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# ASLIB

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## Abstract

ASLIB was, from 1924 to 2010 an independent membership organisation for special librarianship, technical and commercial information work, and latterly for information management. It was highly influential in the development of documentation and information science, in the UK and worldwide. Its activities included research and consultancy, training, professional development, publishing, and technology development. Aslib was for many years the *de facto* UK centre for information research, especially information and library management, information organisation and computer applications. It has had several names, being at times the Association of Special Libraries and Information Bureaux, Aslib, the Association for Information Management, and ASLIB. In 2010, ASLIB became a part of Emerald Group Publishing, and activities ceased in 2016.

## Introduction

ASLIB was, from 1924 to 2010 an independent membership organisation for special librarianship, technical information work, and information management, and highly influential in the development of documentation and information science. Since 2010, it has been a part of Emerald Group Publishing. It has had several names, and name variants, over the years, and for convenience is referred to throughout this article as ASLIB. The article is structured into five chronological sections, reflecting major changes in ASLIB's status.

## Origins

ASLIB was founded as a direct result of a conference held at Hoddesdon, Herfordshire, England, in September 1924, at which delegates from British special libraries and information bureaux met to discuss the desirability of an association to represent their interests. For a full account of its origins, see Muddiman [1, 2] and Hutton [3], and for personal recollections Pearce (4).

Its origins, like much of the information environment emerging at that time, can be traced to the 'second industrial revolution', beginning about 1870, in which new industries developed, based on the rapid developments in chemistry, materials science, metallurgy, electricity, and precision engineering. These industries were 'information intensive, needing access to knowledge from scientific research, to data of all kinds, and to commercial and technical

intelligence. Experience in the 1914-18 war had shown the necessity for unimpeded access to such information, coordinated at national level [4, 5].

This led to the need for individuals and departments who could provide such information, actively and in detail, in a way different from traditional libraries. Inspiration for such work was provided by the documentation movement, pioneered in Continental Europe by Paul Otlet and Henri Lafontaine [6, 7]. This used novel technical methods, particularly index cards, and intellectual tools, especially classification, to provide access to information at much finer levels of granularity than heretofore. (It may be noted that information technology and information organization have remained major themes throughout ASLIB's activities.) Companies, government-supported research associations for specific areas of science-based industry, universities and larger public libraries throughout Britain began to set up special libraries, intelligence bureaux and technical information sections. These efforts were largely uncoordinated and without any co-operation. Some initiatives had been undertaken, including a Conjoint Board of Scientific Societies founded by the Royal Society, which had advised on library/information matters between 1916 and 1923, and conferences organized by the government Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) on these themes, but there was little to show for these efforts.

It was to attempt to improve this situation that the Hoddesdon conference was convened on the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1924, at the initiative of staff from metallurgy research associations.

The conference was stated to be “open to all men and women who need to utilize information systematically, or who are interested in the conduct of information bureaux, intelligence services and special libraries”. It is interesting to note that from this earliest stage ASLIB was open to information users, and those with any sort of interest in information matters; it was never envisaged as an organization solely for what would come to be termed ‘information professionals’. 84 delegates attended, and resolved to appoint a standing committee of 16 members who had the task of creating an organization to promote co-operation and mutual assistance among information departments, to come into being within two or three years. Discussions with the (UK) Library Association about possible affiliation came to nothing; a story which was to be repeated seventy years later. A second conference in 1925 with over 200 delegates, addressed by Paul Otlet, showed a continuing enthusiasm. At a meeting in London on 29 March 1926 the Association of Special Libraries and Information Bureaux, with the acronym ASLIB, was created, as an independent voluntary association. The association was formally incorporated on 30 November 1927. Its main objective was stated to be “To facilitate the co-ordination and systematic use of sources of knowledge and information in all public affairs and in industry and commerce and in all the arts and sciences ...”.

## 1924-1948

This period in ASLIB's history is examined in detail by Muddiman [1, 2]; see also Ditmas [8].

The new association established itself in the Bloomsbury area of London, initially in Bloomsbury Square, and from 1928 in larger premises in Bedford Square, with a small office staff. In 1931, with the economy faltering and income dropping, there was a move to smaller offices in Russell Square. Its secretary at this point was Edith Ditmas, a formidable woman to whom Muddiman [1] attributes a major role in ASLIB's survival in these difficult times. (Muddiman notes that the *Daily Mirror* newspaper dubbed her the “Woman Oracle of Russell Square”.) Ditmas [8, p. 269] contrasted ASLIB's position at “the centre of a spider's web of contacts, each with a vast range of sources of information” with its situation as “an

organisation whose only visible assets were one small room on the top floor of a tall Bloomsbury house, some ill-assorted office equipment which so filled the room that the wall-cupboards could only be opened when some of the furniture was moved to the landing, two typewriters and a typist". The association lived in these straitened circumstances throughout the 1930s, moving to slightly larger premises in Museum Street in 1936, while managing to develop and extend its activities. Further discussions were held with the Library Association between 1928 and 1930 as to whether some form of amalgamation might be possible, but in the end failed, due to partly ASLIB's insistence that its interests were in the organization, management and use of information, rather than in libraries *per se*. The nature of the ASLIB membership, institutional rather individual, and catering for users of information as much as for those directly involved in its management, also made integration problematic.

