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Minding my own business

Nearly forty years of business information

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'Expertise is now needed more than ever, especially the ability to interpret, then recognize the potential of an enquiry, and to enlarge an enquirer's expectations.'

Abstract

The author, who served the Corporation of London's City Business Library for 34 years, successively as assistant librarian, sub-librarian and City Business Librarian, retiring from that post on 31 December 2003, describes his long career as a librarian, from his early days at Nottingham City Libraries in the 1960s, to the experience he gained that led him to the City Business Library, London, UK, after working at its precursor, the Guildhall Library Commercial Reference Room. Notes how the strength of the Commercial Reference Room and the City Business Library in its early days lay with its collection of directories (still true today) but recent years have seen demands for more diverse materials and media, particularly online databases and trouble was experienced in gaining access to certain materials, notably Mintel surveys (Market Intelligence, Leisure Intelligence and Retail Intelligence). Considerable effort went into preparing the Library for the introduction of successive waves of information technology (IT) and the introduction of IT based schemes, such as the computerization of the selective indexing of periodicals, which had been offered from the beginning of the Business Library in 1970 via cards filed in an album with transparent plastic pockets. Most recently, users have gained access to the Internet in the Library but the author's view is that librarians are still as essential an intermediary as ever in guiding enquirers to the information they require.

Keywords: business information, business librarian, career, City Business Library, information sources, demand, information technology, electronic information, printed information

Garry Humphreys took early retirement on 31 December 2003 after more than 34 years with the Corporation of London's City Business Library, having served successively as assistant librarian, sub-librarian and (from 1989) as City Business Librarian. He has also been a member of Aslib Council and chairman of Aslib's Economic and Business Information Group; LA/CILIP Information Services Group National Committee and Standing Committees on Business Information (SCOBI) and Official Publications (SCOOP); lecturer at Aslib, City University, Library Association and TFPL courses, and occasional speaker at conferences and seminars. In 1998 he was one of only one hundred recipients of the Library Association Charter Centenary Medal. Always a fearless supporter of libraries, he recently had a letter in the *Guardian* criticizing its reporting of the CABE report and another letter was the subject of an editorial in *Business Information Review* 20(3) (September 2003). A former professional singer, he plans in future to spend his time writing primarily on musical topics and doing more conducting.

Beginnings

My first experiences of libraries were as a library assistant with Nottingham City Libraries in the mid-1960s. After working in Central Lending and at various branch libraries (where stoking the boiler was one of my tasks before leaving after a late evening's duty), I was apparently earmarked to go into the Commercial and Technical Library, and it was the interest and excitement of working in this *milieu* that eventually convinced me that this was what I wanted to do as a career, even though my time in libraries had originally been intended as a filler between leaving school and doing something completely different for which, I soon realized, I would have been quite unsuited.

John Toon was the Commercial & Technical Librarian, but the spirit of his predecessor David Bromley (only recently departed for Sheffield) was still apparent, and the energy and enthusiasm with which he had run the Nottingham C & T was continued by the sub-librarian, Michael Poppleston. If Poppleston was a disciple of Bromley, I became a disciple of Poppleston and, I think, even developed a suggestion of a Lancashire accent to prove it! (Poppleston it was who was rumoured to have worn plimsolls when at Carlton Road Branch Library – one of the reserve stores – in order more effectively to run up and down the stacks in his enthusiasm to carry out his duties retrieving books.)

What so captured my interest – apart from the joy of working in such an energized environment – was having permission to engage directly with members of the public (some of whom I actually recognized as 'notable' members of the City's community) in finding information for them from a wide variety of sources whose existence would have been largely unknown to them, particularly trade directories. I felt that I was doing something really useful in exercising a skill that was in some way not given to the ordinary person. I took to it like a duck to water, as Poppleston himself acknowledged in some correspondence we had after he had moved to Newcastle upon Tyne. And I found even in my early branch library days that I enjoyed engaging with the public to a degree that would have been unimaginable before I left school.

