

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON THE BREWING INDUSTRY: SOME  
PRACTICAL AND PROGRESSIVE LESSONS TO ACTIVATE SPECIAL  
COLLECTIONS FROM THE 20-YEAR CELEBRATIONS FOR THE  
NATIONAL BREWING LIBRARY

By Robert Curry and Annabel Valentine\*

*This article is a reflection on the project carried out by Oxford Brookes Learning Resources Directorate to celebrate 20 years of the National Brewing Library at Oxford Brookes University. Reflections are outlined in five 'lessons', covering elements from the practical to the progressive, with regard to how this event was planned and executed. The lessons cover key learning points that invite more ambitious plans for activating special collections in the future through an integrated mix of local concerns and traditional and progressive perspectives.*

Keywords: *Beer; ale; businesswomen; pubs; health; applied science; temperance; brewing; distilling*

## **Introduction**

As we approached the significant milestone of holding the National Brewing Library (NBL) at Oxford Brookes University for 20 years, we were keen to arrange celebrations that showed how the collection had developed through a thematic approach that covered the long history of brewing in the UK and how the NBL is developing as a collection, keeping up with contemporary beer and distilling culture.

The celebrations included an in-person event featuring three speakers representing academia, industry and journalism. They were beer writer and journalist Adrian Tierney-Jones on the evolution of brewing awards; academics Dr Victoria Ellis-Vowles and Dr Agnieszka Rydzik on brewers working in contemporary micro-brewing; and Professor Katherine Smart speaking about 'standing on the shoulders of giants' in light of her career in the brewing industry, and her key role in securing the NBL's home at Oxford Brookes. On the evening of the event, we welcomed local brewers Little Ox and Tap Social, who had stalls offering tasters and selling their beers, as well as the Brewery History Society, who offered some of their recent publications for sale and kindly donated a copy of *Brewers of the British Isles: 1890–2021* to the NBL. Reflections on the challenges and successes of the event are outlined here in five 'lessons' covering elements from the practical to the progressive.

\* ROBERT CURRY is the Associate Director of Learning Resources – Academic, and ANNABEL VALENTINE is the Archivist at Oxford Brookes University.

These include key learning points for future special-collections promotions and events.

## **Lesson 1: establishing inclusive themes**

The event to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the NBL was accompanied by onsite and online exhibitions. The onsite exhibition was structured with a themed approach, in large part due to the physical nature of the cases, which were spread throughout the library on different floors, and in the special collections reading room. The exhibition was designed so that each case could be viewed in isolation but included wayfinders to encourage visitors to view the display in its entirety. The development of the exhibition was a collaboration between Dr Robert Curry, Annabel Valentine and Don Marshall, a retired librarian who had worked with the NBL for all of its 20-year history. The suggested themes were shared with the NBL Committee, whose input was invaluable as the committee includes members who work or have worked in the brewing industry as well as academics working in related fields.

The five themes were chosen to showcase the breadth of the library and its strengths. They were:

*Women in brewing.* This covered 'brewsters' (both modern and medieval female brewers); women working in ancillary trades, including hop pickers and pub barmaids and landladies; and key female figures such as Anna McLeod, the first female professor of brewing and biochemistry in the world, whose work is included in the NBL.

*Applying science and technology.* This highlighted some of the more scientific texts within the collection, including books on the importance of the quality of key ingredients; scientific understanding of key processes, including malting, fermentation, yeast and pasteurisation; and key technological developments in brewing, including the invention of the saccharometer to determine alcoholic strength.

*Drinking as a social pastime.* This case explored the social history of beer and pubs as an integral part of the history and culture of the UK, including books on pub games, the importance of pubs in building community and collecting beer ephemera.

*Alcohol and health.* The NBL has a significant section of material on the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century temperance movement. This provided an opportunity to explore a different perspective on beer and alcohol from that in the other themes in the exhibition, which were, on the whole, depicting beer and drinking in a positive light. This theme also included more modern material around campaigns for drink awareness and medical guides arguing the case for both the positive and negative effects of alcohol.

*The development of brewing and distilling.* This theme was given the most space, which allowed for exploring not only the history of brewing around the world, including books on the histories of particular breweries and home brewing, but also some of the more recent publications in the NBL

focusing on the rise of craft beer and the resurgence of gin.

