Dr Matthew Shaw

British Library, curator of United States Collections

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

It was an interest in history that led to Matthew Shaw working for one of the most prestigious libraries in the world. After obtaining a DPhil in the history of the French Revolution at the University of York in 2000, and volunteering at the library there, he moved to the British Library's Department of Manuscripts in 2001 as a curator of 18th and 19th-century manuscripts. He had not gone to "library school" but because the manuscripts were catalogued historically, he was able to use his academic background to secure the post.

He has stayed at the British Library ever since. His next move was to a digitisation project, after which he worked with a US library focusing on French emigration to America, before landing his current role as curator of US Collections.

Shaw has been surprised at how varied his role is. He explains that a good quarter of his week is spent selecting books from antiquarian booksellers, chasing up requests and answering reader enquiries. Yet he also has to organise speakers and run tours--including a private one for Kate Adie recently. He spent the past two years on the hugely successful Taking Liberties exhibition, which focused on Britain's 900-year struggle for freedom and rights. He describes Taking Liberties, which ran from 31st October 2008 to 1st March, as a real high point in his career, as it was a challenge to "make the exhibit accessible but not dumbed down".

There have been some memorable times for Shaw, not least when he has been travelling to acquire and sell rare books. He says: "In the manuscript department, courier trips could be quite stressful. Escorting an 18th-century manuscript through an airport with an armed guard at your
Then there was the day Philip Pullman came in for a William Blake exhibition: "We had used one of [Pullman's] manuscripts and he came in with Tracy Chevalier to record an audio piece for the library. That day he had been on the set of The Golden Compass', and you sort of think to yourself, 'Well, this is actually quite fun'."

For anyone who is interested in a career in libraries, Shaw suggests you need to "figure out what you like and why you like it. You might enjoy reading, but there's more to it than that; you have to be good with people as well." He adds: "It's one of those fields that until you're involved in it you don't realise the huge range of roles that are available."

Nicholas Tranmer

John Barnes Library, Islington, library manager

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

After graduating from Northumbria University in 1992 with a degree in psychology, Nicholas Tranmer went travelling and decided on his return to the UK to study homeopathy. Needing a job that would give him the freedom to study he joined Islington Library Services, where he has remained happily for 10 years. He says: "I have a real love for libraries; they are such a unique public space."

Beginning as a library assistant, Tranmer worked his way up before becoming library manager two years ago. As well as managing people and the premises, and doing general library duties, Tranmer explains that one of the best parts of his job is selecting the music that is available for borrowing. "We have got quite an unusual array and our music issues are the highest in London," he says. "Which is pretty good since we're competing with boroughs like Westminster which have more money than us."

Tranmer insists that "reading is very much at the heart of what we do, we're computerised, but we're not internet cafes". He adds: "We are trying to source obscure gems. It's not like working in a bookshop where you tend to have to go for the masses in order to survive. Libraries are having to do that more and more, but there is a little bit of a niche where we can go for quite unusual books. Stock is a very important part of the job, and the other part is the public."

It is this varied nature of the job which attracts him: "It's not an admin job, it's quite active. I like to interact with our punters and encourage them to come back to the library." As an important focal point of the
community, Tranmer is keen to maintain links with local schools and projects, and develop the library's space to encompass art exhibits and performances. Last month, the BBC held the London heats of its poetry competition, Off By Heart, in the library, with poet Michael Rosen, an Islington local, coming in as judge.

For Tranmer an important part of his work is "the human aspect". He adds: "The unique selling points for libraries are their librarians. People who are higher up are under pressure to come up with figures, so it's good to have an impact on the library floor."

He believes being a librarian is the kind of job that would suit creative people. "It's not a walk in the park, it has its stresses and strains, but allows some flexibilities," he says, then laughingly adds, 'You do get some characters working in libraries."

Library services jobs can be found at www.thebookseller.co.uk/jobs

Wood, Felicity

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