



**15<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY SPEECH TO THE  
M25 CONSORTIUM OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES  
House of Commons, 3 April 2008  
By: Roy Williams**

Barry Sheerman, Colleagues, and Friends it gives me great pleasure to stand before you tonight and relate my personal history of the M25 Consortium of Higher Education Libraries that will in fact delay your celebration of its 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

It is true that I used to be Roy Williams and that at one time I was allowed to be the Secretary of the Consortium but just why I am the person giving this speech is not entirely clear.

I did think that it was because I was in attendance and awake at the very first meeting back in 1993. However, on this score I have to confess myself something of a fraud. Although I was there in Fred Friend's office at UCL I actually missed a fraction of the meeting because I was late. And I can admit to you that it was the worst kind of lateness. Not the honourable god-given simple twist of fate brought about by signal failure on the Piccadilly Line but the very worst kind of lateness.

If you don't understand what I am getting at, **picture the scene at that first meeting**, in the days when the HE landscape was less settled than it is today.

- We see some 25 or 30 senior librarians, alas mostly men in those days, drawn from the old and new universities across London.
- There is a certain tension in the air as not everyone is supportive of this meeting and all those from the former polytechnics are over-awed by the sight of so many leather bindings in one office, which itself is the size of a small ballroom.
- There is nervous chatter over coffee and rather nice biscuits and then Fred Friend, our host and Convenor looks at his watch, coughs with a practiced significance and everyone moves to their seats.
- Our Chair, one Lynn Brindley smiles her dynamic smile and says "Good Morning and welcome".
- Then the door flies open, I rush in and trip head-first over someone's briefcase and think that truly this is the worst kind of lateness.

Luckily I recover my composure, the meeting gets underway, the debate is polite but in some quarters there is fear of an apocalyptic collapse of Order as We Know It. However, the Fred Friends, Lynn Brindleys and Derek Laws steer the whole thing in a knowing way and finally there is agreement to discuss further the setting up of a Consortium with Fred as the arch Convenor.

**Fred Friend it was who reminded me that the spur to setting up a London HE Library co-operative in 1993 was the Follett report** - the name given to the Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group. Increased collaboration was a theme of that report and at the time London, unlike say Sheffield where I had worked previously, didn't have much in that line.

Fred had attended a meeting of the Follett Group and was embarrassed to be asked why (and I am quoting) “we had established a forum for the libraries of the University of London to work together which was not open to membership from the other academic libraries in London”. Fred and others from the University of London Library Resources Coordinating Committee got the message and that initial meeting was convened.

Although Fred describes this as an awkward moment in his career, when the history of HE Libraries in London comes to be written (and let us sincerely hope that it never is because nobody will ever read it) Fred deserves an honourable place in it.

**Formally speaking the first Chair of the Consortium was Denis Heathcote** of Greenwich University. If I had to sum Denis up in one word it would be ‘businesslike’ and he deftly kept the Steering Group and the membership moving forward during a period when not all of the initial tensions had been resolved.

Despite the fact that there was one national Funding Council for all universities, some people had concerns that users from the newer universities would inevitably “swamp” (and that word was used) the specialist and perhaps better provided for collections elsewhere.

Given where we are this evening this might be compared to recent national debates about immigration. In our case the specialist libraries of the University of London and some of their Librarians take on the role of Middle England, whilst the rest of us play the part of Polish Plumbers and Slovenian nurses.

As it turns out, this fear has proven to be almost wholly unfounded over the last 15 years and **indeed two of the so-called problems have proven to be major strengths of the Consortium:**

- **The first of these is that very variety and diversity of the collections** in London universities that some saw as a weakness in the establishment of the Consortium. I think it is fair to say that this richness is even greater than even the proponents of collaboration imagined and we have some wonderful libraries containing everything from A-W.
- So that’s A for Archives, (now accessible via AIM25) and
- W for that fantastic collection at Middlesex containing Wallpaper.
  
- This diversity and the benefits of bringing all of these collections under one Consortium Banner (I was going to say Umbrella but the LA threatened to sue) has actually attracted others to seek membership and so we have seen libraries join the Consortium from outside the original confines of the real M25 and from other sectors, such as National Museums and Galleries. Perhaps if we play our cards right this evening we shall attract a new member in Huddersfield?