In choosing which items to display, ensuring a diversity of writers was an important consideration, although not always easy, as the majority of the items in the NBL are written from a Western male perspective. Bringing in a range of different perspectives is something that is increasingly important to the ongoing development of the collection, and reflecting changes in the wider brewing industry is easier to do with more recent publications. This was carefully considered when choosing material to display, and each case had at least one female writer represented and, where possible, a non-Western perspective. For example, books on brewing traditions in South America and Africa were included. The online exhibition took the form of a 20-item list rather than an online iteration of the physical exhibition, although a small number of books appeared in both. This forms a lasting resource which is accessible via the NBL webpage.<sup>1</sup>

## **Lesson 2: diversifying perspectives, women in the brewing industry**

As well as looking at a broad range of themes across the NBL, showing the richness of the collections, an interesting cultural/historical and contemporary angle was achieved by including a talk on the return of 'brewsters' (female brewers) to the brewing industry. This came about through the work of the anniversary subcommittee and suggestions from an academic in Oxford Brookes's School of Hospitality, Professor Peter Lugosi. He suggested that the group contact two academics he knew who had been doing interesting research on contemporary 'brewsters', Dr Victoria Ellis-Vowles and Dr Agnieszka Rydzik. An in-depth look through the collection showed how the term had been used historically. In medieval England, brewing was largely carried out by female brewers ('brewsters'), with alcohol used to kill germs and ale made for family, friends and local sale. This practice petered out as brewing became an industrialised process, and men largely took over the trade, with women carrying on in low-status roles. What was interesting in looking through the collection was how little had been published on this fascinating subject.

The key text found was Judith M. Bennett's *Ale, Beer and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World 1300–1600*. Bennett shows clear historical evidence of the prevalence of brewsters giving way to a male-dominated trade as beer (as opposed to home-brewed ale) became a more marketable product. Though women carried on working in the brewing industry, this work was only available in the lower rungs of the trade. Female brewers were often culturally demonised as provoking sin (despite behaviour amongst the burgeoning male-dominated trade (1) often also lacking in ethics: 'their trade was as plagued as that of rural alewives with adulterated or badly brewed products and with disorderly houses and drunken clients' (2)). This prejudice extended to a political level. For example, in the sixteenth century, York restricted the trade in ale or beer to mostly male 'honest citizens'.

Bennett's work thus connects well with contemporary research on brewsters, allowing for a nuanced and evidenced critical realist historical

picture to emerge that enabled the NBL's 20-year celebrations to address feminist concerns:

What has kept women from ever taking the lead or even sharing it? In the history of brewsters, the answer lies, as we have seen, not in biology, not in organised male malice, and not in social necessity, but instead in the historical interplay of many patriarchal institutions: family organisation, legal practice, economic structures, political imperatives, and cultural presumptions. (3)

The re-emergence of brewsters shows how women in the modern brewing industry have re-established their place in this industry in a more equal way than the historical picture as brewers with their own 'occupational identity driven by innovation and experimentation' (e.g. new flavour combinations such as grapefruit and lemon (4). This progressive angle to the celebrations was complemented by the involvement of local Oxford brewers Tap Social, who are a social movement offering employment opportunities for people in prison and prison leavers. As part of the promotion for the event, Tap Social founder and director Tess Taylor and Dr Robert Curry were interviewed by BBC Oxford radio, with a subsequent website article, 'Oxford Brookes Exhibition Celebrates Women in the Brewing Industry' (5).

### **Lesson 3: involving students**

Oxford Brookes Events Management students were recruited as volunteers to assist with the marketing and running of the 20-year celebratory event. Students were recruited via academic staff who teach on the programme, with volunteer roles advertised about six months before the event. It is important for the Special Collections service to work with students in this way, as it demonstrates the service's value to the university in building employability skills and gives students opportunities for real-life experience in their chosen field. It also helps to build awareness of the service and of our collections amongst the student body. One of the aims was for the event to appeal to students, so having their input into reaching other students was very valuable. Students helped to promote the event on campus and in local pubs.

