

Weather, Welcomes, and Wheelie Bins

*An Affectionate Look Back at the ABTAPL
Spring (Usually) Conference*

When delving into the back issues of the ABTAPL Bulletin for historical research, I re-read Judy's "Weather, Welcomes – and Wheelie Bins" and realised that we could not do better for a chapter on the history of the ABTAPL Spring conference. As former ABTAPL committee member Michael Gale remarked, it is "a tour de force – a light touch and a generosity of spirit" (pers. comm., May 30, 2025). It also highlights, in a sense, the real history of ABTAPL – of connections made, dinners enjoyed, fascinating libraries visited and most of all, the people of ABTAPL who made it all possible. I introduce you now to Judy Smith-Blow (then Judy Powles), who, in this chapter, is addressing the ABTAPL Spring Conference on its Diamond Jubilee Anniversary conference in Rome, March 2016.

— Christine Love-Rodgers

JUDITH SMITH-BLOW (NÉE POWLES), UPDATED BY CHRISTINE LOVE-RODGERS

Weather, Welcomes, and Wheelie Bins

From 1989 until 2014, I attended every single conference without exception and it is because of this that I have been asked to put a few thoughts and memories together, hopefully to entertain

you in this graveyard slot when everyone is collapsing with weariness after their travelling from far and wide.

I shall repeat here something our former honorable secretary, Mary Elliott, said in the piece she wrote for the Golden Jubilee Bulletin – “Of course, perversely, it’s the non-professional aspects of conferences that stick in the memory” (Elliott 2006, 23). And that is exactly the case for me and for many of you!

Some of you may be wondering about the title of this presentation:

Weather – this is because we all seem to remember the extremes of weather experienced during the conferences. We have encountered everything from snow to almost tropical conditions.

Welcomes – this is because so many ABTAPL members have commented on the warmth of the welcome given to them, both by the conference host and also by the other delegates. However there have also been a few conferences where the host institution would not pass the charm school test.

And **Wheelie bins**? – well I will come onto that in due course.

I’ll begin by giving a bit of historical background to the legendary Spring Conference which, unlike the Association, has not been going for the past 60 years. From what I can gather, the first residential conference took place in Durham in 1978. But before that, ABTAPL had some input into the Library Association’s Universities, Colleges and Research Section residential conference at the University of Surrey in 1975. According to Mary Elliott, “ABTAPL made a successful, if modest, contribution to the Conference” (Elliott 1975, 2).

And it is here that ABTAPL must acknowledge the huge debt it owes to the honorable secretary of the time, Mary Elliott. It is largely due to Mary and also to the late John Howard that the conferences became such a huge part of the Association’s life.

Over the next almost 40 years (this is our 39th residential conference), conferences have been held in university halls of residences, conference centres, retreat houses and, more recently, hotels. It is fair to say that the accommodation has been very varied, ranging from Spartan to complete luxury. There was also the tradition for going “North” one year and “South” the next so that nobody felt disadvantaged in terms of travel distances.

Over the years the start and end days have varied with, in more recent years, a pattern emerging for a Thursday to Saturday model as opposed to the original weekend format of Friday to Sunday. The committee in my time as Chairman had long discussions on this subject, but some of the key factors were that it was often difficult to organize visits

on Saturdays/Sundays and Sunday travel could be very long given the inevitable engineering works on the line. My own experience of the Glasgow conference in 1993 bore this out and I will refer to this later.

Regarding location, the winner in the venue popularity stakes is Cambridge with four conferences. Bristol, Durham, Manchester, Oxford and Salisbury are runners up with three each. Some of the “one-hit wonders” include Chichester, Lancaster, Leicester, Lincoln and Exeter.

For many years there was no such thing as a specific Conference Secretary. The poor Honorable Secretary seemed to do most of the organizing: Mary Elliott with help from John Howard, and later Alan Jesson. But eventually the role of Conference Secretary came into being and we enjoyed conferences organized by Margaret Ecclestone, Rosemary Pugh, Alan Linfield and Rachel Campion with help from people on the ground such as Dorothy Wright in Manchester, Evelyn Cornell in Leicester, Dorothy Anderson in Belfast and more recently Jenny Monds and Jayne Downey in Salisbury and then Carol Reekie in Cambridge. And here we are in Rome with Alan ably leading us again! As for the future . . .

And what of conference delegates over the years? Each year along with a “hard core” of old (and not so old) faithfuls there have been newbies – some new to theological and philosophical librarianship, others taking the plunge to attend after some (or indeed many) years in post. There have also been many visitors from overseas, near and far. It has always been good to welcome them. At some conferences there have been representatives from commercial companies joining us – they have had to run the gauntlet of ABTAPL ire over subscription rates, book prices, etc. etc., but on the whole I think that they have found it helpful, as have we, being able to discuss things positively face to face.

And of course there have been a few eccentrics along the way, many of whom have been sorely missed when they were no longer able to join us. Marion Smith has a lovely memory of Pat Mugliston, who retired in 1988 but who kept coming to conferences until, as John Howard commented in her obituary in 2004, “increasing deafness and the multiplication of her cats made it too difficult for her” (Howard 2004, 6). Marion remembered Pat at the Maynooth conference, “We were walking back to the college and her face lit up when she saw a trailer loaded with a speedboat (I think – either that or a fast car!).” I think we were all totally surprised when we learned that Pat at her death was a double millionaire and had left a bequest to her two cats, Matilda and Top Cat.

All these people have added to the rich tapestry of the ABTAPL Spring Conference.