- Now it is my contention that these different types of library and these different types of institution have not come together despite the challenges of access but because of them.
- The access agreement to which member libraries must subscribe has become both more extensive and, I would say, more straightforward as time has gone on and the Sconul national agreement is shamelessly based on the simple and effective M25 model. Surely the Consortium now leads the Collaboration League Table?

But of course these things don't just happen because you form a Consortium, they all require real people to put in hours and hours of time to develop and implement strategies and plans, bring on board other people, acquire funding and so on.

**One such Hero of the M25 is Jean Sykes.** (And I know that hero is a masculine word, but to be called a heroine it seems you have to parachute behind enemy lines or rescue someone from a raging fire). And when the Heroic History of HE Libraries in London comes to be written Jean will have her own chapter, not least for moving the IT dimension of the consortiums' activity right up the agenda and getting the funding to do so. Largely through Jean's leadership the IT Systems team was established and still resides at LSE and I think I am right in saying that the leader of that team has always been John Gilby.

**John and his colleagues have provided** the search facilities, the union lists and other resource discovery projects and services for well over a decade, both developing and strengthening access to the diverse resources of the member libraries.

Of course John epitomises one of the most significant developments in Consortium history, which has been this **capacity to employ staff to support the work** of the volunteer librarian officers, group convenors and working party members. All of these staff can rest assured that they will get their mentions, their photographs and their fingerprints in the All Inclusive History of HE Libraries in London. Funding permitting.

**For Brian Murphy**, Secretary of the Consortium from 1997 – 1998 and Chair from 1998 – 2000 we may need a second volume, such has been his contribution to the M25. Hardworking, conscientious and dedicated – Brian tells me he is all of those things.

I would describe him as quietly persuasive and hugely influential. Brian was instrumental in taking Collaboration on to a new external level by ensuring that the Consortium itself collaborated and cemented its partnerships externally, notably the Association of London Chief Librarians but also libraries in the NHS and in Art Colleges.

**Of course this collaborative mission** has to be underpinned by good communication and strong advocacy and these twin agendas were particularly

well served by two colleagues that both The Sun and the Daily Mirror have called The Terrible Twins of the M25.

**Anne Bell as Chair and Suzanne Enright as Secretary** were a dynamic duo who together ensured that the impetus and development of everything M25 was maintained.

Membership, the M25 'catchment area', the range of activities and wine consumption all increased during their joint reign and they fully deserve their chapter in the All Singing All Dancing Rock and Roll history of HE Libraries in London with glossy colour photographs of them in action.

Their energy was ferocious and their achievements many as they brought a **unique streak of ruthlessness** to the work of the Steering Group.

They **picked on many a library innocent** and shamelessly manipulated them to carry out their iron will. And it's true:

- If one of them invited you for a cup of coffee this was usually a sign that they wanted your vote in some forthcoming debate.
- If the two of them invited you, you had to get someone else's vote lined up too.
- If you were offered lunch you were destined to Chair a Working Group,
- if you were invited for a glass of wine after work you were going to write a report on some burning issue of the day.
- If it was dinner and a glass of wine after work well, let's just say that this was an invitation that I never received so I cannot possibly comment.

In recounting my personal view of Consortium history I am glossing over some important components of the M25 experience:

- **Dedicated hardworking people** that, because they were doing things outside the limits of their day jobs, were always positive and motivated for the right reasons (not that we aren't those things in our day jobs of course).
- **A rich variety of resources** and, it should be said a rich variety of locations – what treats they were to go to Maritime Greenwich or the Imperial War Museum, to leafy St Mary's or the marble halls and biscuits of Bloomsbury.
- **A continuous story of development and progress**
  - bringing an increasing membership (almost doubled in 15 years)
- **Further and stronger links outwards** and
- Not least **a stronger voice in places that matter**.

It all paints a very impressive picture. But when I accepted the invitation to delay the serving of the cake this evening I **asked Maureen Wade for a brief** as to what I should say. Her reply was that I could say (and I quote) **"anything I liked, perhaps with a few jokes"**. Luckily we only have time for one joke and a pretty poor one it is too, so do join in if you know it.

