

Factsheet G18
General Series
September 2010

House of Commons Information Office

The House of Commons Library

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Library is a word with very specific connotations in most people's minds. The mental image it conjures up is invariably of books, for recreation or study. The House of Commons Library is much more than that. The physical setting of the Members' Library is a series of rooms lined from floor to ceiling with books but the Library is a complex and sophisticated information service for Members of Parliament, concerned with books only as one of a wide range of sources from which information can be derived.

This factsheet is available on the internet through:

<http://www.parliament.uk/factsheets>

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Introduction

The Library is part of the Department for Information Services (a new department created subsequent to the Tebbit Review of 2007).

The Library provides an impartial and confidential information and research service for individual Members and their staff. The department answers considerable numbers of specific enquiries arising from the wide range of Members' parliamentary duties. The total number of requests in 2009/10 for written and oral briefings and reference information was in excess of 23,000 these ranged from requests for specific documentation or basic facts to substantial briefings on policy matters. The Library aims to respond to all these enquiries within the stated deadline or, for those requests without a deadline, within two weeks. In addition pre-prepared Research Papers and Standard Notes are made available to Members and their staff.

These Research Papers and Standard Notes form the backbone of a much wider range of briefing material available to Members and their staff via the intranet. This includes subject-specific links to parliamentary and other material and useful external websites; an increasing number of constituency and other local-area statistics; 'bill information pages'; and other databases. Members have access to the Parliamentary Information Management System (PIMS), a central database that provides access to the majority of information produced by parliament. A limited, subscription based version of PIMS data is available to the public at www.polis.parliament.uk.

There are reading rooms in the Members' Library primarily for Members' use and others in Derby Gate for Members' staff. These are valuable to those Members (and staff) wishing to use the Library's services in person rather than online or by telephone.

The Library provides a service to Members on sitting days from 9am until the rising of the House (or 4pm on Fridays) and Monday to Friday in recesses from 9am to 5pm (4pm on Fridays).

Research Services

The House of Commons Library's research service provides a specialist and impartial briefing service for MPs, their staff, committees and the staff of the House. Its 93 staff - 47 subject specialist researchers, 11 information specialists and 35 technical and administrative staff - produce a wide range of briefing material and other services, including:

- confidential answers to enquiries on the full range of subjects of interest to Parliament
- research papers and other briefings on Bills and other topics of public and parliamentary concern
- material via the Parliamentary Intranet
- talks and informal face to face briefings

The research service has eight subject teams, each comprising subject specialist researchers and a resource team that manages the many sources of information that are used in providing briefing:

- **Business and Transport** dealing with employment, industrial relations, financial services, pensions, competition policy, transport, taxation, small firms, companies and company law
- **Economic Policy and Statistics** dealing with the economy, public and EC finance, training, trade, overseas aid, regional development, and statistical enquiries on the labour market, incomes and taxation
- **Home Affairs** dealing with the criminal justice system, civil law, immigration and asylum, consumer affairs, culture media and sport, data protection, licensing and gambling
- **International Affairs and Defence** dealing with international relations, history and politics of other countries, the EU, UN and other international organisations, international law and treaties, defence and arms trade, human rights
- **Parliament and Constitution Centre** dealing with Parliament, constitution, elections, civil service, devolution, local government, religion, freedom of information
- **Science and Environment** dealing with science, agriculture, energy, medicine, drugs, health and safety, telecommunications, town and country planning, waste, the environment, animals, water industry
- **Social & General Statistics** dealing with statistics on agriculture, crime, demography, education, elections, health, housing, local government finance, social security, social services, transport
- **Social Policy** dealing with social security, child support, tax credits, education, housing, family law for children, conveyancing and land law, health services, personal social services

Some of the work produced by the research service is available to the public, including:

- **Research Papers** briefings on most government and some other Bills, and on other topical issues, and regular statistics including election results
http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_publications_and_archives/research_papers.cfm
- **Standard Notes** on Parliament, the Constitution, the Crown, devolution, elections, political parties and central government usually shorter and less formal briefings on selected topics
http://www.parliament.uk/works/notes_on_parliament_and_constitution.cfm
- **2001 Census data for Parliamentary constituencies** was produced for a Library research paper in 2004 and may be downloaded from the website in Excel format
http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_publications_and_archives/research_papers/research_papers_2004.cfm

Authors of these briefings are available to discuss their contents with Members of Parliament and their staff but cannot advise others. The research service welcomes comments on its papers, however, but cannot guarantee to respond to them all. Comments should be sent to papers@parliament.uk or by post to Research Publications Officer, Room 407, 1 Derby Gate, London SW1A 2DG.

