



A Profile of Derek Law

*Director of Information Strategy
University of Strathclyde, Glasgow*

Derek Law was interviewed by John Merriman

It was a pleasure to meet, once again, Derek who has been a supporter of the UKSG since its early days. He was also a regular attendee at the famous (?infamous) Blackwell's late night parties (now no more), where he enjoyed a dram or two.

Born in 1947, he spent his early days in Arbroath (famous for smokies) north of Dundee. A town which has gone down in history for a record football score – 36 nil against Aberdeen Bon Accord. Perhaps that is why Derek has been a football fan from an early age.

After attending the local primary school, he graduated to the High School. As a devoted user of the public library, he was able to feed his voracious appetite for reading. At that time his parents ran a boarding house, so family holidays were off season, mainly in Spain and France. He also has pleasant memories of holidays with relations on a farm in the Cotswolds and, in complete contrast, Butlin's at Filey. Another regular event was potato picking every October. On the more energetic side, he also enjoyed badminton. His father was somewhat peripatetic by nature, and when Derek was sixteen the family moved to Edinburgh, where his father became a Church Administrator and he changed schools to George Watson's College for Boys.

With History, French, Latin and English under his belt, the time had come to move on to higher education. Almost by accident he was accepted by Glasgow University to read Medieval History – a four-year course; a period of his life that he thoroughly enjoyed. Unable to find accommodation in a hall of residence – he unfortunately applied to live in a women only building and was turned down – he ended up

living with a large Irish family, which gave him a whole new slant on life, and where he caused some consternation, in this devout Catholic family, by using the holy water container as an ash tray.

It is not surprising that someone with so much exuberance and enthusiasm should live life to the full, both at work and play. A football star for the History Faculty, his finest hour was when he kicked three university professors, all in the same match. As graduation drew near, he concluded that librarianship was the career for him. In 1969 he moved down the road to the School of Librarianship, University of Strathclyde, where a year later he gained his Dip. Lib.

Holiday jobs were varied, and his enthusiasm knew no bounds. While working for the Metal Box company, he created a world record by producing the largest number of fish cans in one shift – which must have made him very popular with the trade union! Less high powered, but very useful, were his stints as a hospital porter.

Job applications brought two offers from the University of Glasgow (£980 p.a.) and the University of St Andrews (£990 p.a.). On pure financial grounds the choice was obvious. He started work at St Andrews in July 1970 as an Assistant Librarian Cataloguer. Fortunately, this only lasted two weeks before he became Serials Librarian. St Andrews seems to have been a breeding ground for future distinguished librarians, as Ian Mowat and Mel Collier were both contemporaries. With one assistant, the department ran on traditional lines, using a Cardex for checking in about 2,500 titles. Although user surveys were routine, there was no shortage of funds. At this time he became

involved with the Association of University Teachers and the University College and Research Section of the Library Association, paving the way for a wide and influential involvement in professional affairs in the future.

Whilst mindful of Donald Urquhart's dictum, "The printed word will always survive so long as there are proud mothers to show off the work of their son/daughter", in 1971 he began experimenting with computers. The first Union List of Serials was produced on punch cards in 1972. This was followed by an in-house serials control system – an innovative but simple application for checking in serials.

The time had come for the next move, and in 1977 he became Head of Acquisitions at the University of Edinburgh – the largest academic library in Western Europe. His interest in automation continued. The Library shared the mainframe at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He implemented batch processing and an accounts package. Within three years the great financial bonanza was drawing to a close, and now, as Director of Library Automation, he had to find more cost-effective procedures. This involved automating the library catalogue and implementing GEAC. Somehow he managed to achieve this on budget and on time, which was something of a miracle, as the work was carried out by unemployed, inexperienced graduates. He clocked up another first by becoming the Medical Librarian in what was until then an all-female preserve. For the first time he was in charge of a library, which stood him in good stead for a major career move in 1984, when he crossed the border into Sassenach country to become Librarian of King's College London.

Lesser spirits would have quailed at the tasks that faced him. The libraries of King's, Queen Elizabeth and Chelsea Colleges had just merged. Each had a different culture, and different subject specialities and working methods. As if this was not enough, there were five different classification schemes! He was in charge of 27 libraries over 100 square miles. His task was to make it all work, including a vast retrospective cataloguing programme, budget cuts of a third, staff reductions, and standardisation with the LC classification scheme.

