

Meeting the needs of researchers in the new main library at the University of Birmingham



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The new main library at the University of Birmingham opened its doors on 19 September 2016, the first day of welcome week at the start of the academic year. The new building was the outcome of many years of planning and thought about the needs of the modern student and the staff who teach them. Researchers were not forgotten, and the building was designed to meet the requirements of our approximately 3,000 postgraduate research students, nearly 3,000 academic staff and around 26,000 taught students.

The new library was designed to provide an inspirational space and state-of-the-art facilities as well as improving access to our wide-ranging collections. It is spread over five floors, with 62km of shelving and over 1,800 seats. It contains a variety of study spaces, including group study rooms, individual desks and informal seating, a media room and a training suite with a panoramic view of the surrounding campus. This article will focus on two key elements of the building that were predominantly designed to meet the needs of researchers: the Research Reserve and the Research Suite.

The Research Reserve

As with many research-intensive universities, the library had struggled for many years to find space for physical stock. Despite early participation in the UKRR scheme and periodic weeding of monographs, over 16,000 linear metres of older material was kept in closed access library stores, in sometimes poor environmental conditions. Items were fetched from these stores twice a day and only on extremely rare occasions were academic staff able to browse the stock. We were also aware that a lot of old or low-use items were sitting on the shelves of the old main library, making the library less attractive and making it harder for students to find the material they wanted because of a very complicated stock layout. The library did not necessarily want to withdraw these items, as their potential for research use was still evident, but a new solution was required. The challenge when designing the new library was therefore how to house lower-use, heritage collections mainly of interest to researchers whilst at the same time providing the range of study spaces and new technology expected in a modern library.

Although we considered building an annexe, it was decided that the lower ground floor of the library would form a Research Reserve to house the university's lower-use collections. The Research Reserve contains 50,000 linear metres of mobile shelving, and accommodates journals, monographs, newspapers, microfilms and audio-visual material, as well as some special collections material shelved in a secure area.

The balance in the new library is now around 20% of the collections on the open shelves and 80% in the Research Reserve. In order to decide how the collections should be split, an extensive modelling exercise was carried out to test different criteria. Past usage was clearly an important factor, as was how recently the material had been purchased. In preparation for moving to the new library, it was decided that the criteria for the open shelves would be:

- borrowed at least once since 1 August 2011 (i.e. during the five years prior to the new library opening), or
- purchased since 1 August 2014 (i.e. two years prior to the new library opening), or
- published since 2006 in the case of items in the reference collections.

We also made the decision that pamphlets and oversize books would normally be stored in the Research Reserve, except in exceptional cases, due to their fragility and non-standard sizes. In the case of periodicals, only current, print-only subscriptions were earmarked for the open shelves in the new library. Any material not fitting the criteria for the open shelves was designated for the Research Reserve, although some exceptions were made, for example for classic reference works. Sets and series were kept together either on the open shelves or in the Research Reserve, depending where most volumes fit the criteria.

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Items stored in the Research Reserve have a link from our resource discovery system (FindIt@bham, <http://findit.bham.ac.uk>) to a request form. Staff fetch the requested items throughout the day seven days a week. Currently, 85% of requests are satisfied within a day. Items for loan are made ready for collection on the ground floor, and reference items can be consulted in a room next to the reserve. Despite the fact that the items stored in the reserve are all low usage, the aggregate usage has been high, and the average number of requests per month is between 1,500 and 2,000. Requests may also be made for book chapters or articles to be scanned. Although this is a free service, the take-up has been low. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we have found that around 70% of the fetching requests each month come from the College of Arts and Law. Around 20% of the total requests received come from staff and students of the history department alone, with substantial usage also from classics, ancient history and archaeology; English literature; law; English language and linguistics; and modern languages. Around 80% of the requests are for monographs.