Its funding came largely from membership subscriptions, with limited support from grants from the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. Membership, almost entirely institutional rather than individual, was 220 in 1927: the largest sections of membership were private sector companies (53) and scientific or technical associations (50), but also included were research associations (18), higher education institutions (18) and public libraries (17). Membership rose to over 400 by 1932, dropped to 280 in 1934 under the influence of economic depression, and had risen to 1043 by 1949, but the general balance of the membership categories remained largely constant throughout. Although ASLIB's office remained London-based, regional branches were formed in the 1930s, two for the north of England, in Lancashire and Cheshire and in Yorkshire, and one for London and the Home Counties in south-east England. Internationally ASLIB became closely tied into the pan-European efforts to develop the documentation movement into what became in 1937 the Federation International de Documentation (FID). From its earliest days it had close links with the British Society for International Bibliography, an affiliate member of Otlet's International Institute of Bibliography. The two organizations worked closely together on issues of classification and indexing, and on promoting documentation principles. There were also links with the USA: Hutton [3] notes that that a representative from the US National Research Council was present at the Hoddesdon conference, and thereafter there were few Aslib meetings without an American representative or contribution.

ASLIB's main objectives throughout this period were to foster co-operation within the special library sector, to enable interaction and exchange of experience between those working in the area, to act as a clearinghouse for specialized information, and to promote, and lobby for, the wider dissemination and better use of published information. While there was never any intention of ASLIB's creating its own central collection of information, its first chairman, J.G. Pearce of the British Cast-Iron Research Association, suggested that it should promote a "free trade in non-confidential information", and thereby "unlock the intellectual capital of Britain" [4].

The ASLIB annual conferences, initially attracting 200 delegates from the UK and overseas, rapidly became a fixture, known for their successful mix of the theoretical/technical and the practical/vocational. Their topics covered developments in bibliography, documentation and classification, technical advances such as microforms and reprographic techniques, and planning and management processes. Most notable was the conference of 1938, held jointly with the FID with large numbers of international delegates, meeting under the shadow of the Munich crisis, and which may be seen as foreshadowing the end of the internationalist documentation movement [9].

An enquiry service was launched at an early stage, offering advice by telephone on the best sources for specialised information. A register of specialist translators was established in 1931, an indicator of an area in which ASLIB was to be heavily involved for several decades.

Publications was also an early area of activity: the first *ASLIB Directory: a guide to sources of specialised information in Great Britain* appeared in 1928; the *Aslib Information* newsletter in 1929, initially quarterly, and later monthly; and in 1935 the quarterly *ASLIB Book List*, an alerting service of significant new scientific and technical books. From the mid-1930s, publication of reference works began, typically annual listings of technical books, directories, and yearbooks.

Education and training for special libraries was also a concern for ASLIB, and attempts were made from 1929 to persuade educators to give this greater attention. As a result of ASLIB's lobbying, the library school at University College London introduced an elective special libraries course which ran intermittently throughout the 1930s, while the Library Association included the topic in the syllabus for its Fellowship examinations, though not for the more widely followed Associate examinations. This was not regarded as satisfactory, and education and training for the special library and technical information sector was to become a major theme for ASLIB in the following decades.

The 1939-45 conflict initially caused predicable problems for ASLIB, as its regular activities and membership decreased due to wartime conditions. However in the longer term, its contributions to the war effort greatly increased its profile, and established it on its post-war path. There was a need to keep up, and increase, the flow of information for industrial and military purposes, in face of the disruption to the normal publication and communication channels, due to shortages of materials and personnel, and the cessation of communication with continental Europe, as well as potential and actual destruction of collections through bombing. In 1941 ASLIB was funded by the Royal Society and the Rockefeller Foundation to research the problems and propose solutions. This led to ASLIB designing and managing a service to obtain difficult-to-obtain materials of all kinds, generally those originating in hostile or occupied countries, obtained through neutral nations, reproduce them on microfilm, and distribute them to Allied scientific, industrial and military recipients worldwide. Funded by the UK and US governments, and based at the Science Museum in London, the service, kept secret throughout the period of its operation, made a considerable contribution to the war effort, and was maintained after the war's end, management being passed on to the Royal Society of Medicine [10, 11]. Other contributions included a series of *War Time Guides to Specialized Sources of Information* in important technical and industrial areas (essentially sections of the *ASLIB Directory*, revised and updated to reflect the wartime situation), and an expanded enquiry service. A series of short training courses in special librarianship were also run from 1943 onwards, and proved very popular. ASLIB's first textbook, a *Manual of special library technique*, was published to supplement these courses. The value to the nation of these activities was recognised by the British government which, in 1944, made a substantial grant to ASLIB over a five year period, via the DSIR.

