

Profile: Mel Collier



Your Ed met up with Mel Collier at the recent Fiesole Collection Development Conference in Leuven, Belgium, where he was the local organizer for the conference. It was good to catch up after a gap of several years and we were delighted when he agreed to be the subject of the July 2010 *Serials* Profile.

Mel has had a full and very varied career in libraries. He was born in Bolton, Lancashire where his father was a Sub-Postmaster. His mother worked for many years as a school meal supervisor but her main love was amateur dramatics, which she combined with her skills as a seamstress to make costumes for school plays. Mel attended Bolton School and then went on to St Andrews University (not least for the golfing opportunities) where he studied Arabic languages, the reason being "I was always good at languages and I wanted to do something different". Alongside his studies he spent lots of time playing golf and flying with the University Air Squadron. He also found time to get married to Anne whilst still a student. She was a teacher at the time but also worked in the University library. Having graduated, like many of us, he wondered what to do. As a temporary measure he took a job at St Andrews University Library looking after the oriental languages collection and cataloguing the many items not in the library catalogue. It so happened that two other new graduates started work in the library that same day in 1970 and they all shared

the same office. The other two graduates were Derek Law and Ian Mowat.

Having decided that he liked working in a library, Mel felt that he should acquire a professional qualification and he went on to do a postgraduate diploma at Strathclyde University in 1972. His first professional job was at University College Cardiff as a language specialist. He was fortunate to find that the University was engaged in the SWALCAP (library automation) Project and the Deputy Librarian was looking to hand over responsibility for that project to the newly created post of Automation Librarian. The SWALCAP Project team – of which Mel was a member – designed and implemented the first online library system in the UK (slightly ahead of BLCMP). Circulation went live in 1974 and cataloguing in 1976. Mel stayed at Cardiff until 1979 and then moved briefly to Hatfield Polytechnic as Technical Services Librarian for a year before following Hatfield's Deputy Librarian, Neil McLean, to the Polytechnic of Central London (PCL). Anne and Mel's children were born in these early stages of his career. Charlotte is now 36 and married to an IT consultant. They have two children and live in East Lothian. James is 33 and a sound and vibration engineer living in Australia.

So in 1980 – just ten years after starting his first library job – Mel was a Deputy Librarian, and PCL was an extremely exciting place to be. The library bid for and received a number of British Library

research grants which funded work on aspects of library automation and digital libraries. Another government initiative – IT82 – based at PCL, enabled them to set up an information centre on library automation. Mel is particularly proud of his involvement in the OKAPI Project which was the first time that a distributed system of micro-computers was used in a library project. His career was clearly developing and blossoming in the area of innovation, and it was probably no surprise to his peers when in 1985 (at the age of 38) he was appointed Chief Librarian at Leicester Polytechnic.

“This was an extremely dynamic period for me” says Mel of his time at Leicester Polytechnic (which soon went on to become De Montfort University). When he started in 1985, the Polytechnic had 5,000 students; by 1993 it had 29,000 students on nine campuses (three in Leicester, three in Lincolnshire, two in Bedford and one in Milton Keynes). Opportunities abounded with such rapid expansion and by 1989 Mel found himself the head of converged services comprising Library, IT, AV and Media & Learning. It was a very big department and running it was exciting and exhausting. There were numerous libraries added through the acquisition of smaller colleges which required upgrades but the biggest job of all was networking all those campuses – bearing in mind that it was 180 miles from the northern-most campus to the southern-most campus. Not content with that challenge, Mel led the very first digital library project in Britain – the ELINOR Project, funded by the British Library. The department was also successful in bidding for one of the first library projects with European funding (Framework 3). With partners including Tilburg University, IBM and the Victoria and Albert Museum, the ELISE project worked on the networking of image banks – right at the leading edge of technology. ELISE was the start of a succession of European-funded projects. At one point the department had £4 million worth of European projects on the books. A highlight was the establishment of the flagship International Institute for Electronic Library Research which attracted Charles Oppenheim to De Montfort’s Milton Keynes campus. Mel stayed at De Montfort until 1997, a total of 12 years. Having just turned 50 he felt it was time for a change.

That change meant moving sectors. He became Strategy Director for Dawsons Information Services group, at a time when there was huge

consolidation in that marketplace. In 2000 Dawsons was sold to RoweCom and all of us in the industry know *that* story! After the sale, Mel negotiated his exit and worked the next couple of years as a consultant. Then he was approached by Tilburg University and took the job as University Librarian, learning Dutch and sharing his time between The Netherlands and England. Sadly, after having been at Tilburg some two and a half years, Anne fell ill and Mel returned to England to look after her. Anne passed away in October 2004. A short time afterwards, he received a phone call from Leuven University, asking him if he would act as a consultant for the library’s change management programme. He started in January 2005 and in July 2005 was appointed as Library Director. Mel is now very settled in that job. He loves Leuven (your Ed agrees it is a really beautiful city) and is happy to have come full circle and be back in an old traditional university. And the wonderful news is that he is getting married on 16 October. His fiancée is Hedwig Schwall, a Professor in English Literature at Leuven, who specializes in English literature by Irish authors.

When not working, Mel shares his time between Belgium, England, Scotland (visiting the grandchildren) and Australia. Mel is a true European. He is now fluent in Dutch, to add to his qualifications in German, Arabic and French. He has worked for nearly 20 years on European projects and is very committed to European collaboration, now working on Europeana. We wish him all the best for his forthcoming marriage and wonder just how many more European projects he can lead before he starts thinking about retirement.

Mel’s work has taken him all over the globe, but no signs lead to retirement

