

Discovering the Network and Communicating amongst Astronomy Librarians: or Finding my Feet

Mark David Hurn

*Institute of Astronomy, University of Cambridge, Madingley Road,
Cambridge, England*
hurnm@ast.cam.ac.uk

Abstract.

A light-hearted description of starting work and finding the networks in astronomy libraries. Starting with a description of my librarianship career before astronomy. Networking with (SLIL Special Librarians In London). Why I applied for this job. Starting work at the Institute of Astronomy. A brief description of the Institute library. A glorious tradition: IoA librarians past and present. Getting to know the computers. Joining email lists (ASTROLIB and SLAPAM). Adventures with email and web forums. Saying hello, introducing myself to other Astronomy librarians (RAS and ROE). Other libraries and other networks (SLIC and CLG) in Cambridge. Other libraries in Britain. Unusual inter-library loan sources. Getting on with the job: my plans for the future. Looking back: where I went right and where I went wrong.

1. Introduction

In no way is this recommended as a guide to good practice, I leave that field to more experienced practitioners. With just over one year of working in an astronomical library I am still new to this area of librarianship. What I hope to contribute is a light-hearted description of starting work and finding the networks in an astronomy library.

2. Life before Astronomy

I am sure none of us was born into astronomy libraries. Most likely, the astronomy librarian has had experience working in other kinds of libraries before. In my case I had worked in the technical library of the British Standards Institution (BSI) for nearly twelve years. BSI is the National Standards Body (NSB) for the United Kingdom and is a member of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and other international organizations. It operates a large technical library and archive containing standards and other normative documents from all around the world. I had risen to the height of Senior Technical Librarian, deputy to the Library Manager and responsible for a small team of Library Assistants. I was happy in my job and had become very knowledgeable

about all aspects of the work. So why did I give this up to start again in a completely different field?

The main reason was my great interest in astronomy as a hobby. I had joined my local astronomical society, Milton Keynes Astronomical Society (MKAS), many years previously and had taken an active role in running the society. I was Secretary of MKAS for two years and also its Librarian for another two. The MKAS library was quite a modest affair, it consisted of a few hundred (mainly popular level) books which were stored in a member's garage, and it took only three journals: *Astronomy*, *Sky and Telescope* and *Astronomy Now*. The Librarian needed strong arms to carry a selection of books and the latest journals along to meetings! I did try to improve the library by purchasing some new books and creating a simple catalogue listing of the books (so members knew what was held in storage). I also tried to create a database of journal articles (particularly product reviews of telescopes, binoculars, etc.) for the use of members. I used the database module of MS Works which some of you may remember. However, it was not well used, and I abandoned it due to the large effort required to keep it updated.

As well as my activities as MKAS Librarian, I researched an historical talk on the origins of star names. I put a large amount of effort into the preparation of this talk, and once I had given it to the MKAS, I thought it might be of interest to other groups of amateur astronomers. I contacted the Federation of Astronomical Societies (FAS), (which is the organization most amateur groups belong to in the UK) and obtained a listing in their handbook as a speaker. The talk, called *The Story of Star Names* has been quite popular, and I have developed other talks on the Zodiac and on the Almagest of Ptolemy.

Although I was content at BSI, I did occasionally look through the *Vacancies Supplement of the Library Association Record*. This is where the majority of library jobs in the UK are advertised (now replaced by *Library + Information Appointments*). In the 9th February 2001 (Vol 4 (04)) issue I came across an advert for the job of Departmental Librarian at the Institute of Astronomy in Cambridge. The thought of putting my professional and leisure interests together excited me, and I applied (rating my chances of success as fairly low). I was concerned that my lack of academic library experience would count against me. However, I was invited to an interview and the next day was offered the job by telephone. I did not accept immediately as I knew it would be a great change for me. I took a weekend to decide and accepted the job the following Monday.

3. Preparing Myself

I realised I would have to learn a whole new area of librarianship and so began to look for information on astronomy libraries. BSI required me to work 6 weeks notice, so I had some time.

I also had two days leave, which I used in visits to the Institute of Astronomy, just to get to know the place and meet people before I actually started work. I was also able to collect documents such as the library rules and classification scheme in order to study them at home. This seemed to work quite well in familiarizing myself with many aspects of the Institute.

I also made extensive use of the internet by visiting the web sites of organizations about which I thought it would be useful to find out more (particularly those dealing with publications). These included the International Astronomical Union, the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS) and the Astronomical Society of the Pacific. I started collecting astronomical URLs into a bookmark file.