In the immediate post-war period, and with its new-found success, ASLIB reflected on its future course [1] Should it become a individual member professional association, or focus on a role as a national documentation centre? If the latter, should it remain independent, or seek to become a part of a monolithic state-run information institute? Eventually it settled upon development as a partly state-supported independent entity, focusing on a continuation of its role as a co-ordinator and facilitator of the national system of special libraries and technical information centres. Its high status as a result of its wartime contributions saw ASLIB participating in numerous committees and official bodies relating to information and documentation, and it took a significant role in the highly influential Scientific Information Conference organized by the Royal Society in 1948.

With this aim made possible by an increased membership, and a government grant linked to membership income, ASLIB expanded its activities considerably in the late 1940s, with its membership rising to over 1,000 and its staff to 16. Its main areas of focus were: enquiries (with over 3,000 telephone enquiries and over 30,000 written enquiries *per annum* by the end

of the decade); conferences and education; expansion of international activities; promotion of, and lobbying for, the importance of special libraries and technical information; and publications.

In respect of publications, in 1947 ASLIB launched an academic and theoretical journal, *Journal of Documentation*, to complement its more ephemeral and practical serial publications. The following year, *Aslib Proceedings* was launched, for the publication of papers given at conferences of ASLIB and related organizations.

In the education area, the 1948 ASLIB annual general meeting passed a resolution agreeing to develop a postgraduate qualification in information work. This ambitious proposal was never followed up, and instead ASLIB embarked on creating an extensive programme of short training courses.

Muddiman [1] sums up the situation at the end of this phase of ASLIB's life by agreeing with its claim that it was generally recognised as the main British clearing-house for specialised information, and had scope for expanding this role in several ways in an increasingly information conscious environment. It was at the centre of the emerging field of documentation, which would develop into information science.

## **1949-1980**

Issues in the period have been reviewed in part by Muddiman [2], and by Wilson [12], who draws attention to the way in which Aslib reached out to those beyond the library world with a interest in information, and focused on information management as an integral part of management as a whole.

As a response to its new situation, ASLIB transformed itself into a new organization with a new corporate structure, and a new name. Proposals for a 'new ASLIB' had been announced in 1948, and on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1949, the association formally combined with the British Society for International Bibliography, with which it had long had close links. The new association was simply titled 'Aslib'. The joining of the two organizations, one with a largely institutional membership, and one with exclusively individual members, gave a unique flavour to the organization. So too did the mix of funding: partly direct government support, partly membership subscriptions, and partly fees for the increasingly wide range of services provided. The 1977 annual report comments that, because of this mixed membership, people had different ideas about what ASLIB was, decades after its restructuring.

Edith Ditmas retired as director at this point, to devote herself to study and research, and also editorial work for ASLIB. She was succeeded as Director by Lesley Wilson who saw himself as a modernizing manager, and who steered ASLIB through the growth of the next three decades.

With the security of a further five years' grant-in-aid from the DSIR, matching membership subscriptions, ASLIB moved to larger premises in Palace Gate in west London, to cater for the increased staff numbers: 16, serving a membership of just over 1,000. The new building gave the Director an individual office for the first time, together with a glass-enclosed veranda used for meetings. The membership at that time comprised 32% research associations and learned societies, 20% industrial and commercial, 20% overseas members (uncategorised), 9% UK government departments, and 19% individuals, and it grew steadily year on year, reaching a highpoint of nearly 3,000 by 1966. Staff numbers increased to match, reaching 29 by 1955, 51 by 1964, and attaining a maximum of 69 in 1971, reflecting the much wider range of activities being undertaken by then. The Director always had a major influence on the organisation's direction, advised by a Council largely comprising senior

figures from the information world, from the scientific establishment, and from industry. The first chair of the Council in the new Aslib structure was Harry Hyams of Shell Petroleum; three decades later his nephew, Montagu Hyams of Derwent Publications, was to be appointed Vice President of Aslib Council. In a manner typical of a British organization of the time, its Council always included a proportion of Honorary Members, representing the upper strata of society. In 1958 it could count an Earl, a Baroness and four knights among its members; ten years later it had a Viscount, two Lords, three knights and a Vice-Admiral.

