

From De la Beche to the digital library

Over 150 years of library service to the geological community

by Graham McKenna, Keyworth

oon after the setting-up of the Survey, a house in Craig's Court off Whitehall was allocated in 1837 to the new organisation, to provide a home for the offices and the growing specimen and other collections generated as a result of the Survey's activities. At this location De la Beche established the Survey's Library. Although no exact date has been traced for the start, documentary evidence shows that books were ordered for the Library of the Survey from H Bailliere to the value of £5-13-6d on 31st of March 1842 and that De la Beche presented his own collection of geological books to the Library between 1841 and 1843. At this stage the

Library was small and is not recorded as having dedicated space. But this was to change within a few years as a result of De la Beche's vision for the Survey and his success in getting backing for the construction of a new purpose-built geological museum facing on to Piccadilly and entered from Jermyn Street. The scale of this achievement can be gauged from the fact that, from being virtually a one-man organisation surveying in South-West England, within 15 years De la Beche had projected the Geological Survey into the national scientific scene so successfully that a major new museum building had been designed by a noted architect, built at a key site in the centre of London, and opened by the Prince Consort, Prince Albert, on the 12th of May 1851.

Draft plans for his building signed by De la Beche and discussed with the architect James Pennethorne, show a room in the new building marked "library" with a note in De la Beche's hand "The Director sitting in it". De la Beche wrote to the government of the day to gain approval for the exchange and deposit of the scientific publications and maps of the Survey with similar institutions in the United Kingdom and overseas. Some of the exchanges initiated at that time continue to the present day. The first Librarian was Trenham Reeks, whose assistance was acknowledged in the early works of Charles Darwin. In its new setting, the Library serviced a variety of users, Survey staff, students at the Government School of Mines, later the Royal School of Mines (which was part of the Survey until its transfer to South Kensington in

1872), and members of the public who could use the Library for reference purposes on production of a letter of introduction. In 1877 a printed catalogue of the Library's holdings was published and widely distributed. Around this time the collection was described by Andrew Ramsay, the Survey's third Director, as "a Library unrivalled of its kind."



The Piccadilly frontage of the Museum of Practical Geology.

The transfer of the Royal School of Mines, together with growing pressure on space in the Jermyn Street museum, led to the transfer of a number of volumes to the Science Museum Library in South Kensington, but by 1879 the Library's stock totalled some 38 000 volumes. In the 1880s the British Association for the Advancement of Science began to develop a collection of geological photographs covering the whole country. This collection was housed in the Survey Library and after a period away from the Survey is now back within the Library at Keyworth. Major structural problems with the Museum building around 1920 and further space problems led to the next major event in the Library's history, the transfer in 1935 to another new Geological Museum on Exhibition Road in South Kensington. While a purposebuilt reading room was included here



Trenham Reeks, the first BGS Librarian.





The reading room of the Library at the BGS's headquarters in Keyworth, with (inset) the Library at the Geological Museum, Exhibition Road.

(this is still in use as a library by the Natural History Museum), the library from Jermyn Street was relocated using the original bookcases in what was known as the Small Library at Exhibition Road. The glass-fronted bookcases were used to hold much of the earlier collections including the volumes presented by De la Beche. During the Second World War most of the Library and Archive collections were evacuated to Bangor in North Wales to ensure their safety. Records in the Archives detail the move and the subsequent provision of services to the Survey staff throughout the conflict.

A significant expansion of the collections came about with the merger of the Overseas Geological Surveys (OGS) and the Geological Survey into the Institute of Geological Sciences in 1965/6. The OGS had its own library which was particularly rich in publications relating to the former colonies worldwide. This collection was integrated with the Exhibition Road stock to create a world-class resource for the geological community.

While the Survey was under the Directorship of Sir Kingsley Dunham in the 1970s the Library made considerable progress. A modern library was included in Murchison House, the new Survey Office in Edinburgh, providing a considerable improvement over the cramped conditions at the Grange Terrace site.

Perhaps the most significant development during this period was the adoption of IT in compiling a list of the maps held in the library. In the mid-1970s a STATUS database was commenced. This catalogue, which subsequently reached around 135 000 entries, listed maps at sheet level. At the time this was a very advanced project. Computerised cataloguing at this level has only been attempted by some of the major national map libraries within the past decade. In 1981 computerised cataloguing was adopted for the book and serial collections initially in the form of computer-generated microfiche and later as part of the Library's LIBERTAS online catalogue. In 1983 a policy decision at government level led to the latest relocation of the Library collections, this time to the new Survey headquarters at Keyworth. This move represented a large-scale exercise involving all the stock and equipment of the library -500 000 volumes, 200 000 maps and the archives — packed in some 100 map presses and over 5000 crates.

Having settled into the new premises, the focus turned to bringing the catalogues fully into the online era. First LIBERTAS and then, from January 2000, GEOLIB have been used as library management systems to enable users around the world to search the BGS holdings lists via the World Wide Web. GEOLIB will also automate some

of the Library's routine operations and will, more importantly, enhance the catalogue's capability in that it is designed to link digital full text and images to the relevant entries in the database. In due course researchers who have had to visit the BGS Library at Keyworth in person will be able to access original archive documents and the text of early Survey publications via the Internet.

150 years on from 1851 there are still elements of the original Library which Survey staff from Jermyn Street days would recognise: sections of the older stock, including volumes presented by De la Beche and Murchison; the bust of De la Beche now in Reception, which used to stand above the fireplace in the Jermyn Street Library; a few remaining hand-written catalogue cards; and later generations of members of the public. Alongside these vestiges they would find much that is new and an information resource of which they could only have dreamed: an online catalogue on their desk, which not only records what the BGS collections have to offer but also links to virtually every other major library collection in the world; a significantly bigger stock of publications and maps; extensive collections of geological photographs recording features across the country, and some from overseas, as locations stood both recently and in some cases a century ago; many archive records relating to the history of the Survey and its geologists and to the development of the geological sciences; CD-ROM and Internet access to huge databases of articles dealing with aspects of geology from every corner of the world and the delivery of many of these full-text to their desk; all this backed up by a group of experienced professional information managers — the librarians. In more recent times the resource has been exploited not only on behalf of the local economy but also in support of a variety of activities overseas, such as the resettlement of the Kurdish population in northern Iraq and the supply of drinkingwater for the United Nations peacekeeping forces in the former Yugoslavia. In the light of De la Beche's early vision, it seems likely that he would have appreciated the exploitation of the library he initiated for the wider international community and would be even more keen to be found "sitting in it."