



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Mapping seventeenth-century libraries, digitally

Pearson, D.; Murphy, C.M.; Adams, R.; Glomski, J.

Citation

Pearson, D., & Murphy, C. M. (2023). Mapping seventeenth-century libraries, digitally. In R. Adams & J. Glomski (Eds.), *Library of the Written Word* (pp. 233-255). Leiden/Boston: Brill.

doi:10.1163/9789004429819_011

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3634215>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Afterword: Mapping Seventeenth-Century Libraries, Digitally

David Pearson and Clodagh Murphy

The growing landscape of research and publication around early libraries is increasingly being enhanced through the opportunities of digital technology. The first generation of digital bibliography was much focused around the application of automation to the author/title backbone favoured by library catalogues and national bibliographies; what we needed were tools to tell us what was published, what books exist, and where to find them. This led to the creation of databases like the short-title catalogues, which have become established anchor points in the reference infrastructure. Now, we are moving on to develop digital platforms that are particularly geared towards research around the ownership, reading, use, and perception of books, in line with wider book-historical priorities.

In particular, a database of English book owners is being taken forward as a joint project of the Bibliographical Society and the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters, hosted at UCL. The aim of *Book Owners Online (BOO)* is to create a freely available online directory of historic book owners, as determined from a range of evidences, which will be scalable, capable of chronological expansion, and open to third-party input. Here, we consider its philosophy, development, and progress within the wider context of other databases which have been developed in recent years, such as *British Armorial Bindings*, the *Provenance Online Project*, and databases on annotated books, by comparing and contrasting their approaches, while considering opportunities for future developments in this area.

1 The Twentieth-Century Background

Book-historical work of all kinds depends on the existence of a reference infrastructure, a landscape of authoritative information within which any particular body of evidence or case study can be meaningfully interpreted and contextualized. When it is available, it is often taken for granted, and we forget what the world was like without it. Today, researchers of all kinds working with historic books can rely on a network of bibliographies which will help them

assess how rare (or otherwise) any particular book is, where other copies will be found, how complete their copy is, how many other editions were printed, and other useful information.

A hundred years ago, that was not the case. Someone interested in a particular text from, say, the seventeenth century had no reliable means of knowing how many editions it went through, where copies of those various editions might be found, and how it fitted in the broader published context of its time. From its inception at the end of the nineteenth century, the Bibliographical Society recognized that 'an ideal state is that in which a complete and full bibliography of all literature should be produced', and the creation of the *Short-Title Catalogue of English Books ... 1475–1640*, first issued in 1926, remains its most significant achievement and contribution to national life.¹ It mattered partly for what it delivered, but also as a model which was widely followed. Donald Wing spent the middle decades of the twentieth century compiling and revising his *Short-Title Catalogue ... 1641–1700*, and in 1976 the British Library began work on the *Eighteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue*; eventually, all these resources for the British printed heritage were brought together in the *English Short-Title Catalogue*.² Continental European models like the *Short-Title Catalogue, Netherlands* followed, and the *Universal Short Title Catalogue*, begun in 1997 to map French imprints, has developed into a parallel pan-national venture.³ These projects have provided both a legacy and a bedrock on which so much work of all kinds is built; they provide reliable bibliographic and location information, and they have easy-to-understand definitions of their scope.

One of the other big developments in book history during the twentieth century has been the broadening out of its conceptual embrace. As neatly summarized by Philip Gaskell, the general view of the founders of the Bibliographical Society, of the generation that created that first STC, was that 'the chief purpose of bibliography is to serve the production and distribution of accurate texts'.⁴ Textual bibliography remains alive and well, but many of us have moved on from the idea that what really matters is establishing the ideal copy of an Elizabethan drama. The transition from historical bibliography

1 F. S. Ferguson, 'English Books before 1640', in F. C. Francis (ed.), *The Bibliographical Society 1892–1942* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1949), p. 42.

2 Donald Wing, *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England ... 1641–1700* (New York: The Index Society, 1945–51), and later revised editions; *English Short Title Catalogue*, https://www.bl.uk/projects/english-short-title-catalogue?_ga=2.153576060.530898007.1611588744-239102995.1574755279 (accessed 26 January 2021).

3 *Short-Title Catalogue, Netherlands (STCN)*, <https://www.kb.nl/over-ons/diensten/stcn>; *Universal Short Title Catalogue*, <https://www.ustc.ac.uk/> (both accessed 15 January 2023).

4 Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 1.

into book history has been a journey of bringing users and others into Robert Darnton's much-reproduced communications circuit, and recognizing that we should be interested not just in what was printed but also in who read it, and how it was consumed.⁵ Book history is about the social impact of books, which were three-dimensional designed objects offering various kinds of consumer choices.

There are now many compendia on the history of the book in which the evolution of the material text and its associated philosophies can be explored.⁶ These expanded horizons have created a need for infrastructure to support them, which is currently nowhere near as advanced as our century-old STC inheritance. The recently launched database *Book Owners Online* makes a contribution to the filling of that gap, and it can be contextualized by considering the landscape of other related resources which have evolved since the turn of the twenty-first century.

2 Shifting Focus from Texts to Owners

The short-title catalogues live in a world of texts and authors. Their core questions lie around what was published, and when, and how many editions or variant states there may be. Their key agents, beyond the authors, are printers and publishers; the considerable research industry devoted to the history of printing is an offshoot of that historical bibliographical tradition. In our new world, that focus switches to owners, because we want to know not so much what existed, as what people did with it. Book trade players (booksellers and bookbinders, particularly) are important facilitators, but owners are the hinge around which all these lines of enquiry converge. If people read books, responded to them, bought, sold, discarded, or bound them, it was because somebody owned them. If a book has marginalia or other direct testimony to interaction with its text, it is because an owner or user left those traces.

It stands to reason, therefore, that we have become much more interested in the provenance of books, and that this has been an area of much activity in recent decades.⁷ In one sense, what we are trying to do is to reassemble a huge

5 Robert Darnton, 'What Is the History of Books?', in David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (eds), *The Book History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 9–26.

6 For example, Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (eds), *A Companion to the History of the Book*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2019); Leslie Howsam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); David Finkelstein and Alastair McCleery (eds), *An Introduction to Book History* (London: Routledge, 2005).