I spent 1967 and 1968 at the North Western Polytechnic School of Librarianship, first in Camden Town and later at Essex Road, Islington, presided over by Edward Dudley, as charismatic then as now, with such members of staff as Peter New, Chris Needham, Derek Langridge, Jack Mills and Brian Redfern – names that have now become almost legendary, although then they were all too real. Peter New has written engagingly of those times in *The Poor Man's John Arlott* (Library Association Library History Group, 2002), and it is fascinating to have a view from the other side. Being fixed on a public business library career, I decided to enjoy myself, and chose subjects out of interest rather than necessity: Academic Libraries, Library History, Historical Bibliography and the Bibliography and Librarianship of Music! I passed my Part II exams and returned to Nottingham as sub-librarian in the Commercial & Technical Library, Poppleston's successor Malcolm Stacey having become Commercial & Technical Librarian when Toon left to go to the Nottingham University Science Library.

I wanted eventually to return to London and, even before leaving library school, I had got wind of plans for a new Business Library in the City of London. I enquired about it but was told that recruitment would not begin for several months (in the meantime I decided not to accept a job offered me at the London School of Economics library). In due course I replied to the advertisement for an Assistant Librarian in the City Business Library and was appointed to work for the Corporation of London from September 1969.

Giving birth to the City Business Library

The City Business Library – the brainchild of Godfrey Thompson, then Guildhall Librarian – was not scheduled to open until January 1970 so in the meantime I worked in its predecessor, the Guildhall Library Commercial Reference Room. Although this was for only four months, the memory of it is stamped indelibly on my mind. The Commercial Reference Room was an annexe to Guildhall Library, then housed in premises resembling the nave of a cathedral, complete with stained glass windows. There were some parallels with Nottingham in that, although Malcolm Campbell had been appointed earlier in 1969 to set up and run the new Business Library, the spirit of his predecessors in the Commercial Reference Room, particularly George Henderson and Ian Anderson, was

still strong and, indeed, both continued to be regular visitors there: George usually with parties of students from the Aslib courses at which he lectured on business information in general and directories in particular; Ian (now working for George at CBD Research) carrying out his duties as editor of *Current British directories* by physically examining every item to be included (which included everything in the CRR/CBL directory stock), from which the entries were compiled.

In fact, when I became sub-librarian of the City Business Library in July 1971, after Ian Matheson's return to New Zealand to be librarian of the Parliamentary Library in Wellington, I continued the custom of 'running' each new edition of *Current British Directories* in parallel with the library's stock register, marking it up with our class numbers, updating our stock where *CBD* showed a later edition or something we didn't have, and inserting anything we did have that for some reason was not in *CBD* (we used an interleaved copy for this), and this was kept up to date – entirely manually in those days – for the life of that edition. The resulting copy was used at the enquiry desk as a guide to the CRR/CBL directory stock, with the advantage of a subject index (which also had to be kept up-to-date). The physical stock was then over-hauled to match. An arduous but hugely satisfying task, once it was completed, for which I was entirely responsible from beginning to end (including physically pulling the withdrawals off the shelves for discarding). Consequently, I knew a lot about directories, and when the computer revolution came in the 1980s, and some of my younger colleagues thought this was the answer to everything, I was still able to name off the top of my head, to the astonishment of the person who had asked, sources for particular fugitive bits of information that no amount of 'information technology' (at that time) could locate! This of course was a fundamental skill of the traditional reference librarian that, as I shall no doubt continue to say during this piece, is still as important as ever in the Internet age: familiarity with sources (whether printed or electronic) – or at least with their potential – and the ability to think fast, and laterally.

The strength of the Commercial Reference Room (and the City Business Library to begin with) was in its collection of directories, which continue to be the backbone of the stock until the present day. But the arrival in 1970 of the new Business Library, in custom-built premises unencumbered by traditional fabric, set off a chain reaction, where the evident demand for more resources led to publishers developing new ideas to satisfy those demands – or was it the other way round? In any case, the Library was inundated with more than a thousand personal visitors a day, and constantly ringing telephones, all of which were handled, effectively, by five staff (the sub-librarian and four assistant librarians), with one clerical assistant and two library attendants. We all collapsed, exhausted but invigorated, at the end of each day, but there was already established a habit of voluntary late working in order to keep on top of the various housekeeping tasks, that has continued in varying degrees ever since. On the other side, publishers came to the Library to witness this demand and to float ideas for new publications some of which became standard in any service of this sort: Crawford's *Directory of City Connections*, McCarthy 'cards', and *Key Note* surveys are only three examples that were tested, if not actually conceived, in the City Business Library, in consultation with the library staff.