Many people remember not only the conferences but also the travelling to and from the venues, sometimes in British Rail adversity! There was so much camaraderie, interesting conversations, etc. I have never forgotten Mary Elliott on one journey enthusing about this wonderful book, a sort of crime story set in a medieval monastery complete with labyrinthine library. You guessed it – Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. I just had to buy it on my return and I was immediately hooked – though it is one of those Marmite books – you either love it or hate it!

So returning to that first conference all those years ago in 1978 at St John's College, Durham, Mary Elliott describes it as “a modest affair, but which attracted 27 members, more than our previous half-day meetings” (Elliott 2006, 23). This comment is in itself significant as it just goes to show that there was an interest amongst the members to get together professionally for a longer period than had been the norm with the half-day meeting. The conference seemed to consist of a series of interesting visits rather than having a specific theme or speakers. However I rather enjoyed the comment in the 1978 June *Bulletin* “Minds and bodies relaxed in the atmosphere of bookshops and pubs, of godly learning and good living, of Bede and Cuthbert, of Norman architecture, Anglican chant and the whole Christian tradition that Durham has preserved through the centuries” (Howard 1978, 2). It conjures up such a wonderful picture.

The following year, 1979, was held at St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden (now the Gladstone Library). This one seems to have stuck in many people's memories but not for the best reasons! I rather gather that the Warden of the time was not one of those people who knew the words “Warm Welcome”. Apparently, he ran the place with military precision and not all ABTAPL members could cope with this. Mary remembers that several delegates travelled on a London–Holyhead train which was held up for a considerable time – no explanation given. Only later they learnt of the murder of Airey Neave; the train had been searched in case the perpetrator was on board. Mary also comments how, on the lighter side, they met the “totally Trollopian Vice-Dean of Chester Cathedral” (Elliott 2006, 23). One interesting point about this conference, though, was the introduction of a seminar on cataloguing and classification, the first sign of a ‘Continuing Professional Development’ element, though I don't suppose that phrase was used then.

In 1980, the conference headed for York to the rather romantic sounding Hazlewood Castle, Tadcaster. This was a historic house,

owned for centuries by one family, but in 1972 it had become the home of Carmelite monks and a centre for their work in Yorkshire. The 18th-century stable block had been converted into a guest house for visitors and it was here that ABTAPL took up residence. The main highlight of this weekend for John Howard, as he recorded in his memoir at the Golden Jubilee Conference, was “the involuntary defenestration during the night of a lady member who had lost the key of her room” (Howard 2006, 21)! Reading the conference report I felt absolutely exhausted by hearing of the number of visits packed into one day beginning with the Bar Convent followed by York Minster Library. The late Alan Smith gives a lovely description of the party after lunch “motoring across the North Yorkshire Moors to Shandy Hall, Coxwold, the parsonage for eight years of the novelist Laurence Sterne” (A. Smith 1980, 2). Then they headed for Ampleforth Abbey for another visit. No wonder Alan describes the conference as “most enjoyable, if hectic” (A. Smith 1980, 3).

1981 saw the first of three conferences at Bristol, this one being held at Trinity College but with a fairly small number, a core of about fifteen. Again the main memories of the conference seem to be the many visits on the Saturday, starting with Trinity’s own Library, then Wesley College followed by Bristol Baptist College, the highlight of this being the removal from the safe for ABTAPL members to see of the unique extant copy of Tyndale’s 1526 New Testament – as the conference report comments “probably the most valuable individual book in the whole of Bristol” (Larkin 1981, 2). There followed a trip to Downside Abbey. I was intrigued to read of the evening talk by a local bookseller on the occultist writer A. E. Waite, who died in 1939. Peter Larkin’s report describes, “At first sight this appeared rather remote from usual ABTAPL territory, but so many were the ramifications of Waite’s own influences, and so absorbing was Mr. Gilbert’s advocacy of the value of his subject that much discussion followed the lecture, which had been illustrated with slides” (Larkin 1981, 3).

The first of ABTAPL’s four Cambridge conferences took place in 1982, on that occasion staying at Selwyn College. According to Lionel Madden writing the conference report, “The weekend started in fine style with the rare treat of a talk by Professor Owen Chadwick, Master of Selwyn” (Madden 1982, 2). After a visit to Westcott House, Lionel describes how, “Fortified by lunch, some of us ventured on an exhausting afternoon tour of some of the colleges and their chapels under the guidance of a knowledgeable lady of determined manner, extraordinary rapidity of movement, and indefatigable zeal for Foxe’s

Book of Martyrs" (Madden 1982, 3). The final comment by Lionel struck a chord – "My only regret, as I listened to the reminiscences of long established members, is that I did not begin attending them years ago" (Madden 1982, 3).

In 1983, ABTAPL headed across the border into Scotland for the first time with the conference being held at the Scottish Episcopal Church's Theological College in Edinburgh. By all accounts this venue was very Spartan and so cold that warm pyjamas had to be lent to a delegate from Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), the late Goma Ndamba. I was intrigued to read in the Bulletin report that John Howard, who organized the conference, "had more than his fair share of ill-luck" (Walsh 1983). What did this mean, I wonder? Also Michael Walsh writing the report talks of a gloomy account of the problems faced by Dr. Stephen Pattison in his attempts to supervise the host library. The gloom continued the following morning when members visited the library of the Scottish Congregational College. As Michael comments, "Both institutions provided object-lessons in the problems faced by under-funded, understaffed and under-used collections of religious literature" (Walsh 1983). Oh dear!

1984 saw twenty-two members heading to Manchester to stay at St Anselm Hall. There were the usual visits, including the Deansgate building of the University Library (the John Rylands Library). Nothing out of the ordinary seemed to have occurred though it was interesting to read John Howard's comment on the Sunday morning service held in the Hall's octagonal chapel which many ABTAPL members attended. He said, "this was a moving occasion, being the first time ABTAPL had included such a service as part of the programme. It helped to confirm and enlarge the spirit of engagement in a common task which the weekend had stimulated" (Howard 1984).