7 David Pearson, *Provenance Research in Book History* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2019), pp. 2–4.

jigsaw which has been presented to us with the pieces laid out in the wrong places, and many of them thrown away. Our primary evidence base lies in our printed heritage, in all those books which have come down to us and been preserved, mostly in institutional libraries, but also to some extent in private hands. Historically, the formation of libraries has often prioritized the textual content of books, with items having been acquired, discarded, organized, and catalogued with their textual value in mind. Countless private libraries have been ingested, institutionally, and distributed across shelves by subject (or discarded as duplicates), and made findable by author, title or subject. Arranging them by former owner has not been part of the mindset. Bindings, annotations, and other evidences of owners' interactions with books have been stripped away and lost forever by successive generations of librarians who have, with the best of intentions, directed that books must be stoutly repaired to keep them readable. There are exceptions to this high-level overview, and collections that have been kept together for various reasons, but most research libraries conform to the general pattern. The British Library's series of essays on *Libraries within the Library* showed how difficult it is, today, to find or reconstruct many of the major private libraries which went into building the national one, despite the fact that some named foundation collections are separated out.⁸

3 Library Cataloguing

One of the obvious building blocks needed for reordering the jigsaw is a different kind of cataloguing; making provenance data both recorded and searchable in libraries has evolved greatly during recent decades. Fifty years ago, making provenance indexes was a harmless antiquarian pursuit among some rare book curators, though taken more seriously by incunabulists; today, it is standard practice among all the professionals who deal with historic printed materials, including dealers and auctioneers. The drawers of cards of the past have been replaced by online catalogues with dedicated database fields for copy-specific details. There is a huge amount of information now spread across the world's library catalogues enabling the discovery of books by their former owners, but there are also hurdles limiting its usefulness. Comprehensiveness of coverage remains an issue; although many more of the Bodleian Library's books can be explored from this angle than was the case in 1970, they constitute only a small minority of their total holdings. There are enormous backlogs of retrospective

⁸ Giles Mandelbrote and Barry Taylor (eds), *Libraries within the Library: The Origins of the British Library's Printed Collections* (London: The British Library, 2009).

provenance cataloguing to be addressed (as a general rule, the bigger the library, the bigger the black hole).

Online catalogues today make it easier to locate books once owned by a particular person (say, John Donne, or Samuel Johnson) but finding out systematically involves searching many catalogues individually. We have no means of reliably searching all catalogues in a single operation; such a resource is technically possible, but currently too expensive for anyone to find it worth constructing. The nearest thing we have (and it is a big step forward) is the functionality of the JISC *Library Hub Discover* (formerly *Copac*), which used not to handle copy-specific data, but changed that policy and now includes any such information which comes in with the records it is sent.⁹ The *Hub* brings together many millions of records from around 170 UK libraries, and can be searched by owner to the extent that the received records contain a reference, but drilling down through the results to find the hit is cumbersome. The caveats mean that at the present time, a comprehensive trawl against a particular name needs to be undertaken by moving in and out of many online catalogues, with a potentially endless long tail of libraries within which the researcher has to decide when to stop. The same point, around a limitation relating to what has been ingested, applies to any other union catalogue which does include provenance data, including ESTC and the Consortium of European Research Libraries (CERL) *Heritage of the Printed Book* database. USTC remains resolutely text-focused, and does not incorporate former ownership information.

While this pathway into provenance research continues to evolve, there have been numerous other projects which contribute to the building of infrastructure. There are various approaches, or underpinning philosophies, which apply to these: they may start with a particular library, or group of books, whose collective evidence on former ownership is sufficient to present a useful critical mass of data. Or, they take a more conceptual approach, starting from a particular kind of evidence, and seeking to build a comprehensive, or at least representative, reference source on that feature.

A simple, but still significantly useful, manifestation of the first sort can be found associated with the several projects to recatalogue major collections of incunabula. Students of fifteenth-century printed books have a long tradition of paying close attention to the recording of provenance, and three of the four largest concentrations in the UK have been systematically recatalogued since the 1990s. The provenance index files of the Oxford, Cambridge, and Glasgow projects are all online, with descriptive and biographical details added for

9 Library Hub Discover, <https://discover.libraryhub.jisc.ac.uk/> (accessed 12 November 2020).

former owners, when these can be traced.¹⁰ Because incunabula have been owned or collected by so many people over time, these indexes provide a useful quarry of information about private libraries from the fifteenth century onwards, not only for those from the time of printing.

4 Collection-Focused Databases of Material Evidence

Material Evidence in Incunabula takes this concept to a higher level, by accumulating data from fifteenth-century books in many libraries, with the express aim of enabling sophisticated interrogation of their individual historic evidence. An initiative of the Consortium of European Research Libraries (CERL), *MEI* set out to gather detailed records from an extensive network of libraries, with a research goal in mind: 'to provide a physical representation of the circulation of books throughout the centuries'.¹¹ It recognizes that copy-specific evidence of all kinds (including bindings, as well as ownership traces) provides clues to unlock understanding of the ways in which books were traded and used across Europe. The database was a cornerstone of the associated academic research project *15cBOOKTRADE*, whose many outputs included the proceedings of a major international conference where these threads were drawn together.¹² That project is now beyond its funded phase, but the *MEI* database continues to grow, with a satellite database on *Owners of Incunabula*.¹³

A different, but related approach takes a library, or group of libraries, and aggregates ownership evidence in a way intended to be helpful to others looking to interpret evidence in their own books. The *Provenance Online Project* began in 2011 by posting, online, images of all kinds of provenance evidence from books in the University of Pennsylvania Library, initially in a spirit of seeking

10 Bod-Inc Online, <http://incunables.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/provenance/A>; Incunabula Provenance Index; Personal Ownership, <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/rare-books/specialist-catalogues/incunabula-provenance-index-personal>; Glasgow Incunabula Project, <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/incunabula/provenancespeoplea-z/> (all accessed 13 November 2020). Other similar online files have been generated internationally (e.g. from the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, which houses the world's largest collection of incunabula: https://www.bsb-muenchen.de/fileadmin/pdf/historische_drucke/provenienzen_bsb_ink.pdf).

11 Material Evidence in Incunabula, https://data.cerl.org/mei/_search (accessed 13 November 2020).

12 15c Book Trade, <https://15cbooktrade.ox.ac.uk/> (accessed 13 November 2020); Cristina Dondi (ed.), *Printing R-evolution and Society 1450–1500: Fifty Years that Changed Europe* (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2020).

