



Library & Information History Group

News from the Chair

Welcome to the summer newsletter of the Library & Information History Group.

In this issue I am delighted that we have included a paper on parish libraries in the East Midlands, from Ursula Ackrill at the University of Nottingham. She recognises the conflict between the wish to keep discrete collections in their original home, and the need to give collections greater protection, and of course, access to researchers.

Also in this issue is a report from LIHG's 2024 conference, which took place last October at the Linnean Society of London, in collaboration with the Society for the History of Natural History. This was such a lovely conference, with a collegiate atmosphere and lots of conversations pollinating from it. The special issue of our journal which came from that conference will be published later this year.

Looking forward, our conference for 2025 will take place on 22 November at the National Library of Scotland on the theme of Freedom of information/Information as freedom. Further details of the call for papers, which closes on 1 August, are in the newsletter.

As ever, let me know if you have any queries. I always love to hear from library professionals and researchers about their work on library history. Email me at kathryn.peak@kcl.ac.uk

Kathryn Peak
Chair, CILIP Library & Information History Group

Table of Contents

In review: The 2024 Library & Information History Group Conference	2
Asking New Research Questions of Parish Libraries	4
Call for papers: CILIP Library & Information History Group Conference 2025	9
James Ollé Awards and Library History Essay Award 2025	10
Events	11
LIHG Committee Vacancies	12
Back Matter	12

In review: The 2024
Library & Information
History Group
Conference

The 2024 conference for the Library & Information History Group took place at the Linnean Society of London on 4th October. This was an exciting departure for the group, being run as a joint venture in collaboration with the Society for the History of Natural History.

In our first panel, in the morning, on 'Crowd sourcing and citizen science', we heard from Lisa Cardy of the Natural History Museum, Kiri Ross-Jones of Kew Gardens and John Schaefer of the University of Cambridge. Both of these papers highlighted the use of volunteers on transcription projects and use of transcription software as means to

increasing digital accessibility of books, archives, and artworks.

Panel two on 'Human narratives from natural history archives', included papers by Katherine Enright of the University of Cambridge, Kimberley Glassman of QMUL, and Nathan Smith of the National Museum of Wales and independent researcher, Christopher Preston. We heard an important paper on the voices of non-Western members of staff, and in particular of women's voices, that have been written out of history. This was echoed in Glassman's paper, which considered the women's voices that fed into a work by William Jackson Hooker, the first director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Finally we heard from the National Museum of Wales about community information gathering in the twentieth century within the Cambridge Natural History Society.

At lunchtime delegates were able to take advantage of the historic venue with a tour

of the Linnean Society's library, including some of their book treasures, for which we were very grateful to the Linnean for supporting the event.



The Linnean Society of London Collections.

Photograph courtesy of Jill Dye.

The third panel was on 'Women in natural history'. Liz Smith of the University of Cambridge considered the work and ongoing legacy of Lady Nora Barlow, granddaughter of Charles Darwin, who made a career out of championing her grandfather's work. Ann Sylph of the Zoological Society of London also spoke about the role of women in the early work of the ZSL, in particular the artworks produced by women, revealing the limited

opportunities for women to contribute to the society's work.

In the final panel, on 'Second lives of natural history collections', we heard from Renae Satterley of the Middle Temple Library, who spoke about the natural history collections held in the library, and how a non-scientific library can engage library users and visitors with such historic works, including through exhibitions. We also heard from William Noblett, formerly of Cambridge University Library, who spoke about the library of Philip Miller, head gardener at the Society of Apothecaries' Chelsea garden in the eighteenth century. In particular, he spoke about the detailed sales catalogues which document the selling off of the library after Miller's death.

The conference was well attended, with opportunities for networking between colleagues, and allowed for a fascinating cross-pollination (no pun intended) between natural history and library history. Papers from the conference are to be included in an upcoming special issue of the *Library & Information History* journal, which is due to be published late 2025.

Dr Kathryn Peak
Chair
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Asking New Research Questions of Parish Libraries



Figure 1: The Loughborough Parish Library in the strong room of Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Nottingham. Image © Manuscripts and Special Collections.

The library in this photograph belonged to James Bickham, Rector of All Saints Church from 1761 to 1785. When he died, he left the books to his successors to the post of Rector. The library remained in Loughborough for almost two hundred years. After being stored in several places, the collection was eventually deposited in the University of Nottingham's Manuscripts and Special Collections, where it remains today.

