# The Design of the English Domestic Library in the Seventeenth Century: Readers and Their Book Rooms

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## Abstract

The seventeenth century saw the increase in size of book collections in private hands. Domestic library collections were becoming more visible as important adjuncts to the lives of their socially and culturally engaged owners. This article explores the ways in which the practical and intellectual problems of storing books were addressed in the English home, through inventories and buildings accounts as well as contemporary literature. The changes in library furniture design over the course of the century are traced, together with the emergence of formal organizing systems such as catalogues and subject classification. Finally, the adoption of a different stylistic approach is examined.

From Renaissance paintings of scholar saints like Jerome and Augustine to modern cinema's portrayals of wizards and academics, the image of the private library has remained surprisingly consistent. The rooms belonging to Gandalf, Dumbledore, and John Dee (in Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth: the Golden Age*), cluttered as they are with scientific instruments, taxidermy, and tottering piles of books, are striking in their resemblance to the humanist models represented by Carpaccio and Antonello da Messina. Bonnie Mak and Dora Thornton have demonstrated that the libraries of Renaissance Italy were as deliberately and artificially designed as their cinematic copies (Mak, 2002; Thornton, 1998). The books themselves became representative of their contents through their display, and the presence of trompe l'oeil effects exaggerated the use of the study as a "theatrical space for self-exhibition" (Mak, 2002, p. 212). This manipulation of the private space of the library as a means of creating a public persona through owned objects was, during the sixteenth century, conflated with

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the spatial organization of collections of all sorts to reflect the universe of knowledge—the *wunderkammer* as miniature cosmos (MacGregor, 2007, p. 56). By the seventeenth century, Englishmen were attempting to incorporate and build upon these models of arrangement, while simultaneously aspiring to increasing architectural sophistication. Books and other objects within their libraries, and the manner in which they were displayed, conveyed a set of messages to the viewer about the owner and his understanding of the world.

Before examining the library as a room of self-display, we need to remember that for most English book owners, a room sufficient for the storage and reading of books was a luxury. Many factors conspired to encourage disorder and overcrowding in the domestic library, particularly being crammed into an inadequate space and the too-rapid acquisition of books. It was very rare that money and available space would allow for a purpose-built library, and books were often moved within the house from one temporary home to another. Collections were usually housed in the private spaces of a building, among the closets and bedchambers; as these rooms were rarely seen outside the owner's immediate circle of friends and family, formal arrangement for display was not necessary, or even practical.

Storing books in the private areas of the house would have ensured security, as books were locked in bedchambers and closets, and in chests and presses. There were two chests and two trunks in the "Studdy Roome" at Cockesdon in 1610, though whether these were used to store books is not clear from the inventory (Halliwell, 1854, pp. 81–82). This tendency demonstrates that books were stored much the same as any other personal objects, such as clothes, luxury goods, or private papers. But library collections grew and became overlaid with more complex cultural ideas, as instruments of public display and shared family inheritance rather than simple possessions of individuals. Specialized storage suitable for the more formal rooms of the house became more common. Systems of shelving set into locked cupboards were used throughout the century, although these are rarely mentioned in inventories since they were fixed into the fabric of the building. We are forced to rely on extant examples to get an idea of their appearance. The most well-known early example of this arrangement can be found at the parish library at Langley Marish in Berkshire, where the cupboard doors are covered in trompe l'oeil painting (Girouard, 1978, p. 169). The cozy scale of this library room and the fact that its donor was a local gentleman suggests that its design is comparable to contemporary domestic equivalents. The terminology of inventories can also be misleading—we know that in 1632 the books at Petworth in Sussex, otherwise an extremely modern house, were being stored in fifty-two chests (Jervis, 2002, p. 177), but Susie West has cautioned that "chest"

in the context of an inventory can refer to a chest of drawers or units of closed shelving as well as to locked trunks (West, 2002, p. 271).

The development of specialized furniture forms impacted on the design of the library as a room. The book became an object on constant display, and consequently more attention was given to bindings. The most lavish decoration moved onto the spine, since books on shelves were now stored with the spine out, rather than the fore-edge as previously. Samuel Pepys, for instance, had nearly all of his books rebound to match each other in 1665, and on July 23, 1665, he "went down to my chamber among my new books, which is now a pleasant sight to me, to see my whole study almost of one binding" (1970–83, vol. v, p. 31–32). Linear shelving encouraged the use of consistent binding decoration to emphasize the collective cohesion of the books amassed a single owner, as their similarity was instantly visible on the shelves. Pepys's friend John Evelyn owned his own binding tools (Evelyn, 1926, p. 52), and his bindings were usually gilt-stamped with his emblem of a palm frond with a branch of laurel, or with his motto "Omnia explorate, meliora retinete" (Foot, 2003, p. 66–67). Sir Edward Dering, the antiquarian book collector, took similar care over his bindings, and had several armorial stamps for bindings made in 1627 when he received his baronetcy (Fehrenbach & Leedham-Green, 1992–, p. 144). The baroque library, for instance as depicted by Daniel Marot in his designs for William III, used specially fitted open shelves to make the fastidious arrangement of the book collection a feature of the architectural design of the library, moving away from makeshift hold-all storage and from the more ostentatious display of individual books that characterized the humanist study.

