

Just like a gentleman's club? Club libraries in the 21st century.

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Club libraries have had a long and important role in library history, in both England, their country of origin, and in Australia. Despite this, such libraries are not generally considered as part of contemporary Australian library service and are often only known to those within the club community, or library historians. This omission is due, in part, to the organisational context of the libraries. By their very nature, clubs are focussed inward, providing and promoting services to a tightly contained user group. The lack of recognition also lies, however, in the assumption by many that this type of organisation is an archaic library remnant of a long gone genteel era. By drawing on recent survey data from a wide range of club libraries, this paper provides a unique insight into the reality of modern club libraries and the many challenges they must face. In doing so, it becomes apparent that while some of those challenges are unique to the club environment, many are shared by other types of small, special libraries, revealing the similarities in an unfamiliar library context.

Before discussion of the results, it is useful to consider the unique features of the type of clubs in the survey. Once almost universally known as *gentlemen's clubs*, these are a very particular type of membership-based organisation based on a model which flourished in nineteenth century England. Although such *clubs* provide a range of services and facilities to *members*, their *guests* and members from other clubs, formally recognised as receiving *reciprocal* rights, it is often the more intangible benefits of community, conviviality and status they provide which are the defining features of this type of institution. Much more than a building, a traditional club is a community of members (and club staff) which almost borders on the familial in the intensity and endurance of the relationships. Due to this, there is often a distinct sense of both group and individual identity within clubs.

An inescapable aspect of this community is its exclusivity and the social cache and power associated with membership. Clubs, through the “good conversation” encouraged between members, form and maintain networks which are as invaluable to business as to friendship.¹ This function is enhanced by the controlled, “safe” environment created by the careful assessment of membership. Many clubs still pride themselves on providing a place to conduct delicate business

¹ Quote from response in survey on the focus of the club in question

discussions as well as a place to stay when visiting a new destination, or to take guests when seeking to make an impression.²

Although distinctly British in origin and character, clubs have migrated around the world and are now found in many countries. Likewise, although based on tradition, the model has retained its relevance over time by developing new services, such as business centres and day spas, alongside the more traditional dining and accommodation options and in many cases, allowing membership profiles to evolve alongside the changes reflected in society. Thus, clubs have remained viable into a new century, and club membership remains a part of many lives, including tens of thousands of Australians.

Despite the ongoing presence of such organisations, there is a paucity of current information on both clubs and the libraries within them. Although the RACV Club Library knew from its own experience of some of the complexities and challenges inherent in providing a vibrant club based library service in the twenty first century, it had been difficult to assess if this was the norm for such facilities. Due to gap, and an associated difficulty in locating professional contacts and benchmarking partners in like organisations, the Library recently undertook a survey of club libraries.³ To ensure the data collected was representative, surveys were not only distributed to clubs with existing reciprocal arrangements with the RACV Club, but also sent to Australian or key, established London clubs outside such arrangements.⁴ With a relatively high response rate and responses from a variety of membership sizes, age and locations, the results can be considered a representative sample of modern club libraries.⁵

What the data quickly shows is the great diversity in club libraries. On all key elements examined – infrastructure, collection, staffing and service – there are a wide range of responses. However, beneath this variety, the libraries share many common ideals and concerns and these can, with some caution, be extrapolated to define key elements of a club library.

A key finding has been to document the proportion of clubs with a library/reading room, essential information previously unknown.⁶ With two thirds having possessing such a facility, it is apparent

² For further reading on clubs see *British Clubs* Bernard Darwin (Collins, 1963), *Leather armchairs* Charles Graves (Coward McCann, 1963), *The gentlemen's clubs of London* Anthony Lejeune (Macdonald and James, 1979) and the myriad of individual club histories

³ Data was collected in July/August 2007.

⁴ 174 surveys were distributed, including to the RACV Club

⁵ There was a response rate of 27 % (48 responses).

