
John Kenyon (Ken) Roberts 1940 – 2010

Ken Roberts passed away after a long illness in August 2010, having been a chief University Librarian in Cardiff for more than 30 years.

After student years in Manchester, and earlier posts at Bradford University and the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, Ken's career as a youthful Chief Librarian began in the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology in 1970.

He gained particular note during those early years for his enthusiasm for advancing library services through computer-based systems, and in particular networked facilities, both within UWIST and through JANET. His innovation and concern with efficient use of scarce resources to provide the best possible library service was welcomed by the Principal of UWIST, a fellow chemist and an enthusiast for businesslike methods and financial prudence.

During this period Ken developed a close and productive working relationship with the head of the UWIST Computing Service, a relationship that was to be to the great advantage of the library service in the future.

In 1986, at the request of the British Council, Ken drew up a Development Plan for a Library and Information Service for the Seaports Authority of Saudi Arabia and in 1987 drew up a similar plan for the library of the World Maritime University at Malmö, Sweden.

Also in 1987 UWIST's sister university in Cardiff suffered the notorious financial crisis that drove its rapid merger with UWIST. Ken was appointed Chief Librarian of the merged institutions and Ken was one of the team which rebuilt the university and successfully merged the different and sometimes rival library services.

In a very difficult time of restructuring, even some disaffected colleagues from the "other side" paid respect to Ken's formal punctiliousness and open procedures, though a number would never be reconciled to the emphasis on efficiency and

cost-effectiveness imposed by the strict financial demands of the Universities Funding Council that henceforward drove the university and its libraries until Cardiff finally recovered.

During those years Ken acquired a reputation for long hours of hard work, and a good deal of quiet determination and sceptical practicality. Not all his staff however appreciated the degree of patient tolerance and understanding he also brought to bear on the inevitable and often frustrating problems that arose from financial constraints, and poor staff morale and conduct. Nevertheless Ken assisted a number of library colleagues in the development of what proved to be very successful careers.

Cardiff proved to be fertile ground for three features of his professional philosophy: creative use of information technology, a strong focus on “vfm”, and an insistence on providing a “customer-centric” service. At one time his library had one of the largest networked CD-ROM installations in the UK, and launched into providing electronic journals with enthusiasm. Despite resourcing that was continually less than that enjoyed by peers in other Russell Group universities, his library service consistently won high scores in student satisfaction surveys and the approval of academic staff; though lack of funding meant he was not able to remedy fully the historic dearth of very large collections and archives that many in the humanities hankered after.

In 1998 Ken weathered another organisational storm in the shape of a convergence between the university’s library and computing services. He was appointed Director of the new Information Services division, taking on a daunting range of technical, personnel, and financial challenges. In the ensuing few years his health took a turn for the worse, and in 2002 he stepped down into partial early retirement, though continued to make a quiet but valued contribution to the service until finally leaving the university. In 2006 the University conferred on him the title of Librarian Emeritus in recognition of his service.

Ken the chief librarian was to most acquaintances a quiet, modest and private man sometimes noted more for his institutional determination and can-niness than for the other qualities that fewer saw. Closer colleagues also saw his self-deprecating dry humour, his patience and kindness in dealing with occasionally difficult people, and his sense of how digital information could transform the future of libraries. By the time he left full service

his library had by librarians’ common measures become one of the busiest, most cost-effective and popular in the UK. The legacy of his time at the helm will be valued by his surviving colleagues for years to come.

Alun Jenkins

Richard Mellowes

Norma Roberts