



Sue Reynolds has many tips for new library tourists intent on slipping back through time to soak up the ambience in some of Britain's most renowned libraries.

Recently I was walking through Cambridge, England (as opposed to Cambridge, Massachusetts*) on my way to visit the Wren Library at Trinity College when I noticed a small sign at the entrance to Magdalene College pointing the way to the Pepys Library. Samuel Pepys, I thought to myself, the diary writer and the man who had his bookshelves purpose-built to house his collection arranged by size. And in I went, before continuing on to see Christopher Wren's beautiful room with his specially designed library furniture still in use today.

Oxford has many historical libraries too and probably the most famous is the Bodleian Library at the university. You can arrange a short tour of Duke Humfrey's Library on the day of your visit but to have an extended tour, including the medieval Old Library in the cathedral and the round Radcliffe Camera, you should check online. It took two trips to Oxford, a decade apart, for me to get it right and then I found I had missed out on the opportunity to visit the 14th century Merton College Library. Travellers' tip: check websites before a visit to avoid a missed opportunity. Pleading that you have come all the way from Australia to visit a library does not generally open doors. The libraries are working libraries and are not very keen on tourists interrupting their calm outside of prescribed visiting hours.

Having visited Trinity College, Cambridge I felt the need to also visit its counterpart in Ireland, and some other Dublin libraries too. A great way to see them is by using the hop on and off tourist bus. The route includes the Guinness Brewery but perhaps go there last and start at the Old Library at Trinity College with its magnificent Long Room and the famous *Book of Kells* on display. Then on to the Chester Beatty Library (more like a museum than a library), the National Library of Ireland, and Bishop Narcissus Marsh's library where the patrons were locked in wire cages to protect the books.

In England you can visit Hereford Cathedral to see a library where the books are still chained and locked, as they have been since the middle ages. You can also view the 13th

century Mappa Mundi and if you have the time, continue on to Hay-on-Wye, the Welsh border town famous for its secondhand bookshops, less than hour down the road.

Back in London you mustn't miss the new British Library. Prince Charles is not a fan of its architecture and recommended walking in backwards but once inside you should certainly turn around to take in the magnificent glass tower which houses George III's library; its inclusion was an afterthought, but a stunning one. To see more of the building you need to book a tour but visit the Treasures of the British Library permanent exhibition anytime to view the Lindisfarne Gospels, a Gutenberg Bible, the Alice in Wonderland manuscript and the scribbles which became some of the Beatles' most famous compositions. The library is next to St Pancras Station – the departure point for library destinations throughout Europe if you have the time. Search for 'beautiful libraries' on the internet to make your choices.

You can also pop into the London Library for a free Monday evening tour of the newly refurbished building. This library is a subscription library founded in 1841 and is known for its eccentric classification system (no Dewey Decimals here) and

its famous clientele, past and present, including Charles Dickens, Charles Darwin and Prince Charles, punctuation queen Lynn Truss, and Michael Palin, traveller par excellence himself. You never know who you might see.

Travel too is like that – serendipitous. Get into practice by starting with an historical state, parliamentary, university or supreme court library, or a state-of-the-art public or academic library in your own backyard, while saving your travel dollars and preparing to visit libraries further away by travelling the world wide web in the meantime.

Dr Sue Reynolds

Lecturer, RMIT University
sue.reynolds@rmit.edu.au

* Where Harvard University and its own famous library, the Widener*, are located. The Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library is not open to visitors – which only makes it more desirable. As an aside, the Widener librarian apparently has to be able to swim as a requirement of the position because Harry Widener died on the Titanic.

