

AND THIS IS THE BEST VIEW . . .

A New Location for The John Oxley Library

Abstract

The John Oxley Library was founded in Brisbane in the 1920s by private citizens. Since 1949 it has been a separate library within the State Library of Queensland. Manuscript and archival material has been collected from the inception of the Library. The collection has continued to grow and the methods of arrangement and description have developed, despite changes in location and staff shortages. The collections of the John Oxley Library are now established in the new Queensland State Library building in The Queensland Cultural Centre.

Introduction

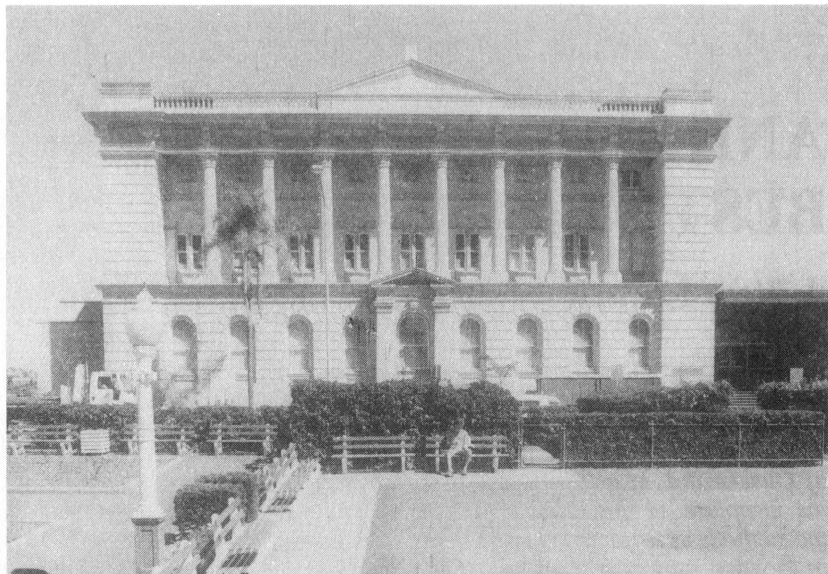
The John Oxley Library is a branch of the Queensland State Library and is vested with the responsibility of collecting, preserving and making available sources which document the history and development of Queensland. Sources relating to its immediate neighbours which have a direct link to the state are also collected. In a similar manner to other state collections, the holdings are divided into the general reference collection and the special collections. The general collection includes books, pamphlets, maps, government publications, newspapers, and ephemera. The special collections include photographs, original art, rare books and the manuscripts and records collections.

The records of the Queensland State Government, State courts and local government bodies are the responsibility of the Queensland State Archives which is also a branch of the State Library of Queensland.

The John Oxley Library collections have recently moved to their new home on the fourth floor of the new Queensland State Library Building in the Queensland Cultural Centre. This move has reunited the collections and is the latest stage in the growth and development of the John Oxley Library and its manuscripts and records collections.

The Development of the John Oxley Library

Public library services in Queensland have traditionally been behind those



The Queensland State Library Building in William St. Completed in 1879 as the Queensland Museum, it was converted to house the Public Library in 1902 and remained the headquarters of the State Library of Queensland until January, 1988.

of the southern states. The Public Library was opened in 1902 and local areas were served by Schools of Arts and private libraries. The development of research libraries devoted to the history and literature of the state was also delayed and it was not until the 1920s that a public library of Queensland literature was founded in Brisbane.¹

The John Oxley Library has its beginnings in the work of the Brisbane Centenary Celebrations Committee which was formed to commemorate the centenary of the discovery of Brisbane by John Oxley.² The celebrations were held in 1924 and the remaining funds were vested in the Oxley Centenary Fund. It was decided that the funds would be used to erect a permanent memorial to John Oxley in the form of a granite cairn to be placed on North Quay. The remaining funds were to be used to endow a library called the Oxley Memorial Library of Queensland to collect and preserve Queensland literature. In 1930 the funds were placed in the hands of a Committee of Advice for the Oxley Memorial Library, and the scope of the collection was widened to include the history of Queensland and Australia.³

