

NICHOLAS PICKWOOD

## Library or Museum? The Future of Rare Book Collections and its Consequences for Conservation and Access

### Abstract

However unlikely it may seem, the conservation of books and buildings share a number of important characteristics. Most important amongst these is the fact that both are usually conserved with a view to their future use. This will often involve intrusive work on their structures to allow safe access and improve their durability. In both cases, however, such work will involve sometimes considerable historical loss in the form of original structural elements which is likely, in the case of books, to have a role to play in establishing the date, provenance and status of the binding. Although significant steps have been taken by means of what are known today as ‘minimum intervention techniques’ to reduce the alteration and loss of binding components, current research into the history of binding is increasingly revealing the historical significance of even small details of the construction of bindings.

It is clear that this sets up a greater tension between the competing needs of traditional library access to text and the preservation of historic artefacts in the form of bound books than is already evident. The twenty-first century is adding both positive and negative aspects to this situation in the form of electronic text and digital copies. On the one hand, the mass-digitisation of books both damages and fails to record bindings, while threatening, in the minds of some librarians and managers, to render the codex-form book irrelevant. On the other hand, the availability of text on-line could have the effect of allowing historic books to be viewed more as museum objects with all the shifts in attitude towards access, use and preservation that will entail.

Whichever scenario (or combination of the two) prevails, the development of a consistent and detailed method of recording book structures remains a priority and is currently the subject of intensive research by

the Ligatus Research Centre at the University of the Arts, London, now nearing completion. Ligatus is currently seeking funding to translate the glossary into as many as 14 European languages, a project which will allow book descriptions to be compiled in a single database in any of the languages and to be read in all of them.