

Introduction

The Work of ABTAPL

CHRISTINE LOVE-RODGERS

The genesis of this book project came with the recognition of the Association for British Theological and Philosophical Libraries (ABTAPL)'s 70th anniversary in 2026, and a plan by Hannie Riley to celebrate this with an open access monograph volume. We began by inviting proposals for chapters on the work of ABTAPL, and more broadly on theological, religious and philosophical libraries in the UK. We were looking for chapters exploring the development of libraries in this sector since the foundation of ABTAPL in 1956, the current situation of libraries and librarianship in this field, and the challenges and trends that the sector will face in the future. We actively sought contributions from libraries and librarians of all religious faiths (and none), and from all areas of the UK. We are indebted to all our chapter authors for stepping up to write and responding to the editorial process, and we are grateful to our publishers, Atla, for being ready and willing to support our idea and to transform our content into a monograph volume. A special note of thanks is due to Rob Bradshaw, whose project to digitise the *Bulletin of the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries* provided a vital resource enabling research into ABTAPL's past for this volume.

Intellectually, this volume follows on from earlier work published in *Theological Libraries and Library Associations in Europe: A Festschrift on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of BETH* (Kenis et al. 2022). This work included important chapters from ABTAPL members on theological libraries in England, theological libraries in Oxford, and the Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide. We are pleased that *Theological Libraries in the United Kingdom and Ireland* celebrates the regionality and diversity of British and Irish theological libraries, exploring their strengths and differences throughout the UK and Ireland. Because we are the Association of Theological and Philosophical Libraries, we have leaned into libraries as the focus of this volume, even though many of our libraries contain archives and some of our members are archivists. For recent insights into the UK and Ireland's rich religious archival collections, see the 2024 special issue of the *Journal of Religious History* (Irving-Stonebraker and Pattenden 2024).

We are proud of the resulting book, which is a celebration, a reflection, and call to action for ABTAPL, for all it has achieved and can achieve. The chapters by Riley and Smith-Blow illustrate how ABTAPL's impact has ranged from the global to the individual. Personal connections and experience have been critical to building ABTAPL and forming its work. The unique challenges of a theological librarian's role in today's information environment are highlighted by Williams and Sinnett-Smith, exploring the challenges of building and managing theological collections. The fact that theological librarians are frequently found in small libraries where they are solo librarians adds further dimensions to these challenges. A fascinating theme that emerges is the relationship between a librarian's role and their religious ministry. We read in Warren's "Theological Libraries: A Cathedral Perspective" about the ministry of hospitality that librarians exercise in welcoming library visitors for events, exhibitions and library study, and in his chapter on "Buddhist Libraries in the UK," Garcia Jane also notes an affinity between librarianship and monasticism, with librarians becoming monks and vice versa. The chapters on theological libraries in Ireland (Conkey and Collins) and in Scotland (Love-Rodgers) explore the evolution of theological libraries through the period that ABTAPL has been in existence, charting both new growth and the challenges of libraries faced with closure. Gale and Fitzpatrick, although from very different perspectives, both explore the complexities of digital delivery for faith-based materials, and the need for librarian expertise to manage the fast-changing world of digital platforms, digital archiving, and open access.

As editors we are also very conscious of the stories that have not been told. Some of these are stories for which we sought but could not find authors, such as a chapter on recent changes to Catholic libraries in the UK, including the great Catholic libraries of Heythrop College and Ushaw College (however, see Purcell 2025). We also reached out for, but could not obtain, a chapter on theological libraries in Wales, and a chapter on Islamic libraries. In the course of writing and editing this volume, we've been reminded of many other stories that could be told about theological libraries in the UK. These include the story of theological libraries in London, the city at the heart of ABTAPL's operations when it began in 1956 (Powles 2020). The two ABTAPL Guides (Lea and Jesson 1986; Kerry and Cornell 1999) detail public libraries as holders of theological and religious library collections, but the recent history of religious collections in UK public libraries remains an under-researched area. Also mentioned in the ABTAPL Guides are library collections for religious education in teacher training colleges and schools. They have played a notable part in the tale of the UK's theological libraries, but their story is yet to be written. We hope that this volume will be followed by further publications on these topics and more.

