

THE INTERVIEW

The Interview: John Trevor-Allen

Abstract: John Trevor-Allen, the outgoing President of CILIP – the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals – talks to LIM editors **Mike and Jas Breslin** about his own career as a librarian, the challenges facing the profession and why every librarian is also a superhero. Well, sort of ...

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John Trevor-Allen was CILIP President throughout 2023

“It’s the information age and we’ve been doing information for 2000 years.” So says John Trevor-Allen, the 2023 President of CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) and as eloquent a champion for the cause of librarianship as you will ever meet. It’s a quote that really gets to the heart of what it is to do this work in the here and now, whatever sector you’re involved in.

John has worked in quite a few librarianship sectors himself, in what has been a varied and interesting career, and one which, in a way, was perhaps predestined. “One way or the other, I spent a lot of time in libraries growing up,” says John. “My mum was the cleaner for a little library in Telford, where I grew up. So, after hours, I’d often end up just sat there while she was doing the cleaning. And I’d have the whole children’s section to myself. That always used to feel quite special. And then, at secondary school, I spent a lot of time in the school library to the extent that my school librarian, who was a

fantastic woman called Mrs Kosinski, got me signed up onto a library assistant training scheme that the local council had, and I got to sit behind the desk. And I also had to learn to use the light pen, because it wasn’t just a barcode back then.”

From there it was on to university, and one that he was later to return to. “I did English literature at Aberystwyth, which was great fun, and then I was kicked out into the world with no obvious career path. I ended up as a cataloguer at the Bodleian, and as part of that role you’d be in the reading rooms, staffing the desks and making sure people got the items they requested, and looking stuff up on the catalogue. I found it very rewarding, so I went back to Aber and did a graduate traineeship, and then enrolled in the library school.”

His career since then has seen John exploring quite a number of library sectors, starting out at Blackwells on the library supply side, and then going on to work in public libraries in Oxfordshire as an information services librarian, before he ended up in the health sector. To begin with this was at the Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, which was primary care and mental health, and then he moved on to his present role at the UK Health Security Agency, where he runs the library and manages a small team of assistant librarians.

It’s been a varied career, then, but one he has very much enjoyed. “I like to help people, but the way in which you’re helping people is always changing. I’m in health libraries now, and that can be hugely varied, because that can be getting people the journal article they want, or it can be really supporting their research.

“But then, on the other end of the scale, I spent the pandemic mostly writing a care homes digest, which was pulling together all the emerging evidence from care homes around the world,” John adds. “And that really felt like I was doing my bit, which was very nice. And then the other day the phone rang and it was someone looking for Colindale Public Library and they had the wrong number. I looked up the number they needed, and gave them that, which was fabulous!”

VOLUNTEERING INFORMATION

Helping people does not finish after office hours for John, though, and it seems fair to say that he's a serial volunteer, having given his time to help out with worthy causes since he was at university, while he is still involved with many charities, as well as being a school governor.

With the above in mind, it's perhaps no surprise that John would also volunteer within his profession, which meant getting involved in CILIP. "It is the professional association for workers across the whole of the knowledge and library and information profession," John says. "We aim to offer trustworthy accreditation and training, and we provide a hub that can help amplify the voice of the sector. We try to offer that sort of professional leadership for everyone, regardless of role. Right now, a big part of our focus is trying to re-establish the role of facts and evidence in public discourse. It's not always an easy task, but it feels like an increasingly important one."

Of course, the knowledge and library and information profession includes those working in the legal sector, and John is keen to emphasise that CILIP has much to offer BIALL members and others working in law. "We're working to stay relevant to the whole profession," John says. "And I would like to think that, certainly compared to 20 or 30 years ago, CILIP is a lot more open to doing that and building a broad church, which I do think is important for everybody."