Private collections of books and manuscripts were obtained and the Oxley Memorial Library's first home was in the Brisbane City Hall. As space and funding grew short the State Government provided

accommodation in the Public Library Building in William Street and provided financial assistance for running costs. The Oxley Memorial Library was officially opened to the public in 1934 and in 1935 a librarian was appointed from the Public Library staff. With the formation of the Library Board of Queensland in 1943, and in the light of the Metcalfe report into public library services in Brisbane and the continual growth of the Oxley Memorial Library, the Committee decided to vest the collections and funds in the Library Board of Queensland. This was achieved by the *Oxley Memorial Library of Queensland Act of 1946* when the Library became a separate collection within the Public Library. It was to form the basis of the state historical and geographical collection. The Oxley Memorial Library Advisory Committee was appointed by the Library Board to advise on acquisitions and the operation of the Oxley Memorial Library. Collecting continued and manuscripts, books and government records were added to the holdings by donation and purchase.⁴ The library continued to expand and by 1959 part 4 of the Library Act dealing with public records was proclaimed and the Queensland State Archives were established from the nucleus of records collected by the Oxley⁵. In 1974 the name of Oxley Memorial Library was changed to the John Oxley Library to remove the confusion with the Brisbane suburb of Oxley.⁶

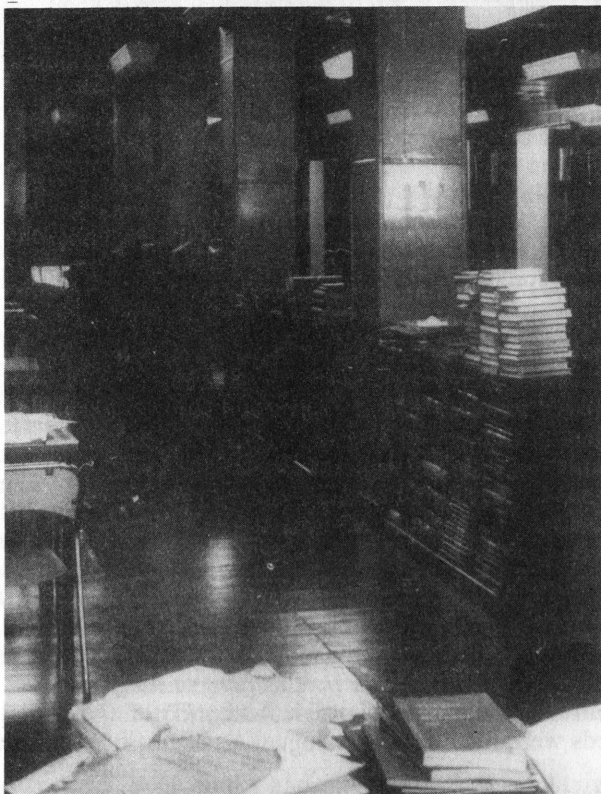
The Manuscripts Collection

The acquisition of manuscripts and archival sources has always been an integral part of the Library's operations. Collections were obtained by purchase and donation by the Committee of Advice and the holdings increased once the library was integrated into the State Library. Typescripts, letters, minutes and manuscripts were entered in the card catalogue with an added entry under subject. Material was filed by form and the card noted as to the location. Large collections such as the Leslie Letters were filed in one sequence and treated as a separate subject.⁷ These methods were used until 1964 when the manuscript and archival records were placed in a separate manuscripts collection. The holdings were reorganised by their provenance and their form was disregarded. Each manuscripts collection was filed separately by its provenance under a unique number. This consists of the prefix OM, year of processing and a running number. For example, OM64-1 denotes the Rosa Campbell Praed Collection which was the first collection processed in 1964. The collection number was also used as the shelf number. Description sheets modelled on the *Guide to Manuscripts Relating to Australia* were compiled and filed in collection number order. Author/Title and added entry by subject cards were filed in the catalogue. An accessions register was also instituted.