The best surviving example of a seventeenth-century library with open shelves is at Ham House, fitted out in 1672–73; all the available wall space is covered in neat shelving except for a small cabinet with a drop-front set into the panels by the door. The shelves from a previous library had been moved here, and an extra 572 feet of shelves with cedar moldings were added (National Trust, 1995, p. 29; see fig. 1). The architect Sir Roger Pratt's notes show him working through the problems of fitting as much shelf space as possible into a small room, as at Kingston Lacy for Sir Ralph Bankes in the mid-1660s, where Pratt takes the measurements of the space, duly subtracts the windows, door, and chimneypiece, and finds three areas (ten foot by ten, seven by twenty-nine, and fourteen by six) for shelving, and one (twelve by three) for cupboards (1928, p. 110). His plan for the closet of books he built in his own home at Ryston is worth quoting in full, for it gives a very exact account of a library's design, consciously allowing for practical use and the accommodation of different book sizes, as well as describing the other furniture, including the desk and ladder.

> Mem: concerning shelves for my bookes Aug: 20, 1671.
>
> I can reache up to a shelfe 7 ft. high, from the grownde.
>
> From a chaire 18 in. high consequently, 1½ ft. higher, soe yt ye whole case may bee 9 ft. high in extreamitie. The breadth 14 in. in ye cleere if such boards can bee founde.
>
> The length I thinke will bee beetweene 9 and 10 ft. viz. ye breadth of ye roome, mem: yt if I would have it 11 ft. high an easy Joyners ladder may bee made about 4½ ft., wch may bee soe made as to thrust in at ye bottome of my Table as part of it.
>
> The highest books generally not 18 in. in hight, ye most not 16 in. 40 of these Folios comprehended upon one shelfe: of ye greatest, more farre of ye lesser.
>
> Books in qto, not 1 ft. ye largest. In 8vo 9 inches. In 16to to 6 inches.
>
> 6 inches allowed for ye bottome of ye case for its border boarde.
>
> For ye Anomanall bookes cases to be made at ye ende of my Table viz. at ye endes of it or at ye one ende, drawers at ye other, a space of about 18 in. to be left free for ye knees. The Table to bee about 5½ ft. long, 3 ft. broad.
>
> 2 sh[elves] of 18 in. each, 2 of 16 in., 2 of 12 in., 2 of 9 in., 2 of 6 in., all about 10 ft. (Pratt, 1928, p. 174–75)

Pratt's plans show that when rooms could be turned over to the storage of an existing collection, shelving could be exactly and conveniently arranged. The lengths of shelves were sometimes relieved by the incorporation of classical architectural details; Marot's design (dating from the 1690s) shows that the shelves around the walls were broken up by pilasters, which were also hollow and provided with shelves.

While linear shelving made for more efficient book storage, it is clear from inventories that the baroque and somber grandeur derived from spatial order was seldom attained. Collections are rarely static, and rooms were not often available exclusively for their housing. For instance, Sir William Ingleby at one end of the century was keeping his books between two study rooms and the dining parlor, while Sir Ralph Bovey had his stored in various closets throughout his house at the other (Cliffe, 1999, pp. 163–164).[1] It is important to note that Sir Ralph, like so many of his contemporaries including John Evelyn, also had a book collection in his house in town, and the relative size of the town and country libraries may have ebbed and flowed according to season and need (see also Evelyn, 1699–1707). From a design perspective, the growth of the book collection presented almost universal problems, both in terms of retrieval and preservation. Pepys gives a charming description of being unable to use many of his books, because of the trouble of disturbing the piles of them on his chairs (1970–83, vol. vii, p. 214). Even the most distinguished libraries could grow shelf by shelf. Sir Edward Dering bought two deal boards for shelves in his study in October 1626, and paid for drawers to be put in during 1627 (Dering, 1617–28, fol. 65r, 66v). But by his death the library he had spent his life acquiring might have been considered as now static and complete, as his son chose that moment to remove the library to 'the

Figure 1. The library at Ham House. Reproduced courtesy of the National Trust Photo Library (NTPL)/Andreas von Einsiedel..

closet in the long chamber, putting up in chests those I do least use' (Fehrenbach & Leedham-Green, 1992–, p. 146). In terms of preservation, the rapid acquisition of books posed further problems, since overcrowding on the shelves put volumes under physical strain.

