

The Oxford Scriptorium: Building a Reader Community at Pusey House Library

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Pusey House Library is a reference library in the centre of Oxford, UK. It forms part of Pusey House, an independent institution founded in 1884 to keep alive the theological legacy of Oxford Movement leader Dr Edward Bouverie-Pusey (1800-1882). Pusey House offers Anglo-Catholic worship at its Chapel, while the Library and associated Archive are open to all researchers – university-affiliated or independent – who wish to learn about Anglo-Catholicism or simply to enjoy a peaceful, historic study space. The Library holds over 75,000 volumes, ranging from a 1475 incunable originally



[Image 1] Pusey House Library (image provided by its librarian)

owned by Dr Pusey to newly published monographs. The specialisms of the collection remain true to Dr Pusey's personal interests: church history, patristics, liturgy, and doctrinal theology.

The Library was once a hidden gem in Oxford, used only by a few enthusiasts 'in the know'.

Since 2018, however, the reading room has taken on a new lease of life, thanks to a group called the Oxford Scriptorium, funded by Christian charity Trinity Forum Europe. The Scriptorium is a study group, but it is also a prayer group, a source of delicious food and drink, and an opportunity for readers to make new friends. Twenty to thirty members attend every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday in the university termtime. Ranging from first-year undergraduates to retirees, they follow a timetable of four independent study sessions in the Library, interspersed with social breaks (with tea and coffee provided), a free sandwich lunch, and opportunities for spiritual reflection and prayer. Structure and accountability are emphasised: at the beginning of the day, members set themselves study or research goals, and they discuss at the end of the day how far they have progressed towards reaching those goals. The atmosphere is positive, welcoming, and encouraging.

The Scriptorium concept began in ‘the Other Place’, as Cambridge is often known to Oxonians. George Seay and Dr James Orr, from Trinity Forum Europe, invited Christian graduate students to the Round Church in Cambridge to work, eat, and pray as a group, in an attempt to stave off the loneliness, stress, and lack of structure that can characterise the scholarly life. The group was named ‘Scriptorium’ after the room in a medieval monastery where monks used to write and illuminate their manuscripts. The initiative was so popular that Trinity Forum Europe decided to set up companion groups in Oxford, Edinburgh, and St Andrew’s. All have thrived through the Zoom challenges of the Covid pandemic and are still going strong. Several scholars have been members of more than one Scriptorium, finding the group to be a spiritual home in unfamiliar cities and institutions.

We count ourselves incredibly lucky that the Oxford Scriptorium have chosen Pusey House Library as their study venue. As you will see in the following testimonial from the current group leader Jack Chisnall, the Scriptorium has provided a fresh readership for the Library, many of whom might not otherwise have ventured into the secluded corridors of Pusey House. The reading room, which once housed perhaps four or five scholars a day, is now nearly full at every session. Academic networks have been forged, religious faith has been discovered, and the social side has burgeoned – last year’s cohort even participated in an Arts Festival showcasing their ‘extra-curricular’ hobbies and passions, and now there is a Pusey Drama Society consisting largely of current and former Scriptorium members. We hope that the group’s contribution to the life of the Library and House will continue for many years to come.

Testimonial

Jack Chisnall

Sacristan and Scriptorium Clerk, Pusey House, Oxford, UK

The Scriptorium continues to be the coal face of Pusey House's engagement with the Oxford student community – though, by this, I mean only two things: first, it is the place we meet students 'up close and personal'; secondly, our encounter with these students yields much that sustains and energises the House. Being with them is certainly far from hard labour.

9.20am–5.30pm
Tues–Thurs in
term time

A study group which meets to nurture Christian scholars through structured work and breaks

PUSEY HOUSE **Scriptorium**



In fact, the work seems to get easier and easier, in part due to the addition of two new team members, one of whom is a medievalist who completed her DPhil while working in the study group last year. It is wonderful to see homegrown Scriptorium talent now taking on leadership roles, and they have risen to their task of feeding and watering thirty-odd students with what must surely be a Spirit-empowered initiative.

Numbers continue to rise; a juxtaposition is always highlighted to me when I see the owlish, sagacious eyes of twentieth-century Anglo-

[Image 2] Scriptorium Poster by Jack Chisnall

Catholic scholar Darwell Stone peering down from his portrait over a room full of lively discussion and laughter every lunchtime. Under such auspicious scrutiny as Revd Stone, and also the portraits of Revd Hood and Bishop Rowell, it is unsurprising that the average themes in conversation tend towards the theological; it is not uncommon to hear more than one group discuss ontology in the great scholastic writers, as if it were as natural a lunchtime topic as the weather or yesterday's test match.

Those who might be uninitiated in the Christian life certainly find their place, though, and everyone is welcome. It is even faintly flattering to me that agnostic or atheistic students attend – they must think we do something right, even if it is only the egg and cress sandwiches. And in any case, some do not remain uninitiated for long; it was a joy to watch two Scriptorium members baptised last academic year, and many more confirmed. Please pray that it continues for this next year's harvest.

Further Reading

Chisnall, J. 2022. "Scriptorium." Accessed November 23, 2022.

<http://www.puseyhouse.org.uk/copy-of-library-archive>.

Keeble, R. 2019. "One body, many members." Church times, June 28, 2019.

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/28-june/faith/faith-features/one-body-many-members>.

Trinity Forum Europe. 2022). "Trinity Forum Europe." Accessed November 23, 2022.

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