John first became involved in CILIP as a trustee in 2015. "I was able to be on the ethics committee as we overhauled the ethical principles," he says. "They had been very worthy and quite academic, and they are now hopefully a lot more active and a lot more practical. It starts with a commitment to promote, uphold and defend human rights, and everything cascades from there in what I hope is quite a useful way, if you're the person on the ground having book bans thrown at you. I was then CILIP chair through the pandemic, so that was more exciting than I had expected."

The next step was President, and it's a role John is relishing (at the time of the interview and writing he was still in the post, but his term came to a conclusion at the end of 2023), especially as this is a time of great change for the profession and for CILIP, perhaps most visibly in the new routes into librarianship that have recently been opened up. "We're creating more inclusive pathways into the profession," John says. "We've done a lot of work around developing apprenticeships, particularly the Level 7 apprenticeships we're working on, and that is a move away from that sort of ivory tower attitude that the Library Association [the old name for CILIP pre-2002] used to have. We're trying to broaden access to the field, but also to inspire people and indicate the areas for leadership and effective ethical practice moving forward."

Broadening access to the profession also means improving diversity and inclusion, something that CILIP has been working hard on in recent times. "There's

definitely a lot that CILIP has been doing. I think we have made tremendous progress in the last few years, but we're not where I would like us to be, and I don't think we're where a lot of people would like us to be. Demographically, the profession does not reflect the country. We are overwhelmingly, statistically, a white profession; we're overwhelmingly, statistically, a middle-class profession, and we're overwhelmingly, statistically, a profession made up of women, except in leadership roles. That is a problem. I think it is a problem that is improving, but it's also a problem that can't improve very quickly, because you need people to age into the profession. You can't just say, 'oh, well, we'll set a target and then we'll achieve the target'. You've got to look at how people are entering the profession, and whether people feel able to enter the profession. This is one of the reasons I think apprenticeships are so important."

Apprenticeships mean that people will no longer need to have a degree to become a librarian, which John says is a positive thing, given the way university education has changed. "I understand why it was felt that it was important to recognise librarianship as a postgraduate profession, because it helped prevent a devaluation of librarianship," he says. "But saying librarianship is a postgraduate profession in a world where university education is no longer free, is suddenly a massive barrier to entry that didn't exist at the time that we said it should be a postgraduate profession. So, things like the apprenticeship programme are opening the profession up."

STEADY NUMBERS

CILIP membership numbers are pretty healthy at present, but it's always interested in attracting more people. "Off the top of my head, it's around 10,000-ish lately," John says. "It went down towards the start of the last decade when everyone was getting austerity version one. It's been recovering in terms of new members, but at the same time there's a retirement wave happening, so it's holding fairly steady. What I find really interesting is it's a real mix of members, mostly in the UK, but we also have international members, particularly since we launched the KM [Knowledge Management] Chartership. That's been really popular internationally. And that's definitely an interesting sector to have positioned ourselves in."

But with so many different sectors to represent, isn't it difficult to get the balance right? "It's interesting, because whichever sector you focus on, all of the other sectors say you only ever focus on that sector," John says. "It's a bit like a domestic arrangement where everyone is convinced they're the only one who does the washing up! The academic librarians have a preconception that what CILIP does is public libraries, but public libraries say what CILIP does is academic. Actually, I think that's quite a good indicator, because our membership is fairly balanced, and the fact that everyone feels everyone else is getting slightly more time in the spotlight suggests we're pretty much getting it right."



John Trevor-Allen enjoyed talking to CILIP members at the 2023 Conference

Another thing CILIP is getting right is changing with the times, something that John believes is crucial if it is to continue to attract new members. “We’re doing a lot of work around a more activist approach,” he says. “We’re working to expand CILIP so that it does represent and is for everyone working in libraries and the information and knowledge sector, which again, it has not always been. We’re doing a lot around the Changing Lives campaign [a ‘commitment to proactively advocate for and promote inclusive, participatory and socially-engaged library, knowledge and information services’, to quote the CILIP website] and we’re trying to communicate more openly and draw in ideas from the membership. For example, when we were restructuring the ethical principles, it wasn’t: ‘well, what should the ethical principles be?’ We launched the big conversation. We went out and we took ideas from the people on the front lines, and we had a lot of focus groups and a lot of discussion. And we distilled it down into the core ethical concerns of librarianship and information science based on what people in the profession thought, which I think is actually quite a significant difference to perhaps the mindset that the Library Association may have had in the 20th Century.”

