
A marriage made in heaven

Promoting the unique and distinctive library collections of York Minster



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Abstract: The University of York has had a working relationship with the Chapter of York since the 1960s with a series of service level agreements to assist with the running of York Minster Library. In 2010 this was formalised through a ten-year partnership agreement. The Minster library holds an internationally significant collection, and the agreement allows free access to all university students and staff. This article will look at the tasks undertaken to promote the Minster's unique and distinctive collections to the university, and consider the future relationship of the two institutions. Throughout the article I shall refer to the Minster library as 'the library' and the university library as 'the university library'.

The Minster library was founded during the Anglo-Saxon period, one of its earliest librarians being the great scholar Alcuin. Following Viking raids in the 9th century, during which time the library seems to have almost completely disappeared, it entered a fallow period until a significant donation in 1414. From that point the library has gone from strength to strength through a series of major donations and through targeted acquisition. It is the largest cathedral library in England, holding around 120,000 books, and has the largest collection of early printed material of any cathedral, including over a hundred incunables. It has a particularly good local history collection which includes civil war tracts, playbills and early York printing, all items people don't expect to find in a cathedral library. There is also a lending collection that is strong in medieval studies and church history and architecture. The user community includes undergraduate and post-graduates from York universities, local historians and academics.

The University of York opened in 1963 and was aware from the beginning of the research poten-

tial in the Minster library, and the advantage that could offer to a new university whose special collections were still developing. There has been university involvement with the Minster under a series of service level agreements since 1964. These had initially provided for staff, and then later support and inclusion in the university library management system. In October 2010 York Minster signed a partnership agreement with the University of York to forge a stronger relationship between the libraries of the two institutions.¹ The library now has four members of staff, one full time, all of whom are university employees. The librarian is also the university special collections librarian and works half time at each institution. The partnership differs from previous agreements, as it is no longer a question of the Minster supplying the university with a service, but rather a series of joint aims for both institutions to work towards.

The benefits of the agreement are clear: the Minster has professional staff to care for the collections, and university users have access to a rich and diverse resource, much of which cannot otherwise be found outside London. The added incentive of the unique and distinctive collections held at the Minster helps improve the university's offer to students and staff when recruiting.

The three years the partnership has been in place have seen a series of initiatives to foster closer working relationships, including the promotion of the collections to wider audiences. These audiences are broader than the university, but York students and staff are an obvious and target group.

Even making a physical visit can initially be a bit of a challenge. The library is situated in the Old Palace, a separate building behind the Minster, across a park, through iron gates and behind an imposing oak door. To students used to an open modern library these barriers to access can be quite daunting. Getting people through the door and into the welcoming reception area beyond and then helping them to make the most of the facilities and resources available is a major objective for the library. Marketing the library as a study space and rich collection is key to promotion and is achieved by working with the university, including academic departments, academic liaison librarians, the web team, communications and the relationships manager.

Targeted induction tours for groups such as postgraduate students in the Centre for Medieval

Studies are offered at the start of each academic year and are well attended. The tour focuses on what the holdings are and how to access them, and offers as an incentive the chance to see and handle some older material. Tours and inductions also focus on the similarities and differences between the university and the Minster libraries. For instance, the library recently gained parity with the borrowing system at the university and the introduction of a transit service means that books can be returned at any of the campus libraries. These measures improve the customer experience for students.

One of the differences is that the main study area in the library is run as a research reading room, which means users have to follow fairly stringent guidelines. They are allowed to use pencil only, cannot have food and drink and may not use their mobile phones to take images. This differs significantly from other areas of the university library where, for example, food, drink and a 'studious buzz' are permitted. This difference needs to be managed in a clear and accessible way and is done in person and through clear signage.

The library attempts in different ways to reach those who do not choose to attend, or are not offered inductions. In 2013 the university filmed a number of YouTube videos and offered the Minster library the opportunity to have one made. Information on access and the collections also appears on both institutional websites, and one-to-one sessions, especially with postgraduates, can also be arranged.

Exhibitions are an effective way of reaching wider audiences and promoting the collection, and the library takes full advantage of this. As well as direct collaborations with the university, the library works closely with the Minster historic collections team who curate and mount exhibitions. York Minster has recently completed a complete refurbishment of its museum and exhibition space and the university supported this project by allowing the librarian to focus solely on that for six months, thus ensuring the book collections were embedded into the heart of the Minster. Collaborations with the university include an exhibition in 2011 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible. The university does not have a theology department and so at first sight this would not look like an obvious area for cooperation, but the exhibition examined the profound and lasting impact of the Bible on English language and culture through many themes, including visual art and music. The

expertise provided by the university's internationally recognised authorities on the early modern book and other areas was a great asset to the exhibition; the university also offered financial help and equipment, which enabled the audio-visual element, increasing the offer to visitors. The groundwork laid in this first collaboration is being followed up in 2014 in a series of events to mark 600 years since the refounding of the Minster library in 1414. Minster staff will work with the university's digital library and academics from a range of disciplines, including history of art, history and English. It is also an exciting opportunity to work with the cathedral libraries and archives network (CLAN).² This work is also helpful for academic departments when measuring impact for the research excellence framework (REF: the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions). In 2013 the Minster librarian was asked to contribute to the REF impact statement for the department of English and related literature.

The 2014 exhibition will be hosted online through the digital library, which is a real opportunity to explore different ways of presenting books that are normally static in display.³ Increasing numbers of Minster images are now appearing digitally under a Creative Commons licence. The university provides a professional photographer to take high quality digital photographs, while copyright is vested in the Chapter of York. Once these images are stored it is possible to use them in a variety of different ways. A series of promotional postcards using some Minster images has been produced by the university. A 'Treasures' booklet is in production; it aims to showcase the unique and distinctive collections curated by the university, and will include material from the Minster, university special collections and the Borthwick Institute for Archives.

The images can also be used in social media, an area where the library is looking to build audiences and promote the collections. A Facebook site was established for York Minster library in 2008 and has over 850 followers. Up to now, using Facebook has worked well, but the library is keen to add more value to its communication in other ways. The library will contribute articles towards a university library blog in 2014, for which staff have already been involved in content planning.

Although much of this activity would to many institutions be seen as business as usual, the partnership agreement has been vital to enabling the Minster library to promote its special collec-

tions fully. The expertise and generous sharing of knowledge, with the chance to explore such things as the digital medium, is invaluable, and the library hopes to continue building on this. For the future there are more plans for close collaboration with academic departments, including a symposium on sacred space, the hosting of a Masters module on religion and the book, the possibility of collaborative PhDs, and the continued use of the historic building as an inspiring venue for seminars. The Information Directorate at the university has recently started to work towards a customer services excellence charter and the Minster library is playing a full part in that initiative. All these measures are firm proof that two seemingly diverse institutions with different strategic aims can still work together in a productive and fulfilling partnership.

NOTES

- 1 The agreement relates only to the library at the Minster and not the other historic collections held by the Chapter of York.
- 2 The inaugural meeting of CLAN was held in York in March 2014. Headed by Professors Brian Cummings and Bill Sherman at the University of York, its aim is 'to engender, co-ordinate, facilitate and promote research on the cathedral collections, and to act as an interface between academic communities, church bodies, and the wider public'.
- 3 York digital library is a constantly expanding digital repository which aims to support teaching, research and study. <https://www.york.ac.uk/library/collections/yorkdigital-libraryyodl/>