Despite the compromises forced on book owners through the adaption, and exhaustion, of existing spaces for book storage, placing the books on open shelves facilitated a more organized approach to collection management, in the form of subject arrangement and catalogues. On occasion this took the form of a generalized arrangement by subject, as at Salisbury House in the Strand, where, according to an inventory of 1614/15, the 1,300 or so books were kept in seven cases. Two of these cases were occupied by "divinity," and since items moved backward and forward between the two, it seems that the space in this section was under particular pressure. The other cases held, roughly speaking, history, philology and music, natural philosophy, law, and a miscellaneous collection of light literature, together with books on chivalry, politics, and commerce (Selwyn & Selwyn, 2006, pp. 507–510). At the same time, the use of shelf mark systems increased, which allowed the library owner to locate a book precisely by using a catalog or booklist, whether or not an arrangement by subject was also in place. Typical shelf-mark systems used static locations, often giving a letter for the press, a number for the shelf, and another number for the position on the shelf. But even when books were arranged only by size, sub-

jects began to come together by default, as at the Jeakes's library in Rye, where, by bringing the different formats together, the Bibles were stored among classics and history, and the law books, sermons and pamphlets shared shelves (Hunter, Mandelbrote, Ovenden, & Smith, 1999, p. xxxi).

The increasing use of subject arrangement and classification meant that while the appearance of the domestic library had changed, the use of space to stimulate intellectual and social associations followed the Renaissance model. Through the conscious arrangement of the collection according to an epistemological system, the books—as material objects—could become symbols of their own arguments, and their disposition around the room was a direct imitation of the divine regularity of the cosmos. In this way, the books in a collection functioned in the same way as the specimens and wonders in a cabinet of curiosities, as a *theatrum mundi.* John Evelyn made this particular corner of library practice his own, and his catalogs demonstrate the depth of his interest in the use of classification and retrieval systems.[2] As a founding member of the Royal Society, Evelyn was, with them, preoccupied with ensuring the clarity and accessibility of learning—Nehemiah Grew's catalog of the Royal Society's repository declared its intention to provide a "clear and full description" of the scientific collection, instead of focusing on "mystick, mythologick and hieroglyphic matters" (cited in MacGregor, 2007, p. 62). In publishing a translation of Gabriel Naudé's *Advis pour dresser une bibliothèque* in 1664, Evelyn introduced the English to modern Continental library practice, which placed a firm emphasis on the use of spatial design to elucidate a collection's contents and promote its proper use. Naudé stated that an exact arrangement of the books was crucial for access, ensuring that the enquiring spirit "may alwayes and with pleasure discern the one [volume] from the other"; books should be "martiall'd in their several quarters like soldiers in an army" so that their arguments and alliances are immediately evident to the scholar regarding his shelves (1661, p. 74). Naudé's *Advis* also gave instruction on how subject arrangement should be maintained, by leaving a gap at the end of each subject section, which could be filled up with new acquisitions, and that twice a year all the books were to be taken off the shelves, dusted, and moved along to even out the space (p. 79). For the most part, as one would expect, classification systems were seen as an ideal by scholarly book owners; imposing and maintaining a sophisticated subject-based system within a private library was no more practical than providing sufficient shelf space. Pepys, even as a Fellow of the Royal Society, famously found Naudé's elaborate systems rather above his touch, and it is hard to imagine that he was alone (Pepys, 1970–83, v. 6). But even Pepys's library at Clapham was so well organized that William Nicolson, visiting it in 1702 wrote that "the books so well order'd that his footman (after looking in the catalogue) could lay his finger on any of em blindfold" (cited in Tomalin, 2002, p. 373).