At the beginning of this journey, we knew there was a book to be written, but we did not yet know what that book could do. We were delighted as editors to receive chapter proposals from such a diverse range of authors. It was exciting at author meetings to hear how this project had led our authors to carry out new research, to have new conversations and make new connections. As a result of those conversations, chapter authors have gone on to speak about their project in other forums and shared ABTAPL's work with new audiences. ABTAPL has gained new members and, following publication, we hope it will gain more.

The ABTAPL Committee consists of members representing the range of our association's work. I speak from my role as Deputy Chair, appointed in 2025. Winette Field is Training Rep from 2018 to 2026. Richard Johnson is Honorary Editor of the *ABTAPL Bulletin*, appointed in 2016. Marni Thurm is Honorary Secretary, appointed in 2021, and oversees ABTAPL's communication activities. Sarah Mann is former Conference Secretary and current Digital Officer, appointed in 2021, and maintains the ABTAPL Union List of Periodicals. Keith Lang is Membership Secretary and Treasurer, appointed in 2023. In the next part of this introduction, I pass the baton to these current committee members to tell their stories of the work they do for ABTAPL.

Training

WINETTE FIELD, TRAINING REPRESENTATIVE

Training for ABTAPL has taken more of a centre stage since 2019. The core autumn and spring meetings had long been established with a speaker programme and member-led sessions operating annually. However, the autumn meeting had seen a decline in the number of delegates, some institutions were reluctant to fund conference attendance, learning outcomes grew in importance, Covid-19 prevented travel and video conference technology became ubiquitous.

These factors led Winette Field to spearhead a change in practice, introducing a training needs survey, which uses CILIP's Personal Knowledge and Skills Base (CILIP 2025) terms, and post-event evaluations. Looking to the future, the next stage will be to create a flexible cycle for the core training needs, particularly important as a growing number of members have been in post for three years or less. Indeed, there has been much discussion about feelings of unpreparedness by new staff for the full extent of their roles in the sector despite undertaking Master's level study. To meet this need, individual mentoring was introduced by Sally Gibbs, former Chair, and this allowed established working librarians and recent retirees to support others.

Practical changes to formal training include events offered online, a wider range of trainers – including individuals from the NHS, authors, UKEiG¹ and Naomi Hart, Heythrop library, a member of the CILIP 125 next generation of leaders – resource lists, an ABTAPL eBook collection, and communities of practice (COP). During the COP, participants read a best practice article, discuss it, and reflect on their experiences. At best, these provide the opportunity to talk about problems and receive feedback from colleagues who might have solutions. Sometimes people share tools they have used within their workplace.

Recently, continental colleagues have been invited to attend events. This complements work done by Hannie Riley, as Chair, with both BETH and collection development within overseas libraries. Take-up has been low, but seeing overseas library workers raise issues such as changes to the Dewey Decimal System's treatment of religion within the 200 schedules has been heartening.

2024 saw the first joint Religious Archives Group (RAG) and ABTAPL meeting (Religious Archives Group 2025). Ruth McDonald, RAG Chair, Archivist and Deputy Director of The Salvation Army International Heritage Centre, had already participated in the Spring Conference as

part of a discussion panel. Together, the two groups put on an autumn face-to-face event at St Paul's Cathedral, London, entitled Fundraising for Archivists and Librarians.

In the skills survey, face-to-face events always appeal to members due to the networking and relational opportunities which arise from them. These meetings remain a challenge, however, as many solo workers find it hard to get away from their workplace. Hybrid events may be a solution, but much relies on the venues chosen for the in-person aspect for this to occur and at present, many places are set up for streaming in but not out.

The secondary issue of funding member training has been addressed by ABTAPL's small grant project, which provides funding for courses, transport, and other CPD needs. Applicants are not restricted to ABTAPL-only events but can apply for a free place at the spring conference if required.

Overall, the training aspect of ABTAPL is in a strong, responsive place, and this can only benefit the sector and the profession as a whole.