Research Reserve

To address concerns about the fact that less material is available on the open shelves, we offer a browsing service for academics and researchers. Tutors may also request the browsing service for individual taught students undertaking their dissertations. Our subject advisors regularly deliver an introductory session in the reserve that includes basic health and safety training (for example on how to use the ladders and mobile shelving). Once people have received this training, they are able to book a browsing session, with library staff on hand to direct them to the section that is of interest to them. The layout of the Research Reserve was designed with the requirement for monograph browsing very much in mind. The new library contains stock from the old main library as well as two stores and four site libraries, and during the move significant effort was put into interfiling as many books as possible into a single sequence. People browsing the reserve are provided with small trolleys and can take items out into the consultation room. As of mid-March 2017, 275 individuals had attended the introductory sessions. The majority were reassured that the stock was 'safe' and were happy to apply for items online rather than browse. From the beginning of January until 13 March, there had been 86 visits to browse from 52 individuals, most of the usage again coming from members of the College of Arts and Law.

The Research Suite

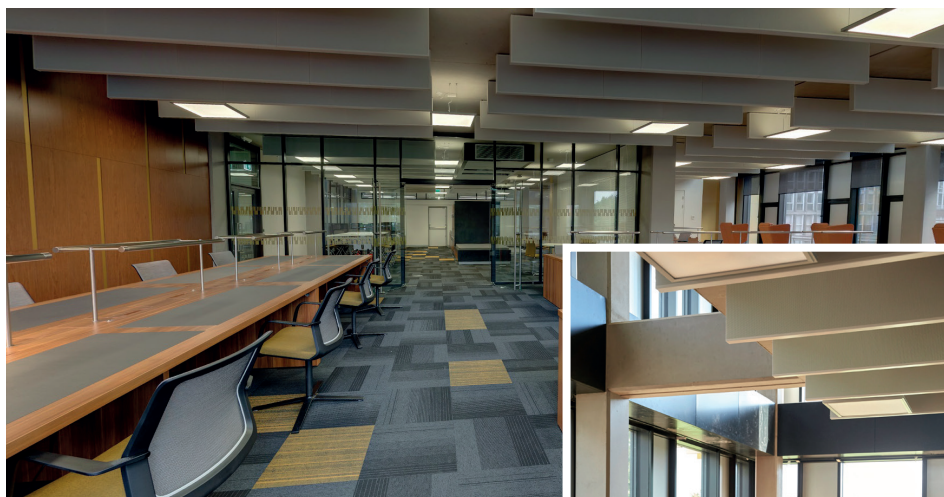
In the old Main Library, we provided a space for academics and researchers in rooms originally occupied by special collections before their move to the purpose-built Cadbury Research Library (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/cadbury/>). The aim in the new library was to create a space specifically designed for use by this group, and this proved a popular retreat from a building dominated by the requirements of taught students.

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The Research Suite is located in one corner of the building, facing east and south. Controlled access restricts entrance to eligible users. The suite consists of two rooms, the first of which, with a capacity of 34, has various uses and contains a small computer cluster, a break-out area, lockers and a drinks machine. The second room was created to look like a more traditional library, while at the same time fitting in with the overall modern look of the building. A mahogany veneer on one of the walls and on the large study desks helps to create the traditional look. The desks have task lighting and leather-look inlay. A number of high-backed individual armchairs provide a more relaxed option. This room has seating for 49. A snapshot of usage in March showed well over 60 people using the suite.



Research Suite

Comments show that the suite is appreciated:

Just discovered the postgrad/staff Research Suite @UoBLibServices, complete with comfy sofas, coffee machine & glorious silence – bliss!

I am very impressed with the Post Graduate suite.



When the old library is knocked down and the 'Green Heart' parkland is created in the centre of the campus, this corner of the building will have magnificent views.



New Library

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Appointment rooms

Another improved facility in the new library is the six appointment rooms for use for individual meetings with students by subject advisors and Academic Skills Centre staff. In the old library there was only one such room and many subject advisors ran advice sessions for individuals at their desks in shared offices. Although not exclusively for use with research students, these rooms have proved invaluable in enabling staff to run focused sessions.

Although the new library has been designed to be attractive to the students of the university, it was certainly not designed solely with the taught students in mind. With provision of dedicated study space, and the facility to bring together collections that were previously dispersed across multiple sites, in poor condition and not always browsable, the new facility has much to offer researchers at the university.

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