While the organization of the book collection according to a consistent and lucid etymological system within the library room demonstrated the sophistication of the owner, this was also indicated by the adoption of Renaissance precepts in the room's design. As already mentioned, the use of linear shelving further enabled the integration of book-storing furniture with an increased degree of architectural show. Ideas on the architecture of the library were firmly based on classical precedent, as transmitted via the Renaissance theorists Palladio, Alberti, Serlio, and Sansovino. The adoption of their precepts in England depended on an increasing familiarity among the gentry with existing Continental models of modern library architecture and arrangement, a familiarity acquired through the Grand Tour. Furthermore, a generation of men—including John Evelyn, Roger Pratt, and Hugh May, who were to have a profound impact on architectural taste after the Restoration—experienced Continental architectural innovations in their youth, during exile from Interregnum England. Such theories of design reached their fullest expression in Naudé's *Advis.* Naudé, when discussing the design of the library, relied heavily on the Roman architect Vitruvius, but Vitruvian precepts can be identified in earlier English publications on architectural practice. For instance, Sir Henry Wotton writing in 1624 insisted with Vitruvius that "all the principall chambers of Delight, all studies and libraries, be towards the East; for the Morning is a friend to the Muses" (Wotton, 1968, p. 82). This sentiment is repeated by Naudé (1661, p. 73). Placing the library as far as possible from the offices and kitchens that produced distracting noises and odors likewise derived from Vitruvius, who also recommended that libraries be above the ground floor to protect them from damp. Both these stipulations are reiterated by Naudé and Evelyn.[3] The emphasis articulated by Naudé on order and suitability of style and decoration to function ("no kind of indecorum or apparent incommodity") is pure Vitruvian dictate, heartily adopted by Wren and the other Restoration architects.

The application of these doctrines depended largely on the extent of the architectural education of the library's owner. The houses of the seventeenth century were very rarely the work of one overseeing architect, and the owner was usually responsible for design, albeit with advice from the professional craftsmen and masons he employed. An increased enthusiasm for building and refurbishment among the upper classes over the course of the century and the diffusion of Renaissance architectural thought as part of a rounded education allowed the owner to give expression to his aesthetic intentions through the form of his house. A humanist education also reinforced the idea of the library as the Renaissance scholars had seen it; as a necessary adjunct to a proper statesman-like or gentlemanly estate; the library had a public role as an emblem of a family's education, authority, wealth, and virtue. A sensational early example of this approach in England was the library built for Prince Henry at St. James's

Palace in 1611–12. The Exchequer accounts show that Maximilian Colt was paid for cutting and carving the decorations, including two arches with architraves, four pillars with Corinthian capitals, and the prince's arms for the spandrels. The room was painted in blue and red by John de Critz, the court's serjeant-painter, and the work cost £2800 in total (Exchequer, 1611). Although the collection's owner died in November 1612, the library and its fittings survived to be surveyed by Christopher Wren in 1706. The plan he sent to the Treasurer, Lord Godolphin, gives its dimensions as 25 feet by 30, and shows that the bookshelves were set up in the old-fashioned way, running back-to-back along the center of the room rather than along the walls (Treasury, 1706, fol. 184r–185v). Thus we have a fairly clear idea of what the room looked like. The shelves were not integral to the architectural design of the room, although the columns at the corners of the central block of shelves may have supported arches that connected to the walls. But the details we have of the carving and painting give a sense of the highly ornate settings given to private library spaces.

Later in the century, and responding to Vitruvius's insistence on *appropriate* decoration, formal library rooms were plain but made of choice materials. Here, the library fittings dominated the architectural design. The intention was to strip away distractions and to express austerity and sober dedication to learning. The few decorations were of the highest quality. The Duke of Lauderdale's library at Ham House is the best surviving example of this ideal, as the woodwork is of cedar, and the workmanship of the highest quality. In Lauderdale's rooms, the tidy assembly of books, manuscripts, and instruments in their designated drawers and shelves was integral to the aesthetic effect. The library might have one visual focal point; for instance, Lord Clarendon's library in Cassiobury Park had a carving of the *Crucifixion* by Grinling Gibbons set into the mantelpiece, while Sir Edward Dering craved an "emblematicall description of my life" for his study mantelpiece (Evelyn, 1955, vol. iii, p 200; Fehrenbach & Leedham-Green, 1992–, p. 145). In addition, maps and globes made regular appearances (the library at Cockesden had a "great mappe of London and six other mappes lesser of dyvers contryes" on the wall, and a large map hangs in Pepys's library in Buckingham Street), as did portraits of friends or ancients (Halliwell, 1854, p. 81).[4] The only other furniture was purely functional—desks, stools, and, if necessary, stepladders.[5] Frequently these formal libraries were designed as spaces for storage and brief occupation for consultation and learned conversation, rather than for long periods spent reading and writing. For the latter purpose, adjacent separate studies or closets with desks and chairs were used.[6] This plain style can be seen as a reaction against the more demonstrative exhibitionism of the Renaissance study, which focused on particular treasures for its impressive effect. The Baroque library carried a more egalitarian message, treating all the books as one unit.

