

Two Fortnights in Sheffield: A Report on a Law Librarian Exchange by Cindy May, Head of Cataloging at University of Wisconsin-Madison

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In October and November of 2002 I had the golden opportunity to live and work in Sheffield, England, on a “professional development attachment” to the Crookesmoor Library, the law library of the University of Sheffield. This article recounts my experience there and some of the ideas I’ve brought home. I begin with a little background on the exchange program and on the city of Sheffield itself. Secondly, I give a brief overview of legal education in England and describe the three law libraries I visited. I then highlight the major differences I noted between those three libraries and my own. Next, I summarize what I learned about online catalogs, budget issues, and interlibrary cooperation in the Sheffield area. Finally, I examine the value of this experience both for me and for my institution.

How It All Started

Steve Barkan, University of Wisconsin Law Library Director, visited the University of Sheffield in summer 2001 to set up a law student exchange program. While he was there, Steve met Sheffield’s library director, Michael Hannon. The two of them began to explore the idea of a law library staff exchange between our universities, and their discussion quickly came to fruition when Sheffield’s Academic Liaison Librarian for law and education, Maria Mawson, came to Madison for four weeks in the spring of 2002. My visit to Sheffield in the fall was Wisconsin’s reciprocal half of this first exchange.

Sheffield

Sheffield is a picturesque city just on the eastern edge of the Peak District National Park, probably best known to the American public as the setting for “The Full Monty.” The city has moved well beyond its industrial revolution steel town image, with lots of green space and beautiful public buildings. The people I met there were incredibly friendly, and their hospitality more than made up for the rainy fall weather.

Legal Education

In England, law is an undergraduate major. After graduation, students may opt to continue their education at a vocational law school to prepare themselves for a career in law. England retains the distinction between solicitors, who deal directly with clients, and barristers, who present cases in court. Solicitor training requires one additional year of school beyond the undergraduate degree, and barrister training requires two. Graduates who did not major in law may proceed to solicitor or barrister training after completion of a one-year catch-up course, known as a “conversion” course. Syllabi for all three courses are very practice-oriented and are determined by the bar.

Law Libraries

The Crookesmoor Library, a branch of the University of Sheffield Library, is housed in the Crookesmoor Building together with the rest of the Department of Law. The library serves 1,250 law students, primarily undergraduates. The Department of Law also offers the one-year conversion course, and the library provides materials for those students in a special room. The library houses a large print collection of primary British, European, and Commonwealth materials; legal periodicals and treatises; and a computer area with twenty workstations. The staff consists of 6.5 FTE who work together as a team, sharing reference/circulation desk duties. Evening and weekend staff are rotated in from the main library.

The other university in town, Sheffield Hallam University, is spread over three campuses, each with its own "learning centre." The Collegiate Learning Centre that I visited covers the subjects of law, history, English, health, psychology, education, and ESL. Currently there are 647 FTE law students and one librarian "law specialist." The library is open 24/7, with two security guards in attendance at night and multiple video monitors in the entrance area. Students check out their own books at a self-charge machine in the large lobby. While they're waiting, they can entertain themselves by reading a scrolling electronic sign that offers "interesting facts," the sign and its facts rented as a package. The library contains over three hundred computers, some dedicated to the catalog and library resources only, others for open use. Some are even password-protected for students with disabilities. The print collection of legal materials is quite small; the emphasis is definitely on electronic resources. A small café area with tables and vending machines is located within the library.

The College of Law of England and Wales comprises five branches. The York branch, which I visited, enrolls 600-650 students. The director of all five branch libraries is stationed in London, visiting each library on a rotating basis. All five branch libraries share networked resources, although their print collections are handled independently. Like Sheffield Hallam, the library at York concentrates on electronic resources. It houses four IT suites (computer labs) with a total of 64 computers. The York branch is essentially maintained by two librarians who have managed to find the time, wedged between acquisitions and cataloging and circulation and reference duties, to create an inviting space with elegant signage and many helpful guides to the collection.

Notable Differences

At all three of these schools, students rely on the library to supply required course readings. As a result, libraries order multiple copies of titles from faculty reading lists. This is economical for the students, but significantly reduces the amount of money available for other purchases.

Another striking difference between academic libraries in Sheffield and those in the U.S. is the absence of student employees. Administrators were surprised at the extent to which the University of Wisconsin has institutionalized student employment, with campus-wide standardized pay scales and a centralized student employment office. They are very enthusiastic about the idea of employing students in Sheffield's libraries for more efficient use

For more testimonials, see the [FCIL-SIS International Visits Committee Website](#).

of limited resources, and posed some hard questions (e.g. what to do about no-shows at the circulation desk during exam periods) which I naturally forwarded to my more knowledgeable colleagues back home.

Possibly as a result of a primary clientele of undergraduates, polite reminders about noise abound. I was especially fond of the wording on the sign posted just inside Crookesmoor's entrance: "Welcome to the library. Please help to maintain Crookesmoor Library as a quiet place for study." Sheffield Hallam has separate rooms for group study, quiet study, and silent study, with prominent signage. Even the library at York, catering to graduate students, has a designated "silent room."

Library Catalogs

As Head of Cataloging at Wisconsin, I was especially interested in Sheffield's cataloging policies and practices. I was surprised to learn that Talis Information Limited serves not only as the source of their automated system, but also as the source of the bibliographic records they use for copy cataloging. Talis is, in effect, their ILS and bibliographic utility rolled into one.