The East Midlands are home to several parish libraries which are currently located in various repositories. In some cases, they have been removed from the original sites (rectory or vicarage) where they were kept by their individual creators, to a semi-public place such as a room in the church or cathedral, or further away, to a public and designated repository managed by

accredited professionals. In current research literature parish libraries are seldom seen. Indeed, except for their voluntary or professional custodians, the public - including their local community - are generally unaware of, and indifferent to, parish libraries. This double obsolescence may be explained by difficulty of access, but also by the complexity of the material.

The 1959 report *Parochial Libraries of the Church of England* by the Central Council for

the Care of Churches recommends that 'unless circumstances absolutely forbid, a parochial library ought to be retained in its original home.'^[i] The report concedes that the rehousing of a parish library in a modern dedicated repository - such as a university or public library – may be required when the library collection is endangered through unsuitable accommodation or lack of interest.^[ii] It is a telling sign that over the course of a few decades, from 1980 - 2014, five local parish libraries have been deposited in the University of Nottingham's Manuscripts and Special Collections (MSC). They are the parish libraries of: Oakham (Rutland) in 1980, Elston (Nottinghamshire) in 1983, Coleorton (Leicestershire) in 2006, and lastly, also from Leicestershire, the libraries of Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Loughborough in (2013 and 2014 respectively). The Librarian who accessioned the first deposit at Oakham's All Saints Church in 1980, recollects that the process faltered given the 'local reluctance to send [the library] so far away.'^[iii] The distance is just under 30 miles, a 50-minute car journey away from the original home.

The famous quip by Mikhail Bulgakov, 'manuscripts don't burn', can be tentatively rephrased for parish libraries to say 'libraries don't travel'. Once removed, their existence seemingly enters another dimension. They are rehoused to be accessible to vested interest groups such as academic research communities and cultural tourists. Oakham Parish Library came to the University of Nottingham because that was 'thought to be the only academic library in the East

Midlands with an interest in rare books',^[iv] the Librarian recollects.

Looking back today, the present library setting has increased accessibility: it makes the libraries available to a global research community as well as to all members of the public. The parish libraries can be viewed in online catalogues, where records for these books are catalogued to a high level of description, including comprehensive provenance information and transcription of copy-specific handwritten annotations. For readers, the Reading Room provides ideal conditions for the books to be consulted in a climate-controlled environment, with appropriate staff supervision and handling guidance. However, the comparative ease of discoverability and accessibility has not (yet) delivered the forecast boost in use and recognition by the research community. Parish libraries remain sleeping beauties in academia with potential for original and groundbreaking discoveries to be made across schools and disciplines, such as history, literature, theology, history of ideas and art.

This raises the question of what further work could be done by information professionals in charge of parish libraries to represent them to researchers. Apart from leading lights such as Dr Jessica G. Purdy's research at the University of St Andrews,^[v] or The Bibliographical Society's long standing advocacy for and enablement of research into Early Modern print,^[vi] an emerging book history researcher may perceive the landscape of information around parish libraries as difficult to scale.

In recent decades the most researched aspect of parish libraries is their interaction with users, particularly focusing on lay people from the parish. Logs of borrowing, recorded in formal registers or jotted on endpapers, marks of use left in books by local parishioners, evidence of women reading or participating in the trade as printers, booksellers, illustrators - these are noted areas of interest in published research. This aspect of research in parish libraries focuses more on the relevance of the parish libraries to those who were not their immediate creators or designated beneficiaries, offering the argument that their merit lies in the impact they had on audiences beyond their original purposes. This interest reflects a focus on how the artwork in books broadened inclusivity and democratised access to a wider range of people. On the Continent, this democratic aspect of Early Modern print's visual art and its meaning for those beyond the original intended audience similarly attracts researchers' interest. Major works have been published recently on title pages^[vii] (see Figure 2) and printers' devices,^[viii] making the point that past and present viewers of this highly impactful art can enter the universe of the book without necessarily having an understanding of the text.