New sources, changing demands

My enquiry notebooks from these early years show very forcibly that addresses and telephone numbers of companies and the identity of the owners of trade names were most frequently requested at that time, and in general we attempted to find them on the enquirers' behalf, offering to call back with the answers if these could not immediately be found. We gave priority to people actually visiting the Library, but in practice it was difficult to ignore ringing telephones and some balance had to be achieved. Of course, people waiting at the enquiry desk accused us of always being on the telephone, while telephone callers said we never answered the telephones! I recall just how much use we made of Kelly's *Post Office London directory*, whose most helpful feature was a street-by-street listing showing where physical features such as parks and public buildings were located, as well as showing the sequences of shops and offices, and where other streets intersected each thoroughfare. It seemed to be invaluable in those days, but we have managed to be without it since its last publication in that form in 1987 (though I admit I do still sometimes find it useful seventeen years later!). Strange it is how questions imperceptibly change to reflect the sources currently available. Or so it seems.

Company annual reports were another source much in demand (and usually available free to bona fide enquirers) and a collection was built up that aimed to include all companies publicly quoted on the British Stock Exchanges (provincial stock exchanges were then still extant), and a selection of the most significant foreign companies, identified from overseas rankings lists and by seeing who was mentioned in the business press (we also had a good collection of the overseas equivalents of *The Times* and the *Financial Times*). One early problem however was the inaccessibility of the unique resources of Companies House, situated quite nearby in the City of London, and in desperation librarians from around the country requested a meeting with the registrar to ask for greater cooperation, only to hear the then librarian of the Board of Trade (of which Companies House was a part) express astonishment and scepticism that there should actually be a demand for company information in public libraries! It is marvellous to see how accessible and user-friendly Companies House has since become, and much of this must be attributable to the energies of Edwin Fleming, former business librarian at Liverpool Central Library, who sank his teeth into the Registrar of Companies (almost literally!) and didn't let go until he got what we wanted, using friendly MPs to ask questions in Parliament on occasion. I remember chairing a meeting at Liverpool in the 1970s at which the Registrar actually appeared and spoke, and the physical manifestation in our midst of this mythical being was then regarded as something of a miracle!

Very soon, however, the demand began to change in favour of market surveys, and this was no doubt due to the fact that these were now to a certain extent available in the public sector. First Jordan's surveys, and then *Mintel* and *Key Note*, were the main sources. Compared with surveys produced for controlled circulation by stockbrokers charging thousands of pounds, dollars or Swiss francs, these were comparatively cheap and cheerful (except that they still weren't cheap!), and good relations with publishers, who in any case saw public libraries as a useful shop window for their goods, resulted in some generous discounts, as was (and is still) the case with these and several other types of services. It should never be forgotten that public libraries have introduced thousands of users to indispensable resources they would never have known existed until the reference dialogue with the librarian had taken place, and subsequently they may have become regular users or actual customers of the publishers in question. Of course, there was always the danger that the publisher's business might be undermined by 'free' use of its products in public libraries (whatever the other perceived benefits), so a 'no photocopying' rule became standard for this type of publication (and a condition of purchase). We were perfectly happy with this, and eventually provided our own stickers to fix prominently on the covers stating this rule. We were also as observant of public photocopying activity as it was possible to be without policing every move. But if someone was determined to copy illicitly they could probably get away with it, and I remember Chris Dunin-Borkowski, who published Jordan's surveys and was also a regular user of the Library, complaining bitterly that he saw constant illicit photocopying of his reports in the library and was not happy. (This was before we introduced the stickers.) One of the practical problems was that different rules applied in educational establishments which students expected to prevail when they visited the public library, and were hard to convince that things were otherwise.