The ABTAPL Bulletin: A History

RICHARD JOHNSON, HONORARY EDITOR

ABTAPL was founded in 1956, and the first Bulletin was published in November of that year. The aim of ABTAPL was

to bring together librarians working with or interested in theological and philosophical literature in Great Britain. Its purposes were to improve the bibliographical information available, to bring to light some of the little-known collections on these subjects, and to help the smaller libraries that lacked professional expertise... In my opinion, the Bulletin is not only the evidence, it was also the success of ABTAPL... It achieved, in varying degrees, all the three purposes mentioned. (Howard 1974)

Twenty-four issues were published between 1956–66, edited from 1956 to 62 by Reginald J. Hoy (SOAS) and from 1962 to 66 by Jennifer Statham (King's College). I have been unable to see copies of these issues, so we have to rely again on John Howard's article for a description of what they contained:

It published a long series of articles describing theological libraries in London and other parts of Britain, it carried notices of bibliographical

and reference works, and there were features on professional matters like classification (of theological libraries, of Indian religions, and of the Dead Sea Scrolls) and the national library system and inter-library lending. It also carried organizational news, announcements, reports of meetings, and other notices for members. (Howard 1974)

In 1966, Jennifer Statham had to relinquish the editorship, and with few active members and a lack of leadership, there was no one able to replace her. For a number of years, ABTAPL was in the doldrums; John Howard writes, “The importance of the Bulletin to the Association is shown by the fact that with no Bulletin there was virtually no Association” (Howard 1974). The reasons he gives have a contemporary feel to them:

Many libraries in small theological colleges and seminaries do not have the funds to support a full-time qualified librarian . . . [and] the large general libraries, national, university and public, have substantial collections but few are organized on a subject basis which allows qualified staff to devote themselves particularly to these fields. (Howard 1974, 14)

However, in the early 1970s, under John Howard’s leadership, the fortunes of ABTAPL began to revive. The “New Series” of the ABTAPL Bulletin was first published in 1974; numbers 1–40 being published from 1974–87, followed by volume 2, numbers 1–18 (1988–93), and volume 3, numbers 1–9 (1994–96). From volume 4 in 1997, each year had a different volume number, reaching volume 32 in 2025.

Over the years, due to the development of email and the internet, the content of the Bulletin has gradually evolved to meet new situations, although there is much that is recognizably the same. We still include important news about the Association, and book reviews, but not the more ephemeral items, such as lists of periodicals on offer. There is no longer the need to communicate basic information about different libraries that can easily be found on the internet; but we do still seek to provide ideas and resources for (especially) solo librarians in smaller libraries “to help the smaller libraries that lacked professional expertise,” in the words from 1956.

ABTAPL conferences increasingly focus on areas of professional development, and the Bulletin provides space for reports of such conferences and enables the speakers to publish their talks in a more permanent form as articles, which functions as a resource for those who were unable to attend the conference or hear the original talk.

We still encourage librarians to write articles about their special collections, or events hosted by the library, or to share with others in ABTAPL how they have dealt with difficult situations – most notably in recent years, the Covid pandemic. More than anything else, the Bulletin seeks to provide the opportunity for ABTAPL members to share with one another both good ideas and good practice, and to be a key part of the networking between members.

In conclusion, here is a list of the Bulletin editors since 1956:

1956–62: Reginald J. Hoy

1962–66: Jennifer Statham

1974–87: John Howard

1987–91: Patrick J. Lambe

1991–92: Alan Smith

1994–2008: Marion Smith

(with Andrew Lacey as co-editor 1994–96)

2008–10: Humeyra Ceylan Izhar

2010–15: Jayne Downey

2016–present: Richard Johnson

Communication Activities

MARNI THURM LI, HONORARY SECRETARY

As ABTAPL exists primarily to facilitate the sharing of information, experience and advice, and support between its members, the ABTAPL website is a hub for advertising our activities. It is the primary platform for sharing with the public and potential members the history of the association, all the benefits of membership, the latest conference updates, and is home to the members' portal where CPD materials are hosted.

The ABTAPL Jiscmail (JISCM@il 2025) is where day-to-day knowledge sharing happens. For solo librarians or those working in a small team, the ABTAPL Jiscmail has often helped a frustrated or bemused information professional by serving as the equivalent of turning to

a colleague nearby to ask “Is it just me?” or “What do we do when...?” providing timely insight, advice and support. Like our North American and European counterparts, as a forum for discussing the latest trends, tech, or how worldwide events affect our local services, the Jiscmail proves itself to be a lifeline.