In the second half of the twentieth century, when established libraries were faced with the prospect of custodianship of parish libraries, researchers emphasised the unique nature of some volumes held in parish libraries.^[ix] Given that the cataloguing of entire collections can be a long time in the making, news of 'star' items warranted



Title page of *Decretum Gratiani. Editio ultima.* (Lugduni : Apud haeredes Gulielmi Rouillii, 1606) University of Nottingham, Oakham Parish Library, Over.X BX1935.G7. Image © Manuscripts and Special Collections.

prioritisation. Even then, researchers such as Graham Best pointed out that parish libraries should be understood holistically and on their own terms to do them justice: 'For the parish library in toto is a historical document; a statement that reflects not only the cultural aspirations of certain eighteenth-century individuals but also serves to reflect the society'.^[x] They map the individual intellectual life of the person who created them, containing both books they read and books they aspired to read but kept unread,

as building blocks of an Early Modern identity. Moreover, the original creation of parish libraries took place in the heart of a local community. As such they show how wider cultural trends intersected with the publications collected in a specific time and place, linking local stories with big ideas.

The difficulty of getting to grips with the complexity of parish libraries is also apparent in the recurrent discussion throughout the research literature of what defines a parish library. The authors of the article 'The English Parish Library: A Celebration of Diversity' use the concept of diversity to illustrate this.^[xi] The conclusion they draw is that the term 'parish library' describes a diverse cultural tradition with origins reaching back to the medieval period, proliferating at the start of the eighteenth century under the influence of Dr Thomas Bray and declining during the nineteenth century. The authors argue that 'there is no such thing as a "typical" English parish library, as the libraries can differ significantly in their provenance, their proposed and actual use, and their subsequent governance.'^[xii] The five parish libraries held at MSC came into being during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Oakham was the library of a young nobleman, barely out of his college years in Cambridge, a courtier and friend to Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales. Ashby Library, on the other hand, started life before the end of the seventeenth century, created in his spare time by a silk cloth merchant of that town, in the pursuit of godliness. Loughborough Library accumulated volumes steadily during the long career of a scholar of relatively modest

means, a sizar in his college at Cambridge, who was retained as a Fellow for twenty years, was presented one of the most coveted parishes and was eventually ordained archdeacon of Leicestershire.

The significantly different social outlooks of parish libraries' creators make the case for an elastic definition. All the parish libraries held at MSC include a component of books collected by individuals who studied in Cambridge colleges. After moving out of College to their respective benefices, clergymen kept and grew their collections as private libraries, and bequeathed them to their successors in perpetuity, thus linking books to parishes in a legally binding way. The deviant in this case is Ashby-de-la-Zouch's parish library which began life as the private collection of a prosperous merchant of the town. The collection was bequeathed to the merchant's son who became a passionate scholar and clergyman, grew the collection according to his liking and, in his last will, left it to the town church, St Helen's, for the benefit of the entire community, rather than the Rector alone.

However, personal matters such as length of life also significantly change the nature of the library left behind. Whilst the Rector of Loughborough lived to the age of 66, the Ashby clergyman who inherited his merchant father's books lived to the age of just 52. Tragically, the originator of Oakham library died young, at 22. Oakham Parish Library is exceptional insofar as these books were made into a parish library after their owner's death. These various origin stories serve as a

good example to highlight the interconnectedness of the library with the person curating it in a specific time and place. The creator of Oakham Parish Library was John Harington, 2nd Baron Harington of Exton (1592 –1614). According to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Harington 'became one of the aristocratic companions of the king's eldest son, Prince Henry, two years his junior, encouraging the latter in his studies and developing a close relationship best illustrated by a joint portrait of the two men on a stag hunt.'^[xiii] In 1608 Harington embarked on an eighteen-month grand tour on the continent, travelling through the great centres of print culture in the Low Countries, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. It is presumed that Harington bought books for his library, on his travels, supplementing the library he would have kept in college. Of the 80 books currently held in Oakham Parish Library, 63 were published before 1614, the year of Harington's death, and 53 of those were published before 1610, when he returned to England from the continental tour. Given his untimely death four years later, Harington probably never read the books. The collection is strongest in Greek and Latin Church fathers,^[xiv] a counterintuitive choice for a young politician at the court of a Protestant king. This perhaps is linked to youthful curiosity travelling in Catholic lands, and opportunism when faced with books he may not have seen in England. After his death, Harington's library was divided by his mother, who acted as his executrix. The religious books were gifted to Oakham's All Saints Church, and the rest bequeathed to

Harington's former Cambridge college library.