13 Owners of Incunabula, https://data.cerl.org/owners/_search (accessed 13 November 2020).

external help with identifications.¹⁴ It developed into a multi-library showcase of many thousands of images, sourced from a number of North American research libraries, mounted on Flickr and grouped thematically by originating library, or evidence type ('Bryn Mawr College Library', 'Unidentified inscriptions', etc.).¹⁵ William Noel, the Director of *POP*, in his 2019 Sanders Lectures, said that the use of the Flickr platform meant that the images reached a broader and younger audience base than might otherwise be the case, but as a serious research resource there is a flip side to this.¹⁶ Although there are many useful images in *POP*, with attached metadata identifying owners, the Flickr interface means that it is not searchable in conventional ways, and the use of the third-party platform may not prove a long-term sustainable model. *Book Traces*, capturing images from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century library books, is more reliably hosted by the University of Virginia, but does not include searchable metadata on owners.¹⁷ *POP* inspired other projects, including the *Sion College Library Provenance Project* at Lambeth Palace Library; this is similarly structured, but does include an index of owners and donors (without dynamic links between the metadata and the images).¹⁸ Beyond this, there are many individual libraries whose staff have devised ways of showcasing copy-specific features of their holdings, usually as a subset of their special collections web-pages; there is a great quantity of data there, but it is not always indexed by search engines in a way that makes it simple to quarry. These kinds of enhancements tend to be the initiatives of local rare book librarians, who recognize the benefits they can bring for scholars, but because they exist outside formal cataloguing frameworks they are not standardized in their approach or data format.

5 Conceptually Focused Databases of Material Evidence

These resources all take the books in one or more libraries as their springboards around which to build research resources. By presenting a comprehensive

14 Provenance Online Project, <https://www.flickr.com/people/58558794@N07/> (accessed 13 November 2020).

15 Provenance Online Project, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/58558794@N07/albums> (accessed 13 November 2020).

16 Sanders Lectures 2018–2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7S45VsnUxGo&t=149s> (accessed 14 November 2020).

17 Book Traces @ UVA, <https://booktraces.library.virginia.edu/> (accessed 14 November 2020).

18 Sion College Library Provenance Project, <https://sionprovenance.wordpress.com/> (accessed 14 November 2020).

overview of the provenance evidence from these defined collections, their aspiration is to create a critical mass which will provide something useful, as representative exemplars of kinds of ownership markings, or as aids to the identification of such marks when found elsewhere. Alternatively, the conceptual basis may define a kind of evidence as the focal point: bookplates, inventories, sale catalogues, armorial bindings, annotated books. In many such cases, printed directories exist, of varying age and reliability, and the digital arena offers opportunities to refine, to expand, and to establish platforms which can be dynamically updated or corrected as further information comes to light. The reference infrastructure on British armorial binding stamps was transformed in 2012 by the release, online, of *British Armorial Bindings*, which immediately replaced an imperfect set of printed sources with an authoritative database which has continued to be updated.¹⁹ Based on work begun by John Morris in the 1960s, it was brought to completion by Philip Oldfield after a systematic programme of surveying hundreds of libraries, in Britain and America, to record their holdings of armorial bindings. The database now contains information on over 3,300 stamps, associated with nearly two thousand individual owners; most of the stamps are illustrated, with locations of surviving examples, and biographical notes on the owners. An extensive editorial apparatus, including a guide to heraldic terminology, adds to its usefulness. If it is not perfect, that largely reflects the nature of the evidence base, which includes stamps whose attribution is unavoidably tentative or doubtful. The database can be quickly edited as new information comes to light, and has been continuously thus improved by its compiler since 2012.

The key resources for British sale catalogues, and bookplates, remain largely print-based at present. The traditional combination of the Munby and Coral union catalogue (to 1800) and the British Museum *List of Catalogues* (for the nineteenth century) is now better covered by Robin Alston's *Inventory of Sale Catalogues*, which has more information and more sales, and Lenore Coral's unfinished work on nineteenth-century sales, which is available as a PDF on the Bibliographical Society of America's *BibSite*.²⁰ Many pre-1700 individual sale catalogues are available in full-text digital surrogate on *Early English Books Online*, and a much patchier number of eighteenth-century ones on

19 John Morris, *British Armorial Bindings*, <https://armorial.library.utoronto.ca/> (accessed 15 November 2020).

20 A. N. L. Munby and Lenore Coral, *British Book Sale Catalogues 1676–1800: A Union List* (London: Mansell, 1977); *A List of Catalogues of English Book Sales 1676–1900 now in the British Museum* (London: The British Museum, 1915); R. C. Alston, *Inventory of Sale Catalogues ... 1676–1800* (St Philip: The author, 2010); Leonore Coral, *British Book Auction Catalogues 1801–1900: A Preliminary Version of Munby-Coral 2*, https://bibso.camer.org/wp-content/uploads/Coral_2016-03.pdf (accessed 15 November 2020).

Eighteenth-Century Collections Online. Bookplates lend themselves to easy digitization and there are numerous galleries of them mounted by libraries around the world, but none of these is large enough to be seriously useful. The catalogue of the Franks Collection remains the nearest thing we have to a bibliography of British bookplates, but this is over a hundred years old and a very imperfect tool by today's standards.²¹ An aspirational project to create a modern database built around the Franks Collection and others was begun under the aegis of the Bookplate Society in the 1990s, but the last update on the Society's website, when completion was a long way off, was in 2012.²²

Sears Jayne recognized the significant quantity of information about private libraries to be found in probate inventories when he published his *Library Catalogues of the English Renaissance* in 1956, and it has been a much-respected reference point ever since.²³ Inventories including complete listings of libraries are proportionately commoner from the sixteenth century than the seventeenth or later, and the (mostly pre-1600) Cambridge University ones were edited and published by Elisabeth Leedham-Green in 1986.²⁴ The equivalent Oxford lists became the first main building block of *Private Libraries in Renaissance England*, an ongoing project which began as a series of printed volumes in 1992, but which has also been developed in an online version mounted on the website of the Folger Library.²⁵ The interface of *PLRE* online is unsophisticated, but enables the database to be interrogated by author, title, or owner, and includes an index of owners' names. Inventories, along with sale catalogues and other extant lists, provide the base of another ambitious online project, *Legacy Libraries*, which is largely but not wholly focused on American private libraries of all centuries, and uses the *LibraryThing* platform to turn the lists into fuller catalogues.²⁶

Annotation as the defining focus underpins *Annotated Books Online*, an international collaborative project based at Utrecht, which invites anyone to

21 E. R. J. Gambier Howe, *Franks Bequest: Catalogue of British and American Book Plates* (London: The British Museum, 1903–1904). Most of the plates listed there have one-line entries, without the biographical or other identification details that users need.