Thirty-one ABTAPL members turned their faces south in 1984 to stay at Chichester Theological College. This seems to have been the highest turnout so far and the conference had a specific theme, "The Education of Theological Librarians." Also, it was the first time the conference had continued into the Sunday afternoon. Apart from the various visits, members enjoyed the professional input and, as Ruth Gibson in her report commented, "Many felt that the papers had enhanced a feeling of professionalism amongst its members" (Gibson 1985).

As a result of the desire expressed in Chichester for younger members and less experienced members to receive advice on various aspects of theological librarianship, the 1985 conference started a day earlier to accommodate a training day. Consequently, fourteen members

arrived at Manchester College, Oxford, on the Thursday evening, ready to enjoy a variety of practical sessions during Friday before the rest of the delegates joined the conference in the evening. Visits were packed in as usual, including Blackwell's distribution centre and the Bodleian Library. However, Elizabeth Williams's report noted that during the afternoon's visits to various college libraries, "There was so much to see that we had to cancel our scheduled visit to Oriel College" (E. Williams 1986). Thanks were expressed to Mary Elliott for her organization of the conference on this "very unspringlike weekend."

I am very grateful to Alan Jesson for his recollections of the next two conferences held at Lancaster in 1987 and Lincoln Theological College in 1988 as there are no reports in the *Bulletin*. However, Alan's own recollections of Lancaster are, as he puts it, "a bit of a blur" as he had recently slipped a disc! He does particularly remember the visit to Stonyhurst College by coach, which was a journey over narrow and rough country roads. Getting off the coach at Stoneyhurst was not at all comfortable! Alan remembers the presentations and lectures as first class, including in particular a talk on Victorian religious literature, though Helen Greenwood, a visitor from New Zealand, described all the papers given as "Scholarly rather than practical" (Greenwood 1987)!

The Lincoln conference was the first conference Alan Jesson organized as ABTAPL's new Honorable Secretary, but he inherited it halfway through and did not do the initial arrangements. As he remarks, "Had I been able to do a preliminary visit to Edward King House, I think that I might have gone elsewhere." It turned out that most people had to share rooms which were "pretty primitive." Alan came down early the first morning to find one of the delegates on his way out with his bag packed. His roommate not only snored, but moaned and talked in his sleep, and this poor man had had no sleep at all. Fortunately, Alan managed to find him an alternative and he stayed on. After that, things got better!

And now we are in 1989 in Cambridge – my very first conference. I had been told about the Spartan accommodation of Lincoln the previous year and the biting cold winds, so I was totally unprepared for the luxury of a lovely modern bedroom at Fitzwilliam College, complete with hotel style toiletries, etc., laid out on the bed and the glorious sunshine showing Cambridge at its best. If truth be told, I was also rather worried about being a newbie amongst these potentially "strange" theological and philosophical librarians for a whole weekend but I needn't have been so concerned. From the outset, I was made to feel so welcome and I warmed immediately to this group of people, many of whom I

now consider to be close friends. The theme of this conference was “Conservation and Disaster Planning” and my recollection is of many interesting, practical talks on the subject – all these are reproduced in the November *Bulletin* for that year (Ratcliffe et al. 1989). However, there were so many talks packed in that, unusually for an ABTAPL conference, there were no scheduled visits. My plan had been to do some touristy things on the Sunday after the conference had finished but, sadly, the sunshine had disappeared and heavy rain descended.

1990 saw us head for Birmingham, staying out at Selly Oak – I think it was at Westhill College (now demolished, I believe). The theme of this conference was “Multiculturalism,” highly appropriate considering our location. With no report in the *Bulletin* I am having to rely on my own memory. Unusually, nothing comes to mind about the accommodation or weather so there couldn’t have been any problems or otherwise with either! However, I do have a recollection of driving round and round the grey concrete of the Central Library in Birmingham trying to find the vehicle entrance! Another memory is of the warm welcome given to us by the Library staff, including our late friend, Alan Smith, who later took over editing the *Bulletin*, and also Marion Smith, here with us in Rome, who, with Andrew Lacey, took over the editorship following Alan’s sudden and tragic death in March 1992, aged 42.

The accommodation for the 1991 conference at Hatfield College, Durham, sticks in my mind. My room was halfway up an Oxbridge-type wooden staircase. It was so incredibly noisy as heavy-footed undergraduates (allowed to stay up for the vacation) pounded up and down the staircase at all times of day and night. The theme for this conference was “Strategic Planning for Libraries” or as Alan Jesson described it in the conference invitation, “a rather upmarket way of saying ‘How to run your library better!’” As Ruth Gibson commented in her report, “Anyone who joined us anticipating a restful weekend would have had quite a shock. It is true that we had only one library visit, but the weekend was led in such a way that no one could take a back seat” (Gibson 1991). This was my first introduction to a type of management exercise, where we divided into groups, each with a large piece of paper, and were invited to work on mission statements using SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). For a little light relief we did, however, manage to see Durham Cathedral Library. I think that some members came away from that conference feeling a little shell-shocked, though many of

us found this new way of looking both at our own libraries and also ABTAPL itself very helpful.