Perhaps discussing how parish libraries map out a cohesive world of authentic cultural, religious and social content can draw academic attention to the interdisciplinary entry points they offer, as well as revive pride in the communities whose history they reflect.

^[i] Central Council for the Care of Churches. *Parochial Libraries of the Church of England* (London: The Faith Press. 1959), p.61.

^[ii] Ibid., p.62.

^[iii] Hoare, P., 'Some Parochial Libraries in the East Midlands' in *Library & Information History: Proceedings of the Library & Information History Group Conference, Parochial Libraries: Past, Present & Future*, April 2010, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2011), p.225.

^[iv] Ibid.

^[v] See [Dr Purdy's research publications](#).

^[vi] See [The Bibliographical Society](#) website.

^[vii] Bertra G., Büttner N. and Zittel, C., *Gateways to the Book: Frontispieces and Title Pages in Early Modern Europe* (Boston: Brill, 2021). See also: Frese, A., *Barocke Titelgraphik am Beispiel der Verlagsstadt Köln (1570-1700): Funktion, Sujet, Typologie* (Köln/Wien: Böhlau, 1989).

^[viii] Wolkenhauer, A. and Scholz, B. F., *Typographorum Emblemata: The Printer's Mark in the Context of Early Modern Culture* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2018).

^[ix] Wakeman, G., 'Unfamiliar libraries XX: Loughborough Parish library' in *The Book Collector*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Autumn, 1976).

^[x] Best, G., *An Eighteenth-Century Parish Library: St Helen's, Ashby-de-la-Zouch*. (Unpublished essay: Loughborough University Department of Library and Information Studies, 1980) p.32.

^[xi] Gray, S. and Baggs, C., 'The English Parish Library: A Celebration of Diversity' in *Libraries & Culture*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer, 2000), pp.414-433.

^[xii] Ibid., p.430.

^[xiii] See [The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#) for more details (subscription required). For the hunting portrait see [Wikipedia](#).

^[xiv] Herbert, A. L., 'Oakham Parish Library' in *Library History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1982), p.2.

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Call for papers: CILIP Library & Information History Group Conference 2025

Freedom of information / Information as freedom

National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Friday 21st November

Control of information, such as through censorship, the removal of books from shelves and the removal of librarians from libraries is at the forefront of our minds, but the practice of book banning or restrictions on access to material is nothing new. Libraries have come under attack throughout history, governments have influenced the contents of their collections, and plenty of librarians have self-censored what they felt was unsuitable material.

The Library & Information History Group invites potential speakers to submit an abstract and short biography by the closing date of Friday 1 August.

Suggested topics are:

- Campaigns for freedom of access to libraries and information
- Historical book bans
- Government censorship of libraries and information
- Self-censorship/ librarians as restrictors of access
- Restrictions of library access, such as to women or on racial grounds
- The history of library access
- Secret libraries

Papers should be no longer than 20 minutes in length, and we ask potential speakers to be mindful of the historical angle of the conference. Therefore, we will not consider any paper for which the primary focus is later than the turn of the twenty-first century. The organisers are happy to discuss variant formats, such as joint papers, a round table discussion, or use of media such as audio or video.

This is an in-person conference and will not be recorded, though a summary will follow in the Library & Information History Group newsletter. Please submit all abstracts and any queries to Kathryn Peak at kathryn.peak@kcl.ac.uk.

James Ollé Awards

James G. Ollé (1916-2001) was an active teacher and distinguished writer in the field of library history; the Library and Information History Group has offered awards in his memory since 2002 with the intention of encouraging a high level of activity in library and information history. Individuals may apply for an award of up to £500 each year for expenses relating to a library history project.

Please note that the award is not intended to support conference attendance.

James Ollé Award recipients will be asked to write a report (maximum 1000 words) of the work undertaken for inclusion in the LIHG's Newsletter, and may be invited to present a short paper at an LIHG conference or meeting, such as the AGM.

To apply for the award, please send a short CV, statement of plans and draft budget to the LIHG's Awards Manager. Applications may be made throughout the year.

Dr Dorothy Clayton, Awards Manager, LIHG
Tel: 0161 826 3883; or 07769658649; Email:
dorothy.clayton@manchester.ac.uk

Library History Essay Award 2025

The Library History Essay Award is an annual prize for the best article or chapter on library history published in, or pertaining to, the British Isles, within the previous calendar year (i.e., 2024). Introduced in 1996, the award is organized and sponsored by the LIHG and aims to support the publication of research into library history in the British Isles. The prize is **£350**.