ABTAPL maintains a presence on relevant social media platforms as a way of advertising its activities beyond the membership to individuals who might benefit from joining, as well as other organisations and businesses. Presently, ABTAPL remains active on X and LinkedIn, as well as a Facebook group.

ABTAPL Union List

SARAH MANN, DIGITAL OFFICER

ABTAPL maintains a union list of its member institutions’ journal holdings online at <https://abtpljournals.wordpress.com>. A union list – “A complete list of the holdings of a group of libraries of materials (1) of a specific type, (2) on a certain subject, or (3) in a particular field” (ODLIS) – offers value for researchers because it is more efficient to search this one resource than to search separately the catalogues of different member institutions. For the same reason, it is a valuable tool for ABTAPL member librarians. ABTAPL operates an interlibrary loan system for member institutions; the union list ensures that member librarians can quickly find which collaborating institutions hold relevant material, and few member libraries share their catalogues elsewhere (for example, most ABTAPL member libraries do not contribute to the Jisc National Bibliographic Knowledgebase). From 2022 to 2024 the site has averaged more than 350 visitors per year, an indication of its ongoing value.

The Role of Treasurer and Membership Secretary

KEITH LANG, TREASURER AND MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

In ABTAPL, the role of treasurer and membership secretary is combined, which helps to keep things more efficient. The role requires careful precision, diligence, and diplomacy. A sense of history is always present in the details when working with the membership database.

As ABTAPL is defined as a membership association, there is no tax or charity status, and it is a pleasure to be able to seek and give opportunities to our membership through the accumulated funds.

Because it is a detailed and careful role, it is challenging to clear space to perform these duties without interruption, so I choose to do it outside of my paid employment in the world of theological librarianship. Others might find it easier, but to ensure my volunteering remains within my own capacity, I find this approach works best for me. The time spent on this endeavour is for our common good, and I perceive this ethos is shared by all of our committee members. For me, this is a continuing source of positive inspiration even on days when I don't feel like doing the necessities!

On the financial side, we benefit from the goodwill of others. Our accounts are audited by a highly qualified accountant for free; he professes joy in being able to do so. For the best part of a decade, as far as our current electronic records show, we benefit annually from a very large Atla donation, which comes via BETH, based upon the number of our members subscribing to Atla products. Atla and BETH could also be described as membership organisations in the United States and Europe, respectively. At our conferences, we receive sponsorship from a range of companies associated with the library world. While reimbursing committee member expenses, this personally underscores the amount of goodwill there is in ABTAPL in time and personal effort.

On the membership side, I really enjoy contact with so many colleagues across the philosophical and theological library sector (although the philosophical element is no longer a notable characteristic reflected among current membership, but was more so back in the 1950s). Our range of library membership starts with individuals who have an interest in, or who are part of, small organisations not able to pay the institutional fee or who have worked in and retired from this work and calling, through various and eclectic medium-sized institutions, right up to colleges and specialist and faculty libraries in institutions whose names are known all around the world.

As the intention of our association is, so is my experience in this role, that of mutual benefit. Being treasurer and membership secretary means I interact, even if only briefly, with so many colleagues, so that when I go to the ABTAPL JISCMAIL email forum, reading and posting, I have a context that imbues each interaction with more meaning. This is especially heightened for me by interacting in person at conferences, approving small grant awards, and occasionally sharing our benevolent fund with members in need.

Your Role?

CHRISTINE LOVE-RODGERS, DEPUTY CHAIR

These stories from our committee members shine a light on the valuable and dedicated work they do to make a difference to the profession through ABTAPL. Our members are the past, present and future of ABTAPL and any member can step up to join the committee, bringing their own unique experience and skills to ABTAPL's future. I would like to end this introduction by inviting you to take up the invitation written fifty years ago by former ABTAPL Chair John Howard. He said, "This discussion of the future of ABTAPL in the light of its past is enough to be going on with. What you have to do now is to decide what part you are going to play in the Association, put pen to paper, and tell any of the committee members" (Howard 1975, 16).

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Notes

- 1 “The UK e-information Group (UKeiG) – formerly known as the UK Online User Group (UKOLUG) ... is now a highly respected special interest group of CILIP,” https://www.cilip.org.uk/members/group_content_view.asp?group=201314&id=692156.