A Second Renaissance:
THE NEW LIBRARY PROJECT
A SECOND RENAISSANCE: AN INTRODUCTION
Corpus Christi College is amongst the oldest of the thirty-eight self-governing colleges that make up the modern University of Oxford. An architectural gem, it has a reputation for academic excellence. It is also admired for the enviable bonds of community amongst the five hundred or so people who comprise it: students, administrative and support staff, and some forty academic Fellows.

As Corpus approaches its 500th anniversary in 2017, the College’s vision for the future draws inspiration from its remarkable past. The first Renaissance institution in Oxford, it pioneered Humanist learning, a radical departure in intellectual life. Today, the College’s 2017 Campaign includes a range of initiatives designed to maintain its excellence in scholarship and education. None is more ambitious or fundamental than the New Library Project, which honours the visionaries of 1517, and adapts the educational purposes of the founding generation to current and future needs.
The early years of Corpus, closely entwined with the story of Renaissance education in England, have bequeathed an arresting intellectual and material legacy. Our Founder, Bishop Richard Fox, who was a chief advisor to Kings Henry VII and Henry VIII, established the College to promote higher standards of education and scholarly inquiry across a range of subjects: notably medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and – no less significant – Greek and Hebrew. Like other scholars of Renaissance Europe, with whom he had many connections, Fox wanted to educate students not just in Latin, the normal language of academic and religious discourse, but also in the languages of the Bible itself. He and the College’s first President, John Claymond, had a keen interest in Hebrew (then called ‘the third language’, in conjunction with Latin and Greek) as well as in Jewish learning more broadly, which they deemed a key to understanding the universe. In consequence, the early community of the College included scholars of Hebrew and Greek. The most celebrated amongst these was the Spanish lawyer and humanist Juan Luis Vives, whose Jewish family had been forced to convert to Christianity and had suffered at the hands of the Inquisition; shortly afterwards a Fellow of Corpus, John Shepreve, was elected the first Regius Professor of Hebrew, a Chair established by Henry VIII.

So successful was its trilingual experiment that Corpus Christi became an unsurpassed centre of classical and Scriptural study. Early in the next century the College quite naturally took the lead in promoting the enterprise that resulted in what we know as the King James Bible, published in 1611. It was John Rainolds, the seventh president of Corpus, who proposed to the King that there be an authorised English translation of Scripture. An outstanding Hebraist, and equally learned in Greek, Rainolds hosted one of the six groups of translators in his College rooms, where they worked on the books of the Prophets.
By definition, Renaissance scholarship required a superior library. Thanks to the generosity of the College’s founder, benefactors and early presidents, Corpus soon built up one of the finest libraries of its time. It was particularly esteemed for its collections in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Erasmus himself extolled ‘the spectacle of this trilingual Library’ and claimed it would equal the Vatican as a magnet for study. When the rules governing the King James Bible project called for accurate translation from the Hebrew and Greek languages, the team at Corpus could call on material resources and scholarship unsurpassed for their time.

Within the College’s holdings of five hundred or so manuscripts, the Hebrew collection is outstanding in rarity and value. Claymond, the first president, was himself a collector of Hebrew manuscripts, seven of which he donated to the College and which now form the jewel of its small but spectacular collection of medieval Anglo-Jewish books. Probably produced in Oxford in the thirteenth century, the manuscripts present texts from the Hebrew Bible – the Tanakh – in parallel Hebrew and Latin versions, often with a literal translation into Latin also written directly above the Hebrew text. It is thought that the manuscripts were the product of co-operation between Jewish and Christian scholars, and were used by non-Jews to learn Hebrew and understand the primary texts of a shared scriptural tradition. In addition to the canonical books of the Tanakh, the manuscripts also include the commentaries of the enormously important medieval French rabbi, Rashi.

In addition to these seven manuscripts, the collection also contains a second, nearly complete copy of Rashi’s commentaries and an Ashkenazi prayer book both produced in northern Europe in the twelfth century. The prayer book is

Below: MS133 Ashkenazi prayer book  
Right: Oglethorpe Bible
A SECOND RENAISSANCE:
THE RENAISSANCE LIBRARY
The Renaissance Library (continued)

one of the oldest surviving Jewish prayer books produced in Europe (some authorities have claimed that it is the oldest). It later came into the possession of a Sephardic Jew who settled in England, and who used some of its blank pages to record business transactions. He did this in Judaeo-Arabic (that is, Arabic written in Hebrew letters). The document is the only one of its kind: we know of no other texts written in this language in England during the Middle Ages.

The expert who is cataloguing the Corpus Hebrew manuscripts has praised their “breath-taking quality and interest”, judging them “the most important collection of Anglo-Jewish manuscripts in the world.”

