Key Dates

These may be of use when providing details of the Library history, at the start or end of your tour.

1416  Earliest specific mention of a University Library in Cambridge is found in the wills of William Loring and William Hunden (both of whom are featured on the Major Benefactors board in the Entrance Hall). The Library is thought to have been established between 1400 and 1410 in the west section of the Old Schools.

1424-1440  First Library catalogue, showing 122 volumes. Of these, 1 survives in the Library today. More than half of the works are on theology and religion. By 1473, a later catalogue shows 330 volumes.

1471  Library’s first rule/ regulation bans unaccompanied undergraduates from using the Library because they had "abused its contents".

1550s  Loss of many items during the Reformation years indicated by a catalogue from 1550s which shows fewer than 200 volumes now held. From 1560-89 Andrew Perne (Master of Peterhouse) largely responsible for re-establishing the Library and increasing stock.

1577  Creation of the office of University Librarian, with a yearly stipend of £10. Not all Librarians were highly qualified: from 1587-93 the role was filled by "an honest but illiterate tradesman" who was willing to work for £3. Prior to this the Library had been under the control of the University Chaplain (abolished during the reformation).

1710  Copyright Act, passed during the reign of Queen Anne gave publishers protection if they sent copies of their work to 9 chosen libraries. However, the Act initially brought popular best-sellers rather than large academic volumes to the Library. From 1751 there is evidence that the Library sold some copyright books and with the proceeds purchased non-copyright scholarly works (reflected by gaps in the Library’s holdings for the 18th century).

1715  Acquisition of the Royal Library. Originally belonging to John Moore, Bishop of Ely, this contained around 30,000 items. On Moore’s death the Library passed to George I who donated it to Cambridge University thereby trebling the size of the existing collections. To accommodate this, the Old Schools Library expanded significantly in 1719.

1934  University Library on West Road was opened and collections transferred there from the Old Schools building.

1972  Closed stack extension at the rear of the building made it possible to transfer the University Archives to the West Road site. Since then, the building has been subject to almost constant extension (with the 6th phase opening in 2010).
1978  Creation of machine-readable catalogue entries begins. Initially, reader access was provided by producing a microfiche catalogue from this computerised data, supplemented by print outs of the most recently catalogued items. In 1983 the first version of the online catalogue is released for public use.

1995  The pre-1978 general catalogue, known as the ‘Guardbooks’, is closed and no further entries are made (between 1979-1995, items published before 1978 were still added). The Guardbook Catalogue, was created over a period of 135 years and contains approximately 1.4 million entries. The main online catalogue takes just 22 years to reach a similar level.

1995  A CD-ROM server is established at the Library making 23 CD-ROM titles available to Library users. The Reader’s Newsletter notes: “CD-ROM is an ideal format in which to make available reference material and the full text of books and journals. Results can be downloaded onto floppy disc and taken away for later printing”.

1998  The public Exhibition Centre is opened in July 1998 by Mrs Anne Campbell, MP for Cambridge. The first exhibition is called ‘Cambridge University Library: The Great Collections’ and items on display include the Chinese oracle bones, the fifth century Codex Bezae, Newton’s personally owned and annotated copy of Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica and the original typescript of A Brief History of Time by Professor Stephen Hawking. Since 1998, 30 exhibitions have been held in the Exhibition Centre with topics ranging from Maps of Australia to children’s literature.

2001  The Munby Rare Books Room and Manuscripts Reading Room open, following an extension to the original 1930s building funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The two rooms provide 150 new work spaces.

2002  Voyager library system and the Newton catalogue is introduced. Over several months all the catalogue information present in the various databases of the previous system was transferred to Newton. The first new entry was, not entirely fortuitously, for The Cambridge companion to Newton, C.U.P., 2002.

2010  To mark the 800th anniversary of Cambridge University, the Library takes delivery of 800 letters written by members of the community to provide a snapshot of life in Cambridge. The letters are all sealed and will be opened in 2109.