⁶ Hereafter, the term library is used for facilities called by either name.

that libraries are a common, but by no means, assured component of clubs.⁷ It is also shown that the situation is always evolving, with some clubs still creating or planning libraries while others are recently closing such services. Indeed five libraries, including one of the largest, were created in the past fifty years and in the case of the RACV Club, within the past three years.⁸

Overall, however, the image of club libraries serving older institutions with a relatively small client base is given some credence by the results. The majority of the libraries date from the establishment of the club itself, and with the vast majority of clubs in the survey over a hundred years old, some libraries are rapidly approaching or already in their second century of existence.⁹ The majority of these clubs also have less than 2,500 members, with the significant exception the RACV Club.¹⁰

Upon considering factors such as the age, location, and size of current club membership, very few of these appear to determine the presence of a library. There are libraries in the smallest and the largest clubs, the youngest and the oldest and from all areas around the world. Clubs in North America and those aged between 121-140 years show a 20% variance from the norm, but the size of the sample precludes definitive correlation. The relevance, and more importantly the expense of a library to a club, appears to transcend the many variations within the club community.

However, although many different types of clubs have a library, the type of library provided varies greatly. Nowhere is this more evident than in the size of the library. Although floor space cannot be considered the sole determinant of the quality of a library's physical accommodation, it can be indicative of the limitations within which a service must operate. Thus although two libraries have very large facilities in excess of 200 square metres, a quarter of the libraries occupy less than 50 square metres of space. This is not a problem unique to club libraries, but often in combination with older buildings and limited resources to improve infrastructure, it is a heightened challenge for the group.

Examination of the collections shows a similar level of variation amongst libraries. Any collection review must be prefaced by a discussion of the budgetary context for clubs. Club libraries face a very different financial paradigm than many other libraries. Income derives from the volatile streams of memberships and service covers, that is, income from meals or accommodation.

⁷ 31 clubs (66% of responses) have libraries

⁸ Although there was an existing gentleman's reading room in the Club, an extensive new Library was created as part of the development for the new premises and opened in July 2004.

⁹ The Sällskapet, Stockholm is 207 years old while the Athenaeum Club (London) is aged 183

¹⁰ 62% of clubs with libraries have less than 2,500 members. The RACV Club currently has a membership base of 25,185

Although many clubs are happy to support services or activities which are income-neutral if they are considered of be benefit to members, all such expenditure is within an environment which has finite yet uncertain parameters and requires funds on other core activities to allow the organisation to function. Such constraints are no longer uncommon in even large and long-standing libraries, but considering the size of some club memberships, and related income streams, it is not surprising to find that under half of the libraries surveyed have an ongoing budget for the collection.¹¹ For those with a budget, there was some reticence about quoting an annual figure, but from the limited data available it is clear that while a few have substantial budgets, others operate on very limited funds. With such a strong correlation between size of club membership and income, it is therefore not unexpected that no library located in a club with less than 1000 members, has a collection budget.

It is important to note that the absence of a budget does not preclude collection development. Although formal gift and/or exchange programs are rare, over 80% of libraries accept donations of material from members.¹² One library notes that this form of collection development can be highly erratic, but for many this is the only way to add to the collection.¹³ It also offers an invaluable opportunity to involve members in the development of the library and in some circumstances, gain unique or valuable material. In one case, an entire library grew from a bequest and for another over 400 donations are made each year.¹⁴ However, for a third of the libraries, less than 25 titles are donated per annum and for three quarters, donations number less than 100 titles.

A rare area of consistency in club collections is the centrality of books to holdings. Virtually all have books, with only Asian club libraries varying from the norm.¹⁵ The actual size of the book collection varies greatly, however, from well under 1,000 to over 60,000, but the majority of collections are relatively small. 90% of libraries have less than 10,000 titles and half have less than 5000. The notable exceptions to this are the Athenaeum Club, Tokyo American Club and Sällskapet.¹⁶ The growth of book collections also greatly differs, ranging from as little as five to over a thousand annual additions. Overall, half the libraries add less than a hundred titles a year.