22 The Bookplate Society, <http://www.bookplatesociety.org/projects.htm> (accessed 15 November 2020).

23 The second, updated edition is now the one to use: Sears Jayne, *Library Catalogues of the English Renaissance* (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1983).

24 E. S. Leedham-Green, *Books in Cambridge Inventories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

25 R. J. Fehrenbach and E. S. Leedham-Green (eds), *Private Libraries in Renaissance England* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies; Marlborough, England: Adam Matthew Publications, 1992–); <https://plre.folger.edu/> (accessed 15 November 2020).

26 Legacy Libraries, <http://www.librarything.com/legacylibraries> (accessed 15 November 2020).

contribute images of interestingly annotated books to the database.²⁷ The website provides the functionality to browse through the digitized books, page by page, to see not only the original material but also, ideally, edited transcripts of the marginalia. Many of the hundred or so books currently uploaded are sixteenth-century ones, some of them copiously annotated. The absence of transcripts from many of these, and the relatively low number of books ingested, flags up the challenges of building a sophisticated academic resource on a crowdsourced basis, when each book submitted represents a major investment of time and resources in scanning the books and editing the files. *The Archaeology of Reading*, a joint project of the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters at University College London and John Hopkins University, has achieved a more consistent result with this methodology, underpinned by dedicated funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, but is limited to thirty-six books annotated by two high-profile owners (John Dee and Gabriel Harvey).²⁸ The idea of establishing a crowdsourced database to capture owners' interactions with their books was first pioneered by Simon Eliot and others when they created the *Reading Experience Database* in 1996, a joint project of the British Library and the Open University to record all kinds of reading experiences, 1450–1914, evidenced by annotations or secondary sources (e.g. accounts in diaries).²⁹ It attracted significant funding and by 2020 had c.30,000 separate records in a sophisticated metadata structure, but outdated interfaces and broken webpage links also testified to the problems which all such resources face if they are not actively maintained.³⁰

Beyond the cluster of online resources which are obviously directly supportive of research around book ownership, there is a broad and ever-growing penumbra of others which are potentially useful.³¹ Databases on bookbindings, projects focused on particular kinds of historic library (e.g. *Books and Borrowing 1750–1830*, *Dissenting Academies Online*), and websites on the histories of particular libraries are all knowledge quarries which will be on the radar of anyone working in this area.³² What none of them provide (including the

27 Annotated Books Online, <https://www.annotatedbooksonline.com/> (accessed 16 November 2020).

28 Archaeology of Reading, <https://archaeologyofreading.org/> (accessed 16 November 2020).

29 Reading Experience Database (RED), <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/index.php> (accessed 16 November 2020); Simon Eliot, 'The Reading Experience Database: Problems and Possibilities', *Publishing History*, 39 (1996), pp. 89–97.

30 <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/index.html> (accessed 16 November 2020).

31 Many will be found listed on the CERL website, Consortium of European Research Libraries, <https://www.cerl.org/resources/provenance/geographical> (accessed 17 November 2020).

32 Books and Borrowing, 1750–1830, <https://borrowing.stir.ac.uk/>; Dissenting Academies Online, <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/sed/religionandliterature/dissenting-academies/dissenting-academies-online/> (both accessed 16 November 2020).

ones mentioned above in more detail) is a broad overview built around owners as the focal point. If owners are now a key hinge of so much book-historical work, we need a reference source which provides a starting point and summary of essential information. Presented with a name from some point in history, there are several questions we may want to ask: did this person own books? If so, how many, what kind, what happened to them, and where might they be now? How did their library compare with others of the time; was it typical, or in any way unusual? Did they annotate or inscribe their books, and what might their bindings tell us about their approach to their library? Are there references to their libraries in their wills, diaries, or other personal documents? The resources described so far may provide answers to some of those questions, but not all.

6 *Book Owners Online*

Book Owners Online has been created to try to fill the gap that these questions pose. It was launched in 2020 as a freely available website built as a collaborative project between the Bibliographical Society and CELL at UCL, with some additional seedcorn funding provided by the Lyell Electors at the Bodleian Library.³³ Initially containing data for around 1,400 English seventeenth-century book owners, it has been designed to be scalable and flexible, with the aspiration to expand both chronologically and geographically.

The idea of the database began as a brief list of seventeenth-century owners, compiled by working through a range of sources, including directories of bookplates, sale catalogues, inventories, and armorial stamps. The list was augmented from the evidence of surviving books, in libraries, which indicated the existence of a personal library. A range of secondary sources was also brought in, where libraries were described in published historical and other literature. Sometimes, the evidence is pictorial rather than documentary; we know little about the books of John Boys, Dean of Canterbury (1571–1625), but the contemporary image of him in his study shows him sitting in front of shelves of books.³⁴ That list was posted as a work-in-progress document on the Bibliographical Society website (partly because it might be useful to others, and partly to solicit input) while research was undertaken to expand the brief list entries into fuller directory-style accounts.

33 Book Owners Online, https://bookowners.online/Main_Page (accessed 16 November 2020).

34 Book Owners Online, https://bookowners.online/John_Boys_1571-1625 (accessed 15 January 2023).

The rationale and methodology of the project was described in a paper to the Bibliographical Society in 2012, and at various other workshop and conference presentations.³⁵ In 2016 the Society formally decided to adopt the directory as an electronic publication, and a search took place to find the right partner to provide development support and a stable base for its hosting. An agreement was signed with UCL in 2019 to establish the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters as that partner, and the content of the draft directory was turned from a series of Word files into an online database during the academic year 2019–2020, with the help of a part-time research assistant (Clodagh Murphy), whose salary costs were met by the Society and the Lyell Electors.

