

## ABTAPL: An Overview

**ABTAPL** is the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries, an organisation of libraries and librarians working with theological and philosophical collections and related materials in the UK and beyond. Membership is not confined to professional librarians and anyone who has an interest in theology and/or philosophy may join. It provides for its members an informal network for sharing information and experience, for consultation, for advice and for support for both individual problems and continuing professional development. Some members have spent all of their working lives in a specialist library; others have transferred from the public service; some have bookselling experience; some carry library responsibilities because they lecture in theology or in philosophy. The only membership qualification is to have an interest in the bibliography, librarianship or management of our specialist subjects. All are welcome in ABTAPL.

### HISTORICAL ROOTS

ABTAPL was founded in 1956 at a meeting held at the University of London's Senate House to bring together librarians working with or interested in theological and philosophical literature in Great Britain. Its purpose was to improve the bibliographical information available, to bring to light some of the little known collections on these subjects and to help smaller libraries which lacked professional expertise. Originally it was intended to be the United Kingdom member of an international theological libraries organisation which had been set up in 1954 following a meeting convened by the World Council of Churches under the auspices of UNESCO. Unfortunately, this international body did not survive long, but many of its aims and objectives are now carried out by the *Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie (BETH)*.

Some of ABTAPL's original objectives can be found in an earlier organisation, SCOTAPLL (the Standing Conference of Theological and Philosophical Libraries in London). After World War 2 the UK's Library Association was keen to develop co-operative schemes which would make materials of all kinds more accessible. One of these ideas was a project for allocating to each library service in Greater London and the surrounding counties a section of knowledge which they could then develop and build into a significant collection. On being allocated the fields of Philosophy and Religion, Westminster City Library, under the leadership of Robert L. Collison, Reference Librarian from 1948-59, began to contact other libraries, initially in the London area, likely to have substantial collections in these subject areas.

From this initial contact, an ecumenical group of librarians was formed which "constituted a friendly circle, flexible but long-lasting, that gradually extended itself over the whole country"<sup>1</sup>. The Rev. Roger Thomas, librarian at Dr Williams's Library, generously made his library available as headquarters for the new group and provided "just that degree of stability and encouragement that was so valuable."<sup>2</sup> From the very beginning institutions representing other faiths were included, e.g. the Jewish Historical Society and the Buddhist Society. For its first few years ABTAPL worked alongside SCOTAPLL, with the latter acting as a regional branch of the national association. However by 1964 SCOTAPLL had ceased as a separate entity, transferring its funds to ABTAPL.

This description of ABTAPL's roots helps to explain its broad multi-faith and non-denominational ethos.

### EARLY YEARS UP TO 1974

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Collison, "SCOTAPLL and ABTAPL: the early years," *Bulletin of ABTAPL*. New Series 1, no.34/35 (March 1986): 13-15, p.13.

<sup>2</sup> Collison, "SCOTAPLL and ABTAPL",13.

From its inception, the Association continued a regular pattern of meetings as established by SCOTAPLL. A Bulletin was launched which included articles describing theological and philosophical libraries, features on professional matters, information about new publications, forthcoming meetings and other notices of interest to members. This became one of the Association's most successful ventures. John Howard, in his overview of ABTAPL in 1974, highlighted that the chief evidence on which any assessment of an Association's success or failure should be based is the written record and in this case the Bulletin. He said "In my opinion, the Bulletin is not only the evidence, it was also the success of ABTAPL."<sup>3</sup>

Sadly when the Bulletin Editor stood down in 1966, the Association virtually came to a standstill with only 5 meetings between 1966 and 1974. John Howard described this period as "the doldrums"<sup>4</sup> and ascribed it to a lack of leaders. He recognised that too many libraries in small theological colleges and seminaries did not have the funds to support full-time qualified librarians, and the staff member in charge usually had other responsibilities.

## 1974 ONWARDS

Fortunately for ABTAPL, when John became Chairman in 1974, he put all of his energies into reviving the Association. When he stood down from this role in 1982 he then took on the editorship of the Bulletin from 1983 until 1987 and he remained on the Committee until 1996. During this lengthy period his enthusiasm had the effect of revitalizing the Association. In recognition of John's services to ABTAPL, John was made an Honorary Life Member - a very rare honour.