Although Aslib remained headquartered in London throughout the period, regional branches for Northern England and for Scotland were established in the new structure, joined by a branch serving the English Midlands in 1951. These regional branches remained unchanged throughout the life of ASLIB as an independent organization. An ASLIB office opened in Birmingham, in the Midlands region, in 1968, sharing facilities with other organization and staffed by one liaison officer. Overseas membership remained significant, at least 20% of the total, throughout the period, and there were proposals for an overseas branch structure. Nothing came of this, perhaps due to the wide geographical spread of membership, with over 70 countries generally represented.

A new initiative was the setting up of special interest groups among the membership: in 1951 groups were set up for aerospace, textiles, economics, and food and agriculture, and in the following two years these were joined by engineering, fuel and power, and chemicals. This set of groups was fluid through this period, as groups formed, merged, renamed themselves and disbanded. Most common were groups, like those named above, devoted to information in a particular industry or sector; they were later joined by groups for the furniture industry, for film libraries, for biosciences, for social sciences, for transport, and for electronics. Other groups focused on processes and techniques, such as the technical translation, mechanization (later computer applications), and co-ordinate indexing (later informatics) groups. Only one, the One Man Band group, brought together those working in similar environments (a note in the February 1990 issue of *Aslib Information* pointed out that although women were in a majority of the membership and the committee, the group liked the imagery of the male name, rather than the gender-neutral One Person Library). Some of the larger groups, with memberships of several hundred, had activities and reach equivalent to that of professional bodies in their own right, and some undertook original research; see, for example, the Informatics group's study of the indexing process [13]. The branches and groups contributed greatly to ASLIB's activity, with extensive programmes of events and publications complementing the central provision [14].

Conferences and meetings were a major preoccupation. The ASLIB annual conference became one of the major events of the year for the information professions, and a great variety of both regular and *ad hoc* conferences and meetings were organized, both centrally and by groups and branches, and covering the whole gamut of topics relevant to the wide interests of the ASLIB membership. A few themes are constant throughout the period: management processes and costs; demonstrating the value of information; planning and control of operations; document handling and reproduction; subject-specific resources; classification and indexing; dealing with publishers and other suppliers; new technologies and research results; translations and the language barrier; and reports of international developments. A particularly notable venture was the organisation, on behalf of FID, of the influential Dorking conference on classification in information retrieval.

Training programmes were developed further, the main offerings being courses for newcomers to special library and information work at either junior or senior levels, soon joined by a course of intermediate level staff.

In all, there were typically at least 10 ASLIB events, including training courses, per month throughout this period, rising at times to 20.

The publications programme continued, based around the four periodicals – *Aslib Information*, *Aslib Proceedings*, *Journal of Documentation* and *Aslib Book List* – regularly updated directories, and bibliographies and guides to information sources in specific subjects. An *Index to Theses* from British universities commenced annual publication in 1953. The register of specialist translators, which in 1950 included 126 names, was complemented by an *Index to Scientific and Technical Translations*, later renamed the *Commonwealth Translations Index*. A similar register of specialist indexers was established later, but was never so successful as that for translators; this was attributed to the competing services of the Society of Indexers, whereas ASLIB was alone in providing access to translators.

A series of ASLIB manuals, providing detailed and practical advice on special library topics, was established. In 1956, the first issue of the highly regarded and influential *Aslib Handbook of Special Librarianship and Information Work* was published. In subsequent years the publication programme expanded to encompass textbooks and monographs on a variety of information-related topics.

The enquiry service, renamed later as the information service, continued its work of providing answers and referral to technical queries. It was complemented by a new in-house ASLIB library, with a collection of journals, books and pamphlets, and facilities for document reproduction. This dealt with queries on library/information issues. To give an idea of the early scale of operations, in 1950, 100 periodicals were taken in the library, and 271 books and 228 pamphlets added to the stock. There were 138 personal enquiries, 868 by post, 1310 by telephone, 718 loans of material, and 94 requests for translations. As an extension of this kind of work, a consultancy service was established in 1952, to deal with enquiries needing considerable work to solve. The use made of the service grew dramatically, so that in 1956 more than 30,000 requests were made, attributable in part to a large number of new members from small or one-person information departments.

Lobbying and promotion activities, as throughout all of ASLIB's existence, involved a continual process of direct contacts with government ministries and agencies, and with international organizations, on many information related topics. ASLIB were also represented on numerous national and international committees and working groups of many organisations: the British National Committee on Documentation, British Standards Institute, International Standards Organization, National Book League, British National Bibliography, UNESCO, the British National Committee of UNISIST, and IFLA, to name but a few. ASLIB also served as the British representative to FID, and in a joint panel with the Confederation of British Industry considering industrial information issues.