Whatever the size or rate of growth for most book collections, the subjects profile is broad. Close to twenty key topics were identified within collections, with almost twenty percent collecting in over

¹¹ 14 libraries (48%) have collection budgets.

¹² 5 libraries (17%) have exchange arrangements.

¹³ 11 libraries (27%) only add to their collections by donations.

¹⁴ Tattersalls Club and Tokyo American Club

¹⁵ 30 (97%) of libraries have books

¹⁶ 60,000, 27,000 and 17,000 volumes respectively.

fifteen areas.¹⁷ The most collected topic is history followed closely by travel, literature and biography.¹⁸ Although business is collected by almost 70% of libraries, art and architecture are collected at the same rate, reflecting the enduring popularity of the humanities in club libraries. Collections do range broadly, however, including health and fitness, law, science and sport. Driving this diversity is the lack of specific focus for many clubs. Almost 20% of clubs could note no particular focus and over a quarter indicated a purely recreational focus, such as dining. Many clubs have several quite different areas of focus, such as sport and business. This requires a matching breadth in library collections and subject expertise by library.

There are exceptions to pattern, with some clubs such as the Garrick and Royal Irish Automobile Association. These libraries have significant holdings on a single topic and because of this become centres of research. Others, such as the RACV Club, have areas of specialisation, alongside briefer holdings in a range of other topics.¹⁹

Unique to the club environment is the amount of material collected by libraries on clubs. Books, such as club histories, are widely held while some libraries also collect work written by their own members.²⁰ This is often matched by substantial holdings of club magazines in many collections.²¹ This material is useful in a club context as members wish to research other clubs, particularly reciprocal organisations.

Although there is some uniformity in the book holdings of club libraries, the same cannot be said for serials. Unexpectedly, results show that newspapers are collected in just over half the libraries and these holdings are small, generally of less than ten titles and without overseas titles.²² This is in stark contrast to the classic image of a club member reading newspapers all day in a leather armchair. It is also contrary to the great popularity of newspaper resources within the RACV Club Library.²³ This finding cannot be adequately explained by budgetary factors, given that 70% of libraries allocate ongoing resources for magazines.²⁴ The common presence of newspapers in other parts of a club, such as lounges and games rooms may, however, contribute to this result.

¹⁷ 5 libraries (17%) collect in 16 or more subject areas in their book collections

¹⁸ 25 libraries collect history (83%), 23 travel (77%), 22 biography (73%) and 21 literature (70%)

¹⁹ Motoring and travel are the key areas in the RACV Club Library, alongside a broad range of smaller holdings on business, sport & fitness, food & wine, and house and garden

²⁰ 21 libraries (70%) hold books on clubs while 2 (20%) collect works written by members

²¹ 15 (71%) of the libraries who hold magazines hold reciprocal club magazines

²² 17 (57%) of libraries collect newspapers, with 13 (81%) holding less than 10 titles, and 6 (37%) with overseas titles

²³ The inaugural member survey in 2006 found 68% of members used the newspapers, twice the rate for any other library resource

²⁴ 21 libraries

Magazines may be more commonly held in club libraries but again, the collections remain small with almost a third having less than ten titles and over three quarters having less than forty titles. The exceptions to this are the Tokyo American Club and the RACV Club, with both having collections in excess of a hundred titles.²⁵ In magazine collections of all sizes, there is some overlap in subjects with the book collections, although current affairs and business do predominate rather than the humanities.²⁶

Two areas of unexpected strength in the collections under review lie in the non-book and “special” material areas. The former is found in over a third of libraries and ranges from the realia, maps, manuscripts and scores gathered in the past in older libraries, to DVDs and audio books collected by a range of younger libraries.²⁷ Only two libraries hold any electronic material and then only in the form of accompanying CD-Roms for books.