Semantic MediaWiki was chosen as the platform for the database, because it is freely available, open-source software whose format is familiar to anyone who has interacted with *Wikipedia*, and which allows for sophisticated search options by encoding semantic data within its structure. It can hold images as well as text (an important consideration for *BOO*), and can be tailored to present a professional and user-friendly public interface. The resulting database is flexible and scalable, with endless opportunity for expansion both as regards content and editorial input.

Developing *BOO* raised a series of questions around content and format which will continue to be part of its intellectual landscape. How can a potentially limitless project be divided up into manageable segments? What constitutes a private library, that is, when is someone's demonstrable extent of book ownership enough to merit an entry? What are the elements of information that a *BOO* entry should include? The first of these questions was initially dealt with by limiting the first phase to English-based owners of the seventeenth century, defined as people who died between 1610 and 1715. The dates were rather arbitrary, and it will rightly be pointed out that the library of someone who died in 1610 is more likely to be a sixteenth-century construct than a seventeenth-century one, but lines have to be drawn somewhere. Databases like this need clearly understandable criteria for inclusion, the simpler the better, so that users know what to expect.

What do we mean by all owners? This is a harder question to answer, and deciding the boundaries will always be a matter of judgment as well as defined rules. *BOO* is not meant to comprise a universal provenance index to every name found written in the world's books; that would be a separate, and huge, project. A book with a name which is known from one occurrence may be the sole survivor of what was once a large library, which has otherwise disappeared

35 David Pearson, 'The English Private Library in the Seventeenth Century', *The Library*, 7th ser., vol. 13 (2012), pp. 379–399.

through the circumstances of history, but in the absence of other documentary evidence, we will never know. It can be argued that a directory of historic book owners should begin by listing all members of universities, inns of court, and professional bodies, as they are all likely to have owned some books, and possibly many. Size is not, of itself, a defining factor; a hundred books owned by someone at the end of the sixteenth century is more noteworthy than the same quantity owned a century later. Fifty books owned by a cleric, or academic, in the middle of the seventeenth century is unremarkable, while the same number owned by a yeoman farmer is certainly something worth recording.

It has deliberately been entitled *Book Owners*, rather than *Book Collectors*, although people who have had personal libraries are often, as a whole, described as collectors, and that word will regularly be encountered in both academic and more popular publications in this area. Book collecting is a familiar modern concept, summarized by John Carter as ‘reverence for, and a desire to possess, the original or some other specifically admirable, curious or interesting edition of a book ... [which] must be either in its original state or in some contemporary, associative or otherwise appropriate condition’.³⁶ Some of this wording can be applied in an early modern context, when people did seek out editions that were valued, and did care about condition, but not in ways that chime with the concepts of connoisseurship that underpin Carter’s definition, and which remain commonly associated with the idea of book collecting today. The ownership of books through the early modern period was widespread, and hugely important in laying the foundations of the libraries we rely on today, but one of the points that *BOO* would seek to make is that we should not think about, or judge, the private libraries of the past simplistically in twenty-first century terms. All collectors are owners, but not all owners of the past have been collectors in a modern sense, and there is merit in taking more care with the terminology.

The criteria which evolved for creating *BOO* entries are

- the use of a bookplate or armorial binding stamp (likely to reflect a library of some size, though this is not invariably demonstrable)
- the survival of all or part of a library, through preservation in an institutional or private library today (or, documentary evidence of a gift or bequest in the past, of books now lost)
- evidence of a person’s books having been sold, via a surviving or lost catalogue, or an advertisement, naming them

³⁶ John Carter, *Taste and Technique in Book Collecting* (London: Private Libraries Association, 1970), p. 9.

- the documentation of a library in probate documents, in wills as well as inventories
- other secondary evidence (diaries, letters, images, book bills) which testify to the existence of a library, now lost or dispersed.

The format of the entries is guided by the purposes of the database. It is meant to be a place to start, not one to end, providing overview information and signposts to further sources of reference. *BOO* does not aspire to list all the books a person owned, though it will cite edited lists if they exist. Entries conform to a standard structure which is described in more detail on the site, with a number of fields which will be more or less full, depending on the nature of the evidence.³⁷ They all include a name with at least a date of birth or death, a narrative field on 'Books' aiming to summarize what we know about their library, and at least one source of further information (in print or online). They always include 'Categories', which form the basis of browsable subject classifications (e.g. Aristocracy, Physicians, Libraries Sold at Auction) and usually an opening section of 'Biographical Information'. This is generally derived from other standard sources and is deliberately minimal: details of family origin, education, and career, enough to give a sense of who they were without repeating too much data readily available elsewhere. If someone is included in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, or the *History of Parliament*, there is no need to replicate information which is readily available there. The 'Books' field sits much more at the heart of a *BOO* entry than the biographical one.

One aim of *BOO* is to help to identify inscriptions or other evidences in books, and a field on 'Characteristic Markings' is therefore included to facilitate this. Incorporating images, as well as verbal descriptions, is obviously important here and we are very grateful to the libraries and other custodians who have agreed to permit their inclusion, taken from their books. The project has no budget for this, but the evolution of digital photography (and of library mindsets in loosening traditional restrictions) makes this process (which would have been much harder ten years ago) simple, and possible. It is regrettable that some of the larger research libraries continue to refuse such permission, effectively discouraging a kind of scholarship which they might be expected to support. Populating this field depends on locating examples which can be photographed, and it is hoped that the many gaps which currently exist here can gradually be filled as examples are reported.

There is no standard formula for the content of the 'Books' field, as it depends very much on the nature of the library and the surviving evidence. Similar sets

37 Book Owners Online, https://bookowners.online/User_Guide (accessed 17 November 2020).

of wording will be found in all the entries for libraries which were sold at auction, or where a bookplate was used, but it is important that this field provides an opportunity to generate broader impressions of individual libraries within their contemporary context. The extent to which this can be done depends on the level of research which it has been possible to undertake, case by case. Was the library typical in size and contents, taking the owner's background into account? Do we have any insights into the owner's engagement with, or interest in, the books, looking at the ways they were bound, or the ways they were disposed of? There is a lot of generally untapped evidence to be found in wills, in which people with large libraries are sometimes found to mention them not at all, while those with more modest ones devote considerable care to the disposition of their books. Common patterns emerge when many wills are examined, such as the giving of English language and devotional books to wives and daughters, while sons and nephews receive professional ones and those in Latin or other learned languages. Many Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills which are digitally available through The National Archives are referenced in *BOO*, but this is an area where there is scope for much more work.