In 2001, John Weeks, the publisher of Mintel surveys, after much 'full and frank discussion' with us, announced that Mintel reports (that is, the 'journal' series, such as *Market Intelligence, Leisure Intelligence* and *Retail Intelligence*), which had long been the mainstay of our product and industry survey collection, would no longer be available to 'overtly business libraries in large conurbations'. His contention was that as long as people could see his reports free in a business library they would not purchase them from Mintel. We contended that purchase was not an alternative: the reports were beyond the budget of most individuals and many SMEs, and in any case, in practice people looked at parts of several related reports rather than the whole of only one. I tipped off my opposite numbers in the other London and provincial business libraries, but the curious outcome was that everyone continued to be able to purchase Mintel reports as before except the City Business Library and the British Library Business Information Service. It seemed, in John Weeks's eyes, as if business people did not exist other than in the Square Mile and the Euston Road! We were faced with the ludicrous situation of having to tell enquirers that we no longer had Mintel reports but that they could still be seen at the Westminster Reference Library down the road! (Westminster was delighted to have its ailing attendance figures boosted as a consequence!) Again, we came to manage without Mintel and, fortunately, other

publishers have continued to take an enlightened view of making their products available in the public sector, in many cases going out of their way to make it affordable to continue to do so and readily taking on board suggestions for improvements in the light of the user feedback we received.

Rebuilding for IT

I suppose the next significant development was the arrival of electronic information technology, and it was fortunate that this coincided with our moves to new premises (first temporary then permanent) following the demolition of Gillett House, and we were first able to experiment (in temporary premises) then fully adopt (when we occupied 1 Brewers' Hall Garden) IT systems in a planned way; for example, by having suspended floors to facilitate the cabling and subsequent changes that would be required. Our original Gillett House library (with Godfrey Thompson's solid marble floors) would have been completely unusable in this respect, other than with the disruption of major excavations.

We had long been teased by colleagues from elsewhere for our reluctance to embrace IT with the same enthusiasm as others, but contrary to the suspicions of some, Malcolm Campbell was by no means against this; he was quite rightly unconvinced that much of what was then available was likely to be an actual improvement on what already prevailed. Most demonstrations of services said to be able to revolutionize information provision were almost always feebly unconvincing, or ended in disaster – not an outcome that could be sustained in a live situation with an impatient enquirer breathing down one's neck. Even those that had some merit were then either heavily USA-biased, or related more to science and technology than to business.

So we began by adapting something we already did: the selective indexing of periodicals, which had been offered from the beginning of the Business Library in 1970, the details being written (later typed) on to $5'' \times 3''$ cards which were then filed in an album with transparent plastic pockets. Now the cards could be computer-printed before filing! This may not seem much in the way of progress, but it enabled us to get to grips with the technology in a familiar context before grappling with something entirely new. (The selective index of periodicals is now fully available on-screen via

Cardbox.) Our final move in 1992 to Brewers' Hall Garden also coincided with the planned introduction of online public access catalogues (OPACs) to the City of London Libraries service, and we were second only to the Barbican Library in having these installed in the Square Mile. There were teething troubles, but I think we all felt that waiting and seeing for several years had allowed us to start so much further ahead of those authorities that had plunged in first, had suffered in the process, and were now left with rapidly ageing systems. We felt that on the whole we had got what we wanted, rather than what the manufacturers wanted us to have. So often in the past we were told that a system was wonderful but … would not allow us to continue to do this or that essential task or to offer this or that aspect of a service. Manufacturers learned a lot too!

The unstoppable advance of IT, particularly during the 1990s, and the necessity of taking it on board, eventually had another happy outcome: everybody (more or less) became in varying degrees adept at understanding and operating the systems themselves, particularly with the arrival of the Internet and the acquisition by staff of the European Computer Driving Licence. No longer were we slaves to the computer specialists who talked a language we did not understand, or did not fully comprehend our requirements or, in the case of one former colleague in the late 1980s, imperiously led us in our ignorance into dangerous areas of inappropriate technology from which it eventually became difficult to disentangle ourselves.