Changes in Location

While the methods of arranging and describing the collection remained

relatively stable, the physical location was changing. The library always suffered from a lack of space. From 1946 further accommodation was required, and in 1948 there was space for only two readers and the shelves were overcrowded. By 1950 plans were in hand to allow the library to expand as was housed in a room only 38 feet long by 17 feet wide. By 1954 the library was being remodelled and the space was expanded to 2,000 square feet by 1955 the remodelling was complete and the library had cold cathode lighting, a suspended ceiling, a view of South Brisbane and was painted in pastel shades and bright colours. For a time the collection was left in peace, but by 1961 plans were being made to remodel the library once again. In 1964 the library was moved to temporary premises in George Street and did not return to William Street until 1966. It now had air conditioned quarters and the grand total of six staff. By the 1970s the collection was outgrowing the available space, and in the late 1970s material in the other collections was relocated to accommodate the growing manuscripts collection.⁸



This temporary accommodation in George St was used during the 1960s while the William St building was remodelled.

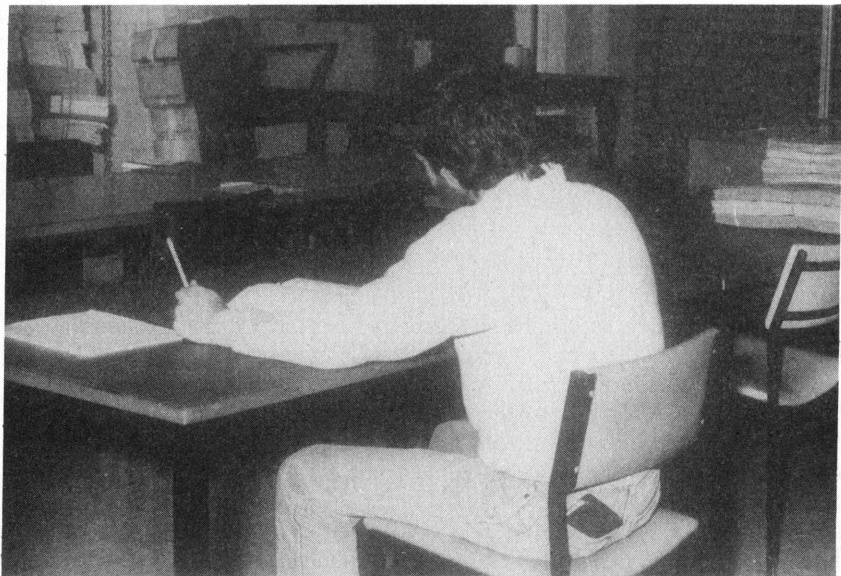
In 1977 the newspaper collections of the State Library and the John Oxley were transferred to a building in Costin Street in Fortitude Valley. In 1980 Cabinet agreed to accommodation of the library in the new State Library Building in the Cultural Centre. In 1981, due to a lack of space, the larger unprocessed collections from the manuscripts collection were transferred to Costin Street.⁹

While it was acknowledged the building was unsatisfactory it had sufficient room to house the collection and to allow processing to be carried out efficiently. Room for expansion was required as larger collections of records were located and accessioned. In 1983 the whole of the manuscript and records collections were transferred to Costin Street. Shelving was installed and areas renovated to provide a reading room and separate processing area¹⁰. Costin Street entered the litany of the State Library as the ends of the earth. It leaked, was grimy, had no air conditioning or humidity control, and security and fire prevention methods were somewhat primitive. The readers and staff were alternatively boiled or frozen and the stack areas were open to public view, and entry to the work area was difficult to control. There was absolutely no view. The only light at the end of the tunnel was the new building.