In 1956, a 'staff employment register' was established by the membership department. This later developed into a full recruitment agency activity.

The last of ASLIB's major activities was initiated in 1957, when a research committee was formed, and produced an outline for a research programme into aspects of library and information work: this covered a wide area, including library procedures, information retrieval, costs and effectiveness of services, indexing, bibliographic control, abstracting services, and access to non-English material. From the start, it had an emphasis on rigorous research with clear practical application which became the hallmark of ASLIB's research in later years. The research department was set up in the following year, its first remit being the oversight of the Cranfield retrieval experiments on behalf of the funders, the US National Science Foundation. Projects over the next few years included studies of the language barrier, on inter-library loan in special libraries, on abstracting journals and on grey literature, and a major study of information users in science and technology.



As early as 1955, with 29 staff and 1187 members, there had been complaints that the ASLIB headquarters was cramped, so that, for example, members could not read in the library. Two years later, with 32 staff and a membership doubled to 2254, the situation became impossible, and in 1958 ASLIB moved to its own buildings in the imposing surroundings of Belgrave Square, in London's West End. The move was supported by a government grant and donations by members to a building fund. The effort was worth it, as the following year's annual report concluded that the building provided, for the first time in ASLIB's history, fully satisfactory conditions for staff, committee meetings, courses (which could now be held in-house), the library and other activities.

The new building, together with a further DSIR five year grant and a steadily increasing membership, led to a general expansion of activities. To the existing training courses, which provided a general introduction for new special library staff, were added specialised courses on a range of topics including patents information, classification, Eastern European material, and document production. The courses typically lasted between 3 and 5 days, indicative of a less time pressured age. The space in the new building allowed courses to be complemented by demonstrations and exhibitions of equipment and procedures, such as photocopying and journal binding. Training was now seen as so significant that in 1960 the post of Education Officer was established to plan new courses. ASLIB also joined in discussions with the UK Institute of Information Scientists on formal training for those engaged in technical information work, and endorsed the syllabus of the two year evening course at Northampton College of Advanced Technology (later City University London), which later became the MSc Information Science [15]. In 1963 ASLIB produced a leaflet on 'Information work as a career', aimed at school leavers and college students, which was effective for many years in bringing more publicity to what had been a little known profession.

By the time ASLIB's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary was celebrated in 1964, it was approaching its peak in term of size, with a full staff complement of 70 serving a membership of nearly 3,000. It was a major force on the national and international information scene, particular in respect of its conferences, publications and research, as well as its lobbying and influencing.

Peak member numbers were reached in 1966. The annual report covering that year recorded 2887 members: 1014 industrial and commercial members, 205 from UK government departments and agencies, 272 public and national libraries, 459 universities and colleges, 403 other non-profit organisations, and 534 individuals. Thereafter, a gradual decline in membership set in; by the end of this period, in 1980, the total membership was 2082.

The nature of government support for ASLIB changed around this time. A new government department, the Office for Scientific and Technical Information (OSTI) was formed in 1965, partly a result of ASLIB's representations for the need for long-term government policies towards information services. One of OSTI's first initiatives was a joint investigation with ASLIB on ways of strengthening ASLIB's research, consultancy and training activities. One result was a decision to focus on computer applications.. Another was a strong steer towards applied rather than basic research, and to make a closer link between research and consultancy. The report recognised Aslib as a prime mover in information research.

Thereafter government support for ASLIB came from OSTI, and later from the British Library's Research and Development Department, and was focused on supporting specific activities and programmes, rather than the previous open grant-in-aid arrangements. As a result, the research department expanded considerably, and produced a remarkably wide body of results [16], becoming the *de facto* national centre for research in information science and documentation. In 1966 it had a staff of 15, divided into teams focusing on mechanization, on operations, and on surveys. It also offered consultancy and advice services, which brought in a significant income, and contributed books and reports to ASLIB's publishing programme. The following year it moved into its own premises in Hobart Place, close to the main ASLIB

building, with new projects on cost-effectiveness, on bibliographic records, on computer typesetting, on clerical processes in libraries, and on the use of metals information. In 1970 it changed its name to the Research, Development and Consultancy division (in 1979 this would become simply Research and Consultancy), reflecting a renewed focus on helping members to solve their information problems, with a particular focus on cost-effectiveness and on new technology. In 1975 the department, now with 17 research staff and 5 full-time consultants, moved to still larger premises in Bedford Row, Bloomsbury.

The training programme also expanded along the lines recommended in the OSTI report, launching courses in mechanization, microforms, dissemination of information, systems design, information retrieval and thesaurus construction, as well as information for subject-specific areas such as business, finance, food and agriculture, pharmacy, and medicine. The training programme took on, for the first time, an international dimension: a course was held in Nairobi for participants from several east African countries, and other courses were organized in London for visiting groups from overseas.