Under John's Chairmanship the new committee proposed the following:<sup>5</sup>

- Regular talks and visits to appropriate libraries in Greater London
- Revival of the Bulletin, for current information on the bibliography and librarianship of religion and philosophy
- Publication of a *Directory of Theological Libraries in Britain*
- Possible compilation of *British Union List of Serials in Religion*

All these objectives were achieved and the Association has continued its pattern of regular meetings and visits ever since. A new series of the Bulletin began and a Union List of Periodicals was established, as well as a directory of Theological Libraries.<sup>6</sup> Other publications followed, such as the "Religious Bibliographies in Serial Literature".<sup>7</sup>

## RESIDENTIAL CONFERENCES

Perhaps one of the most significant ventures was the introduction of the annual residential conference beginning in Durham in 1978. These conferences were organised for many years by Mary Elliott of King's College London, Honorary Secretary and Conference Organiser from 1974 to 1986. Like John Howard, Mary's enthusiasm for ABTAPL helped to ensure that the Association continued to thrive over the following years and she too was made an Honorary Life Member of ABTAPL.

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<sup>3</sup> John V. Howard, "The Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries: a personal view of its past, present and future. Part 1", *Bulletin of ABTAPL*, New Series 1, no.1 (Dec.1974): 12-15, p.12. [Hereafter described as Howard, "Personal View. Part 1"]

<sup>4</sup> Howard, "Personal View. Part 1,"13.

<sup>5</sup> Howard, "Personal View. Part 1,"15.

<sup>6</sup> Emma R.M Lea, *A guide to the theological libraries of Great Britain and Ireland*, edited by Alan F. Jesson (London: ABTAPL Publishing, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Walsh, compiler, *Religious Bibliographies in Serial Literature: a Guide* (London: Mansell, 1981).

The residential conference became invaluable not only for showing the wide variety of modern library practice in many different institutions, but also giving opportunities to meet other librarians in the same specialisations, especially for those working in isolation with no prospects of otherwise broadening their professional education. Long standing friendships have been formed and new professional networks developed.

Over the years many places and libraries have been visited and many themes explored, such as disaster planning, archive administration, library design, and management techniques. In particular, 2 conferences stand out, the Golden Jubilee Conference in Prague in 2006 and the Diamond Jubilee Conference in Rome in 2016, both ably organised by Alan Linfield. At both, the delegates were incredibly privileged to see wonderful libraries with bibliographic treasures rarely on view. *[For an overview of ABTAPL's conferences see the address given by Judith Powles on the first evening of the Rome conference.<sup>8</sup>]*

## **INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

Mary Elliott not only organized the UK meetings and conferences over the years but also she became ABTAPL's representative at the meetings of the Conseil International des Associations des Bibliothèques de Théologie, now BETH. This fruitful relationship has continued ever since, with Penelope Hall and Marion Smith amongst others representing ABTAPL for many years.

ABTAPL has also developed excellent relations with other national associations including ATLA and ANZTLA, with delegates from ABTAPL attending their meetings and vice versa. Much has been gained from this mutual cooperation.

## **CURRENT POSITION**

Membership in 2020 is 129, made up of 95 institutional members, 10 personal members and 24 retired members. Although the closure and/or merger of various institutions and collections has inevitably led to some resignations, it is positive to record that new members are still joining and some former members rejoining.

## **ACTIVITIES**

ABTAPL continues to meet twice a year—a day meeting is held in the Autumn, which includes a visit to a library in the specialisation, and a residential three-day conference held in the Spring. In recent years there has been a discussion whether the Autumn meeting should continue but a survey reinforced that people appreciated meeting in person to network and mingle. Because of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the Spring conference had to be cancelled but the Autumn meeting is being held online. It may be possible to hold future conferences as a hybrid with some attendees in person and others online.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

The full list of current publications can be found on ABTAPL's website. These include the *Bulletin*, the *Union List of Periodicals*, a *Directory of Current Institutional Members* and the *ABTAPL Guidelines for Theological Libraries*.

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<sup>8</sup> Judith C. Powles, "Weather, Welcomes - and Wheelie Bins: an affectionate look-back at the ABTAPL Spring (usually) Conference," *Bulletin of ABTAPL*. New Series 23, no.2 (Summer 2016): 9-26.

## **DISCUSSION LIST**

ABTAPL has a free online discussion list which can be used for loan requests, advice on a number of topics or indeed anything within the subject areas. <<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/abtapl.html>>

## **TRAINING DAYS**

These sessions, on topics such as copyright, social media, and archive administration, were established to provide an inexpensive means of professional development for members and have proved to be very successful.

## **CURRENT AND FUTURE PROJECTS**

The biggest project launched in 2019 was the collection of Dawson eBooks for librarian/archivist, made available to ABTAPL members. Subsequently Dawson ceased trading but ABTAPL has successfully switched all the Dawsonera ebook titles to Brown's VLeBooks. A benchmarking exercise is being continued and extended with more libraries being encouraged to take part.

## **AND FINALLY**

The Association records its thanks to the many officers and committee members, too many to name here, who have given their time over the years on a voluntary basis, in addition to everything else they do. Without their service, commitment and enthusiasm ABTAPL would not be the flourishing organisation it is today.

### **Bibliography**

ABTAPL's website: <https://abtapl.org.uk>

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