And possibly to the dismay of those shell-shocked members, the following year continued the management theme and here I introduce the Wheelie Bins! So in 1992 (my first as ABTAPL Chairman) we stayed at Salisbury and Wells Theological College, now Sarum College (in the days before the refurbishment which we enjoyed in later years). It turns out that the planned main speaker had pulled out virtually at the last minute leaving Alan Jesson in a mild state of panic (his words). Fortunately, one of his friends at church worked for an organisation in Cambridge specialising in management training and offered him at a bargain rate the package usually aimed at local government officers. This saw us again dividing into groups, each of us being given a specific role within a fictional local authority and told to fight our corner for funding. My remit was the environment and I had to speak on behalf of retaining wheelie bins, amongst other things! Votes were cast and I am pleased to say that I won on behalf of wheelie bins everywhere. It did turn out to be a valuable exercise as so many of us were then, as now, facing threats to funding within our institutions and to be able to “fight our corners” was particularly helpful. There must have been some visits during this conference but Wheelie Bins dominate my memory!

It was back to Scotland in 1993, this time to Jordanhill College in Glasgow. My memory is of arriving with a group of other ABTAPL members at the main station and looking hopelessly around us for a sign to the local station, which we needed to get us out to Jordanhill. A lovely local gentleman came to our rescue – none of us could understand a word he said as his accent was so thick but he kindly led us down steps, round corners and finally onto the platform. I don’t remember that much about the conference, apart from a line of black taxis which arrived on the Friday evening to take us for a special visit to the Mitchell Library, floodlit for our benefit (well perhaps not!). However, I do remember very clearly the journey home on the Sunday. We left Glasgow as normal, but on reaching Carlisle, the announcement was made that there was good news and bad news. The bad news was that the train was having to divert, the good news (according to the announcer) was that the diversion was going to be along the famous Carlisle to Settle line. The fact that they were removing the buffet car at Carlisle was not included in the announcement, but we only discovered later on our very long, cold journey home that there were no refreshments

to be had, so the wonderful scenery rather passed us by on that bleak Sunday afternoon. We were very late getting home.

Our second trip to Bristol took place in 1994 staying at The Hawthorns, part of the University. The various visits mirrored the earlier conference with, once again, the glimpse of the Tyndale Bible at Bristol Baptist College being one of the highlights. It was almost immediately after that conference that we heard that the Bible had been sold to the British Library for a million pounds. As Jean Woods wrote in her conference report, “Those who missed seeing the book at Bristol will soon be able to see it on show in the British Library, though not with the intimacy with which we were able to see it in the small chapel of Bristol Baptist College” (Woods 1994, 21).

1995 was something of a first when we went “abroad” for our conference – to St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, just outside Dublin. The College was celebrating the 200th anniversary of its foundation and the conference took as its theme “Maynooth’s 200 years: the old and the new”. Some thirty of us attended, including my late husband, John, who was to accompany me on so many subsequent conferences. Sadly (or perversely, as Mary might comment) the memory which strikes me most is that of our room in the Pugin-designed seminary being at the end of the long corridor on the “Men’s floor”. To reach the ladies’ bathroom I had to walk the length of the top corridor, go down a wide stone staircase and then go along the corridor on the floor beneath which had been designated for the female attendees. On the Sunday morning (Palm Sunday), I came out of our room in my dressing gown, armed with my soap bag ready for the long trek, only to find myself being passed by a steady stream of earnest young seminarians on their way to the Chapel. Embarrassment all round – or perhaps not!

Another clear memory was our first evening meal, which seemed to be more of a high tea with pots of tea on the table and plates of bread and butter – a rather low-key affair. We were expecting the same the following evening and the majority of us were therefore underdressed accordingly, only to be taken aback by the very formal anniversary dinner, complete with wine bearing the Maynooth anniversary labels, which had been laid on for everyone staying on that evening. A final anecdote from me is of an evening expedition into Dublin which some of us took, returning on the local bus only to find that the gates were locked. To this day I can’t remember how we got in – but we must have somehow!

In 1996 we returned to Oxford, this time staying at Regent’s Park College. The conference included a visit to Pusey House, where I

remember Penny Hall's eyes lighting up at the sight of the organ in the chapel there – and then she was actually allowed to play it. I don't remember much more about the conference except that we watched a couple of training videos featuring John Cleese. One, I recall, was on answering the telephone effectively! Rosemary Pugh remembers being very grateful for Alan Jesson's car mechanic skills when her car wouldn't start at the end of the conference. Multi-talented librarians.

Moving on to 1997 in Winchester, the stapled rabbit immediately comes to mind as do the many hills we walked up and down during the course of the conference. We stayed at King Alfred's College and this year's theme was "Design and Display," the conference running from Saturday to Monday. The main session on the Sunday afternoon was devoted to a demonstration on display techniques given by a rather dynamic couple who seemed to have a fetish with a staple gun. I remember distinctly letting out a howl of anguish as a poor soft toy rabbit was stapled with great relish to a display board by its ears. There was also a "hands-on" participation exercise – I was totally useless. This same couple were of an artistic temperament and our poor Honorable Secretary of the time, Andrew Lacey, had to display the patience of a saint as they complained about access and other issues before and after the presentation. It was in Winchester that the decision to move the Annual General Meeting (AGM) to the Spring residential conference was made. So the AGM became a highlight (or not!) of the weekend. We did, that weekend, also see the Winchester Bible, a great treat.

In 1998 we returned to Manchester, staying at St Anselm Hall again, but moving round the corner to Luther King House for our conference sessions. This conference was ably organised by Dorothy Wright with the theme of "Multiculturalism and Nonconformity" and featured an excellent mix of talks and visits. It also featured stuffing envelopes with questionnaires for the *Guide to Theological Libraries*! Another memory is of a fantastic cream tea given to members attending the pre-conference Theological Heritage User Group (THUG) meeting at the Nazarene College. Food plays such an important part in my memories!