While the seventeenth-century library relied for its aesthetic effect upon order and dedication, there are signs of more transient, more ambiguous book rooms where design and ideal began to break down through the exigencies of everyday life. The spaces used to store books were most often in the private corners of the house among the bedchambers and dressing rooms, where rooms could change functions according to demand. This flexibility of function can be tracked through the accounts of the office of the King's Works; the royal palaces had to accommodate the rigorous demands of diplomacy for princes and their consorts, to ensure that their apartments exactly reflected their status, while also responding to the requirements of a high turnover of courtiers and favorites (Colvin, 1963–82). On a lesser scale this occurred in every English house of the period, and the confusion and exchange of functions forced nonlibrary material into the spaces for book storage. Some of the typical clutter illustrates the close link between the library and the curiosity cabinet as a space for learning and enquiry—inventories and illustrations describe ostrich eggs, elephant tusks, and wasps' nests as well as globes and scientific instruments. Contemporary scientific philosophy emphasized direct observation over the questionable authority of text, so the inclusion of specimens could be part of an intentional design. But some inventories show that the space was often used to store anything that required storing. Sir William Ingleby's books shared a room with a sparrow net, a lark net, horse collars, and bridles (Selwyn & Selwyn, 2006, p. 506). At Cockesdon, three cloak bags were kept under the table, the trunk contained some clothes, including a barrister's gown and a "black Temple cap," while a "black pyk for hay" also stood behind the door. The adjoining room held a variety of arms, including swords, a helmet, and the owner's "wet and dry leather boots" (Halliwell, 1854, p. 63–83). And it is peculiarly gratifying to find that Evelyn—who expended so much energy on library theory and design, and who commented in his diary on nearly every private library he visited—had a library complex at Wotton, which had something of a lumber room quality. Evelyn left for his grandson and heir a memorandum of the house in which all the contents of the rooms around the library are described. The library itself, as well as holding the books, contained tables, a scrittoir, stamps, seals, and, "instruments of writing," together with "all the tooles belonging to the binding of bookes." The "chartophylatium" next door held globes, mathematical instruments, drawings in boxes, John Evelyn junior's tools for etching and engraving, as well as maps and pamphlets, and all the papers relating to the Evelyn estate. Finally, there was a store room or lumber room next to the chartophylatium (Evelyn, 1926, p. 52–58). These are rooms that function as part of a living house, rather than being architecture set-pieces like the state apartments.

In the inventories of the period, we find the collision of reality with the seventeenth-century ideal of the library. This ideal in itself is very different

from the highly self-conscious arrangement of the humanist scholar's study. But it would be a mistake to suggest that these later private libraries were more authentic in their scholarly approach, more dedicated, more devout. By adopting the dictates of the Renaissance architects, drawing attention to the size and coherence of the collection through open shelving, by including classical decorations, arranging the books according to an intellectual schema, and by the very austerity of the rooms, English gentlemen were surely also manipulating their libraries to cultivate their self-image. The effort and resources the owner devoted to the design for the storage and display of books can speak volumes about the relationship between book and reader. Studying the material culture of the private library, its design and arrangement, is as significant for our understanding of the history of reading as the material culture of the book itself.

## Notes

1. The Ingleby inventory was taken at Ripley Hall in 1618, the Bovey inventory in Stowe Hall in 1679.
2. See British Library MS Add 78631 for Evelyn's draft subject catalog, *Method for a Library According to the Intellectual Powers*, and MS Add 78406 for his proposed subject scheme for the Royal Society, probably intended for selection purposes as much as for management of the existing collection.
3. Examples of libraries remote from the busy areas of the house include Roger North's at Rougham Hall (North, 1980, p. xxviii), and Oliver St. John's at Thorpe Hall (Worsley, 1993, p. 5). Very occasionally libraries were placed in separate wings, as at Stoke Bruerne for Sir Francis Crane, and Oatlands Palace for Sir Edward Herbert.
4. The same room also "contained my brother Thomas Symondes picture." Pepys had a series of paintings of friends (Evelyn among them) by Kneller hung around his library, which are clearly visible in the drawings of the room now at the Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge.
5. For instance, the inventory made by Sir Kenelm Digby in 1664 shows the contents of his library at Stoke Dry as two "Spanish" tables and one ladder to reach the shelves (fol. 48v). The library at Hunstanton Hall, owned by the musical L'Estrange family, contained two tables, three stools, one chair, one cushion, and three globes (L'Estrange family, fol. 2v).
6. Sir Edward Dering had an "inner study," and there is a library closet with a desk at Ham House. At Stoke Dry, the "room against the library" has a desk, one table with leaves, two mirrors, and a pair of fire-irons, suggesting that this space was intended for studying in greater comfort (Digby, 1664, fol. 48v).

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