John has also taken a 21st Century approach to the ‘theme’ for his term in office. Every CILIP President is asked to choose a theme and as 2023 was the 125th anniversary of the granting of the royal charter to the organisation, John’s is the CILIP 125 list. “In a way this feels emblematic of the shift,” he says. “Because for the 100th anniversary of the Library Association they

created a centenary medal and it mostly went to recognised leaders in the profession, which is fine. They’d made contributions. It’s perfectly valid to recognise that. But with the 125 list we picked up and coming leaders, people in the first few years of their career who are already making a difference, and what we said was: ‘this is fantastic, keep it up, where are you leading us next?’ So I think we’ve got a slightly more future-focused attitude, which I think is definitely enthusing people, which is always exciting.

“The CILIP 125 list was about inspiring people,” John adds. “I think very often, especially if you’re new, it’s easy to be overawed by the people in charge of the profession, the people leading the profession, and it’s quite easy when you’re young to think that leadership is a thing that sort of happens to you when you reach a certain age and you’ve been in the profession for long enough and suddenly, ‘oh, I must be a leader’. Actually, that’s not true. I wanted to inspire people, to make them understand that actually this is a skill. It’s not a thing that happens when you approach retirement. Leadership is something that you can learn now, while you still have a frontline perspective.”

SOCIAL NETWORKING

The opportunity to try to inspire members is, in fact, one of the things John enjoys most about being President. Another thing he enjoys is interacting with the membership. “One of the great things was at [the CILIP



CILIP has around 10,000 members and people from all library and information sectors, including law, are welcome

annual] conference, I just got to go around and talk to people,” he says. “I didn’t get to talk to everyone, but I did my best! But it is being able to inspire people and make those connections. Not networking for strategic gain, but just networking so that you can listen to people and reflect their thoughts and ideas through to the CILIP board in the decision-making process, I think this is a wonderful privilege.”

Another privilege is to head the organisation at a time when it is in a good place, both figuratively and geographically. “We’ve just had the relocation,” John says, “We’ve sold the old premises in Ridgmount Street. They were custom built for us in the 1960s and they were great, but the shape of CILIP today doesn’t need a five-storey building in central London. So we’ve relocated to the British Library, in the Knowledge Quarter, which is very exciting. And I think CILIP, as an organisation, is doing very well.”

But that doesn’t mean CILIP, and indeed the profession, is not facing challenges, particularly when it comes to where it positions itself in a fast-changing world. “I think the sector is not necessarily braced for the storm that feels like it’s coming,” John says. “I think there is a rise in disinformation, there’s a rise in authoritarianism. We’re seeing it in America with the book bans, and I think actually there are some early sparks here. There are people protesting against children’s rhyme times in Reading, and I think that is going to be a source of increasing concern and risk. So I think one of the things

that I would really like to see CILIP doing is trying to get ahead of that and saying, ‘look, this is what libraries stand for, it is not a personal affront if libraries include items that you personally do not want to read’. And I think that’s leadership on what is ethical librarianship. It is going to be a big challenge and it’s something I’d like to try and get us out in front of.”

TIME TO SHINE

John also believes that librarians are exactly the right people to be on the frontline when it comes to this, and other challenges such as artificial intelligence. “There are a number of people that are suddenly positioning themselves in their profession as ‘oh, we can understand AI’. But we’re already here! This is what we do; understanding that you draw in all of these inputs and you get this output, and that is what librarians have always done. But I don’t think we always articulate that well enough, and I think it’s something we’ll have to get better at.”