Valuable lessons were learnt through the process; for example, while a good number of students were interested in being involved, in reality only a handful of students continued until the event took place, and much of the work was done by one student. This meant that the number of tasks the student volunteers originally envisaged to be carried out had to be reduced. Some good ideas were dropped, including a pub trail of Oxford, which was intended to be developed using historical information from the NBL. Other ideas were carried out by staff instead, including tours of the exhibition on the evening of the event. Clearer expectations were needed for the students to be able to commit themselves to seeing the project through.

1 See <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/library/collections/special-collections/food-and-drink/the-national-brewing-library> (accessed 9 Aug. 2024). 2 Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer and Brewsters* (Oxford, 1996), 111. 3 *Ibid.*, 156–7. 4 A. Rydzik and V. Ellis-Vowles, 'Don't Use "the Weak Word": Women Brewers, Identities and Gendered Territories of Embodied Work' in *Work, Employment and Society*, xxxiii (3), 2019, p. 493. 5 See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-63728008> (accessed 9 Aug. 2024).

From the learning-resources side, a better understanding of how much and what support the students would need would be necessary if this kind of project is carried out again. For example, one student created a webpage design that was impossible to use because he had not been briefed on the constraints of the website's content management system or the importance of copyright when choosing images for the design. A clearer brief and supporting documentation would have avoided this. A key lesson for future projects involving student volunteers is to set clearer expectations during the project's recruitment phase and offer more support to the students throughout the project.

#### **Lesson 4: marketing to stakeholder groups**

Usage of the NBL had reduced significantly during and since the lockdowns and restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Previously, the NBL had been one of the most used collections, but its usage, and enquiries about it, had not rebounded in the same way other collections had by the start of the academic year in September 2022. One of the key desired outcomes of the 20-year celebrations was to counteract this and increase usage of the collection again. Reaching stakeholder groups was, therefore, very important in event-marketing planning.

The key way in which the event was marketed was through contacts with previously identified stakeholder groups. These included organisations interested in beer and brewing history and heritage, including, for example, the Brewery History Society, the British Guild of Beer Writers and the Pub History Society. The Institute of Brewing and Distilling, who are the owner of the majority of the collection and are represented on the NBL committee, put an article written by the NBL committee in their publications *Journal of Brewing and Distilling* and *Brewing and Distilling International*, to promote the event and the collection more generally. Marketing materials were also produced, including pencils and a beer mat promoting the collection. The beer mats were used to promote the collection and the event at the local CAMRA beer festival and in pubs in Oxford. The beer mats and pencils were also given out on the evening of the event and were both designed so that they could continue to be used after the event.

Apart from some minor logistical issues, everything went well on the day, with excellent talks and good engagement with the two brewers and the Brewery History Society stall. The turnout was good, and we were particularly pleased with the number of people who joined one of the tours to see the exhibition and NBL *in situ*. The wider impact of the push to raise awareness of the NBL was felt in a significant increase in enquiries relating to the collection and double the previous year's number of on-site visits by individual researchers in 2022–3. Another positive outcome was that a beer from Little Ox Brewery, which had a stall on the evening of the event and was founded by an Oxford Brookes alumnus, was chosen by Adrian Tierney-Jones to be his beer of the week in the *Daily Star* after he was introduced to them at the event.

## **Lesson 5: archival development through an integrative traditional and progressive approach**

As librarians and archivists responsible for collections of high cultural and historical value, a key professional aim will always be to keep collections organised, accessible and safe. The history of libraries and archives can thus be seen from one perspective as an ongoing battle against the destruction of material-based knowledge, often lost in history through neglect more often than through wilful destruction, and now further challenged by the often quickly discarded digital milieu: 'It may be cheaper, more convenient, easier and faster to destroy knowledge than to appraise, catalogue, preserve and make it available but to abandon knowledge for the sake of short-term expediency is a sure route to weakening society's grip on the truth' (6). However, as well as this core responsibility, we must find new ways of appreciating the value of library and archive collections from our historical moment. This requires an integrative approach that puts our current cultural concerns and interests in conversation with historical knowledge and traditions; as the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer opined, 'Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself' (7). In the development of our collection at the NBL, which contains archival material as well as published works, we have looked to expand the collection with new texts and fill perceived historical gaps across multiple cultural perspectives on the brewing and distilling industry. As well as technical, scientific and business aspects, this has also involved building within our collection texts critical of these industries, particularly the temperance movement. Thus, in promoting the collection, as reflected in our 20-year celebrations described above, we are mindful of giving a balanced picture of the cultural-historical value of these industries, showing different, sometimes opposing, views.