Notable amongst the manuscripts of a later date are the ‘Oglethorpe Bible’ and the ‘Newton Letters’. The former comprises two early sixteenth-century manuscripts given to the College by General James Oglethorpe, a Corpus alumnus and the founder of the American colony of Georgia. Commissioned by Francis I of France, the French text is a translation of the historical books of the Old Testament; extravagantly decorated, it represents the zenith of the manuscript book as a luxury object. The ‘Newton Letters’ comprise part of the correspondence of John Flamsteed, the first Astronomer Royal. From 1680 to 1695 Sir Isaac Newton regularly importuned the meticulous astronomer for his calculations and raw data, and in one letter supplied a tiny sketch of a comet shooting over King’s College chapel.

The manuscripts represent only a small part of the College’s historic collections. The 1517 Library also houses one of the largest college collections of early printed works in Oxford. President Claymond was an influential figure, furthering the spread of scholarly knowledge by co-operating with the printing houses of Europe; Rainolds, too, left much of his formidable personal library of over 2,000 books to the College. Fox’s insistence on humanist learning influenced acquisitions for centuries to come. There are approximately 20,000 early (pre-1830) printed titles in the College’s collection. These include 280 incunables, books printed from movable type before 1501. The most authoritative cataloguer of Oxford college libraries judges that Corpus has “one of the most important collections of early printed books in any college, whether at Oxford or at Cambridge, and one that reflects vividly the tastes and achievements of the earliest members of the college.” Its strengths include early editions of the classics, works on science, Italian titles from the bequest of Baron Coleraine, and sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth-century political, historical, and theological tracts.

Above: Letter from Sir Isaac Newton to John Flamsteed
Left: John Rainolds
The
NEW LIBRARY
PROJECT

THE RATIONALE

The New Library is the most ambitious building project on the College site for three centuries, offering the greatest enhancement of its study space since 1517. It will provide a home worthy of one of the great Oxford libraries and of the College’s Renaissance collections. Equally, the Project addresses the developing educational needs of Corpus as it enters its sixth century.

The New Library will sit alongside, and to some extent around, the Tudor Library of 1517, although the sight lines within the historic building will not be affected.

The following needs and considerations have prompted the College’s Governing Body to authorise the Project:

1. THE SECURITY AND PHYSICAL INTEGRITY OF THE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

The College’s Manuscript and Early Printed Book Collections are currently housed in the cramped basement of the eighteenth-century Fellows’ Building, on the site of the original College well (which is still in existence). These conditions carry some risk and are wholly incompatible with the long-term care and security of our priceless materials.

2. THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT FOR READERS AND OUR VALUED STAFF

The study space for readers working on these specialist collections is underground, cramped, and airless: only one or two scholars can be accommodated at a time, under supervision. The day-to-day working conditions of the Archivist and his assistant are barely adequate.

The New Library will address a further limitation by providing accommodation internally for the College Librarian and her staff, who at present have to work in an office outside the Library.
3. ACCESS FOR ADVANCED STUDY AND SCHOLARSHIP

- On-site access for researchers. Digitising the Library’s key manuscripts and early printed books, already underway, and loading the images on-line, will improve access and minimise the heavy use of fragile texts. Low-quality on-line images will be free to users; charges will usually apply for high-resolution images. The experience of specialist libraries shows that when key collections are digitized the outcome is an increase in visiting scholars’ footfall. Some aspects of scholarly research can be supported only through handling the materials themselves. The study of the history of the book concentrates not just on the content of the texts and the use made of them over the years, but also on their construction: the binding, material, palaeography, and printing type.

- Visiting research fellowships. The College will establish an Advanced Scholars’ Programme to encourage research into the collection through short-term visiting fellowships for specialists in the fields of the Renaissance, Anglo-Jewish history, and other areas of study to which the Corpus materials lend themselves.

4. THE EXPANSION AND ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING AND STUDY SPACE

Corpus recruits students of the highest quality, wholly on merit, into a particular range of undergraduate degree subjects and related postgraduate research areas. Our strengths in the Humanities (Classics, English Literature, History and Philosophy), in Mathematics and the Natural Sciences, and in Medicine, are a constant reminder of our Renaissance purposes and inheritance. The College is also strong in several Social Science disciplines, notably Economics, Law and Politics.

Corpus students in all these subjects use the College Library for study; it is open all hours. They also have tutorials, seminars, and some lectures in College, but space for these on our main site is at a premium. The New Library will make a qualitative and quantitative difference. We plan to provide designated internal areas for study groups and seminars, as well as much-expanded readers’ space. Books and other materials that currently occupy prime space can be resituated, to liberate historic rooms on the ground floor of the main quadrangle for teaching purposes and College meetings. Meanwhile, the 1517 Library will continue to provide as much space for readers as at present.

5. ARCHITECTURAL ENHANCEMENT

The design of the New Library, produced by award-winning architects, will make an architectural statement worthy of the College in the twenty-first century, replacing an undistinguished building of the early twentieth century and its unlovely, north-facing, 1950s facade. The new building offers the opportunity for a dramatic aesthetic improvement, especially when the College is viewed from the northern end of the adjacent Oriel Square.