Many more club libraries – 68% - hold material which can be considered “special”. Some of this material is archival for the Club, with many libraries acting as the repository for official club documents and over half holding some material of historical significance to the Club. This material can also be of great cultural importance, due to pivotal role the club and its members may have played in society.²⁸ Just on a third of libraries nominate holding material of significance on a particular topic. The pre-eminent example of this is the Garrick’s theatre collections, but many other libraries hold important works on a variety of topics. Finally almost half the libraries note their holdings include “valuable items” as defined by the age, rarity or cost of the item. The age of many collections contributes to this, but famous past donors have also enriched collections with signed or limited run editions, manuscripts and objects. These holdings make club library collections of importance to the broader community and a number of libraries do offer limited public access to holdings for research in their area of specialisation.²⁹

Essentially, however, the libraries are for their members. This has a profound effect not only on the nature of services, but on the importance placed on the concept of service itself. Quality and consistency of service are considered hallmarks of the traditional club, with personalised service held in particularly high regard. Being membership based, clubs need to continually meet member needs to ensure renewal and the long term survival of the organisation. With relatively small, well

²⁵ 130 and 125 titles respectively

²⁶ 80% of magazine collections contain titles on these subjects

²⁷ 11 libraries (38%)

²⁸ This is particularly true of the great London clubs which were important forums of political and cultural life.

²⁹ Both the Garrick Club and Royal Irish Automobile Association reported such use.

defined user groups, another feature of club based service is the personal stake all members have in the activities of their club. All of these factors combine to create a longstanding, loyal and often very exacting client group for club libraries.

Meeting such high standards of service can be extremely challenging in any environment, but is particularly so when the harsh realities of staffing levels in club libraries are considered. Only 40% have staff paid to specifically work in the library, with the majority having a single person on staff.³⁰ The number of available hours per week can be as little as eight and although almost a third of libraries can provide staff assistance during all opening hours, almost as many can only provide assistance some of the time.³¹

Libraries use a range of options to manage this situation. Well over a third use club staff from other areas, most commonly from administration, but also from concierge, retail or dining.³² These staff handle tasks such as ordering or processing material alongside more routine jobs such as laying out the daily papers and shelving.³³ Less commonly, libraries use volunteers whose time can be spent ordering, cataloguing or processing material and in one case assisting with desk shifts.³⁴ The success of such arrangements depends on coordination with one response noting that volunteers, the only available support in the library, could not be currently used as the co-ordinator of tasks had left. The final option available to club libraries is to be always open and left unstaffed. This is the arrangement in 60% of libraries.³⁵ Although it is apparent there are significant shortcomings in this model, it does ensure access to material.

A further problem for club libraries is the limited access to people with the appropriate skills. Half of those in paid employment in club libraries have no library training, although some staff do have other specialist professional skills such as in archives or art.³⁶ Sometimes a library is fortunate with staff from other club areas or volunteers, possessing such skills, but these are the exceptional situations. It must be noted, however, that staff without formal library training familiar with a club environment can provide the most essential attributes required in a club library - good customer

³⁰ 12 libraries have paid staff, 5 (42%) are single person libraries

³¹ 9 (29%) of libraries

³² 13 libraries (45%) use club staff from other areas with 7 (54%) from administration, 4 (31%) from the Reception Desk and 3 (23%) from concierge.

³³ In 9 (69%) libraries club staff "lay out" the papers and the same number undertake shelving

³⁴ 9 (31%) of libraries use volunteers with 5 (36%) cataloguing and the same number processing.

³⁵ 18 libraries

³⁶ The Athenaeum Club employs a qualified archivist and the Garrick Club an art historian, each library using these particular skills in their specialised collections

service skills - and the contribution of such staff in the daily running of the facility should not be underestimated.

