

Work-in-progress: cataloguing the books in the Morley Library



A comprehensive inventory of items is essential to the management of any library collection, and the development of that inventory is the business of librarians.

Library catalogues are detailed lists of all the books which together make up a collection. They provide an invaluable source of information for their users. A library catalogue will not only establish, for example, whether a user can find a particular title in the collection, but may also indicate where it is located on the shelf, what it is about, when and where it was published, or whether there are other texts in the collection by the same author. The catalogue serves as a tool for navigating a library effectively – the roadmap for making sense of what is there.

Prior to the development of online catalogues and digital databases, libraries used printed catalogues or a card index system, both of which enable a reader to search for books, typically by title, author name or subject. While printed catalogues and card index systems remain useful technologies to support basic searches, the bibliographic information they provide is limited – often, they present a finding aid or a simple inventory of what is held by an institution or group of institutions, but without the underlying infrastructure to record more granular detail or enable complex searches at scale.

The first computerised library catalogue databases which emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s replicated the same basic search structures as before. However, over time, these systems have become increasingly powerful. Today, it is possible to conduct sophisticated and precise searches and to analyse large quantities of bibliographic data at the click of a button. The capacity to create and manipulate ever greater datasets, meanwhile, has given rise to innovative forms of bibliographic research, made possible only through technology.

Yet the effectiveness of digital catalogues depends on the quality of the information which library cataloguers input into the records. Errors, absences and inconsistencies in the record data make for a poor-quality catalogue and in turn inhibit what we can know about a collection. Professional standards, developed by international library agencies and federations, have helped to reduce this issue – library cataloguing standards encourage consistency through stipulating the format and level of detail each library generates in its records, in order that these records are coherent and compatible with different operating systems.

All of this has an important bearing on how Winchester Cathedral manages its own library catalogue. In recent decades, significant work has been undertaken to ensure every book in the Morley Library is linked to a record in the Curator's digital database. These records, which are not yet accessible via a public platform, contain minimal item details – the title, author, date and place of publication. This information is helpful to an extent, but much like the card index system, it has its limits. Standards in rare books cataloguing today recognise that early printed books and manuscripts are material objects which carry within them unique information. This information is in turn integral to how we understand them. Features of the way in which a book has been bound, the paper it is printed on, the arrangement of the text, and marks of ownership, annotation or other indicators of engagement on the part of the reader are now worthy sources of study in their own right.

Over the past year, supported by a team of volunteers, I have been working on a project to improve the existing bibliographic data we have for the books held in the Morley Library – a rich collection of mostly sixteenth and seventeenth century imprints. This project has involved a physical assessment of every book to record new pieces of data, namely its condition, language, a description of the binding, any marks of ownership, readers' notes, and other features. In addition, the project has also enabled us to create a system of subject

classification, so that it will eventually be possible to analyse the make-up of the collection in greater detail than before. My thanks go especially to Cydel David, Nick Thornton and Peggy Souter, who continue to play a key role in collecting this information.

Once the work is complete, we will be in a far better position to analyse the composition of the library – the proportion of books written in different languages, for instance, or number of books for a particular discipline. Early findings have already revealed a much more diverse range of subject areas than may otherwise have been assumed of a cathedral library. While the largest proportion of books in the Morley Library are religious in nature - works of theology or ecclesiology – there is also a significant number of books about natural science, physics, music, geography, history, politics, anthropology and literature.

Other information gathered will influence how we think about the future care of the collection. We use a simple 1-5 grading system for assessing the condition of the books (very good, good, fair, poor and very poor) and their conservation needs. By identifying the worst-affected books – those with severe damage to the binding, or very fragile elements – it will become easier in turn to prioritise which items require the attention of a specialist conservator.

The physical description of a book's binding is another core component in rare books cataloguing. We are fortunate in the Morley Library to possess many beautiful, original bindings, which serve as identifiers and can tell us something about the history of the book itself. Creating a comprehensive record of all book bindings in the library is important – we have taken note of features such as the type of material used (for example, leather, paperboard, or wood); the presence of "tooling" i.e. the use of tools to imprint lines or images into the surface of the leather, sometimes with the use of gold leaf, or else without (called "blind tooling"); whether there are clasps, ties or similar.

Yet it is perhaps the recording of the marks of ownership and/or readers' notes which has so far proved the most interesting and surprising. This category of information includes the recording of bookplates, inscriptions, doodles, annotations, corrections, defacements, and other ghostly echoes of readers who have, at one time or another, held the book we now hold in our hands today. Some books contain the names of several generations of owners, a lineage of readers all of whom have held and (we assume) read or at least consulted the book.

There remains much to do. Once the initial survey of the collection is complete (I hope within the next 3-4 months), then the next stage will be to check and correct all the data we have collected – no small task. Yet we will at this point return also to those names scribbled in the corners and the margins, to the intriguing bookplates and dedications, and ask: who were these individuals? What can we learn about their lives? What are the stories we can uncover about how their books came to be in the collections of the Cathedral?

The more we can know, the more I hope to share – and the more that can be shared, the greater the possibility for new academic research to emerge in the future.

Eleanor Swire

Curator & Librarian