Above: Memorial plaque to the Oxford Jewish Quarter
Far page, above: Professor James Legge
Far page, below: The Tudor Library today
6. HONOURING A UNIQUE HISTORY

The New Library Project is driven by much more than utility, essential though practical considerations are in the College’s pursuit of its educational purposes. The Project is also inspired by a desire to recognise and celebrate the full richness and implications of the Founder’s vision, embodied in Renaissance inquiry into medicine, science and the humanities, and the contributions of scholars in Hebrew and Greek. Corpus was established on land that had been adjacent to the Jewish Quarter of the city until King Edward I’s Edict of Expulsion in 1290. The College’s intellectual foundations reveal the continuing influence of Hebraic scholarship and even of Jews themselves during the period from their expulsion from England until they were unofficially readmitted during the rule of Oliver Cromwell in 1656. The story of Renaissance Corpus is a story of political boundaries made porous by international scholarship.

The later history of Corpus echoes its Renaissance experience of humane scholarship that crossed national and political boundaries. The College played a role in the development of oriental studies in the West through two Fellows who were pioneers in their fields, the seventeenth-century Arabist, Edward Pococke, and the nineteenth-century Sinologist, James Legge, the first professor of Chinese at Oxford. In the modern era, the College served as the home for one of the most distinguished of the émigré Jewish Classicists who fled Germany in the 1930s. Eduard Fraenkel (1888–1970), Professor of Latin at the University of Freiburg, lost his post under the racial laws inaugurated by the new Nazi regime in Germany in 1933 but was soon appointed to the Corpus Chair of Latin in the College. Perhaps the supreme Classicist of his generation, Fraenkel was to be hugely influential on the field in England and Italy.

The New Library Project will provide the resources for humanistic education to continue flourishing at Corpus, whatever the advance of more instrumentalist approaches to learning elsewhere. The College has long regarded critical literacy and free inquiry as essential to the life of the mind and a good society. The New Library will be a visible and practical statement of our continuing intent.
THE CHALLENGE

In designing a new library, one befitting the importance of the College’s special collections, we have to deliver a specialist building that will house fragile materials – all within an ancient site, and providing natural flows between the original and the new.

The task facing our prize-winning architects – Berman, Gueddes, Stretton – has been to develop plans for a New Library that will provide much greater functionality than at present and meet all six of the considerations set out in the Rationale section above. The architectural challenge involved should not be underestimated. Much of the New Library has to be underground and in close proximity to other historically important structures. The College and the architects have imposed the principle that the replacement of any existing building should result in an enhanced aesthetic. Understandably, the costs involved are high.

Some of the College’s current buildings detract from its historic setting. The New Library must serve to remedy that and make a positive architectural contribution to the visual amenity of Oriel Square. Its design quality must be such that in 500 years’ time, it will still be regarded as an architectural jewel.
THE DESIGN

The new building will wrap around the current library with a minimum intrusion into the fabric of the old. Our scheme provides for the opening of a door in the West end of the existing library (the only change to the 16th century structure). An entrance to the Library will allow the installation of a proper issue desk, together with appropriate levels of security.

For those coming into the older building, the new doorway will afford a splendid vista along the ancient chain book presses to the stained-glass Chapel window beyond.

In realising this ambition, the design replaces two existing buildings. The first is a small residential block, erected in the 1920s with subsequent alterations. It is not regarded as an important feature of the current college site and has little aesthetic merit. The second is a functional building facing Oriel Square. Replacement of these facilities will be provided in other buildings within the College’s estate.
The Special Collections Centre itself will be entirely below ground and will be in the form of an L-shape. The main part will include over 2,500 metres of archive storage and a secure, naturally-lit reading room. A glass wall will allow visitors to the adjacent New Library a glimpse of researchers working with the manuscripts and early printed books.
THE OPEN ACCESS LIBRARY

The New Library will provide additional reader spaces and allow for the relocation of 45 existing user spaces. This, in turn, will allow the creation of seminar teaching space in the Old Library.

Adaptable reading rooms with state-of-the-art communications and conferencing technology will offer spectacular views over Oxford. These rooms will be designed to accommodate changing technology.

With an entrance on the ground floor and immediate access to a passenger lift, all the Library areas will, for the first time, be fully accessible to readers with impaired mobility.

EXHIBITION SPACE

On the ground floor a discrete space will give the general public the opportunity to view rotating exhibitions drawn from the historic materials housed in the Special Collections Centre. It will also allow the use of items from the Collection in student seminars and lectures.

APPROVALS

Although obtaining approval for a scheme of this type within the confines of an important historic site is not easy, the College has secured the formal consent of the local planning authority, whose members have warmly praised the design. They were particularly impressed by the consequential improvement to the aesthetic of Oriel Square, one of the city’s most significant architectural spaces.
IMPLEMENTATION

In order to begin work on the New Library, the sum of £18m will have to be raised from philanthropic sources (a further £2m will be provided from the College’s own reserves). Naming rights to the new building will be available:

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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<tr>
<td>Main Library Building</td>
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<tr>
<td>Archive and Special Collections Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Garden Quad (Library Entrance)</td>
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<td>Seminar Room (West)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Lower Reading Room</td>
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Building work will not begin before the Spring of 2018.