

Working with Shane Godbolt at the Charing Cross Library 1976-1992

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I started in the library at the Charing Cross Hospital Medical School in the autumn of 1976, having spent the previous five years working in Nigeria, originally as a VSO volunteer. I was very lucky that Shane (the librarian at Charing Cross) was prepared to take me on, since many employers might have thought that the experience of running several scattered hospital libraries in a developing country might not be entirely relevant for work at a London medical school. By a strange coincidence my boss in Nigeria,



Figure 1: Charing Cross Hospital under construction
Photograph by H. Windsley, 1972. Credit: Wellcome Collection. CC BY

Brian Armitage, had been librarian of the old Charing Cross Hospital near The Strand in central London, before he had sought new challenges in Africa in 1970. Shane had been appointed Deputy Librarian at Charing Cross in 1970, shortly before the hospital and medical school were due to move to west London. The library in the Reynolds Building at the Charing Cross Hospital site in Fulham was brand new in 1976, only having opened a few months before, and Shane

had been instrumental in planning its services and facilities. It occupied most of the top two floors of the medical school building, and in many ways became something of a show library, with numerous visitors coming from this country and abroad to look at its excellent facilities. It was always Shane's philosophy to look and reach outwards, and indeed to 'think outside the box'.

From the start the emphasis was on new technology and new developments in medical education. One example was the promotion of audio-visual materials in



Figure 2: The Reynolds Building at Charing Cross

the library. We were fortunate in the staff appointed to do this, originally Paul Valentine and later Carl Clayton. Shane developed close links with the very active Department of Medical Illustration at Charing Cross, as indeed she did with many hospital and medical school departments, and she was greatly respected by the staff in those departments. Later a television studio was created next to the library, and medical school lectures were recorded and made available for the benefit of the students. As can be imagined this proved a popular service, not least in the run up to exams. From an early stage the library was involved in training medical students in the use of Index Medicus (originally a printed tool, of course). Second-year students came to us in groups of eight or ten, and all the senior library staff took part in these sessions. I seem to recall it wasn't always easy to convince the students that they would get better results if they used the MeSH Thesaurus first, to find the most specific search term for their particular subject. These training

sessions were quite a challenge for the library staff, but we believed they were useful for the students. After a while Index Medicus became available in its computerised form as MEDLINE, which revolutionised the way that searching could be done. Library staff carried out hundreds of literature searches on MEDLINE for hospital and medical school staff, and we also offered a monthly updating service against subject profiles. I believe Charing Cross was only the second UK site to introduce the use of MEDLINE on CD-ROMs. It should be remembered that these early days were well before the Internet had been developed as the universal tool it now is, eventually allowing staff and indeed students to conduct literature searches from their own computers.

Shane always had a keen interest in library staff training and development, which took many forms. Each year we had a new graduate trainee. They all made a great contribution to the running of the library and many went on to have very successful careers in the field. In the early 1980s Shane organised a course in 'Medical Librarianship and Bibliography' in association with the local Hammersmith and West London College. This was designed to prepare students for the Library Association C508 exam – the Bibliographical Organisation of Science and Technology, and sessions took place weekly, spread over three terms. I still have a copy of the course prospectus for 1982/83. As was typical she involved all the professional staff at the Charing Cross library in this, as well as bringing in outside speakers. I see that I was involved in talking about: MeSH and Index Medicus, medical reference works, alternatives to the periodical, British statistics and government publications, and international statistics and the work of the World Health Organization. I found these sessions very enjoyable, and they did keep

you up to speed in the topics that were being discussed. I remember feeling at the time that 'alternatives to the periodical' was quite advanced thinking for 1982! The topics also tied in with some of my other professional interests. For many years I represented medical, health and welfare libraries on the Standing Committee on Official Publications (SCOOP), which had changed its name from the old Library Association/HMSO Services Working Party in 1983.

Shane's international interests have been well documented (including her later close involvement with Partnerships in Health Information), and we used to receive a steady stream of international visitors to the Charing Cross library. Quite often she was involving in helping to organise their study programmes in Britain, not least because she had so many contacts in the medical and health library field. I shall always be grateful for the way she supported me when I received invitations to visit libraries abroad. In 1978 I spent four weeks in Bangladesh at the request of the British Council to help run a course for medical librarians in that country, and in 1983 I was able to visit Kumasi in Ghana to carry out in-service training with the newly-appointed medical librarian there. In 1984 I was able to visit Kuwait as course tutor at a training course for health care library staff at the invitation of the World Health Organization. None of this would have been possible without Shane's enthusiastic endorsement. She herself had been invited to visit India in October 1982, along with Ena Chakrabarty, to run a course based at the National Medical Library in Delhi, though this particular trip had to be postponed at a late stage due to organisational problems in India. I would guess it took place the following year.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of my job as Reader Services Librarian was the opportunity to mount small displays or exhibitions of material in the library about a particular topic. Sometimes these focused on important developments in medicine, such as when the World Health Organization certified the global eradication of smallpox in 1980, or the development of CAT scanning. Sometimes I indulged myself and chose a historical theme, using material from the library's fairly extensive historical and archive collections. One of Charing Cross's most eminent students was Thomas Henry Huxley, who had been admitted as a free scholar in 1842 and who published his first paper in 1845 at the age of 20. This was about a hitherto unrecognised layer of the inner root sheath of hair, and it is still called 'Huxley's layer'. On another occasion the Dean of the medical school sent down a note to the library, asking whether it was true that David Livingstone had been a medical student there – it was true, though he was only at the hospital for a year and then went back to Glasgow to graduate, before going out to Africa. These small exhibitions in the library caused some interest amongst readers, and of course had Shane's full support. However one of the few controversial occasions that I recall during my time at Charing Cross was when it was proposed by the medical school that the library's collection of historical books should be sold off. In due course this did happen, sad though it was for many people at the time. Also I seem to recall that the money raised went to the school and not the library! Much later the hospital and medical school archive collection was moved to Imperial College Archives in South Kensington, where I had a hand in its cataloguing. This followed the establishment of the Imperial College School of Medicine in 1997, some years after Shane had left.

I never ceased to be amazed by Shane's capacity for hard work and for taking on new projects. In 1984 Charing Cross had merged with the Westminster to form the Charing Cross and Westminster Medical School, which was of course a major development for everyone. At about this time Shane became joint editor with Leslie Morton of the major reference work *Information Sources in the Medical Sciences* (3rd ed 1984, and 4th ed 1992). At the same time Shane was editing the MHWLG Newsletter, and she played a key role in developing this into the professional journal *Health Libraries Review* (now *Health Information and Libraries Journal*). She was editor from its launch in 1984 until 1998. Just as Shane herself had been inspired by the generation of John Thornton and Leslie Morton, so she in turn became an inspiring figure for many other librarians, myself included. It was a privilege and a pleasure to have worked with her. In many ways her philosophy is contained in one of the earliest articles she must have written, in the Library Association Record for February 1977, namely 'At the end of all our work is a patient'. This contains a lot of background to the library at Charing Cross and what she was trying to achieve there, and concludes "The heart of the library is in the services it offers, not its premises."