Developments Over the Last Ten Years

While the collection was inadequately housed it was not inadequately administered.¹¹ In 1979 a new position was created to assist with the manuscripts collection and carry out field work, which had been carried out by other staff on a part time basis. A separate collection was established in 1979 to organise the large number of accessions of business and other records which had been added to the collection through the increased field work.¹² In 1980 a full time field officer was appointed and this allowed the internal transfer of a full time and qualified archivist to the manuscripts and records collections.¹³ These changes allowed a substantial backlog of accessioned but unprocessed material to be arranged and described. With the transfer to Costin Street the collections were reboxed in archivally sound materials and shelved. Microfilming of the heavily used collections began in 1984¹⁴ and in the absence of a conservator, small amounts of contract conservation were carried out. Large collections which had been gathered in previous years were processed into the records collection and series descriptions were completed. By 1984 an extra position of Business Records Librarian was filled.¹⁵

From the beginning of 1985 a CEP project to shelf check the collection by temporary and contract staff was initiated and basic conservation work such as wrapping in acid-free paper, reboxing and removal of paper clips is being carried out. A further CEP project to transcribe the records of the Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria in preparation for automated retrieval was also initiated at this time¹⁶.



The reading room and staff work areas at Costin St.



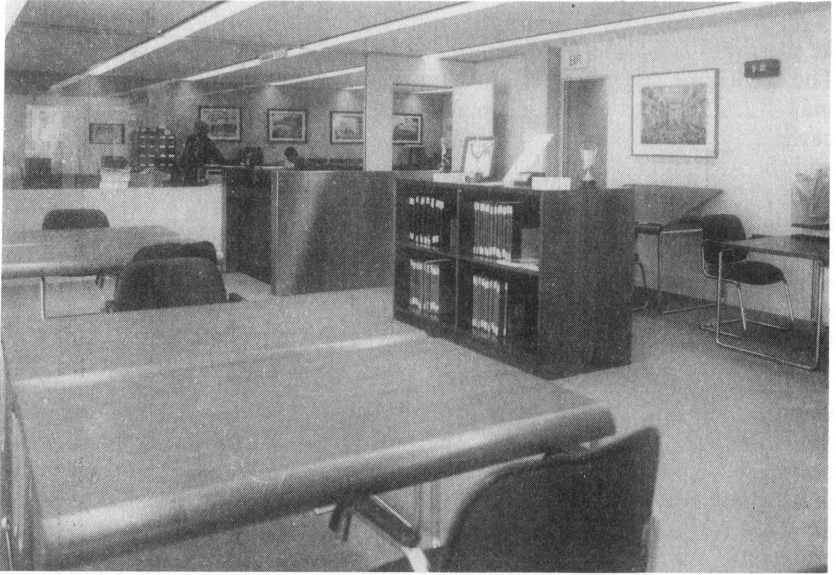
At the end of 1986 a new Manuscripts Librarian joined the staff and at the same time the new position of Manuscript Indexer was filled.¹⁷ The additional staff allowed the plans for the automated retrieval of the manuscripts collection to be implemented. The subject indexing is being carried out using Library of Congress Subject Headings and keywords and the Australian MARC specifications onto the Library's Online Public Access Catalogue using the ORACLE programme developed by the Queensland State Library. Modifications to the existing State Library of Queensland cataloguing procedures were made to accommodate the nature of the collections. At the same time the backlog of undescribed manuscript collections is being reduced and processing continues on the records of the Uniting Church, the largest archival group held.

The donation records are being documented on a Sperry micro computer, using Enable software. This programme is utilised by all sections of the State Library. Extensive use is made of the personal computer for the compilation of finding aids and answering reference queries. Further work is now being carried out on the automation of other finding aids, such as those to the church registers, which form a significant part of the collections. With the completion of the project to transcribe the records of the Diocese of Carpentaria the contract typist commenced to type the backlog of the descriptive sheets which had built up. A series guide to the records collection was also published and is now being distributed. A programme of publishing significant collections, such as the Diary of Lucy and Eva Gray, who lived on stations in North West Queensland late last century, is under way.

A New View

While the work progressed in Costin Street, the new building was rising on the South Bank. The building is the fourth stage of the Queensland Cultural Centre, and like the other buildings in the complex was designed by Robin Gibson and Partners. The contractors were Graham Evans & Co. (Qld.) Pty. Ltd. Situated on the Brisbane River, it commands sweeping views of both the river and the central business district. The storage areas are located on the western side and the reading rooms overlook the river and a central courtyard highlighted by established poinciana and jacaranda trees. Natural light is a feature of the foyer, staff areas and reading rooms. Construction of the building began in 1985 and it was completed in late 1987.¹⁸ On the 22nd of January 1988 the State Library building in William St closed. By mid February the manuscripts and records collections, now occupying in excess of 1100 shelf metres and more than 2000 collections, were installed in the new building. The remainder of the John Oxley and State Library collections followed and the building was officially opened on the 8th of April as a fully operational unit.