Submissions should contain original historical research and be based on original source materials if possible. Evidence of methodological and historiographical innovation is particularly welcome.

Authors may put themselves forward for the prize but may make only one submission per year. Any member of CILIP may also nominate a published essay for consideration.

The entries will be identified and judged by a panel of three:

- Chair of the LIHG
- Awards Manager of the LIHG
- Additional assessor at the invitation of the LIHG Committee

Nominations and any queries should be sent to Dorothy Clayton, the Group's Awards Manager (see details to the left).

Deadline for submissions for Library History Essay Award 2025 is 30 September 2025.

Please Note: The article/book chapter must have been published in 2024.

Events

Medieval Love Debate at Longleat

Longleat House, 29 March 2025 - 5 July 2025

This exhibition tells the story of a late 15th century manuscript (MS 258) once owned by William Thynne, a senior official in Henry VIII's household and uncle of Sir John Thynne, the builder of Longleat. Focusing on a translation of the famous medieval French love debate by Alain Chartier, *La Belle Dame sans Mercy* (*The Beautiful Lady without Mercy*) the physical and online exhibitions guide audiences through this poem and its printing in William Thynne's edition of Chaucer's *Workes* (1532).

During the 'Medieval Love Debate at Longleat' project, Manuscript 258 was fully digitised, performances of its poetry were filmed, and an online exhibition was created to complement a physical exhibit displayed at Longleat House. The project was a collaboration between the University of Birmingham and Longleat. It was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

For more information visit: <https://www.longleat.co.uk/online-collections-and-exhibitions>.



Institute of Advanced Studies, London, 9 - 10 September 2025

How were libraries created, extended and compiled in the early modern period (1500-1800)? What was the animating force which created personal, institutional and other libraries and collections? How were these libraries filled with books, manuscripts and objects? How did libraries and library founders inspire donors to give money and books? What structures and rules were created to manage access to the library? Where can we locate marginalised groups in the library? What caused the destruction, dispersal, or integration of collections? And what was the bibliographical context for this activity?

This 2-day symposium will explore the rich field of early modern library studies, inviting fresh, interdisciplinary perspectives and methodologies to open up existing narratives and bodies of evidence. A programme will be available soon.

You can register as a non-speaking delegate via [eventbrite](https://www.eventbrite).

LIHG Committee Vacancies

The LIHG committee is proactive and enthusiastic in promoting the history of libraries and information and aims to organise visits, talks and events that attract a wide and diverse audience. The Group is made up of volunteers who meet 3-4 times per year (latterly, with at least two of these meetings online). The CILIP LIHG is looking to appoint two roles to the committee:

Web Editor

The Web Editor is responsible for the design and presentation of the Group's website, including sourcing new content, reporting and statistics and maintenance of digital files.

Marketing and Social Media Officer

The Marketing and Social Media Officer is responsible for promoting the work of the group, working closely with the Newsletter Editor and Website Editor.

More details are available on the [LIHG website](#). To apply, please send a one-page CV and short paragraph outlining your interest in the role to Kathryn Peak (Chair) at kathryn.peak@kcl.ac.uk.

Back Matter

The LIHG newsletter is produced twice a year. It contains short articles, news items, exhibition and conference announcements, notices of awards and bursaries, and reports on conferences, exhibitions, and site visits. We also highlight a selection of new publications. We are always looking for feature articles in the field of library and information history; descriptions of little-known historic libraries; information about projects with a significant historical component; new resources (print and digital); news items; and calls for papers.

We also welcome reports on conferences on any subject in library and information history and reviews of exhibitions. Recent graduates are invited to submit brief descriptions of their research projects. Please contact the editor, Rachel Daley, if you would like to have news, events, exhibitions or calls for papers included in the newsletter: lihgnewsletter@gmail.com

Proposals for feature articles (length of article max. 2000 words) and descriptions of graduate research projects (max. length 750 words) should be accompanied by a short CV. Deadlines for contributions:

31 October 2025 (Winter 2025)

15 May 2026 (Summer 2026)

Information about events, conferences and bursaries is also disseminated via the [CILIP website](#).

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