Parliamentary Reference Services

The Reference Services Section is the Library's main interface with its internal clients - Members of Parliament, their staff and staff of the House.

Users contact the section in a number of ways - by telephone, in person, e-mail, letter, or fax. The job of the section is either to answer the request for information directly or to filter it, ensuring its exact scope is known, setting a deadline and forwarding it promptly to the correct person in the research service.

Enquiries answered directly by Parliamentary Reference Services include those connected with parliamentary holdings and papers, bills, acts, and other current and historical reference information. It also deals with many historical enquiries.

The Section runs information points in three locations:

The Members' Library

There are six large rooms on the riverfront of the Palace of Westminster, private to Members of Parliament, conveniently close to chamber and committee rooms, which provide seating for users, together with self-service computers and points for laptops. The main face-to-face enquiry point is the Oriel Room and the main telephone enquiry bureau in the Reference Room serves both Members and their staff.

The enquiry points in the Members' Library deal with about 23000 requests per year.

The Derby Gate Library

This is a split level room at entry level in the 1 Derby Gate building, the old Whitehall Club. It has a range of reference books, newspapers and periodicals, user PCs and is intended principally for Members' staff.

The Members' Centre

Staff are also present in the Members' Centre in Portcullis House where Members may access Library services at the same time as services from other House departments.

The enquiry points outside the Members' Library deal with about 6000 enquiries a year but many more people come in to use the facilities.

Library Resources and Information Systems

Indexing and Data Management Section (IDMS)

IDMS consists of a central indexing team, who are all Library and Information Science (LIS) qualified, who create and maintain PIMS records for proceedings, papers and questions. The focus of the team's work is currency and accuracy, adding metadata to parliamentary information in a consistent way to enable precision searching across a variety of data types, over a fifteen year period. The PIMS Editorial Support Team ensure electronic feeds of information into PIMS, from TSO, are accurate and add data to PIMS for material where automatic feeds are not possible.

The team gets involved with Library-wide projects and working groups, looking at improving ways of meeting user needs by the use of controlled vocabularies to tag parliamentary information. In conjunction with the WebCentre, IDMS is involved in developing ways to post more parliamentary information onto the 'Current Issues' page of the redesigned Parliament website.

A detailed overview of IDMS outputs

IDMS creates subject indexed records for the Parliamentary Information Management Services (PIMS) database, enabling users to search the full-text of:

- Commons and Lords debates,
- ministerial statements,
- oral questions,
- written questions,
- written statements,
- petitions,
- legislation,
- parliamentary papers and
- in-House documents, such as factsheets, research papers and standard notes.

The section uses an in-house thesaurus to add subject indexing to facilitate retrieval, as well as ensuring metadata enables users to search by Member, Peer, date, type of material (e.g. Members' debate contribution or written question), type of debate (e.g. Adjournment or Opposition day), location of debate (e.g. Westminster Hall or Commons Chamber), Hansard column reference and across parliamentary sessions.

A time consuming but useful task of the section is to prepare and publish indexes to Hansard that provide a historical record of all parliamentary proceedings and questions, by Member, date and subject.

A number of other services are provided by IDMS for use by the Library and the rest of Parliament

- the Early Day Motions database,
- the Bill index and
- House of Commons Parliamentary Papers online.

In addition to Westminster business the section also indexes the proceedings, questions and papers of the National Assembly for Wales and will soon resume indexing for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

PIMS data is used by Justis to produce Parliamet, the online subscription version of the database.

Library Resources Section

Deals with library acquisitions, cataloguing and classification of holdings and stock editing.

Accommodation and Staff

In the Palace, the Department has six public rooms on the river-front principal floor, and some offices in the North Curtain. In 1991 most of the staff moved to nos. 45-47 Parliament Street which were renamed '1, Derby Gate', where a spacious new Branch Library was provided in three fine rooms of the old Whitehall Club (1866), a listed building. . The Library also has a room in Portcullis House. This was known as the *E*-Library until Summer 2008 when it welcomed the presence of other House departments to provide a central Members Centre where a range of services can be accessed.