- A student goes up to the Issue Desk in an M25 library and asks “Where are the books on Nuclear Physics?”
- The Assistant at the Counter replies “I am sorry, we are not allowed to answer queries here you need to go to the Enquiry Desk”.
- The student replies “Oh right, where is the Enquiry Desk innit?”
- And the Assistant says “Sorry, but we are not allowed to answer queries here”.

Now you may agree that this is a most pathetic joke but I recount it for a reason.

**I told the same joke at the very first meeting of the M25 Staff Development Group** back in about 1995. It seemed to me then a good way to break the ice whilst highlighting the importance of staff training at the same time. But it wasn't.

Nonetheless the group did some sterling work as we went through a period of parallel and then converging work with the University of London Staff Development Group.

Now I earn myself a footnote in the History of HE Libraries in London for convening that Group but the person whose name crops up in the chapter heading is **Jean Yeoh**. She was Chair of the University of London Group, long-suffering member of the M25 group until she in turn acceded to the Chair and finally brought the two groups together and formed what we now know and love as CPD25.

As most people in the room will know from first hand experience CPD25 has been highly successful year on year (as they say next door) delivering a wide range of training and development activities.

However its significance is not just in what it does but in what it is.

**For me the staff development wing of the M25 group provides the real glue** for the Consortium, ensuring that we don't become, as perhaps Sconul and Copol once were, a Dining Club for Chief Librarians.

CPD25

- potentially touches every member of staff in our libraries,
- provides them with opportunities to develop their skills, update their knowledge and reflect on their careers.
- Moreover it also takes them out of their home libraries and puts them in touch with people doing similar jobs, from whom there is always something to learn, for better or worse.

**Which, more or less, gives us the full picture of the Consortium's work over the last 15 years.**

The mission has been refined but remains essentially the same as at the outset:

- Developing and improving **access in support of learning and research**,
- by **facilitating co-operation** amongst Consortium members
- and by **collaborating with relevant regional and national** bodies.

The mission is delivered:

- through **Services to learners and Researchers**
- Through **Mutual Support**
- And through Collaboration and Influence

Underpinning all this, the Consortium has aims relating to:

- Governance and Financial Management;
- and Advocacy and Communication.

It has been pretty much a model organisation on both fronts.

I haven't got the time to **mention everyone who has worked to deliver all of this**, but

- **Robert Hall** was Chair for longer than anyone else,
- **Nick Bevan** has been both Treasurer and Chair;
- **Caroline Lloyd** is hugely efficient as the current Treasurer
- Whilst **Maureen Wade**, our longest serving Secretary, booked me as your Speaker at the House of Commons. (Which at least has a nice ring to it).

**Now when the History of HE Libraries in London comes to be rightly consigned to the Dustbin of Oblivion** it will include a second footnote against my name: I was the Secretary who first put the Minutes on the Web, even though three prominent members insisted on receiving theirs in plain brown paper envelopes.

**But if you go to the Consortium Website today** (now a lot less yellow than before) you can read the Top Ten Facts for yourself and marvel at the extent of library activity in London and the way that the M25's work has made the life of researchers, students and staff both easier and more varied.

**For after all the notion of a library Consortium, like many excellent ideas, is a simple one.**

In our own library we may have 100,000 or 200,000 or half a million volumes. Together we have 30 million.

Your library may have 100 or 200 or 900 or 1500 study spaces. Together we have 45,000.

**Universities are still in many respects perceived as elite institutions.** Their libraries were once preciously guarded and exclusive.

**Tonight we are celebrating the 15<sup>th</sup> birthday of a voluntary group that has:**

- developed a cooperative and egalitarian approach to resource sharing and service development
- whilst maintaining and indeed enriching the integrity of its individual members.
- The Consortium is truly more than the sum of its parts.

Now **15 years means that this is the Consortium's Crystal Anniversary** so in closing can I say that:

- it would be extremely apt in a few moments time to raise a crystal glass to the crystal clarity of vision of all those who over the years have helped shape the group's purpose and success.
- Not forgetting also to look into the crystal ball of the future where many of you here tonight and many more to come will surely take the M25 Consortium of Higher Education Libraries to even greater heights.

And now at last for some cake!