There is a great deal of documentation on the textual contents of libraries, in the many sale catalogues which survive, for those which were sold by auction or retail sale, usually after the owner's death, from the late seventeenth century onwards. The policy of *BOO* is not to analyse these in great depth, title by title, but to summarize them by stating the total size (number of lots) and breakdown by language or subject, as given in the catalogue. Anyone who has worked with these catalogues knows the caveats which must be borne in mind when using them (books left out, books salted in from other sources, many multi-owner sales in which individual provenance cannot be separated out) but it is hoped that the establishment of a body of data with this level of statistical analysis will help to create a framework within which any particular sale can be better contextualized.

There are interpretative dangers attached to drilling down too far into any one particular catalogue, a temptation to imagine that a library as crystallized in a listing like a sale catalogue represents a kind of intellectual testimony of its owner, a deliberately chosen set of books, title by title, that leaves us a snapshot of what an owner valued and thought important. In fact, of course, any particular library is subject to all kinds of winds of chance, not only through movements that take place after an owner's death, but also during their lifetime. Libraries are rarely static things, and books are bought and sold all the time; a book owned in 1680 may have been disposed of, or lent out and never returned, by 1690. Books which might be expected to be found on someone's shelves may not have been there because the owner had access to them

elsewhere, or because the opportunity to purchase them never came along at the right time. If we concentrate too much on one library, as an isolated case study, these qualifying factors around the usefulness of the data are more significant than they are if we look instead at patterns and trends, across a broader spread of libraries.

What is the purpose of *BOO*? One of the questions raised at a symposium on this research landscape, which included a presentation on *BOO*, was: why have you created it? To which the most immediate and honest answer is, because it needs to exist. Structured around owners and their libraries rather than individual books, *BOO* fills the current gap in the reference infrastructure and so serves as a starting point from which research on historical book ownership can be undertaken. By way of a research output from the project so far, an academic monograph giving an overview of book ownership and private libraries during the seventeenth century, based around the information in *BOO*, was published in 2021.³⁸ This is, however, only one kind of product to which the data can be applied; it is hoped that anyone working on a particular individual or their books will find it useful in advancing their research. Curators of historic collections should be helped in identifying and contextualizing their own books, while dealers, auctioneers and collectors (who have become much more attuned to the value of provenance in making books interesting) can also benefit from its contents.

7 Using *Book Owners Online*

Anticipating that users will approach *BOO* from a wide variety of perspectives, there are several different entry points into the site that cater differently to different user interests. Although *BOO* is not focused on individual books, the user looking for further information about the provenance of a specific item will still find the database a beneficial resource. The researcher examining the copy of Lorenzo Valla's *De lingua latina quae optime meriti: de eiusdem elegantia libri sex* (1510) held at Christ's College, Cambridge would learn from the provenance notes provided that the book was gifted to the College by Ralph Widdrington, but may want to know more about the context of this bequest.³⁹

38 David Pearson, *Book Ownership in Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

39 Lorenzo Valla, *De lingua latina quae optime meriti: de eiusdem elegantia libri sex ...* (Paris: Francois Regnault, 1510) (USTC 1783502), https://idiscover.lib.cam.ac.uk/primο-explore/fulldisplay?docid=44CAM_ALMA21410804310003606&context=L&vid=44CAM_PROD&lang=en_US&search_scope=SCOP_CAM_ALL&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=cam_lib_coll&query=any,contains,H.8.36&offset=0 (accessed 05 May 2021).

Who was Widdrington? What other books did he own, and how many? What happened to them?

Answers to the first question can be found through Cambridge University's *ArchiveSearch*; the information provided about Widdrington here consists of a general outline of who he was, with particular focus on his roles at the University and his association with collection items such as his 'Latin letters and copies of verses, published on official occasions between 1637 and 1685', which 'were deposited in the various university collections'.⁴⁰ Further discussion about his books and donations made to the college is not offered; one might then come to *BOO* in search of this information.

With Widdrington's name already in hand, the user would find either the keyword search engine or the A–Z index the most effective tools for locating this owner on *BOO*. Considering the criteria for creating *BOO* entries, the fact that Widdrington is listed on the database is itself confirmation that this copy of Valla's *De lingua latina* was indeed once part of a larger personal library, about which Widdrington's entry then offers further information. While the 'Biographical Note' corresponds to the information obtained through Cambridge University's *ArchiveSearch*, the 'Books' field offers a concise account of the contemporary context of Widdrington's library and its dispersal. Its size 'is not known but can be assumed to have run to four figures as regards numbers of volumes'; part, if not all of it, was once kept at Christ's College, and these books were sold after Widdrington's death upon his request.⁴¹ A portion of his books passed to 'Henry Godolphin, provost of Eton (1648–1733), whose bequest to Eton College of c.150 books included 50 from Widdrington's library' while others were gifted to Christ's library during Widdrington's lifetime, *De lingua latina* evidently being one such item. As a result, his books have been widely scattered and 'can now be found in libraries around the world'; if the user is then interested in following up or identifying more of Widdrington's books, the 'Sources' offers recommended reading for further research, 'Characteristic Markings' supplies visual evidence of his inscription, and some examples of extant books known to have belonged to Widdrington and the repositories in which they might be found are provided.⁴² *De lingua latina* is listed as one of these as Cambridge H.8.36, and others include Eton College Eh.5.4–5, Eton College Eb 7.15, and Lincoln College, Oxford K.11.14.⁴³ One other

40 *ArchiveSearch*, <https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/agents/people/6350> (accessed 05 May 2021).

41 *Book Owners Online*, https://bookowners.online/Ralph_Widdrington_1614/15-1688 (accessed 15 January 2023).

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

book listed is also at Cambridge, this time in Queen's College, as shelf mark Cambridge H.8.40, which is a copy of Plutarch's *Plvtarchi Chaeronei historici et philosophi gravissimi, Graecorum, Romanorumque illustrium vitae* (1560). The copy-specific notes for this item again identify Widdrington as the donor, but also note the presence of inscriptions within the book belonging to a 'Robertus Bryan' and 'Thomas Hayton', the latter also responsible for another inscription subsequently crossed out, but which includes a 'faded date at bottom right corner: 1575'.⁴⁴ Presumably, these were previous and/or later owners, and the evidence of their ownership further illuminates both the spread and provenance history of Widdrington's books, which the researcher may then follow up further, well equipped with the tools and information provided by Widdrington's *BOO* entry.