The Members' Library remains in the six principal floor rooms in the Palace of Westminster, as it has since the mid-nineteenth century. It is entirely exclusive to Members, and "strangers" are not allowed to visit it. The only exception is for groups of visiting librarians or parliamentary officials who may occasionally be shown round during recesses on special application to the Librarian.

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Appendix A

Librarians of the House of Commons

1818	Benjamin Spiller	1950	Strathearn Gordon
1831	Thomas Vardon	1967	David Holland
1867	George Howard	1976	David Menhennet
1887	Ralph Walpole	1991	Dermot Englefield
1908	Austin Smyth	1993	Jennifer Tanfield
1937	John Vivian Kitto	1999	Priscilla Baines
1946	Hilary Saunders	2004	John Pullinger

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Appendix B

History of the Library Service

The ultimate origins of the Library of the House may well stretch back as far as 1547 when the Clerk, John Seymour, compiled the first manuscript Journal, or diary, of the proceedings of the Commons. Seymour's Journal was little more than a record of the readings of bills. For generations afterwards, the Commons "library" must have been a fairly rudimentary affair, consisting mainly of the handwritten Journal volumes. However, in the early eighteenth century the Commons began to take an active interest in their records and, in 1742, the House made its first order to print the Journals: which then became an ordered and authoritative parliamentary record. Around such manuscript and printed records of the House there grew up collections of books, tracts, pamphlets, Statutes and other documents which constituted in fact, if not in name, the early House of Commons "library". With the election of Charles Abbot as Speaker in 1802, solid foundations for the Library proper were laid. His scholarly enthusiasm for organising and preserving the national archives extended to the mass of parliamentary reports over which he, as Speaker, had control. Under his guidance, the famous Abbot Collection of eighteenth-century parliamentary papers was brought together and bound, and a method of classifying the rapidly increasing numbers of nineteenth-century parliamentary papers was introduced, which was followed until recent times. In 1817 his successor as Speaker, Manners-Sutton, set aside a room to house these growing collections. At the same time, the decision was taken, with the approval of the Treasury, to appoint the first Librarian, Benjamin Spiller, with effect from 1 January 1818.

The New Library

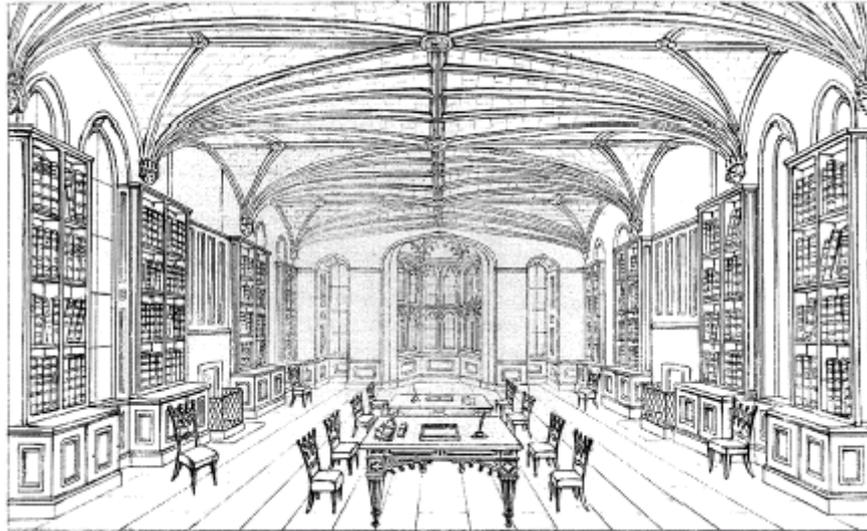
By 1826, Spiller was reporting that the space at his disposal (a room 16ft x 17ft) was insufficient; and in 1828 a new Library, a two-storey building purpose-built to the designs of Sir John Soane, and overlooking Cotton Garden, partly adjacent to the Painted Chamber and Bellamy's coffee house, was inaugurated. The main room measured 55ft x 22ft 6ins, and the House voted £2,000 to equip it "with such books as might be deemed useful for Members of this House". The first catalogue showed about 2,000 volumes in stock. In 1832, the upper storey of the new building was added to the Library, thus doubling the available floor area.