The events programme diversified further. The annual conference was held outside the UK for the first time, in the Netherlands in 1966 and in Germany in 1971. An annual ASLIB lecture series was started.

The publications programme also diversified, with a number of new monographs on topics such as mechanization, classification and thesaurus construction, a new *ASLIB Reader* series, bringing together significant writings of topics of central importance, and a range of directories and bibliographies. A third, and much expanded, edition of the *ASLIB Handbook* was produced. The contents list for this handbook give a good indication of what ASLIB considered to be core elements of its area of operation at this stage [17]: the special library and information service; administration; selection and acquisition; classification; information retrieval; filing and storing; technical report literature; library planning; service routine; subject enquiries and literature searching; abstracting; publications of the information department; mechanical aids in library work; organizations in the special library field.

A new *Aslib Occasional Publications* series was started, to disseminate reports from the research department: early examples dealt with the changing nature of the scientific journal, the use made of technical libraries, and the library/information literature. A new journal, *Program*, dealing with library automation and formally published by the School of Library Studies at the Queens University Belfast, was incorporated into ASLIB's periodicals portfolio, as was the *Technical Translators Bulletin*, formerly published by the special interest group, and *Audiovisual Librarian*, previously published by the Audiovisual group. Publication of *Forthcoming International Scientific and Technical Conferences* was taken over from the UK government Department of Education and Science. In 1969, ASLIB partnered with the Library Association in producing the new *Library and Information Science Abstracts* secondary publication, this arrangement continuing until 1980 [18].

The employment register, now established as a licensed recruitment agency, was renamed the Professional Appointments Register, and became one of the few agencies specializing in library and information jobs.

The library took on the role of systematically collecting thesauri, subject heading lists, classification schemes and bibliographies, and regularly listing them [19, 20]. In 1979 this was formalized by ASLIB being nominated by the British Standards Institute as the official clearinghouse for British thesauri, including those planned or in preparation.

By the mid-1970s, although ASLIB was still at the peak of its activities and influence, a small decline in membership having been off-set by income from other sources, particularly consultancy to large national and international bodies, changes in the economic, social and

technical environment began to cause concern for the future. One immediate response was for ASLIB to rationalize its idiosyncratic membership structure. Individual members were offered a reduced fee as affiliates, without the voting rights of full, institutional, members, and the anomaly by which any UK government department could have free membership by virtue of the grants supplied by the government, was removed. Student membership was introduced, to attract the new generation.

At an ASLIB conference on 'The information worker: identity, image and potential' held in London in November 1976, Dennis Lewis of ICI Plastics Division gave a talk entitled "There won't be an information profession in 2000AD" Lewis's "Doomsday Scenario" came to have a major influence on the future of ASLIB. In the following year, ASLIB suffered its first major cut-back, when rising costs forced the reduction of the research department from 17 to 11. In 1980, it was further reduced by three, and its separate premises were given up.

Other trends at the time were positive, with Aslib becoming a European centre for the promotion of the new technology of online searching, which led to a focus on this topic in the library, which hosted an Online Information Centre, research projects, training courses, and publications, including monographs, particularly J.L. Hall's influential *Online retrieval sourcebook*, a 'European user' series, how-to guides, and a new monthly newsletter, *Online Notes*. In 1978, ASLIB's long-standing interests in technical translation and in applications of technology came together in the organization of the first of the *Translating and the computer* conferences, which were to continue for over three decades.

In an environment starting to give concern to all information-related professional organizations, there was a renewed interest in cooperation. A Joint Consultative Committee, involving ASLIB, the Library Association, the Institute of Information Scientists, the Society of Archivists, the British Library and the SCONUL academic library group, was revised after some years of dormancy, and a tripartite conference between the first three organizations was held in Sheffield in September 1980.

## **1980-2010**

This next stage of ASLIB's story is one of an attempt to adapt to a changing environment, which saw some innovation and success, but overall a decline and retrenchment which, at the end of period, saw ASLIB lose its independent status.

The reasons for this somewhat depressing state of affairs are multiple, and affected many other information-related organisations in similar ways. Most immediately, the UK government ceased to offer direct financial support, in the way that it had for nearly four decades. This not only affected ASLIB directly, but also the research associations and similar bodies which made up a significant part of the membership. The decline of British science-based industry over the period had a direct effect on ASLIB's membership, as did changes in the information environment which led to the merging, downsizing or closure of many special libraries (appropriate enough, one the 1980 conferences addressed the topic of 'cuts and the special library'). Organisations of diverse type, including consultancies, publishers, and universities were increasingly involved in the activities which previously had been left to organizations like Aslib. Finally, social changes posed changes for very many membership-based professional bodies, and ASLIB, despite its unique position and generally loyal membership base, was far from immune to this.