The keyword search and A–Z index are useful for the user looking for information about Ralph Widdrington and his books because his name is already supplied by provenance notes, but the user approaching the site with a book in hand might alternatively have evidence of ownership that is not well suited to a text-based search. A keyword search would do little to help the user looking to identify the owner of a monogram or bookplate, for instance, if the identity of the owner is unclear. The monogram of Edward Herbert is one such example, the distinction of his 'EH' initials neither immediately obvious nor easily attributable to him without already having further knowledge of his ownership. If the user were to search for the term 'monogram' using the keyword search function, the wiki would bring back all pages in which the word 'monogram' is mentioned, which includes Herbert's, but the keyword-search focus on textual rather than visual information would mean that the user would have to go through each result individually to locate an image or description that matches the information they have to hand. An image-based search is therefore a more efficient way for the researcher wishing to use *BOO* to identify the owner of a book from an ownership mark such as this.

There are currently over eight hundred images of ownership marks on *BOO*, and the semantic markup automatically generates all media into a browsable image gallery that is easily accessed via the main page. Browsing the gallery, the user would find an image of Herbert's monogram summarized as 'Edward Herbert's typical EH inscription', complete with details of the book from which

44 Plutarch, *Plvtarchi Chaeronei historici et philosophi gravissimi, Graecorum, Romanorumque illustrium vitae* (Lyon: apud Antonium Vincentium, 1560) (USTC 126584), https://idiscover.lib.cam.ac.uk/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=44CAM_ALMA21402181730003606&context=L&vid=44CAM_PROD&lang=en_US&search_scope=SCOP_CAM_ALL&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=cam_lib_coll&query=any,contains,H.8.40,AND&mode=advanced&offset=0 (accessed 05 May 2021).

this specific image was taken (in this case, a 1579 copy of *Rerum Sicularum scriptores* held in Montgomery Castle) and a link to Herbert's *BOO* entry. In addition to providing more information about who Herbert was, the books that he owned, and the dispersal of his library, Herbert's 'Characteristic Markings' field also allows the user to learn more about other ownership marks that he used: in addition to the monogram, Herbert occasionally signed his books and added the price paid. He also used two armorial stamps, images of which are included on his *BOO* page along with a link to their entries on *British Armorial Bindings* where further heraldic information might be found. *BOO* therefore not only helps the user to identify and learn more about the owners of provenance marks in books, but also makes future identification of the same owner easier if the user either encounters their books again elsewhere or is actively interested in seeking them out (Fig. Afterword.1).

Other entry points into the site include the categories lists, properties lists, and a semantic search tool, each of which are enabled by the Semantic MediaWiki markup. These features are particularly well suited to the user interested in obtaining macro-level information, such as tracing ownership trends in the period or examining the ownership habits of a specific demographic or social group. There are currently seventy-one categories in use on the site and these are mostly related to occupations, ownership marks, and the dispersal of books and libraries. These appear as tags at the bottom of each page; Mary Astell's page, for example, has the categories 'Libraries Bequeathed to Institutions', and 'Marginalia and Annotations' among others.⁴⁵ The wiki generates the categories into separate lists that serve as finding or browsing aids, and as a means of narrowing down the information on the site; one might use the categories lists to explore female book owners who have pages on *BOO*, owners who were fellows of the Royal Society, or owners whose books or libraries were sold at auction.

Properties are less immediately visible than the categories: these are embedded in the text and serve primarily to describe and define data to the computer. Like the categories, the wiki also automatically generates the properties into lists that serve as finding and browsing aids; unlike categories, properties lists are searchable. The 'Subject' property, for example, provides a standardized list of the subjects that are included in library descriptions. The user interested in the ownership of books related to geography can then search for this term in the subject property list; similarly, the user interested in bequests made to a particular institution, such as the Bodleian Library, might search 'Bodleian

45 Book Owners Online, https://bookowners.online/Mary_Astell_1666-1731 (accessed 05 May 2021).

Library' in the 'Beneficiary' property to retrieve this information more easily. The only property that is immediately visible to the user is 'Crossreference', which is used to create internal links between pages, allowing the user to easily move between them. It is particularly useful, then, for tracing connections between owners and the dispersal of books and libraries. Family libraries such as those of the Isham or Bankes families can be easily traced through the cross-reference property, either through viewing connected pages via the 'browse properties' tool or by directly following the links embedded in the text. Social networks can be traced, such as literary patronage networks, with Lucy Russell's page linked to those of John Donne and Ben Jonson, for example.⁴⁶ Further, links between social connections and the dispersal of libraries might be traced through the cross-reference property: Thomas Allen, for example, bequeathed all of his manuscripts to his pupil, Sir Kenelm Digby, who was later persuaded by William Laud to donate them to the Bodleian Library; these pages might be easily followed in succession.⁴⁷ The benefit of the 'Crossreference' tool has recently been demonstrated by Eleanor Swire, Library Assistant at Magdalene College, Cambridge; she writes 'it is through the database that we find an association' between Thomas Travers (c.1619–1717) and 'another book owner, John Robartes, 1st Earl of Radnor (1606–1685)' as well as 'an equally touching connection to Robartes' chaplain and private tutor, Walter Snell (d. 1677).'⁴⁸ Here, the 'browse properties' feature displays uses of the 'Crossreference' property in Travers' page as well pages in which Travers has been flagged with the 'Crossreference' property himself, these being displayed in the bottom right-hand corner (Fig. Afterword.2).

The properties and categories both allow the user to carry out semantic searches, which is an advanced search tool that can be used to query the data on the site. The user who searched the 'Beneficiary' property to find bequests made to the Bodleian might use the semantic search to find out more information: what were the occupations of the owners who made these bequests? where were they educated? By selecting [[beneficiary::Bodleian Library]] as a condition and ?Education and ?Occupation as printout selections, the user can generate a table displaying the places of education and occupations of owners

46 Book Owners Online, https://bookowners.online/Lucy_Russell_1581-1627 (accessed 15 January 2023).

47 Book Owners Online, https://www.bookowners.online/Thomas_Allen_1540%3F-1632; Book Owners Online, https://bookowners.online/Kenelm_Digby_1603-1665; https://bookowners.online/William_Laud_1573-1645 (accessed 15 January 2023).