The Fire of 1834

In the Great Fire of 16 October 1834, which destroyed much of the Palace of Westminster, the nearly new Library building was gutted. About 60% of the books were rescued, but virtually all the manuscript material was lost. Some of the original books, rebound and refurbished, remain in stock today.

The old House of Commons Library, from an engraving published in 1828. This room, later the Lower Library, was in the building erected by Sir John Soane and totally destroyed in the fire of 1834.

Photo: by courtesy of the British Architectural Library



Rebuilding the Library

In the rebuilding of the Palace, the Library was allocated a suite of three grand rooms (lettered A, B and C) on the river front of the New Palace, facing east, and occupied in 1851-52. These rooms each measure 55ft x 30ft and are some 20ft high. The rooms were not galleried and in some ways are not ideal for library use - readers cannot, for instance, browse whilst perched on a ten-foot high ladder - but they are a most magnificent sight nonetheless. To these rooms were soon added two more: the present Oriel Room, which was originally a writing room, and the present Reference Room, originally one of a suite of committee rooms, which was converted in 1855-6. The sixth room (D) was designed as part of the Library, but was long used as Mr Speaker's own library. It was added to the main suite only in 1967,

In the early Warrington guides to the reconstructed Palace, the following was the description of the Library:

The rich and beautiful design of the Libraries, combined with the appearance of the most complete comfort, commands almost universal admiration. Oak bookcases with well furnished shelves extend from the floor to near the ceiling, rollers for maps for all countries are ranged around, the recessed windows looking towards the river afford convenient retiring places for study, the thick carpets, prevent noise, the perfume of Russia leather pervades the atmosphere, works containing the most minute and varied information, bearing on almost every subject brought under the notice of Parliament, are available at a moment's notice, and, in short, every possible inducement of convenience and utility is afforded to that section of members who devote their time and best powers to their responsible duties. To those, however, who have time to look around them, and to the visitor, the series of panels which will be filled gradually with the portraits of our most distinguished statesmen, and which extend all round the rooms over the bookcases, the varied designs of fanciful characters with which the ceilings are decorated, the minute and beautiful carved wood work, the quaint and characteristic fireplaces with their shining brass fire-dogs, the peculiar design of the carpets, which, with all other articles of furniture throughout the new Palace, have been manufactured from the designs of the architect, the curious old-fashioned though comfortable chairs, and the rich hangings of the windows, form altogether a "tout ensemble" which carries back the imagination, perhaps more than any other part of the building, to those times of feudal magnificence in the style of which both the new as well as the old Palace at Westminster has been conceived, and which may now be denominated our National style of Architecture.

The Stock

The stock, in 1828, was "to compose a Library of Historical and Constitutional Information" but, as the century drew on, these tenets were less and less adhered to. General works, literature and philosophy were being bought by the mid-century, and by 1856 the Library Committee was buying, for instance, all the scientific works of Cuvier, the French anatomist, at £236, the *Corpus Scriptorum Byzantinorum*, at £42, and other works of general literature. The only material excluded was fiction, but in the later 19th century, standard novels came to be purchased also. Many works of British national and local history were acquired at this time, as well as titles on foreign travel. These have contributed to the Library's present rich heritage in such areas; which is still being added to by purchases of selected antiquarian books, in some cases replacing copies lost in the 1834 fire.

The Library therefore became very much a general collection, with the particular enthusiasms of its Librarian or members of its Committee from time to time well reflected. With a number of donations, which could not be refused, it came to resemble something between a large-scale country-house library and an aspiring national collection. Many of the books were finely bound in calf and other leathers, and the shelves were leather covered: unfortunately, the leathers tended to deteriorate badly over the decades.

Sir John Sinclair in 1872 described the Library thus:

"At the intersection of the lobbies you find the Library, which consists of five rooms, the walls of which are covered with books in shelves, chiefly books of reference; and there one can sit over a comfortable fire, and read and write as one thinks proper, which is a great relief during a dull debate, when the same arguments are often reproduced time after time... "

The Nineteenth Century

Despite the miscellaneous nature of the stock, the Library obviously became the one place to which Members would turn when they required information. Thomas Vardon, the then Librarian, told a Committee in 1835 " ... *there is no subject connected with parliamentary business ... on which I am not called upon to afford instant information.*" Nineteenth century Librarians spent much of their time indexing parliamentary papers, journals, etc: Spiller himself was paid an extra £180 for indexing as early as 1828, and Vardon was, for instance, paid £300 for 15-year indexes to the Journals. By 1906, the Library had created a special manuscript index - to Committees and their Chairmen - which was to be the first of many such specially designed for information-giving purposes.