Old and new

Most public libraries, including the City Business Library, now have free public Internet access, though it is clearly not used primarily as a means of finding business information; and when it is, this is often only after it has been suggested as an option by a member of the library staff, or a web address actually produced to be followed up. The obvious sources still seem to be overlooked (rather like Yellow Pages in the print-only days), and the ability to search still seems to be as much a closed book to your average intelligent member of the public as it always was. My old friend Terry Kendrick asserts (no doubt with excellent authority) that most people don't get beyond the first page of Google; and they use more or less unstructured search terms anyway. So it is my view that librarians are still

as essential an intermediary as ever in guiding enquirers to the information they require, and that the simplistic Government assertion (unfortunately adopted by many local authorities also) that librarians are a thing of the past now that 'everybody' has direct access to the Internet, is quite wrong and can only be the product of considerable ignorance on the part of authority of the whole business of information finding.

The tragedy is, that many excellent libraries have been closed or dispersed, to the inestimable economic disadvantage of individuals, businesses, communities and, ultimately, of the country as a whole. (The significance of these services is recognized internationally, judging by the numbers of 'official' overseas visitors to the City Business Library over the years, and the numbers of enquiries received from abroad, as a result of its worldwide reputation, and the absence of anything comparable in the visitors' own countries.) The removal of staff with knowledge, experience and expertise – the drive for 'flexibility' in staff required to turn their hand to any user or subject field, from children to business information – the move from specialists to generalists, and in some authorities from qualified to unqualified staff – has adversely affected library services, particularly business information, but also other specialist areas such as music and local studies. It suggests that less value is placed on these services than, for example, surveyors' departments that no-one would consider being run other than by qualified surveyors! Expertise is now needed more than ever, especially the ability to interpret, then recognize the potential of an enquiry, and to enlarge an enquirer's expectations. The failure to realize this, and the limitations of the non-specialist in identifying and then finding appropriate information ('appropriate' being what the enquirer actually needs rather than what s/he thinks s/he needs), has assisted in the universal fall in library attendances, particularly for reference services, alongside growing Internet and intranet access in people's homes and offices.

I believe that the situation will change, and hope that when it does it will not be too late. We librarians too often take for granted just how much we know about information finding, compared with everyone else (I nearly wrote, 'the average individual', but some of those who don't know are considerably above average and should know better!); we must work very hard to get this across to those in authority. Some years ago I took part in discussions with the BBC about a proposed television 'treasure hunt' series, featuring teams of reference librarians hunting fugitive information; it never took off, but it is something like that, to capture the public imagination, that is needed if people are to recognize our skills and ultimately our importance to all areas of life in this country (or any other country for that matter). If Lynne Truss can make punctuation popular – her *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* was the surprise best-seller of last Christmas's books – we ought to be able to do something similar for reference librarianship.

We need support from our authorities, however; the present plethora of Government-inspired initiatives may be a good thing in itself, but not when we become so obsessed with them as to remove from the equation the enquirer seeking information – our *only* raison d'être. Furthermore, our authorities' obsessions with falling attendances should not disguise the fact that enquiries also come more and more in forms other than physical 'footfall': the traditional letter, telephone call, fax and now email; and that there may be more time to give individual enquirers a better service. Why are judgements so often quantitative rather than qualitative? Another phenomenon is the enquirer who ends up at the library as a last resort, having failed to find the required information on the Internet! Three further considerations in conclusion: first, new technology does not necessarily render old technology obsolete – neither is 'better' than the other, and each has advantages and disadvantages to be used as and when appropriate; second, business reference materials cost more than resources in other subject areas, and parent authorities must recognize this and make adequate funds available if an effective service is to be provided; third, the advantages of personal contact with the enquirer should never be underestimated – the 'reference dialogue' remains as important as ever. As T. S. Eliot wrote in *The Rock*: 'Where is the knowledge we have lost in the information?'. Over and out!