The BSI Library took the *ASLIB Journal of Documentation* and I found an article on the Armagh Observatory library. However, I feel I should have carried out a more formal literature search using something like LISA (Library and Information Science Abstracts). Another thing I should probably have done was visit some librarians in astronomical libraries.

4. Starting Work

I started work at the Institute of Astronomy on Monday the 30th of April 2001. For those not familiar with the Institute, I will briefly describe its role, its history and its library. The Institute was founded by the famous cosmologist Sir Fred Hoyle in 1967 as the Institute of Theoretical Astronomy. In 1972 the name was changed to the Institute of Astronomy. It is a department of the University of Cambridge and is located slightly outside the city to the West. It is one of the largest centres for astronomy research in the UK, with a total staff of around 150 people. The Institute specializes in the following areas of astronomy: cosmology, gravitational lensing, X-ray astronomy, galactic astronomy, clusters of stars, stellar physics and instrumentation.

The Institute occupies the historic Cambridge Observatory building of 1823. This building had been designed to be an observatory as well as the home of the observatory director. Some famous names in astronomy have lived in the house (forming the East wing of the building), including George Biddell Airy, John Couch Adams and Sir Arthur Eddington. This year (2002) the Institute opened a new building, providing office accommodation, lecture and meeting rooms.

The library is housed in ground floor rooms in the Observatory building. The library consists of about 13,000 books, principally on astronomy but also on physics, mathematics and computing. There is a collection of rare books, some dating back to the 16th century. All the major astronomical journals are taken, with long back-runs normally to the first issue. There is a collection of about 10,000 pamphlets and about 3000 35mm slides. When the UK government closed the Royal Greenwich Observatory (RGO, based in Cambridge) in 1998, the IoA inherited its collection of reports and observatory publications. In co-operation with the central University library access to electronic resources is provided, particularly for journals. In 1998 the library had been partly automated using the SIRSI Unicorn system, which is used for the library catalogue and for serials control.

5. A Glorious Tradition

The previous librarian had been Julie Nicholas, who had gone on to another job within the University. Some of you may remember her from LISA III where she gave a paper. Julie had been responsible for installing the SIRSI Unicorn

system. She had also managed the difficult period during which the RGO library had been amalgamated with the Institute prior to its closure.

Julie had left three months before I started and during that period Nicholas Cutler, the library cataloguer had kept things running smoothly. Nicholas was the only other person employed in the library and his experience was extremely useful to me.

Jean Sanderson had been the librarian before Julie. Although retired, Jean would visit the library once or twice a month. She was very useful in giving me the historical background behind certain aspects of the library.

Dr. David Dewhirst was an astronomer and the Academic Librarian of the Institute from 1950 to 1993; he also has published on the history and bibliography of astronomy. As you can imagine, he is a gold mine of information on all aspects of astronomy. Although long-retired he keeps an office at the Institute and visits the library two or three times a week.

Another member of the academic staff is Dr. Roderick Willstrop, who at one time had stepped in as librarian. Although now retired, he takes a close interest in the library and has been very helpful in advising on book selection.

6. Getting Online

In my previous job and at home I had used Microsoft Mail for email. When I discovered that the university used a UNIX based programme called Pine I was quite surprised. Many of the email facilities I had taken for granted, such as the ability to just click on internet links, were no longer available to me. However, email is such a valuable tool I was prepared to persevere with this rather outdated programme.

ASTROLIB: One of the first emails I received was from Ellen Bouton (National Radio Astronomy Observatory USA) welcoming me to the Astrolib list. It is very useful just to lurk and read the emails to find out the news and what the issues are. I made use of Astrolib when I had been unable to locate a report by the Mission Research Corporation of Albuquerque, USA. No UK library I had access to seemed to have it, so I placed a message on Astrolib asking if anyone could get it for me. This was in December 2001. Within days I had an email from Donna Cromer at the University of New Mexico (in Albuquerque) saying she could supply a copy. She had contacted the Mission Research Corporation herself and obtained a photocopy, which she posted to me. I was very pleased and would recommend Astrolib as essential for anyone working in an astronomical library. I have tried to reciprocate by answering other librarians requests but have so far always been preempted by other libraries getting in first!

SLAPAM: Ellen Bouton also suggested I join PAMnet, an email discussion list for Physics, Astronomy and Mathematics librarians. It was set up by the SLA (Special Libraries Association USA) but you do not have to be an SLA member to join. The contact for PAMnet is David Stern at Yale: (david.e.stern@yale.edu). Because of the wider subject range, there is a lot less relevant material for astronomy librarians. It also carries many items which would not interest librarians outside of the USA, or outside academic library serials departments! However, it is still extremely useful for keeping oneself informed.

