

Safeguarding the Old Library

FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS



Photo: Annti Vitale

By Niamh O'Flynn

An ambitious and critically-important plan to safeguard Trinity's world-renowned Old Library is one of the flagship projects of *Inspiring Generations*.

Trinity is working with Dublin-based, internationally acclaimed firm Heneghan Peng, architects of the recent award-winning refurbishment of Ireland's National Gallery, on a plan that will deploy the best 21st-century design and technology to make urgent structural and environmental upgrades to the Old Library. This will protect the building and its precious collections from deterioration and damage, conserve them for future generations and make them more accessible to students, visitors and researchers from around the world. The recent devastating fires in other national cultural institutions have, sadly, underscored the critical importance of this work.

The Old Library is the heart of Trinity's historic campus and is known around the world not just as a symbol of Trinity, but of Ireland. Its magnificent Long Room and *Book of Kells* exhibition attract over one million visitors each year, 80% of them from overseas. In 2018 alone, over 50,000 schoolchildren visited the Library, many of them with the Trinity Access team that works closely with schools in disadvantaged areas to support students' progression to higher-level education. The Old Library also plays an important role in Ireland's cultural diplomacy by hosting almost every international head of state and global leader on official visits to Ireland.

The building was completed in the 1730s, although the famous barrel-vault ceiling of the Long Room was added in 1861. It is home to over 350,000 printed books, manuscripts and artefacts including some of the most important touchstones of Irish history: the medieval *Book of Kells* and *Book of Durrow* manuscripts; the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic (one of the last few surviving originals); and the national symbol of Ireland, the Brian Boru Harp.

The collections chart the evolution of the Irish nation across the creative arts, literature, politics and the sciences and also include many works of global significance, from 2,000-year-old Egyptian 'Books of the Dead' to the Fagel Collection, a library amassed by generations of a powerful Dutch family that includes rare and unique items across every area of knowledge and exploration in the 17th-18th centuries.

The Old Library is a national treasure and Trinity takes its custodial responsibilities very seriously. Advanced conservation work takes place in the Glucksman Preservation and

Conservation Studio, generously funded by Lew Glucksman and Loretta Brennan Glucksman as part of the Ussher Library building, opened in 2003 by then President Mary McAleese. In this beautiful, light-filled space, a laboratory-style hush is the order of the day and Keeper of Preservation and Conservation, Susie Bioletti, heads a dedicated team of conservators.

The support of alumni and friends has been fundamental to preservation and conservation work over recent decades. The *Save the Treasures of the Long Room* appeal that launched in 2004 elicited support from alumni around the world and has funded one-year positions for 42 preservation assistants since then. This year's team of three assistants, trained and supervised by the conservation department, is working systematically through the Long Room; cleaning, assessing damage and carrying out stabilising repairs. On average, it takes one day to complete works on one shelf. The funding of these positions has allowed the Library to treat almost 100,000 items to date. The assistants also engage visitors in learning about the Library and its conservation work in a popular 15-minute demonstration every afternoon at 3pm in the Long Room.

Preservation assistant positions are advertised annually and attract an international response. Most of the programme's alumni have gone on to pursue careers in museums and libraries around the world and are proving an invaluable asset to the global network of the Library.

On a recent typical day in the Studio, conservation interns from Italy and France, supervised by Trinity's senior conservator Andrew Megaw, were all skilfully applying the tools of their trade – including delicate brushes, sponges and selections of beautiful papers, bindings and silk threads. Angelica Anchisi was carefully removing centuries of grime from an 18th-century Register of St Kevin's School in Dublin's city centre and Morgane Vaucher was conserving a collection of letters recounting the 1798 rebellion, while Andrew Megaw was resewing the pages of an 18th-century manuscript of unpublished writings by Dean Jonathan Swift (author of *Gulliver's Travels* and one of Trinity's most famous alumni) entitled *A Whimsical Medley*.

The Glucksman Preservation and Conservation Studio and the *Save the*



Photos: Trinity Conservation Department

Treasures of the Long Room appeal together enabled a dramatic step change in conservation work across the Library of Trinity College Dublin. But now, the Old Library building itself is in critical need of attention, to prevent further deterioration of both the structure and the precious collections within.

Substantial work on the Old Library structure was last undertaken in the 1970's and the *Book of Kells* exhibition was designed 30 years ago to cater to c. 200,000 visitors annually – one-fifth of today's number.

And although the Old Library is very much a working library, attracting students and scholars from around the globe, the research study facilities do not match the world-class standards of the collections.

The design by Heneghan Peng addresses all of these concerns in a holistic way. Trinity Librarian and College Archivist Helen Shenton has also brought her experience in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Library and Harvard Library to bear, in developing this landmark plan to secure the future of the Old Library.

The main elements of the plan are:

- Critical work on the Old Library building to restore the structure and install more sophisticated fire protection and environmental controls that will preserve the precious collections for future generations.
- Creation of a new Research Collections Study Centre; a new *Book of Kells* exhibition; and new visitor facilities to accommodate the one million visitors now hosted annually, putting the Old Library on a par with the best library and museum visitor experiences around the world.

- Scaling of digitisation across nine priority areas of the collections to preserve the materials, reveal more of their secrets and make them accessible to students, scholars and citizens around the world.

The Old Library Redevelopment Plan will secure the future of the historic building and its precious collections that together form part of Ireland's national heritage. The total cost will be raised from the University, the State and philanthropy. Comparable projects in other leading libraries around the world have cost between €80m-€100m. *Inspiring Generations* will play a critical role in securing philanthropic support from alumni and friends that will help leverage the State funding needed to achieve this critically-important plan for Trinity and for Ireland.

FREE ENTRY FOR ALUMNI

See tcd.ie/alumni to find out how to access the Old Library and *Book of Kells*, free of charge.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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