And food (and wine) played a large part in the following year's conference in 1999, organised by Andrew Lacey at Trinity Hall, Cambridge with the theme "The New Small Library," taking advantage of the fact that a number of Cambridge colleges had built new or refurbished their old libraries. The new Jerwood Library at Trinity Hall was particularly impressive – I remember seeing the window seats in the Library where students could sit and read as they looked out watching the river flow past. Less impressive was Andrew's office, which was more of a broom

cupboard. We also had visits to Sidney Sussex and Jesus College. As for our meals, despite the fact that we sat on long benches, the quality of the food and wine was superb and not to be forgotten!

2000 in York was a special year in the annals. However, for me personally, and one or two others, it is a year to be forgotten. This was the year when the residential conference moved from Spring to Autumn so that the ABTAPL conference could follow immediately the BETH conference, which was being hosted by ABTAPL at the College of Ripon and York St John. Graham Cornish, an ABTAPL committee member for many years, who was at that time working at the British Library, Boston Spa, helped greatly with the organisation. Rather than revisit all the difficulties experienced, which involved a significant theft from one of the overseas visitors, anyone wishing to find out more is invited to read my report in the *Bulletin* for that year (M. Smith 2000). I would like to repeat my thanks to Andrew Lacey for all that he did to help. And this is probably the moment to thank Andrew as well for the many wonderful talks on a variety of historical topics relevant to our particular venue which he has given to us over the years as our “resident academic.” Similarly, Graham Cornish has over many years added to our professional knowledge with his many sessions on copyright issues.

It wasn’t all bad though in York, and we had some wonderful times with our BETH friends though it may have sounded a bit like the Tower of Babel at times. A visit to Ampleforth Abbey particularly stands out. We had been invited to attend Evensong but were relegated to the gallery at the back of the Abbey as we “wouldn’t understand the service as it was in Latin.” We were also told to keep very quiet. Given that a large number of us were well-versed in Latin and well understood how services of this nature were conducted we felt a little put down – or even peeved, if I am being honest! We were also not allowed access to the monastery library, though we did see the school library with its Mouseman furniture. The other perverse memory is of our visit to the Bar Convent. If I say “The Hand” some of you may shudder as I do. In the Chapel there is a very special relic, carefully covered with a cloth. This relic is the perfectly-preserved hand of Saint Margaret Clitherow. When the nun showing us round asked if we would like her to remove the cloth, I think most of us were willing that cloth to stay put, but one delegate piped up, “Yes, please,” and the cloth was ceremonially removed. The hand is indeed well-preserved but that is all I will say!

Just 6 months later, in Spring 2001, we were meeting again, this time in Exeter at St Luke’s College with the theme “Cataloguing the

Specialist Collections in Today's Theological Libraries," the first conference organised by Rosemary Pugh. Rosemary and her lovely husband, John, often with their camper van, became permanent fixtures on the delegate list for each conference. I don't remember too much about the details, except that there was a good mix of visits and talks. Rosemary remembers us all arriving at the accommodation block but having to wait absolutely ages for someone to come and let us in. Some of us had en-suite rooms and others didn't, and it was after this conference that the committee decided to recommend en-suite for all. Also, there was a school party in the same block as some of us. One night, they decided to have a game of football in the corridor after we had all gone to bed. We were not amused. For those of us who had been in York, it also brought back bad memories of the rowdy student reunion which had caused so many problems at that conference.

In 2002 it was north again, this time staying at Chester College with rooms containing little ensuite "pods" (for want of a better word). Here we again had a mixture of talks and visits, one of which was a return to St Deiniol's. Fortunately for those who had attended the infamous 1979 conference, the Warden was no longer there and we had a very warm welcome from Patsy Williams and her colleagues. Graham Cornish also led some very interesting and informative sessions on copyright. Canon Roy Barker gave a very entertaining talk on the Cathedral Library in lieu of a visit as it was sadly being refurbished. I think this was the first conference where the popular "Open Forum" session was featured.

Our second visit to Salisbury occurred in 2003, again staying at Sarum College. If I mention "the lunch bags" many of you will instantly recall the picture, which was subsequently featured on the website and the ABTAPL publicity leaflet, showing all the delegates clutching white paper bags in a thick mist! The theme of this conference was "A Theology of Religious Record-Keeping" and we had some memorable visits, including Downside Abbey (who could forget the wonderful welcome given to us by the charming Dom Daniel Rees?), and Wells Cathedral with their two lovely librarians. I also remember the visit to Salisbury Cathedral Library and being "welcomed" by the rather fierce librarian who was keen to point out the cupboard housing a toilet specially built to save her having to go up and down the many steps leading back down into the Cathedral. More perverse memories!

My distinct memory of the 2004 conference held in Leicester, staying at Beaumont Hall near the Botanical Gardens, is of the visit to the Jain Centre in central Leicester. This had originally been a nonconformist

Chapel but its frontage had been remodelled with Jain carvings. I had never seen anything like it before. Again, we had a very warm welcome and I learned much about Jain spirituality. Of course, much of the conference focussed on multiculturalism. Another thing I remember is that we had two representatives from Continuum joining us for the whole conference. A baptism by fire for them, I suspect! Evelyn Cornell, then on the staff at the University Library, had done much to help with the organisation of the conference and it was highly successful.