Twentieth Century Developments

There was a certain amount of criticism in the inter-war years about the level of facilities provided by the Library; mainly that it did not afford Members a satisfactory and active information-giving service. Though there is no particular evidence that the majority of Members felt this way, Sir George Benson (later a distinguished Chairman of the Library Committee) wrote, "*as a back-bench member in 1930, I was appalled to find the House of Commons served by a Library which had hardly progressed since 1850.*" In the Second World War much of the stock was sent for safekeeping to the prison at Shepton Mallet, Somerset. As it happened, the Library was not damaged during the War, but the books suffered grievously during, and in transit to and from, their long exile.

Select Committee Investigations

In 1945 there was a very large influx of new Members who, it became rapidly clear, required a more sophisticated information service than the Library could offer. Accordingly, a Select Committee was set up, and its Reports, laid before the House in November 1945 and March 1946 (HC 35 and 99, 1945/46), remain the fullest investigation ever held into the Library. In many ways, the Committee's recommendations still form the basis of the modern remit of the Department. *"Your Committee feel that the Library of the House of Commons ... should be made into a unique institution ... far more than a repository of books and parliamentary papers."* In their first report, they had declared, almost in Vardon's words of 110 years before, *"the essential purpose of the Library is to supply Members with information rapidly on any of the multifarious matters which come before the House, or to which their attentions are drawn by their parliamentary duties."* The reports also made recommendations on staff structure, accommodation, main and reserve stocks, and cataloguing.

The Library expanded in terms of function and of staff throughout the decades after 1945. Some landmarks of that period were:

- the establishing of a comprehensive reference library (late 40s) and expansion of newspaper and periodical holdings
- a research service (1946)
- a statistical service (1946)
- creation of a number eventually twelve - of visible indexes to parliamentary, public and international affairs (from 1955)
- a book borrowing and interlending service (1961)
- press cuttings service (early 60s), a Scientific section (1966)
- an International Affairs section (1968)
- Economic Affairs section (1968)
- Branch Library (1975)
- Education and Social Services section (1977)
- Public Information Office (1978)
- Education Officer (1980),
- computer retrieval system (POLIS) and Computer and Technical Services section (1980),
- video recordings service (1981)
- much enhanced Branch Library (1991).

Most of these dates refer to the formalising of an embryonic service started a few years previously. The Library became an independent Department of the House in 1967 (having previously been in the Speaker's Department), which status is now enshrined in legislation (the *House of Commons Administration Act 1978*). The Vote Office was added to the department in 1979, but was transferred to the Clerk's Department in 1993.

Library Committees

From 1830 onwards, there has generally been a Committee of Members to advise the Speaker on the Library. In the 1840s, eminent parliamentarians, such as Peel, Russell, Palmerston, Gladstone and Disraeli, were members of the Committee; the Speaker generally presided over it in person. This Committee was appointed by Resolution of the House, but was not set up after 1862. From then until 1922, no committee was appointed. From 1922 to 1965 an informal advisory Committee was set up by the Speaker: this included over the years such Members as Clement Attlee, Hugh Dalton, Hugh Gaitskell, H A L Fisher and Professor J A R Marriott.

After a reorganisation of all the committees giving advice to the Speaker, there was established a Library sub-committee of the new Services Committee, which met for the first time on 15 December 1965. The Librarian assisted the Committee and reported to it from time to time. The Committee concerned itself with policy and the services offered to Members, but unlike its nineteenth-century predecessor, did not generally involve itself in book selection or the day-to-day management of the Department. Upon implementation of the Ibbs Report in 1991, the work of the sub-committee was devolved to a new Information Committee, of which Michael Jack MP was made Chairman. The Information Committee was replaced by the Administration Committee in July 2005 to incorporate the work of the five former domestic committees: Accommodation & Works, Administration, Broadcasting, Catering and Information.

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