This is also the case for law librarians, of course, and John is keen that BIALL and CILIP should be in step with this. “At CILIP we’re very concerned about how to reassert the role of facts in a functioning democracy, which is a mad sentence to have to say. But vital to a healthy democracy is the role of considered and evidenced opinion, that flows very naturally through to jurisprudence and the criminal justice system, so I hope this



Artificial intelligence was a central theme at CILIP's 2023 Conference – John Trevor-Allen believes librarians are best placed to advise on AI

is very much of interest to BIALL members. But there's also a lot of work around digital literacy and information literacy, and that ties in actually with AI, because I think fundamentally we are the people who understand information literacy in a way that other people don't. And I think because we're very good at it, it's easy to forget how good at it we are.

"Actually, it's not difficult for most members of this profession, when they're googling for information, to put together a search term that returns immediately the thing that they want," John adds. "It's not hard for us to watch an advert and go, 'oh, the script was written by Chat GPT, because all of the sentences are five words long and it's got all the key little hallmarks in how the sentences are constructed and it's really obvious'. But actually, someone who isn't used to analysing information the way we are, would look at it and go, 'oh, that looks like a really cool product'. And I think something that will be important for everyone in this profession is going to be understanding our role in teaching and developing information literacy skills, because the information overload is going to get bigger. I think that one of the huge downsides of AI is that it's going to make it harder for people who aren't used to sifting information to pick the wheat from the chaff. And it's going to be very important for all of us to work together in promoting those digital

skills that people don't necessarily know they're lacking. You know if you can't swim, you probably don't know if you can't analyse information effectively."

But it's actual disinformation that is perhaps the biggest challenge to the profession as a whole, John believes. "I think disinformation coupled with authoritarianism, is sort of rising," he says. "It's a little unfair if I characterise it as political laziness, but I think there is a certain mindset that says, 'I would like people to vote for me, I will say the easiest thing, and I don't care if that's actually a good solution or not'. And very often the easiest thing is not true. But because you've then politicised it, you start getting a tribal effect where people say, 'you can't challenge it because that's having a go at our political mindset', and that rapidly becomes a bit of a minefield to try and navigate and to try and say, 'look, these are the facts'.

"I think we can fight against that," John adds. "But to an extent, I think it comes back to this image problem where people, for some reason, don't associate librarianship with information, they associate it with books. And that's because for a long time the unit of information was books, but before that it was scrolls and wax tablets. It's just that it was books for so long. Some people don't understand that if the unit of information has changed to be searchable databases and Boolean terms, that's what

we do now – and also books, and also scrolls, if you've got scrolls in the collection. We've been the experts in information management and in processing information, and we still are, but people don't recognise that. And I think we can lead and we can teach people information skills, but we need to also make sure they understand that we are the people who would naturally be doing that. It's not that we're muscling in on AI because no one reads books anymore, it's that, actually, we go where the information is, not the other way around. So there's a messaging issue there that I've not yet worked out how to solve."

The way John puts all this is certainly inspiring, perhaps even heroic, which brings us to the bit about superheroes in the abstract. "Your classical superhero is the guy who flies in and pulls you out of a burning

building while wearing an implausible costume," John says. "But actually, sometimes what you need is the person who can say, 'okay, this is where you are, this is how you get to where you want to go,' and then lead you there. And that is us. But with less spandex, I hope.

"I think we're very clear on what ethical information management looks like, and why it's important," John adds. "The flipside is, if people are suddenly looking around for superheroes, it's probably not because everything is lovely and peaceful in Gotham City. So it's not necessarily going to be easy. But I think it's quite hard to be downhearted at the minute, actually, especially when you look at the passion and enthusiasm that we're seeing in people like those on the 125 list. There's genuine excitement and a need to do good out there."