Dennis Lewis, who had predicted the demise of the information professional, took over in 1981 as Director from Basil Saunders, who had served for a short period following the retirement of Leslie Wilson. He produced a development plan for ASLIB which, in view of the deteriorating financial situation, was put into action in 1985, earlier than anticipated,

moving toward a “slimmer and trimmer” organization, run on fully commercial lines [21]. ASLIB left the fading splendour of its Belgrave Square location for premises in the Holborn area of central London. The research and consultancy division was closed, the research staff continuing to work on British Library projects, and the consultants forming an independent ‘Information Partnership’. ASLIB still offered a limited consultancy, associated with the information service and the training programme, as it does to the present day. The cessation of ASLIB research caused dismay to many in the information world, and is still seen by many as marking the end of ASLIB’s unique position in that world. Small survey research was still carried out at ASLIB; see, for example, a survey of IT use by the information service [22].

The new vision was for a focus on membership services, publications and professional development, with ASLIB undertaking a positive leadership role in the development of information management in the UK. At the time, the by-line ‘The Association for Information Management’ was added to the ASLIB name.

The branches and groups continued active programmes, with some new groupings added, most notably the Information Resources Management Network [23]. The Informatics group was involved in organizing a series of Information Retrieval Package fairs. The nature of the conference programme changed, with the long-standing annual conference supplanted by less regular multipartite events with other information organizations. The staff register was spun-off as ‘Aslib Professional Recruitment’, an independent wholly-owned subsidiary of ASLIB.

Publications expanded, with an ambitious programme of new books, and new journals in local area networking and records management. More emphasis was placed on shorter publications, particularly addressing topical issues: these included a series of monthly newsletters on topics such as information technology, library automation, and business information, and a series of short ‘Know How Guides’ on a variety of Information technology and information management topics.

The training programme, now offering almost exclusively one-day courses, was further expanded, particularly in areas of technology and online searching. More than 50 courses were run in 1985, more than half dealing with some aspect of online searching. Ten years later the ASLIB training programme was similarly responsive to the needs of moment in focusing on Internet-related courses

In 1989, Dennis Lewis was succeeded as Director by Roger Bowes, a former newspaper executive, who continued Lewis’s policy of downsizing to profitable areas, and on corporate information management as ASLIB’s focus. The organization moved premises again, to Old Street in the eastern part of Central London. Advantage was taken of the layout of the new building to create a ‘One Stop Information Shop’, with services including quick reference, desk research, library, consultancy and recruitment visible and accessible from the street. The Society of Archivists took up space in the building, and it was hoped to make it a focus for other information organizations. However, this did not happen, and ASLIB moved again to occupy two floors of an office building in the City of London.

The Saunders report of 1989 recommended the merger of the independent UK information-related associations, to form a single body to represent the information professions. ASLIB took an active part in the discussions, particularly with the Library Association and the Institute of Information Scientists, but concluded that the association was too different in nature and purpose for a merger to be feasible. ASLIB therefore stood apart from the merger of the other two organisations which formed CILIP; many considered this a missed opportunity to carry ASLIB’s values and perspectives further.

In 2002, a further major downsizing took place, as ASLIB abandoned their publication activity, selling their books business to Taylor and Francis, and their journals to Emerald

Group Publishing, with ASLIB members given favourable terms as purchasers and subscribers. Only a monthly *Managing Information* newsletter, the successor to *Aslib Information*, remained. Thereafter ASLIB and Emerald worked increasingly closely together in providing services to the membership.

Shortly thereafter, the ASLIB library and information service closed, and its stock, and the organization moved to smaller premises near Victoria Embankment. By 2005, membership had halved in three years, to less than 800, and in the same period staff numbers had fallen from 40 to 10. In December 2005, ASLIB went into voluntary liquidation.

It re-emerged in early 2006 as a private company, having been bought by the former Director, Roger Bowes. Operating from premises in Shoreditch, east London, it continued to offer professional development and recruitment services. The training programme remained active, offering about 50 one-day courses, one of a wide variety of topics in information management, library/information skills, information organization, management, information governance, information technology, and subject-specific information. Onsite courses, on the customer's premises were offered, and the first ASLIB distance learning course, in thesaurus construction, was launched. There was still activity in some of the groups and branches, though most were becoming inactive, but the only regular conference was the long-standing *Translating and the Computer* meeting; ASLIB otherwise supported the meetings and conferences of other groups.