Call numbers include sequence, classification, and suffix. Like Wisconsin, Sheffield's law library shelves volumes in separate sequences for reference, reserve, periodicals, primary materials, treatises, etc. These sequences are recorded as the first part of the call number. The classification part of the call number is a Dewey Decimal number. Every library I visited in Sheffield uses the Dewey Decimal classification, with the exception of a few of the public library branches that use the "book store" arrangement of books into broad topical areas. The "suffix" part of the call number consists of the first letter of the author's last name or, if the book lacks an author, the first letter of the title. Obviously, this results in many identical call numbers, but they're not considered a problem because volumes are uniquely identified by their bar codes.

[The University of Sheffield's OPAC is called Star](#). In addition to author, title, and key word searches, Star can be used to find out whether a serial is held at any of the nearly one hundred libraries, both on and off campus, which contribute to the Sheffield Union List of Serials.

Sheffield Hallam uses Innovative Interfaces as its ILS. The public library system uses Epixtech (formerly Dynix). Although I was surprised to discover that Epixtech is a non-MARC system, I was impressed by its ability to route new books in different orders of precedence among the library's 27 branches, so each branch receives its fair share of brand new titles.

The "catalog versus home page" debate concerning access to electronic resources is alive and well in Sheffield. The University of Sheffield relies on its home page almost exclusively. The only electronic resources in the catalog are e-journals, and they are simply linked to the e-journal page of the library web site. By contrast, the philosophy at Sheffield Hallam is that access to electronic resources should be through the catalog, and that creating separate lists of electronic resources on the library's web site would be unjustifiable duplication of effort.

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Regardless of system, dedication to high quality cataloging and authority control were evident in every cataloger I met. The Head of Cataloging at the University of Sheffield and I were so immediately congenial that we decided it must have something to do with “cataloger’s wave length.”

Budgets

In my discussions with library administrators and in meetings I attended, I was repeatedly struck by the extent to which libraries in England and the USA are facing the same pressing issues, including collection management in the face of steeply rising subscription costs combined with budget and space constraints, fund allocation decisions between print and electronic resources, and electronic licensing restrictions. There were times when I could close my eyes and easily imagine myself at a meeting back home (except for the classy accents, of course). In fact, the University of Sheffield is committed to a zero collection growth policy by 2005, and is planning a new library that will be almost entirely electronic.

To help bridge the gap between needs and resources, librarians in Sheffield have become experts at pursuing grant funding. I read a successful application for a digitization project that was an absolute gem, and saw several innovative public library initiatives brought about entirely through grant funding, including the installation of computers for public Internet access in all branches, computer training for all staff, bookmobile service for disadvantaged groups, and even baby packs for every Sheffield birth.

Library Cooperation

The University of Sheffield Library is a member of both RLG and its British equivalent, CURL (Consortium of University Research Libraries). CURL’s union catalog, COPAC, is used as a backup when Star has to be taken down for any reason.

SINTO, the Sheffield Information Organisation, is a partnership of library and information services of all types in South Yorkshire and North Derbyshire with the aim of improving the quality of information services through cooperation, planning and partnership. Crookesmoor Library participates in the SINTO Legal Information Group, which has published a pamphlet entitled “Looking for Legal Information in Sheffield.”

Crookesmoor was also part of the ambitious Case Project (<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/case/>), a grant-funded feasibility study to evaluate the possibility of enhancing access to legal research materials through increased collaboration among seven university law libraries in the region. The project experimented with pilot projects for virtual reference service, legal document delivery, consortial purchasing, a union catalog, collection descriptions, a web gateway, a repository of documents relating to information skills law students need, and online tutorials. The two-year project will be completed at the end of February 2003 and a final report will be submitted by the project manager.

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Outcomes

On an institutional level, this first exchange represents an enhanced level of interlibrary cooperation and knowledge transfer. As staff at our two libraries get to know one another, there will be a greater willingness to draw on one another's expertise. We at Wisconsin will have at our fingertips a group of law librarians with a total accumulation of many years of experience in British and European legal research. And likewise our colleagues in Sheffield will be able to call upon us for assistance with U.S. legal research questions. The level of service at both institutions will be raised and strengthened symbiotically.

On a personal level, my visit to Yorkshire was incredibly valuable for my professional growth. I returned to Wisconsin much more knowledgeable about English legal education and the issues faced by law libraries there. I was able to compare and contrast policies and practices in several libraries, and then compare them with those at Wisconsin. I was able to inventory the primary materials in Crookesmoor's collection, and bring that information back to assist the collection development librarians with decision-making here at home. I developed professional relationships with colleagues whom I can contact should I ever need their help with a reference request, a resource evaluation, or an explanation of policy choices. And I was inspired by the team spirit, positive attitude, and social commitment exhibited by the librarians I met throughout my visit. I returned home with renewed enthusiasm for my job and my library, and that's got to benefit the library as well as me. I sincerely hope that our two libraries will be able to continue these short-term exchanges in the future, and heartily recommend them to other institutions.

I want to thank Steve Barkan, University of Wisconsin Law Library Director; Nancy Paul, Assistant Director for Technical Services and Collections; and Michael Hannon, University of Sheffield Director of Library Services and University Librarian, for making this exchange possible. I also want to thank the Law Librarians Association of Wisconsin for its financial help. And I especially want to thank all my colleagues at the Crookesmoor Library, the Main Library, and all the other libraries I visited, for going out of their way to make my visit a success. I'll never forget how generous they were with their time, and how willing to share their knowledge and experience with me. Special thanks to Maria Mawson, my unofficial hostess extra ordinaire, for all the time she spent scheduling appointments for me before my arrival, accompanying me to meetings, chauffeuring me around and about, and just generally ensuring that I was comfortable and content every day I was there. Maybe next time I'm in Sheffield someone will finally tell me where those Full Monty guys perform!