48 Eleanor Swire, 'Book Owners Online', Magdalene College Libraries, 21 May 2021, https://magdlibs.com/2021/05/20/book-owners-online/?fbclid=IwAR2Oy7cCmoD2i-Bqgrf2AZe1NfngTiZIBgffXbi6HxYOD3jR4x7_Iy3tCcw (accessed 04 July 2021).

on the site who made bequests to the Bodleian; the results show that thirty of the total thirty-six owners on *BOO* who made such bequests were educated at Oxford with Henry Wriothesley, for example, having studied at Cambridge (Fig. Afterword.3).

A more detailed query might include the conditions `[[Category:All Owners]]` and `[[Category:Libraries Bequeathed to Institutions]]` with the printout selections `?Date of birth`, `?Date of death`, `?Date of bequest`, and `?Beneficiary`. The table produced for this query contains two hundred and sixty-eight results, offering the user a detailed yet clearly presented starting point from which to explore further questions they might have about bequests made to institutions by owners on *BOO*. The semantic search might also be useful for the user interested in what types of books people owned. This user might select `[[Category:Women]]` as a condition and the printout selections `?Subject` and `?Language` to find information about the types of books owned by female book owners on the site; from the results provided, perhaps interested in women's ownership of medical books, the user might then select Elizabeth Sleigh, Bridget Bennet, Elizabeth Freke, Alice Hatton, Margaret Heath, Isabella Hervey, and Elizabeth Isham from this list. As mentioned, the extent to which this information can be interpreted as reflecting an owner's interests or the types of books valuable to them is limited due to the often arbitrary nature through which libraries both were formed and developed over time; the results should therefore be interpreted with some caution but serve as a useful starting point for conducting research of this nature (Fig. Afterword.4).

BOO is, at its core, an index of owners, and this is in and of itself a significant contribution to the range of resources already available; however, the site remains accessible for, and hopefully beneficial to, a broad range of user interests. Despite not being a directory of all individual books with marks of ownership, and therefore not providing copy-specific information, users may still come to the site with an individual book in hand to gain an understanding of its ownership, the wider context of the larger personal library to which it once belonged, and where to look for more information about its provenance. Similarly, not knowing the identity of a particular owner is not necessarily a barrier to using the site; on the contrary, *BOO* can serve as the resource that enables such an identification to be made. And, further, although *BOO* is structured around individuals, the semantic markup allows the site to remain open to and useful for users interested in broader book-historical questions, whether these relate to groups of people, institutions, or wider patterns of ownership. *BOO* therefore enables a wide variety of users to gain the tools necessary to carry out provenance research; it is hoped, then, that the database will find a place in the list of standard sources to which all kinds of

book historians turn on a regular basis for factual information, and to catalyse teaching and research.

8 *Book Owners Online* in Its Broader Context

Within its particular umbrella of study related to the provenance and former ownership of books, *BOO* invites methodological questions around how most usefully to advance that field: its backbone lies in owners, rather than particular books or texts. Its philosophy is aligned more to the overview than to the particular, in considering any individual case, though it may be argued that libraries should be approached via complete lists of their contents. *Private Libraries in Renaissance England* is continuing its gradual march through extant sixteenth- and seventeenth-century library inventories, and *BOO* does not intend to repeat the work being done on these inventories; rather, this is one of many projects which *BOO* aims to complement while developing its own distinctive niche, and the ease of cross-linking databases in the web environment facilitates our ability to make all these resources collectively more useful than the sum of the parts.

As a contribution to the burgeoning landscape of digital humanities, *BOO* is partly another case study around how these projects can be devised and achieved, and of the challenges which most of them face around resourcing and sustainability. It was first turned from a series of text files (themselves the fruit of many years of individual research) into an online database through the raising of modest funding to cover development costs and through an initial phase of data input. Following the initial launch of the site, it was rightly observed that its geographical and chronological focus is undesirably restricted; it would be much more useful to many more people if it went beyond the seventeenth century, and covered a more international range of owners. The platform is designed to be endlessly expandable, and the constraints are only those of resources. The project is steered by an advisory group, who agreed in late 2020 that its next phase should move into the eighteenth century. The evolution of connoisseur-type collecting during the Hanoverian period has been well explored, but beyond that the broader patterns of book ownership during this time have been only patchily documented. There is great scope for *BOO* to help us develop a better understanding of book ownership during the eighteenth century, but also a huge number of individuals to be covered (many more than for the century before). Since 2020, and thanks to the contributions of a growing number of volunteer editors, and further grants from the Marc Fitch Fund and an anonymous Scottish donor, the chronological limits of the site have

begun to stretch further into the eighteenth century and, similarly, the regional coverage has begun to be expanded to take in all the British Isles. As of January 2023, the database had grown to include over 2,600 entries. Further international expansion might be desirable, but it is hard to see how that could be achieved without establishing editorial centres in other countries, to coordinate local national projects.

Going forward, a wider team of volunteers is likely to be needed to help continue this work. This will raise issues of maintaining quality control, and also of recruitment; there are plenty of people whose knowledge and interest make them potential contributors, but who do not necessarily have the time to devote to such work. Sponsors of the database will need to continue to support any essential maintenance and hosting costs. These issues are common to many projects of this kind, including a number of the databases mentioned above; while it is hoped that a degree of crowdsourcing will help to take *BOO* forward, at some point it is likely that a further injection of funding will be needed.

Sustainability (for *BOO*, and for many of the other digital resources mentioned here) is perhaps the biggest challenge, and this will depend ultimately on the success of take-up. It is well known that many digital humanities projects during the last couple of decades have produced web-based outputs which have disappeared, or become unusable, through a lack of maintenance or updating; the environment is a fast-changing and fragile one. The fact that *BOO* is published under the aegis of a long-established learned society, in partnership with a leading university, should help to ensure longevity. It is also hoped that the simplicity and breadth of its defining concept (a database of book owners) should add to its robustness; these underlying definitions need to be easy to understand. Its greatest defence will lie in being used, so that in time its loss becomes unthinkable. *BOO* aspires to become a community resource which is indeed an established part of the reference infrastructure; the project should be open-minded about the ways in which it grows and evolves to develop that status, and remain true to a firmly rooted aim around being useful.