At the end of 2008, ASLIB moved to its final London location, an office suite in Goswell Road, Finsbury. With no in-house training facilities, course were run, as in ASLIB's early days, in hired venues. The recruitment agency ceased operating during the course of the year, and the training courses, *Managing Information* magazine, and the *Translating and the Computer* conference, were ASLIB's only remaining activities. The only active group was the combined engineering and technology special interest group; all the other groups and branches were dormant. Clearly the organization was no longer viable as an independent entity.

## **2010-date**

In April 2010, Aslib was acquired by MCB Group, the holding company for Emerald Group Publishing Ltd. The April issue of *Managing Information* noted that "Aslib will operate as a sister organization to Emerald, drawing on Emerald staff and resources, but still retaining its independence". The London offices were closed, and ASLIB activity centred on Emerald's Headquarters in Bingley, Yorkshire. In the next issue it was noted that "Our original ethos, which still applies today, was 'to serve those engaged in the collection, treatment and dissemination of information in many departments of human activity'."

Membership arrangements continued largely unchanged, though with an increased emphasis on Emerald's general management information benefits. Training and group activity was initially suspended, though the annual *Translating and the Computer* conference was held, and the Aslib Yearbook and membership directory published online, and the *Managing Information* newsletter continued to appear, with a new emphasis on research reports drawn from Emerald publications. A new design and branding saw the upper-case 'ASLIB' restored as the organization name, still with the 'Association for Information Management' by-line.

ASLIB was relaunched with a member meeting at the London Online Information Meeting in December 2010. 5 Emerald staff were initially named as assigned to the association's activities. An advisory Council was formed, though sadly without any peers, knights or admirals. A survey of the membership showed that training was the most highly regarded service, and the training programme resumed in 2011, with public courses in London, onsite

courses, and an increased distance learning provision. The courses were categorized as business and official information sources, cataloguing and classification, copyright and intellectual property, general management and communication skills, library and information management skills, and web and internet. Most were based on courses offered formerly, but there were new offerings in social media and in web profiles and privacy. The engineering and technology group restarted activity, and a Business information Community of practice was formed.

Over the next three years, the programme was slowly expanded. New training courses were introduced, in areas familiar from old ASLIB days, including information governance, information management, general management, and intellectual property. Some were in a half-day format, some ran outside London, and two day 'masterclasses' ran in Malaysia and Hong Kong. The 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ASLIB training activities was celebrated with a feeling that this element of the old association was still vibrant.

A programme of member evening meetings and joint meetings with other bodies was started. And a two-day ASLIB Knowledge and Information Strategy Seminar at the British Library in December 2013, with the aim, again familiar from former days, of bringing together researchers and practitioners. Publishing activities under the ASLIB name restarted, with a series of monographs published by Emerald "in association with Aslib", and a new quarterly newsletter, *Privacy and Data Protection*, was launched.

However, Emerald proved no more able to sustain a membership-based organization than had the old ASLIB. It was announced at the end of 2014 that ASLIB would focus its efforts on expanding its professional development program. ASLIB membership and associated benefits, including group membership, ended, and the two newsletters ceased publication.

As from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015, ASLIB was integrated with the wider Emerald organisation, providing, in effect, a library/information professional development arm. No longer an association, it is known simply as 'ASLIB'. The name also lives on in Emerald's *Aslib Journal of Information Management* (formerly *Aslib Proceedings*). At that time, 34 courses were offered, as public courses in London and Manchester and as onsite training, with some via e-learning, in eight main areas: business and official information sources; information organisation; copyright and intellectual property; customer services skills; knowledge management; general management; marketing and communication; and writing and editing.

In July 2015, Emerald announced that, in view of changing professional development requirements, Aslib training courses would cease. All activities with the ASLIB name, other than publication of *Aslib Journal of Information Management* ceased in May 2016.

## Conclusions

Richards wrote that the history of documentation, or information science, in Britain is largely synonymous with that of ASLIB, its members and their activities [11]. Muddiman [1] suggested that ASLIB could fairly be regarded as an innovative organization, which actively shaped the development of the 'informational turn' in society, and, in its earlier days, gave impetus to the involvement of the sciences of information and documentation in an increasingly information intensive world. Both are correct, and we might also reflect on the number of the discipline's thought leaders who have been involved with ASLIB: Brian Vickery, Blaise Cronin, Steve Robertson, and Alan Gilchrist to name but four. So multi-faceted have its activities been, that it is difficult to single out the most significant achievements, but they must certainly include the promotion of the idea of rigorous, applied research, support for the effective introduction of several generations of information

technology into library/information settings, and a continual insistence on the important of the information disciplines and professions.

The influence of ASLIB has been very great throughout its history, as it has reinvented itself through changing times; and we should remember that ASLIB's story may not yet be over.

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