Durham in 2005 certainly sticks in my mind, first of all because of the weather. We had snow! This was the second conference my husband accompanied me and afterwards he commented on what a privilege it had been to go where no man or woman usually ever went. He was referring in particular to the visit to Auckland Castle, the home of the Bishop of Durham (then Tom Wright). As Carol Reekie recalls, "The Bishop gave us the run of his study – rare books intermingled with personal family possessions, it was a joy to see." I remember the guide saying to us that she had never been in that room before as it was definitely off the tourist route. Carol also says "We also saw the well-known paintings of the twelve tribes of Abraham (only one was missing). After our visit, I recall there was a lot of controversy about selling these." ¹ We were indeed privileged. On a more negative note, we stayed at Collingwood College where, although the rooms were very comfortable, I have to say it was the worst shower experience I have ever had. Apparently my shriek as the cold water hit me was heard for miles!

And now the icing on the Conferences cake – the Golden Jubilee Conference in Prague, extended to 5 days in 2006, based at the International Baptist Theological Seminary just outside the city. What an amazing experience for the fifty-plus delegates who attended. The word "privilege" again comes to mind as, thanks to the amazing work of Alan Linfield (his first as solo conference secretary) with his on-the-spot connections in Prague, we were able to visit collections rarely seen by ordinary tourists, for example, the library of the Nostitz Palace (where we were followed round by a security guard carrying a large gun) and the theology and philosophy libraries of the Strahov Monastery. Carol again recalls "the bus routes being changed because a James Bond film with Daniel Craig was being filmed – something Alan could not have foreseen but he coped admirably."

And who could forget that brightly-coloured jester's hat? Where is it now? Many of us will also recall that amazing conference dinner in a restaurant overlooking Prague. I remember with affection our late

colleague John Howard who gave a marvellous overview of the first fifty years of ABTAPL. It was largely down to him, following a prompt from Graham Cornish (as I discovered from Graham only recently), that the almost moribund association had been resurrected. It is good to mention Lesley Utting's recollection here, joining the conference from New Zealand, "it was a wonderful setting to meet and make lifelong professional connections. The welcome was warm and this set the tone for the whole conference. Therefore the location, the programme, the visits and the people made this conference a highlight of my library career" (Utting 2006). Exactly so.

That was a hard act to follow, but Alan surpassed himself with the accommodation we found in Edinburgh at the Salisbury Green Hotel, part of the University's Pollock Halls complex – the first time ABTAPL had stayed in a hotel. Talk about quirky rooms. I think most of us were totally taken aback by the baronial style luxury – our room had, for example, its own little tower room – you went through a tiny door, up some stairs and then could sit in the turret window seat looking out at amazing views over Arthur's Seat. During the conference there was another good mix of interesting visits and talks, including one by Anthony Brewerton, an expert in library marketing. Marion Smith recalls introducing Humeyra Ceylan to John Howard in Edinburgh not long after she took over the *Bulletin*. Marion says "it felt a bit like passing on the baton in a relay." Perhaps one of the more memorable events was the sudden arrival of the haar (sea fog), which swept in and totally obliterated the day's glorious sunshine as we walked from the Scottish Catholic Archives to New College. It makes me shiver to think about it!

And now we move in 2008 from Scotland to Ireland again, this time to the north where we stayed at Stranmillis University College in Belfast, my last conference as Chairman. An extra day was added to the conference so that we could maximise our time in Northern Ireland. During the time, we packed in visits both within the city itself and outside, plus talks and presentations. Perhaps the highlight for most of us was on the Friday morning when we boarded a coach to Armagh. We ate our packed lunches on the steps of St Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral, much to the surprise of a large group gathering for a wedding. The coach then took us through the stunning scenery of the Mountains of Mourne and the coast road to Downpatrick, where we went to the Down County Museum and the Saint Patrick Centre. As Christine Ainsley recalls "Maybe we could remember the Irish idea of time: that bus tour over the Mournes for example (shall we eat

lunch now, in Armagh, or when we get to Downpatrick?) and arriving at the Patrick centre after it had closed!” One of the sad things at this conference is that we had to acknowledge the death of David Parry, who had been booked to attend. I am sure that Dave himself would have acknowledged that he was one of our eccentrics – I still don’t know why a china pig accompanied him at mealtimes at so many of our conferences!

In 2009 we found ourselves back in Oxford, this time staying at Worcester College with the attendance (43 delegates) higher than any previous conference other than the Golden Jubilee. The weather was absolutely amazing for the entire time. The food and accommodation were excellent, there were really interesting visits and it was hard to remember anything detracting from our enjoyment, professional and personal. I particularly enjoyed the optional afternoon visit to Yarnton Manor, the home of the Oxford Centre for Jewish and Hebrew studies.

The amazing weather continued the following year in 2010, when we returned to Bristol. This was the first conference organized by Rachel Campion and what an excellent job she did, especially in negotiating a great rate for us to stay at the Mercure Brigstow hotel near the river. We enjoyed all the visits, which included the New Room (John Wesley’s first chapel) and Charles Wesley’s house, but I particularly remember the final session on the use and process of ‘marketing strategy’ within the theological library sector. We certainly felt that we had earned our keep professionally, so to speak. It was sad to hear at that conference that Wesley College was under threat of closure.

Rachel again did us proud in 2011 when we stayed at the Maid’s Head Hotel in Norwich, apparently the oldest hotel in the UK. The weather was, once again, fabulous and I just remember a day packed full of visits, all done against the backdrop of completely blue skies and sunshine. The visit to the Julian Centre stands out for me especially as it was such a peaceful place. Sally Gibbs, recalling her second conference, says “I remember waiting in the new grand foyer at Norwich Cathedral for the Dean, who was going to show us the Cathedral library. One member of the Cathedral clergy asked what collective noun should be used for a group of librarians – I suggested a ‘pedant.’ We went on to discuss what term could be used for a group of clergy, my idea was a ‘gossip of clergy’. He already had the term ready for a collection of Deans and was delighted to tell us... a ‘forest’ of course!”

