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A Special International Dateline Interview — From Fortress to Fairway

by **Bruce and Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) and **Rita Ricketts** (Author, *Adventures All*)

Column Editor's Note: This *ATG* article/interview is based on discussions between **Bruce and Katina Strauch**, **Julian Blackwell** (Owner and President, **Blackwell Bookshops** and **Blackwell Book Services**), **Sarah Thomas** (Bodley's Librarian and Director of **Oxford University Library Services, OULS**), **Richard Ovenden** (Keeper of Special Collections and Associate Director of **OULS**) and **Rita Ricketts** (Blackwell's Historian and Bodleian Visiting Scholar). — **KS**

Several weeks ago **Bruce and Katina Strauch** had the pleasure of visiting Oxford, the **Bodleian Libraries** and **Blackwell's Bookshop** on **Broad Street**. The **Bodleian** is, as all know, one of the oldest libraries in the world, containing priceless collections of books and artefacts. In its present incarnation it dates back to 1602 when **Sir Thomas Bodley** refurbished and expanded the fifteenth century **Duke Humfrey's Library**, which is still a splendid sight and a magnet for tourists. But the **Bodleian** has its roots in the fourteenth century when a small collection of chained books were housed on the north side of the University Church; and nearby early booksellers and publishers plied their trade. Just across the road, facing into the sun (it doesn't always rain in Oxford) is the **New Bodleian**, designed by **Sir Gilbert Scott**. A product of the austere Nineteen Thirties, perhaps it is just as well that it is on the sunny side of the street since it is more functional than beautiful. Adjoining the new **Bodleian** is **Blackwell's** world famous bookshop, parts of which are **Queen Anne** and **Georgian**. When **Blackwell's** first opened in 1879 its premises consisted of one small room only twelve feet square. Now it has miles of shelving stretching under the quad of **Trinity College**.

"**Blackwell's of the Broad**," as it was traditionally known, was not the first **Blackwell** bookshop. In 1846 **Benjamin Harris Black-**

well, the great grandfather of the present owner **Julian Blackwell**, opened a shop just outside Oxford's City Wall. From the first **Blackwell's** forged a close relationship with the **Bodleian**; a relationship that blossomed when its **Broad Street Shop** opened and students and scholars alike sought refuge in "that other college of Oxford."¹ Indeed many referred to the **Bodleian's** new neighbour as the "**Blackwell free Library**," where browsing was actively encouraged.

"Many men will aver that the greatest educative influence of Oxford resides neither in the Bodleian, nor schools, nor tutors, nor lectures, nor college societies, but in the excellent management and most liberal facilities of one of the best bookshops in the world."
— *Mr Blackwell's*²

For almost two centuries **Blackwell's** has lived and worked happily with its nearest **Broad Street** neighbour, the **Bodleian**. As education expanded, boosted by the development of state provision during the early 20th century, so too the University's libraries flourished. And in turn, the librarians came to rely on the booksellers. Among these, **Blackwell's** stands out.³ For **Basil Blackwell**,

*"bookselling and publishing ... went hand in glove with ... serving the needs of scholars and scholarly librarians the world over."*⁴

Today, perhaps more than ever, **Blackwell's** and the **Bodleian** have a common cause: furthering the cause of scholarship by providing books for readers from all walks of life, while still "staying in business." Today's libraries, like bookshops, have to "pay their way," by finding and generating the resources necessary to meet the demands of the ever-expanding academic community and its disciplines. One of the **Bodleian's** most pressing needs was to find extra storage for its mountains of books and papers stored underground in the **New Bodleian**. If a way could be found to do this, then this "Fortress" on **Broad Street** could become a fairway where members of the public of all ages could rub shoulders with students and scholars; where **Richard Ovenden's** brain child: "The Centre for the History of the Book" could be made flesh. Even more important, as **Sarah Thomas** reminded was the "mentor effect" of seeing scholars "sitting at their books."⁵ Prospective students and scholars manqué would gain inspiration from them and being able to "imagine" that they too could dip into the world's

knowledge. Such a dream centre would also include state-of-art protection, conservation and imaging technology, teaching centres, exhibition spaces, auditoria and a digital bank that could be called on anywhere in the world where there is access to the Internet. Even in remote African villages, the retiring Secretary General of the Commonwealth reminded his Oxford audience, children avidly wrangle over a single computer.⁶ In short, the **Bodleian's** digital facility will be one of the world's most democratic and egalitarian, giving the goal of "Outreach" and "wider participation," one that Oxford is serious about, real meaning.⁷ A watch-word for openness, the "new" **New Bodleian** will also provide a haven for tourists exploring this loveliest of Cities and giving shape to **Matthew Arnold's** words:

"Lovely all time she lies."

But dreams were not enough for **Bodley's** Librarian, and her predecessor **Reg Carr**. Following on from **Reg Carr's** preliminary work,

she took her lead from the University's Vice Chancellor (**John Hood**): a New Zealander who knows a thing or two about equality of opportunity and had successfully used his consummate business leadership skills in its very tough and cash-strapped higher education sector. "**John Hood**," **Sarah Thomas** explained, "is a man of great vision who also inspires me to do more than I think I can do, and because, in over 35 years of librarianship, I have never known a university leader as actively committed to the excellence of libraries as is the Vice-Chancellor."⁸ But no amount of goodwill could deliver the hard cash needed to finance such an enormous project: as we all know "it's not so much the trouble as the expense." Perhaps it was time to call in the chips? Friends of the **Bodleian** across the world were called upon and plans became concrete under the masterly creative eye of **Jim Eyre**, who was chosen as the architect. **Blackwell's** was involved early on in the piece, when **Julian Blackwell** gifted

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well, the great grandfather of the present owner **Julian Blackwell**, opened a shop just outside Oxford's City Wall. From the first **Blackwell's**

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his father's working library to the new project. **Rita Ricketts** enticed the architects and the **Bodleian** bigwigs to create a room to preserve **Blackwell** treasures and a place where writers "known and unknown to fame," particularly those on the University's Creative Writing courses, could get their new work a hearing.⁹ And they needed no persuading, neither the **Bodleian** nor the writers.

Julian Blackwell was delighted that the **Bodleian** wanted to give a permanent home to the **Sir Basil Blackwell** working library, and relished the idea of a replica of his grandfather and father's old workroom being created. But this would not happen if there was no money for a building. And this set him thinking. Just before Christmas, 2007, he asked **Bodley's** Librarian, in his characteristically modest

way "how can I help?" Three months later, at Founder's Lunch in the **Great Hall of Exeter College** where the Pre-Raphaelite characters beloved of **Sir Basil** had disported themselves, it was announced to an astonished and hushed audience that **Julian Blackwell** would give £5million to the "new" **New Bodleian** restoration.¹⁰ When the standing ovation was over, **Sarah Thomas** joyously explained.

*"For well over a century, the **Bodleian** and **Blackwell** histories have intertwined. **Toby (Julian) Blackwell** is ensuring that the **Blackwell** name will forever be associated with the **Bodleian**. He has made the largest cash gift of any private individual in four centuries of the **Bodleian's** existence to launch the campaign for the transformation of the **New Bodleian**. He shows great loyalty to his family and to the heritage of his forefathers. He's also a man of passion, often ending his notes to me with: 'We're going to make history!' And he is a man of vision — the vision is a shared destiny, lifetime partnership: **Blackwell's** and the **Bodleian**."*

These will be busy and exciting times for **Sarah Thomas** and **Richard Ovenden** as they work out the nitty-gritty detail of their plan. The work on the **Gilbert Scott** building is expected to begin around 2010. When this butterfly emerges from its chrysalis a new book depository will be in place. The

spread of libraries, 33 at present, coming under **Bodley's** Librarian will have been rationalised; eleven of which will form a new Humanities Centre. Oxford's streets will be well trodden by new generations of readers of all ages, who will no longer be deterred from entering the portals of the **Bodleian Libraries**. The Libraries are a living thing, not mausoleums, and will be open for all to see their physical, social and psychological transformation. There will have to be security, **Sarah Thomas** adds, but it will be user friendly and appropriate to the particular facility or collection. Managing change, **Sarah Thomas** concludes, is what we are all about. This sentiment fits **Bodleian's** neighbour too. **Blackwell's** and the **Bodleian** both have much in common, with a focus on careful selection of books for scholars and serious readers. Today's shop manager, **Tony Cooper**, stresses three criteria for the shop's continuing success:

service, stock and markets. Whereas the shop benefits from retailing professionalism, and the introduction of a range of goods that sit happily alongside books: diaries, journals, stationery etc., **Julian Blackwell** has ensured that, in this age of mergers and impersonal chains, the **Blackwell** shop will remain independent.

In the early twentieth century when **Blackwell** publishing was overseen by **Sir Basil**, he wryly remarked that **Stephen Spender** had imitations of immortality. Justly now, **Blackwells** can have

its own share in the new **Blackwell Hall**, at the entrance to the **New Bodleian**. Here there will be a space for public displays of many of the rare materials which have not been accessible in the past. It will also have a second floor gallery where research scholars can study the collections. Ever was it thus that "scholars could

come to **Blackwell's** for their tools."¹¹ In **Sir Basil's** view, this recognition would have been misplaced, "it was in the glory of the books" that it should reside. "As I see it," he wrote, "there is a Third estate, unorganised, unvocal, unpredatory, being the commonwealth of those whose commerce is in sharing delight in the noblest products of the spirit of man, in the visual and scenic arts, in music... and, need I add, — in books:

"In books we have the compendium of all human experience. We may use them or neglect them as we will, but if we use them, we may share the courage and endurance of adventurers, the thoughts of sages, the vision of poets and the rapture of lovers, and — some few of us perhaps — the ecstasies of the Saints."

Whatever the future holds, **Blackwell's** and the **Bodleian** are sharing a remarkable moment in time — a moment in the history of the book, of Oxford, its University, and of the worldwide academic and book-loving community. May the emperors of the **Sheldonian** continue to guard them both well!¹² Floreat! 🌿

*More **Rita Ricketts's** tales of **Blackwellian** adventures will appear in later editions of this publication. — **Rita Ricketts, Bruce Strauch** and **Katina Strauch***

Endnotes

1. **Rita Ricketts**, *Adventurers All, Tales of Blackwellians, of Books, Bookmen and Reading and Writing Folk*.
2. *ibid*
3. **Reg Carr's** introduction to **Rita Ricketts**, *A Moment in Time*, Bodleian 2004.
4. **Basil Blackwell's** own manuscript notes.
5. Expression used by **Sir Basil Blackwell**.
6. **Rt Hon Don McKinnon**, given at the VC's lecture, Rhodes House, 25 February 2008.
7. The **Bodleian Outreach** programme was set up by **Reg Carr** and **Rita Ricketts** to celebrate 125 years of the Broad Street shop in a way that would have had resonance for its founder. It was launched with a sixth form open afternoon and an exhibition of works of **Chaucer** down the ages, including the **Blackwell** (Newdigate) **Chaucer**; This was so successful that **Reg Carr** threw open the **Bodleian** to support the University Admissions widening participation and Open Day programmes, which also includes teachers' study weeks under the joint auspices of the Sutton Trust and University Admissions.
8. **Sarah Thomas**, Speech at the Founder's Lunch, 8 March 2008.
9. This has been a tradition at **Blackwell** since the beginning and is now given greater impetus by working closer with the **Kellogg College Creative Writing Centre**, as well as many local community groups.
10. Founder's Lunch, supported by **Blackwell**, celebrates the anniversary of **Thomas Bodley's** birth, 2 March 1545.
11. *Ode to Scholarship*, Poona, April 1912 op cit **Rita Ricketts**, *Adventurers All*.
12. The book contains an insight into the **Blackwell Archive**, now lodged at **Merton College Library**, and an introduction to a genre of book-production that can be seen here at the **Bodleian**. A small display of books and other effects can also be seen in the Gaffer's Room in **Blackwell's Broad Street Shop**. Op cit **Rita Ricketts**, *Adventurers All*.