

Profile: Christine Fyfe



Christine is a well-known figure in UKSG circles. Not only is she a past Chair of the Group, she has also acted as Conference Organizer and, all in all, has been a major contributor to the ongoing development and success of the Group. Christine is currently University Librarian at the University of Leicester but she will shortly take up a significant new challenge – that of Pro Vice-Chancellor at Leicester for a four-year period. Christine is the first PVC not to come from an academic department and only the second woman. So what was the path to her success?

Christine was born in Southport, Lancashire. Her father was a commercial artist, later to become a further education lecturer in graphic and communication art, her mother was a 'stay-at-home' Mum and she has one younger brother. When she was eight years old the family moved to Cheshire and Christine spent her whole school life there, latterly attending Bramhall County Grammar School. She loved the academic side of the school work, winning a number of academic prizes, but confided that she would "do anything to get out of sport and PE".

It seems that from a fairly early age Christine was destined to enter the library profession. Her first job, at the age of 15, was as a 'Saturday girl' in her local public library – a small village library – where the deputy librarian was highly stereotypical, knew the stock by heart and was loved by all the customers for the help she gave them. This was her first lesson in the importance of customer service

in libraries and indeed she admits that, even today, she sometimes draws on experiences learned in those early days in the village library.

Christine left school with three A levels and went to Bristol to read English Literature. She says of the English Department that at that time it was a tremendous department with some high profile academics working there. Looking back she recalls very little formal teaching, more 'opportunities to learn', from small group tutorials, wide reading (very few reading lists), writing and personal feedback. These were not yet the days of mass higher education! Towards the end of her course she went to see the careers advisor and surprise, surprise ... she recommended she go into librarianship and gave her a Sconul traineeship form.

But she certainly landed on her feet. The Sconul traineeship took her to Manchester University where the Librarian at the time was Fred Ratcliffe, whom many readers will recognize as being one of the most influential UK academic librarians of his era. During Christine's time at Manchester, Reg Carr, Bill Simpson, John Hall, Ian Lovecy and John Henshall were all working in the cataloguing department. Fred Ratcliffe used to boast that, in total, 13 of his cataloguers went on to become University Librarians. And that figure didn't include Christine who, at this very early stage in her career was given the title of Morley Librarian (rather grand, one might think, for a trainee). She was allocated half a day a week to look after the collection of Lord Morley – essentially a collection

of a Victorian gentleman's leisure reading – which was housed in one of the hall libraries. But more importantly it meant that she also got free board and lodging for the whole year. Her actual salary was a princely £1,100, she recalls, but she has never felt so well off as she did that year. In addition to the Morley Library she also spent time in the John Rylands Library, cataloguing and selecting stock from second-hand book catalogues. The cataloguing was very specialized as many of the items were rare books. All in all it was a tremendous year and she didn't want to leave.

However, all good things must come to an end and the following year Christine found herself in Sheffield studying for an MA in Librarianship. The course was interesting but practical (and less taxing than her first degree) and she finished with a distinction leading her into her first professional post at Keele University. It was the late 1970s and the cuts in higher education were beginning to bite. We all know the impact of this funding crisis for libraries: year on year of journal cancellations, fewer books purchased and restrictions on such services as inter-library loans. In other words, a spiral of diminishing access to materials and information. Along with most universities, Keele was not immune from these pressures but there were still lots of opportunities on offer. All in all, Christine spent 20 years at Keele, gradually moving up the career ladder. She met her husband Gordon there and they have one son, Alex, who is now 17.

But one day a job advert for the Deputy Librarian's post at Warwick University caught her eye. She and the then Director of Information Services at Keele, Allan Foster, even had a conversation about the disappearing post of deputy librarians. However, it wasn't until the phone call came, inviting her to apply, that she seriously considered the post and as things worked out she was offered the job. The family decided to move as Alex was only seven and could move school quite easily at that age and Gordon continued in his academic post at Keele.

It certainly seems that the time was right to start a new, exciting job. E-journals were in an early stage of development and with the JISC Pilot Site Licence Initiative (PSLI) the door was opened on a new era. Warwick became an early adopter of all things electronic. A certain amount of budget flexibility meant that experimentation could take

place. For example, in the early days they took away many of the print journals from the Physics Department (with their permission of course!) and monitored use and user behaviours with e-journals. It is interesting to note that one of the major issues at the time was not the content but technology. High-spec PCs on everyone's desk and high-quality printers were not the norm (even in the Physics Department) but they ploughed on and bought as much e-content as they could, employing Derek Law's 'drugs in the playground' strategy – and academics got hooked. Christine firmly believes that the growth of the digital library has transformed the image of the library and she remains a fan of the 'big deal'.

And so to Leicester, where Christine has been University Librarian for the last five years. The dominant feature of this time has been the library building project. The original University Library building was opened in 1975 and it was intended that it would be extended almost immediately. That didn't happen and the building had a temporary wall on the back for 30 years. The VC – who arrived in 1998 – was determined to place the library building at the top of his agenda and planning began some five years ago. The project will double the space of the library and re-model the 1970s elements of the building. The estimated finish date is December 2007.

We finished the interview by discussing the future of libraries and the role of UKSG. Christine believes that libraries will continue to have an iconic significance within society in general and universities in particular. Our increasing ability to provide e-content and enhanced services strengthens this role, and e-learning and e-research make libraries pivotal in the life of the university. The greatest challenge will be for librarians to embrace the reality of the Google world. We can't do what they do ... but they can't do what we do. Another challenge is meeting the expectations of the iPod generation and embracing developments such as Second Life. We need to "go with the grain" on that. As far as UKSG is concerned, Christine says: "UKSG will continue to thrive and expand its interests – it is a remarkable organization still bringing together the whole of the serials community in a non-political way. It has a strong and open culture and it has moved with the times". May that long continue.