In 2012, we found ourselves a little closer to home for our Conference Secretary as we paid our third visit to Manchester, this time staying at Luther King House. Sadly, the weather lived up to the Manchester

reputation and we were decidedly damp as we walked around the city between the various visits to the John Rylands Library and Chetham's, where we saw the famous chained library. However, the welcome everywhere was warm, the accommodation very comfortable, and, as always, the company excellent. We also enjoyed a really informative and practical session on disaster planning and management given by Emma Dadson of Harwell Document Restoration Services.

Rain followed us in 2013 when we once again crossed the border into Scotland, staying at the Beardmore Hotel (now called the Golden Jubilee Conference Hotel) in Glasgow. This was quite an adventure for me, as I had flown from Stansted Airport where I had fallen foul of the security check (I had forgotten to remove my mobile phone from the front pocket of my suitcase) and had had the entire contents of my suitcase flung out onto the table before the somewhat unpleasant airport official. I remember wondering where we were going as the hotel shuttle approached what appeared to be the main entrance of a hospital. It turned out there was a shared entrance with the Golden Jubilee Hospital.

Some of the conference is a bit of a blur as I was about to exchange contracts on the house I was hoping to move to. I remember trying to balance a mobile phone against one ear while trying to hold on to my umbrella being battered by the wind and rain and trying to make sense of what the estate agent and then solicitor was trying to tell me. However, I definitely could not forget our visit to the Glasgow School of Art and the wonderful Charles Rennie Mackintosh-designed library. How terrible to know that the amazing place was completely gutted by that dreadful fire in 2014. To help our professional development, our colleague Graham Cornish once again gave us the benefit of his expertise talking about e-copyright. I know that I was able to make good use of his advice on my return to Spurgeon's in regard to our online site.

In 2014 we returned to Sarum College, where Jenny Monds and Jayne Downey had organized a most enjoyable conference. I especially remember the trip to Winchester and especially the Winchester College Fellows' Library where we saw so many treasures (Day 2014). Sally Gibbs has a particular memory, "Out of all the conference library visits I have experienced, the artefact that has left the deepest impression was at the Winchester College Alumni Library (2014). We were shown a very rare Algonquin New Testament which early traders would have handed out to Native Americans – giving what they could not understand to people who could not read. The Winchester boys had asked if it might be sold to raise the funds to have their football

pitch astro-turfed. The librarian had replied that it was so valuable the sale would pay for the whole of Winchester to be astro-turfed, then to us he added that probably the whole of the south of England could be so treated. I barely have a memory of the book itself, it seemed small and insignificant, it was the astronomic value which astounded me. I suppose the impact was all the greater because we have had such tight budgets in recent years. While many theological libraries struggle to keep their modules resourced, some other institutions are sitting on vast, probably inestimable treasures.”

For the 2015 conference I had to turn to the report in the *Bulletin* as I was enjoying the sunshine in Tuscany. From all accounts you had a great time staying at Westminster College, Cambridge, enjoying a packed programme of visits and talks all put together so well by Carol. The description of the Cambridge sunshine and the visit to Fitzwilliam College brought me full circle to that first conference I attended there in 1989.

And now here we are in Rome. So many wonderful memories – all that weather, good and bad, all those welcomes mostly warm – and even those wheelie bins!

Here’s to the next however many years of the ABTAPL Spring conference. And with thanks to all those colleagues, past and present, too many to name, who have contributed so much to the conference experience.

Update : ABTAPL Conferences 2016–2025

And there we must leave Judy, raising a glass to ABTAPL in 2016. While I cannot hope to match Judy’s virtuoso performance, that was, of course, not the end of the ABTAPL conference story. The *ABTAPL Bulletin* recounts in some detail the visits and sessions at the Rome 2016 conference – high points included “a visit to the Tower of the Winds, one of the most famous buildings of the Vatican, which is located on top of the archive buildings” (Linfield 2016, 28) and visits to the Biblioteca Angelica and Biblioteca Catanense, “both were slightly reminiscent of the Tardis, with unprepossessing entrances revealing amazingly rich interiors” (Warren 2016, 33). Anna Williams, in her summing up of the Rome Conference wrote: “I haven’t even mentioned the drinks receptions on the roof terrace and the beautiful view from there, but I have just scratched the surface of what was an excellent conference, where I have met colleagues, struck up friendships, gained from shared thoughts and experiences, and visited amazing places – I would do it all again tomorrow” (A. Williams 2016).



Image 1: The 2016 ABTAPL Diamond Jubilee Conference group, Rome. Photo by Alan Linfield, used with permission.

I joined the 2017 Birmingham conference at Woodbrooke College, which provided us with plenty of food for thought about quality standards and what that might mean for all of our different kinds of libraries in ABTAPL. Michael Gale notes aspirations for benchmarking, or even peer assessment, within UK theological libraries (Gale 2017, 8). My lasting memory is of mealtimes at this peaceful, austere, Quaker college, where a bell rang to signal a minute's silent reflection before our meal could begin.

The 2018 Durham conference at St Chad's College made the most of Durham as a World Heritage Site, with visits to Durham Cathedral, Library and Treasures Gallery and Palace Green Library at Durham University, and it was my first time visiting Ushaw College, with its historic library and ornate chapels. Cassandra Gilbert-Ward attended (Gilbert-Ward 2018) as the recipient of the first ABTAPL student bursary, and participated in the teachmeet section about her work at the National Art Library.