He is philosophical about his nine years at King's, which included masterminding 32

building programmes, managing over 100 staff and 5,000 serial titles. One perk was the superb view from his office window – Big Ben to Tower Bridge. In 1993 he took over computing with the new job title of Director of Information Services and Systems – 'Librarian' was already becoming old hat.

In 1998 the wheel turned full circle when he was headhunted to become Director of Information Strategy at the University of Strathclyde, or as he points out his real title is Pro Vice-Janitor, because he is left to sweep up the mess.

He is a member of the Senior Management Team with direct access to the Vice-Chancellor, has a staff of 100 and 6,000 current serial titles. There is a progressive shift to electronic journals, although where available in paper and electronic form, both are taken.

Derek has four concerns about important unresolved issues concerning electronic journals:

1. Intellectual property rights.
2. Archiving – no publisher guarantees more than three years.
3. The STM model is wrong. The whole issue of network topology has been underrated. There is a false assumption that this will be done commercially.
4. We are at the talking heads stage of electronic journals.

He also believes that NESLI has missed the target. The model is fundamentally wrong and misjudges the real need. We must shift to a HighWire model to select individual titles. Although the University of Strathclyde is a science and technology institute, only 250 Elsevier titles are taken.

He is excited about the University's Millennium Student Project, which has the following objectives:

1. the fastest network in the country;
2. every student with network access from their study bedroom;
3. every student to have compulsory IT skills;
4. every student to have a laptop computer;
5. lots and lots of course ware and content.

He now has 35 staff in the Media Department and, just to keep his hand in, the Library is being refurbished this summer at a cost of £1,000,000!

As can be expected, Derek has, for many years, been involved in extramural professional activities and is well known on the international conference and lecture circuit.

He fondly remembers his very first paper with the title, 'The Universal Availability of Publications and Serials Control'. This was given at the IFLA Conference in Manila in 1984.

Arriving jet-lagged, he went to his room, drew the curtains, turned on the TV and went to sleep. He was awoken by the TV which was showing The White Heather Club, with the words dubbed in the local language – Tagalog. He thought he had flipped. Another claim to fame is to have lectured on different subjects in Paris, Rio, Los Angeles, Sydney, Beijing, Bangkok, Cape Town and London, all within 16 days.

He has published books, articles and reviews too numerous to list. However, with a twinkle in his eye he mentioned the article he co-authored with Liz Chapman and published in Logos with the title 'Academic Dress Codes for Librarians' which caused quite a stir.

He has been and is involved with many important committees and councils. A few examples of his influence and achievements are:

- Chairman of the Library Association Council Executive Committee;
- deep involvement with the drafting of the Follett Report (Most of his ideas were adopted);
- active in SCONUL;
- after a session in the Hand and Racket pub in London, he claims to be one of the co-inventors of BIDS.

Of the many professional and academic

honours he has received, he is particularly proud of his D.Litt. from the University of Paris, and his election as Vice-President of the Scottish Library Association.

Last but not least, not only is he Treasurer of IFLA, but will also play a major part in organising their conference in Glasgow in 2002. I am sure that he will devise a very good social programme for 'accompanying partners'.

Very wisely, he lives in a flat nearby, so avoids the miseries of commuting to work. He married Jacqueline in 1969 (They were at school together.), and they have two daughters. The elder is reading medicine at Cambridge and the younger is studying for her A-Levels.

Although still a football supporter – West Ham – his real passion is for naval history. An avid collector of books on the subject, he has built up an extensive library. (Hope he has checked the floor loadings in the flat!) He is on the Council of the Naval Records Society, Vice-President of the Society for Nautical Research and a book reviewer for the Mariners Mirror. The Navy in the Second World War is one of his special interests. He also has to find space for his extensive record collection, in which is reflected his wide taste in music.

How does one describe Derek? Exuberant, enthusiastic, humorous, sociable are all words that come to mind but, above all, totally committed to his chosen profession and the pursuit of excellence in academic libraries and managing change. With all the success he has achieved, he never forgets how his grandmother once cut him down to size with the words, "Don't think that you are so bloody wonderful, it is just that everybody else is so bloody ordinary".