

Living through a building project

Richard Wake
Deputy Librarian, University of Southampton
R.L.Wake@soton.ac.uk

The Hartley Library is the largest library in the University of Southampton library system. It was extended and redesigned in a major project during the 1980s, but in the period since then the university has greatly increased in size, and the library has expanded to fill all the available shelving. The archives and manuscripts in special collections have also increased beyond the capacity of the available storage. The university established a task force which recommended that additional space should be added to the library, and serious planning began in 1998. The following account is by no means complete, but aims to paint a picture of how the project developed, from planning to the present (the project is not completed as I write), and of how the library sought to maintain its services.

Planning

The first stage was to identify the project's goals. In our case, there were several aims, which between them offered improvements of direct and immediate benefit to all major groups of library users

- Additional library shelving and study areas, adding 3395 square metres to the Hartley Library (an approximate increase of 30%)
- Greatly improved special collections storage and facilities, including new staff working areas and a manuscript reading room twice the size of the previous one
- Re-arrangement of the stock, including moving all periodical titles to one sequence
- New enquiry services
- Improved study environment, including improved access to electronic resources

Having decided what we wanted, we then had to deal with the constraints which limited what could be achieved, and these fell into a number of groups

- Technical constraints. Because the project is an extension to an existing building, there are some things which are either impractical or even impossible to achieve, and some plans had to be modified or abandoned. The site of a tree, for example, determined that the new exterior wall would be curved instead of straight.
- Institutional constraints. The main constraint was financial, because the university is currently undertaking a large capital development programme, and so the available funding was strictly limited. This was important as the project proceeded and affected a number of decisions, but at the planning stage meant that a number of features were deleted from the project. Other elements, for example institutional culture and the institutional view of the role and purpose of the library, are also relevant. There was debate about the

effect of electronic formats on the use of the traditional printed library, and on the need to provide space for expansion of printed materials, and also about the level of stock withdrawal appropriate to a research library, all of which was opened up by the need to plan the new library. It became clear that our stock withdrawal programme was inadequate, and one result of the building project has been the allocation of more resource to this activity.

- Inter-personal constraints. A large building project involves not only the institution (Library, Estates, Finance) but also contractors, consultants, quantity surveyors, and eventually sub-contractors and manufacturers. As with all projects, the inter-action between different groups is an important element, and as with most projects, this sometimes ran more smoothly than others. Whilst not necessarily preventing anything happening, this element sometimes made things harder and slower to achieve.

Work in progress

At the time of writing, the project is still some way from completion, and eventually there may be as many as five (or more) distinct stages. Up to now, there have been three clearly different stages and the effect of the project on library staff and on library users have been very different.

Stage 1 lasted almost a year, from July 2002 to June 2003. This was the time during which the extension was built. Because the extension wraps around the outside of the building, there was comparatively little disturbance to the library itself. A screen was erected about 1m inside the perimeter on the north and east sides of levels 1 and 3, both large reading rooms, and a number of seats were lost. There was also some re-arrangement of material to enable an interior staircase to be demolished, which led to some strange temporary sequences. But apart from this, and some noisy work from time to time, disruption was limited, and because the work was mostly at the back of the building, some readers appeared to be completely unaware that a building project was in progress.

In some respects, this lack of disruption was a difficulty. People were sometimes surprised to find the changes described above, and when we wished to give out information about forthcoming changes it was done in a context of stability and so not always noticed. But on the whole, this was a period when the situation was fairly stable and the disruption to most users slight.

This changed in June 2003, when the extension was complete and ready for occupation. Besides the new building, there was a programme of substantial refurbishment to most of the library, and this meant that every book on levels 1, 3 and 4 had to be moved. In addition, we were taking the opportunity to alter the sequences, gathering all periodicals together on level 1, and so items were being re-ordered as they were moved. The university community had made it clear that retaining access to material throughout the summer period was a high priority, and so we also had to find a means to ensure access. However, the demands of the refurbishment programme meant that much of the library had to be closed to readers during the summer vacation.

The solution to this was to offer a fetching service. All items in those parts of the library which were closed (almost all science, social science and law material) was requested by readers, collected by library staff, and made available for collection twice daily. There was no possibility of browsing material. This seemed to be surprisingly successful with readers, who on the whole accepted the difficulties of the situation and were very supportive of the library staff, although of course there were frustrated readers at times. On the other hand, the service placed considerable pressure on the library staff who were doing the fetching. Because the library was either recently built or in the process of refurbishment, some of the physical environment was unpleasant at best, and the logistics of the programme meant that some items were moved more than once into temporary locations, making it difficult to keep track of the locations of stock. We did increase our holdings of electronic back files of science journals to relieve some pressure, and the availability of titles online clearly did mean that this was less painful for some readers than it might have been a few years ago.

The intention had been to finish work outside special collections by the beginning of the autumn term, but the programme was always very tight and various difficulties over the summer meant that this was not achieved. The new periodicals level was opened on the first day of the new term, with all journals in place, but other parts, for example group study rooms, not completed. Only about one third of level 3 could be opened. This meant that the fetching service continued for large areas of stock, mostly science and social science books, and this was very difficult for large groups of readers. We employed temporary staff and increased the frequency of collection times, but were clearly offering a much inferior service to large groups of our readers. As this continued through the term, library staff found this increasingly difficult. Liaison librarians were continually in situations of having to explain a service with which we could not be satisfied, and staff at enquiry and service points were continually explaining how material could be obtained, how to find material in temporary locations, and how to find material which had been moved.

The final two stages are to come, a project to remodel the entrance hall to provide a learner centre and to modernise the loans area, providing both a better service and also much improved staff accommodation, which will be in two stages. In addition, this discussion has not considered the extensive work to dramatically improve the facilities for special collections, which could itself be the subject of a similar piece.

Conclusion

One of the most difficult features of the whole project was giving information to readers. There is always the difficulty of knowing the best way to give out information – posters, web sites, email lists, email messages. This was exacerbated by the fact that the university restructured on 1 August 2003 and so a new network of contacts needed to be created. Even more difficult, as the timescales slipped and it became apparent towards the end of the summer vacation that not everything would be ready, was knowing what to say. We took the decision that people wanted accurate information most of all, and so we did not give out target dates or deadlines until very late in the process when we could be confident that we would not miss the dates in question. Whilst this sometimes led to some vagueness, the response we received suggested that this was the correct decision.

This period, and especially the time since June 2003, has been very difficult for everyone connected with the Hartley Library. Many of us have gone through a range of emotions during the project, from optimism at the outset, through highs and lows as things went better or worse, and at present, still some weeks from the re-opening of the final sections of the reading rooms, many staff are frustrated, discouraged or demoralised. On the other hand, we do believe that the project will deliver major improvements to many aspects of the library, and the shelving supplier has already taken some photographs, which must indicate that it looks good. We look forward to the end.