2019 found ABTAPL members heading to Regent's Theological College in the Malvern hills. This conference heard Donald Mitchell speaking on rising to the challenge of supporting distance learners, and sessions on theological publishing, antiquarian book care and rare book cataloguing. Winette Field remembers "the epic view over

the valley and the remnants of snow as I approached the college. The library was approached via a tunnel which meant students did not need to cross the main road” (pers. comm., June 6, 2025). Visits included the Hive, a university/public library collaboration in which the library is run by the University but also offers public library services. Gudrun Warren reports that “one thing that does stay in my mind was at the Rome conference . . . Sally Gibbs telling us about her standing desk, and how good she found it, and then at the Malvern conference we were able to see her standing desk in situ, which struck me as a nice example of how we can help each other out of our own genuine working experience, and also the value of visits to libraries as a good way of learning” (pers. comm., June 2, 2025).

The 2020 conference was planned to be in Cardiff, capital city of Wales, with visits to the National Museum of Wales and Welsh University Special Collections. Sadly, as the conference dates of 2–4 April approached and the Covid pandemic escalated, it became clear that it could not happen as planned, and the 2020 conference was cancelled. But in 2021 the ABTAPL conference was back as a one-day only and online conference, delivered via Zoom, and Sally Gibbs reported in her Chair’s report that “positive feedback” was received (Gibbs 2021).

Michael Gale remembered that the 2022 Cardiff conference “was such a positive experience – we were just happy to be meeting again after three years” (pers. comm., May 30, 2025). Winette Field remembered that “Phyllis Thompson introduced the newly reformed New Testament Church of God archive plans to the group. That was fascinating as we saw how one of the newer UK denominations was beginning to realise the need to safeguard its history” (pers. comm., June 6, 2025). In her conference report, Alison Turner pondered on Dr David McNenemy’s lecture on ten types of truth in a world of post-truth and fake news (Turner 2022), welcoming the opportunity to “take a step back from everyday concerns and look at the bigger picture – knowledge as a whole and our place in it.”

The 2023 Conference was in Liverpool, which as Alison Turner noted, “at that time was gearing up to host the Eurovision Song Contest in place of Ukraine” (Turner 2023). Travel arrangements were beset by some of the biggest national rail strikes in 30 years, but ABTAPL colleagues still managed to gather to enjoy session topics ranging from the theology of Doctor Who, the life and work of Prof. Andrew Walls, and user engagement at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool.

ABTAPL members and international colleagues from Atla and BETH braved the many steps and hills of Edinburgh to meet at New College

for the 2024 conference. We joined the rest of the library world in discussing what AI is and what it might mean for us, and also covered the more familiar territory of collection development and support for distance learners. Winette Field remembers that “We experimented with a panel discussion which included Ruth McDonald, chair of the Religious Archives Group and Naomi Hart, one of CILIP’s 125 list of new professionals (CILIP 2023)” (pers. comm., June 6, 2025). The panel covered an array of questions on the themes of volunteer management, advocacy, off-site storage, training course recommendations and distance-learner support. A highlight for me was the conference dinner at Ciao Roma, with its Robert Louis Stevenson-themed décor complete with pirates and skeletons.

The 2025 Belfast conference was small in numbers, but perfectly formed in its programme and blessed by beautiful spring weather. With a clutch of visits to libraries including the Linen Hall Library and Queens University Belfast, the sessions had an international flavour with sessions on the International Council on Archives Section on Archives of Faith Traditions, decolonialism and religion in collections and global trends in theological and religious studies librarianship. It was also a pleasure to welcome a recipient of a free student place to the ABTAPL conference once more.



Image 2: The 2025 ABTAPL Conference group on the steps of Union Theological College, Belfast. Photo by Marni Thurm Li, used with permission.

That's forty-seven conferences and counting, which have brought ABTAPL members together, and the full list of conference locations sums up how much we have travelled over the years.² I hope this retrospective on the ABTAPL Spring conferences, with its history of memorable places, warm welcomes, insightful topics and quirky anecdotes encourages you to join us at an ABTAPL conference and make it part of your history.

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Appendix: List of all ABTAPL Conferences

YEAR	PLACE	
1978	Durham	
1979	Hawarden	
1980	York	
1981	Bristol	
1982	Cambridge	
1983	Edinburgh	
1984	Manchester	
1985	Chichester	
1986	Oxford	
1987	Lancaster	
1988	Lincoln	
1989	Cambridge	
1990	Birmingham	
1991	Durham	
1992	Salisbury	
1993	Glasgow	
1994	Bristol	
1995	Maynooth	
1996	Oxford	
1997	Winchester	
1998	Manchester	
1999	Cambridge	
2000	York	Took place in September following BETH conference
2001	Exeter	

YEAR	PLACE	
2002	Chester	
2003	Salisbury	
2004	Leicester	
2005	Durham	
2006	Prague	Golden Jubilee conference
2007	Edinburgh	
2008	Belfast	
2009	Oxford	
2010	Bristol	
2011	Norwich	
2012	Manchester	
2013	Glasgow	
2014	Salisbury	
2015	Cambridge	
2016	Rome	Diamond Jubilee conference
2017	Birmingham	
2018	Durham	
2019	Malvern	
2020	Cancelled due to Covid pandemic	
2021	One day only (online) due to Covid pandemic	
2022	Cardiff	
2023	Liverpool	
2024	Edinburgh	
2025	Belfast	

Notes

- 1 These were the Zubarán paintings (<http://aucklandcastle.org/exhibitions/zurbaran-paintings>) which the Church Commissioners were proposing to sell, but fortunately a campaign to save them led by Jonathan Ruffer raised millions. <https://aucklandproject.org/discover/the-zurbarans-of-auckland-palace/>.
- 2 See Appendix.