As well as our traditional professional drive to curate balanced viewpoints, there has, in more recent decades, been a perceived need to respond to more active moves in library and information communities to examine how our collections and archives can sometimes leave marginal voices excluded. Movements such as 'Decolonising the Curriculum' in wider higher education have drawn academic librarians to interesting and valuable work helping academics diversify reading and resource choices beyond a sometimes Western patriarchal myopia with diverse suggestions and resource acquisition support, drawing inevitable critique from reactionary supposed defenders of tradition. Hopefully we have shown in our reflections on the event described in this article that it is possible to bring on board progressive and traditional views in an integrative manner, as all perspectives are essential to our understanding of our past, present and potential future.

6 R. Ovenden *Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), 223.

Keeping a tradition and its associated historical knowledge and values alive culturally can often best be achieved from the perspective of a critical friend who is not afraid of challenging established norms or received wisdom whilst respecting the tradition as a whole. Rydzik and Ellis-Vowles's research, discussed above, shows how all the female members of Project Venus are as passionate about the future of brewing as any dedicated brewer has been (8). Thus, an archive/special collection can be brought to life with newly researched progressive angles (e.g. the return of brewsters) *and* a balanced evaluation of all aspects of a tradition. After all, there are very good reasons why brewing and distilling are still a highly valued part of our culture. As neuroscientist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist argues as an aside in his magnum opus *The Matter with Things*, with its wider call for a more holistic value and purpose-based understanding of being in the world,

In Britain, the pub has for a thousand years been one of the mainstays of community life. Social connectedness is, for the health of a people, more important than anything else – and that means for both their mental and physical health. So marked are the effects of social connectedness on health, not to mention happiness (without which there is little point in health), that they outstrip those of diet, exercise and smoking. (9)

7 H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1975), 307. 8 Founder member Sara Barton became the first woman to win the coveted title of Brewer of the Year by the British Guild of Beer Writers in 2012. See <https://www.beerguild.co.uk/news/first-fe-male-winner-of-brewer-of-the-year-sara-barton-awarded-top-brewing-prize-by-the-british-guild-of-beer-writers/> (accessed 9 Aug. 2024). 9 I. McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things* (2021), 805–6. 10 The Michael Jackson Foundation for Brewing and Distilling, 'What We Do', <https://www.themjf.org/> (accessed 9 Aug. 2024). 10 The Michael Jackson Foundation for Brewing and Distilling, 'What We Do', <https://www.themjf.org/> (accessed 9 Aug. 2024).

## **Conclusion and next steps**

Key to the overall success of this event was pulling together a group of highly organised people with a passion for the collection being promoted. The strong relational aspects in terms of communication amongst the project team meant that many potential hurdles could be easily overcome. A key learning point for future similar projects would be to spend more time with the students who have volunteered, particularly around any digital capability issues and the specifics of what is being asked of them. As this requires an environment where the student feels comfortable, a one-to-one meeting in an informal setting could be ideal. Having established how to link the National Brewing Library to local interests, cultural-historical and progressive concerns and traditional stakeholders, we now have a good template for future events where we wish to celebrate a historical collection and activate it through contemporary perspectives. We are now planning an equally ambitious project to celebrate fifteen years of the Michael Jackson (an influential journalist who worked under the 'Beer Hunter' and 'Whisky Chaser' trademarks) archive. Michael Jackson had a fascinating career that saw him elevate the cultural importance of beer in England, Europe and around the world. Michael worked hard on promoting brewing as a career to diverse audiences as well as in his prolific and influential writings on many different drink styles (still influential on many innovative brewers and enthusiasts). Hence, part of his legacy is the Michael James Jackson Foundation for Brewing and Distilling, which funds technical education and career support for black and Indigenous people and people of colour in the brewing and distilling industry. Therefore, as with the National Brewing Library's 20-year celebrations, a project group involving input from brewers, academics and enthusiasts is being assembled with further ambitious and progressive aims, and this time with broader cultural perspectives with input from stakeholders from the UK, Europe and North and South America.