Despite these challenges, many in the survey offer a range of services, albeit shaped by the constraints present. Although staffing levels restrict the level of access to some collections, more than two thirds of libraries are open longer than 40 hours per week. Some open early (7 a.m.) or close late (8p.m/ 9 p.m.) to capture those who use the club outside “office hours”, several offer limited weekend access and one manages a seven day a week service.³⁷

Belying the old fashioned image of club libraries, the most widely offered service is access to the internet.³⁸ This is undoubtedly due in part to the ability to make this service available without staffing. Based RACV experience it is also, however, a very popular service, with members interested in business, those using the accommodation and reciprocal visitors keeping in touch with “home”. The survey also shows that a quarter of club libraries are also involved in providing secretarial services such as typing, copying and faxing, although these services are sometimes offered in a separate “business centre”. Such services are accessed by both members using the club as an “office” and travellers using the club as a base. 40% of libraries also offer self service photocopying.

Although obviously limited by the availability of staff, 60% of libraries do offer reference services. While some collections can support researchers, the nature of many collections and usage patterns from the RACV Club Library indicates that the need for quick enquiries predominates. These RACV usage patterns also show that club library reference duties can involve connecting members to information sources of which they may be unaware, such as those that exist in other libraries, and in improving skills in the use of tools such as the internet.

However, it is telling to note as many club libraries organise regular member activities as provide reference services.³⁹ Reported events include talks, lunches or book groups. Although many other types of libraries are now involved in such events, the importance placed on these activities differs in a club context. It is essential that club libraries develop and maintain their profile within the club and in a recreational environment this entails presenting largely social events in an attractive format which can compete alongside wine dinners, games nights and visiting chefs. Again, based on the

³⁷ RACV Club Library – 2.8 effective full time staff

³⁸ 16 libraries (76% of responses to the question)

³⁹ 13 libraries (62%) provide reference services, with the same number organising activities.

experience of the RACV Club Library, such events can be the cornerstone of marketing the library and, although time consuming and often of limited value as reader education in the traditional sense, they considered an essential part of a library service within clubs.⁴⁰

Another familiar library service given a unique club approach is lending material. Over three quarters of club libraries offer loans and 10% even make available interlibrary loans.⁴¹ However, given practical limitations, the relatively small number of potential borrowers and the element of trust which underpins the use of many club facilities, these transactions differ markedly from busy service points in other non-club libraries being often self-recorded and administered loosely. Although members are the primary group for this service, many libraries also offer loans to reciprocal members or guests in accommodation and thereby enhance the appeal of the club to visitors.⁴²

Upon consideration of the overall results of the survey, it is apparent that although club libraries are still very much in existence, the nature of the facilities varies greatly. Some are large libraries with unique and/or important collections, comparable to any small or special library. Others are virtually only a room of books, tended infrequently. It is also clear, however, based on the enthusiastic feedback from many participants in the survey, including those with some of the smallest libraries, that despite being quite different from each other and from what is now considered “adequate” or the “norm”, club libraries are still valued by their clubs. It is also evident that those involved in their care are committed to achieving the best results with often limited resources. Thus the most important outcome from the survey may not lie in the data collected, but in the potential networking arising from the work.⁴³ As is so often the case in libraries, there exists a willingness to share information and draw on expertise outside one’s own organisation, providing the means to achieve much more than would be possible in the isolation that is the norm for club libraries.

⁴⁰ Over 700 people attended library events in 2006/7 and close to 40 events were held.

⁴¹ 23 libraries (77%) provide loans, 2 offer forms of interlibrary loan

⁴² 11 libraries (48%) offer loans to reciprocal members staying in club and 5 (22%) to non-residential reciprocal members

⁴³ The Association of Pall Mall Libraries was established in 2004 to link seven of the largest and oldest club libraries in London. The RACV Club Library survey had as one of its aims to assess the desire for a similar group in Australia and form international links in a library sector with such a strong focus on intra-organisation co-operation.