

THE BODLEIAN LIBRARIES' LOCAL VIEWS INDEX

Malcolm Graham October 2023


Established in 1602, the Bodleian Library was collecting printed books, manuscripts and collections of local relevance centuries before local record offices and local studies libraries were founded. Staff were well aware of the prints, drawings and photographs effectively hidden in collections of documents, and began to record them on a slip index early in the 20th century. That venture soon foundered, but the concept may have encouraged Henry Minn (1870-1961), a local photographer and antiquarian, to join the Bodleian Library as an extra member of staff, or trusted volunteer, in 1935. He worked until the late 1950s on the Bodleian's topographical collections, and he was primarily responsible for creating the card index of local prints, drawings and photographs in the library. The index includes references both to manuscript material in what is now Special Collections and to printed books and collections with shelfmarks such as G.A. Oxon. Minn's cards were handwritten, but many of the later cards added by Peter Spokes, another Bodleian volunteer, and by Dr W O Hassall's staff in the Department of Western Manuscripts were typewritten. According to Colin Harris, who was a member of staff at the Bodleian from 1967 to 2017, additions to the Views Index effectively ceased in about 1990 when Western Manuscripts began cataloguing online and were able to produce fuller descriptions than were possible in published or printed catalogues.

Henry Minn was especially interested in the history of Oxford and he focused mainly on indexing City and University views. Given also the particular appeal of Oxford to artists and photographers, it is no surprise that Oxford subjects account for around 60% of the estimated 22,650 cards in the Views Index. Reflecting the Bodleian's role as the official repository for Oxford diocesan records until 1984, the scope of the index was gradually broadened to include Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, the three counties which form Oxford Diocese. Oxfordshire subjects account for about 30% of the cards, and Berkshire and Buckinghamshire subjects for about 5% each.

After the transformation of the New Bodleian Library into the Weston Library it was initially proposed that the Views Index should be transferred to the Bodleian's Swindon store, but Colin Harris and other staff successfully argued for it to be kept in Oxford because of its local importance. The cards were newly boxed up and Bodleian readers can see the index by applying to staff in the Weston Library Rare Books & Manuscripts Reading Room.

The Oxford cards are primarily divided into University and City subjects. The University cards are sub-divided into sections covering university buildings, colleges, portraits and miscellaneous topics; the City cards are arranged in sections covering buildings and places, streets, churches and portraits. Within each subject area, the cards are arranged by date with the oldest illustration at the front. The Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire cards are also generally arranged in date order, but there is no obvious order to the many cards for towns such as Abingdon, Bampton and Witney. The number of cards relating to a place varies from less than ten for Yelford to over thirty for Kidlington and around a hundred for Bampton.

BAMPTON	1868
	Date.
Title or Subject Castle	
Artist Alfred Cobb.	
Process Pen and ink	Size 108 x 43 mm
Shelf-mark MS. Top. OXON. p41 (bottom) C.522 F.21	



Each card provides the subject or title of the view recorded, the date, the artist and engraver, the production process involved, the size of the image and, crucially, the Bodleian shelf-mark for ordering up the item. The cards are not numbered consecutively so, even in cases where they are arranged by date, it is worth bearing in mind that some might have been misfiled. Colin Harris has cautioned that the Views Index may not be complete, especially for county material, but Oxfordshire Victoria County History researchers find it invaluable for each parish they study, and it remains a vital source for tracing local illustrations among the Bodleian's wealth of collections.

Digitising the Views Index would be the best way to make it more widely accessible, but handwritten cards and the use of fractions currently make optical character recognition (OCR) scanning impossible. Ideally, all the data on the cards would be keyed into a spreadsheet so that they become fully searchable, but there is no budget for that and no real prospect of identifying volunteers. A few existing cards feature thumbnail photographs of original prints and drawings, and an even more ambitious long-term objective would be to link a digitised index to copies of the images. Picture Oxon has effectively done this for many local illustrations in the Bodleian's Buckler and Minn Collections - <https://heritagesearch.oxfordshire.gov.uk/images> - and, given the necessary human and financial resources, other large collections might be prioritised for similar treatment.