



Theological Librarianship in the UK: A Brief Overview of ABTAPL

by Judy Powles

First of all, I would like to thank you all for welcoming John and myself to your conference. We have had such a warm reception and have been made to feel very much at home here.

The following is just a brief overview of ABTAPL (the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries) and theological librarianship in the UK. First of all I will give some details of my personal background and put myself in context. Since 1985 I have been Librarian at Spurgeon's College, a Baptist theological college, in South London. This is a solo position and means that I do just about everything in the Library from the professional tasks to the nonprofessional ones. Normally speaking it would be very difficult for me to be away from the College for this length of time, even in the summer, but as I speak my library is currently in a state of chaos as it is being totally refurbished. All the books and periodicals are in store and the library is not due to reopen until mid September.

In 1991 I was elected Chairman (at the time I had no objection to this title as I considered it to be the title of the role – I didn't particularly want to be likened to a piece of furniture!) of ABTAPL and I held this position until last year when I stood down to allow time for me to prepare for the library refurbishment project and to undertake an MA course in Victorian Studies at the University of London (and also to prepare for our daughter's wedding in July 2008!).

The membership of the Association, which was founded in 1956, is open to all with no religious affiliation necessary. Both libraries and individuals can join and membership extends beyond the United Kingdom. It embraces not only the disciplines of Theology and Religious Studies but also Philosophy. It covers all faiths – and none. There are 167 current members who include 121 institutional members, 25 personal members, 19 retired members and 2 honorary life members. Institutional members cover a wide range of institutions, including University libraries, Theological College libraries, Cathedral libraries, Monastery libraries and other specialist libraries. On ABTAPL's website (www.abtapl.org.uk) it is possible to see the range of activities and publications which the Association offers. It meets twice a year; in the spring there is a residential conference, and in the autumn there is an afternoon meeting. Also regular training days are held.

Our residential conferences are normally held during the Easter vacation (either in March or April) and usually take place from a Thursday afternoon to the Saturday lunchtime. They contain a mixture of presentations and visits, as well as the formal AGM and general business meeting. The venue tends to alternate between the "North" and "South" of the UK. For example recent conferences have been held in Oxford, Belfast, Edinburgh and Durham...



“In 2006 we celebrated our Golden Jubilee with a memorable conference in Prague. Perhaps I can suggest that ANZTLA might like to do something similar for your Golden Jubilee!”

In 2006 we celebrated our Golden Jubilee with a memorable conference in Prague. Perhaps I can suggest that ANZTLA might like to do something similar for your Golden Jubilee! [Photographs were included in the presentation of some of the wonderful venues mentioned, plus one of the ABTAPL group outside the Salisbury conference venue, Sarum College where delegates are shown clutching the now infamous white lunch bags!]

The normal pattern for our autumn meetings is that we meet for an afternoon in late October or early November, usually in London. It tends to consist of a tour of the venue, followed by tea and a business meeting. Recent venues have included the British Library, Wesley’s Chapel, Westminster Abbey and Oak Hill College.

In recent years various free training days have been offered to help members in their professional development. Topics covered have been archive conservation, online library inductions, library publicity material and using Web2 and social networking sites for library publicity. When professional training from outside bodies is so expensive, the fact that ABTAPL offers courses inhouse has been a great advantage.

Our next autumn meeting will be held on Thursday 5th November 2009 at The Foundling Museum, Bloomsbury, London and our residential conference in 2010 will be taking place in Bristol from Thursday 8th April until Saturday 10th April. All ANZTLA members would be very welcome to attend.

ABTAPL publishes a Bulletin three times each year, in March, June and November. This contains a mixture of articles on professional subjects as well as news and events listings. A Union List of Periodicals is maintained on the website of the University of Leicester at www.le.ac.uk/abtapl/ (there is a link to this from ABTAPL’s own website). This includes the journals holdings of approximately 50 member libraries and is an excellent source for interlibrary requests.

Also on ABTAPL’s website is a Directory of Theological and Religious Studies Collections (www.abtapl.org.uk/database/contents.html). This fully searchable database lists institutions (including nonABTAPL members) which have significant collections in Theology and Religious Studies.

ABTAPL also has an email discussion list covering a wide range of topics. It is open to all with an interest in our subject areas and you would be very welcome to join. Full instructions can be found by following the link on ABTAPL’s website to www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/abtapl.html where you can also see the archive of topics raised on the list. This has been a very brief look at the range of ABTAPL’s activities in the UK. If you have any questions, do get in touch.