The manuscript and records collections are now stored in a purpose



Staff work areas and the reading room in the new building.



built and archivally sound area, above flood level. This, by dint of good management, also happens to have the best view of the entire building, which is an unexpected but nonetheless appreciated bonus. Apart from the view the area is air conditioned and humidity controlled to archival standards. There is adequate work space with room for expansion for both staff and collections. The field officer is located close by, and access to the printed collection for biographical and administrative history sources is vastly improved. Access to senior and other staff is no longer by phone, improving communications and the flow of new collections to the area. A fully equipped conservation laboratory is located on the first floor, as are the photographic staff, although microfilming is still completed by another government department outside the building.

The collections are housed in a secure area and are no longer open to public view. A Halon gas system, twenty-four-hour security and smoke and movement detectors ensure the collection is well guarded. Reader service has improved through a reading room which allows stricter supervision of readers and which is clean and dust free. A small scholars' room is provided for interstate readers or those working on restricted material such as the church records. Two microfiche readers allow access to the more heavily used collections which have been filmed. A display area near the foyer allows public awareness of the collection to be fostered. Readers no longer have to make a special trip to the Valley to use the collections, and access is possible for disabled readers where previously collections were sent to the William Street building. Provision has been made for computer terminals in the work and reading rooms. A small



The view from the staff work area looking across the river to the central Business District and down to Expo.

seminar room in the main part of the Library will allow small groups to meet.

And This is the Best View

The collections have travelled a long way since their humble and somewhat fragmented beginnings and it is fitting that the new building with its sweeping views and improved facilities will be their final home.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Library Board of Queensland *Annual Report for the year 1976-77*, p. 39.
- 2 John Oxley was appointed Surveyor General in 1811 and in 1823 explored the Queensland Coast. His report was followed by the establishment of Penal Settlement at Moreton Bay which later became Brisbane. *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Vol 2, Melbourne, 1967, p.306.
- 3 Oxley Memorial Library *Notes on the origin and growth of the Oxley Memorial Library*, 1945.
J.L. Stapleton *News and notes from the Public Library*, text of a radio broadcast delivered 15 April 1950, John Oxley Library.
M. Walker *The John Oxley Library*, text of a talk delivered to the Queensland Women's Historical Association, 13th March, 1980.
- 4 Library Board of Queensland *Annual Report* 1946, p. 31.
- 5 *Ibid* 1960, p.10.
- 6 *Ibid* 1975, p.7.
- 7 *Archives and Manuscripts* Vol 1, Number 3, December 1956, pp.20-21.
- 8 The information in the paragraph is taken from the following sources
Library Board of Queensland, *Annual Report*, 1946, p.27,
Ibid 1948, p.3,
Ibid 1954, p.6,
Ibid 1955, p.12,
Ibid 1966, p.2.
Minutes of the Oxley Memorial Library Advisory Committee, May 1969.
- 9 Library Board of Queensland *Annual Report* 1977, p.28,
Ibid 1981, p.14.
- 10 *Minutes of The John Oxley Library Advisory Committee* April 1983, October 1983.
- 11 *Minutes of the John Oxley Library Advisory Committee* May 1979.
- 12 *Ibid* May 1979.
- 13 *John Oxley Journal* Volume 1, Number 5, May/June 1980, p. 2.
- 14 *Minutes of the John Oxley Library Advisory Committee* December 1984
- 15 Library Board of Queensland *Annual Report for the year 1984-1985*, p. 18.
- 16 *Minutes of The John Oxley Advisory Committee* November 1984.
- 17 Library Board of Queensland *Administration Circular* No 43, 17th October, 1986.
Ibid No 39, 19th September 1986.
- 18 Library Board of Queensland *The State Library of Queensland*, Brisbane, Government Printer, 1988.