I was also advised to forward my details to Uta Grothkopf of ESO (European Southern Observatory) for inclusion in her Directory of Astronomy Librarians and Libraries (www.eso.org/gen-fac/libraries/astro-addresses.html).

7. The Human Networks

I had been told that there was once “The Big Four” astronomy libraries in the UK. These were, the Royal Astronomical Society (London), the Royal Observatory Edinburgh (ROE), the Royal Greenwich Observatory (in Cambridge) and the Institute of Astronomy. Since the RGO had closed, there were now only three. I was determined to get to know the librarians of the other “Big Two”.

I introduced myself by telephone to Peter Hingley, Librarian of the RAS, and he invited me down to London to visit the library. We later cooperated over a display for the Omega Centauri Workshop in Cambridge (2001). He also had some surplus journals that we took to consolidate our holdings. It was useful to get on Peter’s email group as he regularly sends out information of great interest to the UK astronomical community.

I also introduced myself to Karen Moran at the ROE. As the ROE is connected with the University of Edinburgh, this library is perhaps closer in role and services to the Institute of Astronomy than that of the RAS library. I sometimes contact Karen by email to check if she is having the same problems with online access to journals I am!

When I worked for the BSI in London, I got involved with a group called SLIL (Special Librarians in London). The main organizer for this was Bert Washington. SLIL would meet up after work in a pub, once a month, invitation was by email, and the evening would consist of informal discussions on anything! It was a good way of meeting other librarians and discussing problems. At the last SLIL meeting I went to I was thrilled to hear that there were plans to set up a SLIC (Special Librarians in Cambridge).

SLIC has not been quite as successful as SLIL. Although there are a lot of libraries in Cambridge, most are connected with the University and the librarians consider themselves to be in the academic, rather than the special sector. However, I did make some useful contacts locally through this group. A possible reason for the slow take-up of SLIC is the existence of another librarians group, namely the Cambridge Library Group (CLG). The CLG largely consists of librarians from the University. They meet after work each month normally for a visit to a library or to hear a specialist give a talk. I joined this group because I thought it important to get to know other libraries and librarians in the University.

8. Other libraries and networks in Britain.

I will not have space here to cover the great range of libraries and information sources in the UK. Instead I will take just a couple which I have found useful over the past year.

CILIP: An important change for UK librarians occurred this year (2002). Their professional body the Library Association merged with the Institute of

Information Scientists (IIS) to form a new body called CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals). The professional qualification Associate of the Library Association (ALA) has been replaced by MCLIP (Member of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals). The name changes have not been popular in all quarters. There are both special interest groups and regional branches of the new organization, with plenty of scope to get involved.

Public Libraries: Local Authorities (that is county and city councils mainly) are required by law in the UK to provide a public library service. They are widely used by all sectors of the public for study and business as well as leisure reading. My own use of a public library many years ago led to an unusual inter-library loan to the Institute. We needed to see a copy of ‘The Black Cloud’ by Sir Fred Hoyle (one of his science fiction books). We could not find a loan copy of it anywhere. Then I remembered that I had read a copy as a boy many years back in a public library. I contacted them to see if they still had the book. They did and I was able to borrow it.

9. Getting on with the Job

I have now been in this job for over a year. On the whole I have been quite pleased with how I handled the change in my career. Nothing dramatic has gone wrong, no disasters at least! There have also been some moderate successes. I would count the building of a network of contacts with other librarians as one of the successes.

My plans for the future of the library are closely tied to the future development of the Institute of Astronomy. My philosophy all along has been that the library should be an integral part of the Institute. I am positively collecting any books by people who have worked at the Institute (regardless of subject); these can be used in library displays and by biographers. I plan to have at least some library involvement in everything the Institute does. In practice this can mean providing computer manuals for the administrative staff to co-ordinating the use of library rooms by TV crews interviewing eminent astronomers.

10. Conclusions

Examining my record of communication and networking over my year at the Institute of Astronomy, I have reached the following conclusions:

The things I did right were: scanning the professional journals; gathering information on organizations from the internet; visiting relevant libraries and getting to know their staffs; making use of ex-librarians (not always possible I realise); joining email groups; joining local groups of librarians.

I don’t think I actually did anything wrong, but in two areas I wish I had done more. These are: literature searches to find background material, and talking to more librarians in similar kinds of jobs. If I had done more of that, I would have found my feet earlier!