighteenth- and nineteenth-century publications relating to the slave trade and the abolitionist movement.

Activities involving either of the local universities in Canterbury have reflected this diversity. In the past year, for example, library staff have afforded facilities to students in English (early modern drama), music, classics, history (English Civil War and women) and ethnobotany. Theology and religious studies are conspicuous by their absence. Indeed, it can be said that, as far as working with universities is concerned, there has been a steady shift from purely ecclesiastical concerns towards functioning as an off-site special collections department. Religious subjects are not even taught at York. The majority of York Minster Library's users are from the university and do not attend services at the Minster. Similarly, the most frequent users of Durham Cathedral Library are the university's students. Many do use the modern theological collection, although a number of other departments are well represented, and group visits by students of history and art history

from other higher education providers are well established. The reading rooms are also popular for pre-exam revision during the summer term.

It is ironic that cathedral libraries belong to and continue to be invested in by a group – the clergy – which, by and large, no longer uses them. Some 70% of all visitors to the reading room at Canterbury are amateur genealogists and local historians, with students accounting for much of the remainder. At Durham and York Minster, university members are in the overwhelming majority. Conveying to cathedral paymasters that their library holdings continue to be relevant, while at the same time promoting and maximising the availability of material to extant and potential users, remain major tasks for professionals within the cloisters. Initiatives in digitisation, such as ‘Pictures in Print’ at Durham or ‘Mapping Asia’ at Canterbury, bringing together the strengths in cartography of cathedral libraries and other local repositories, have been one way forward. Full cataloguing of journal articles using subject headings to enhance the researcher’s experience, as at York Minster Library, has been another. They are both ways of conveying the proper status of cathedral libraries within centres of worship or heritage sites: as living, working libraries, rather than as mausoleums.

I am indebted to John Powell at York Minster Library and to Joan Williams at Durham Cathedral Library for their help in the preparation of this article.

REFERENCE

- 1 D. Patterson, *Survey of cathedral libraries, 1984–1987*, London: Bibliographical Society, 1987, p 3.