

**Richard Ovenden**  
**Doctor of Letters**  
**Durham Cathedral, 27 June 2024**

Richard Ovenden's career as one of this generation's great librarians began here in Durham when, as an undergraduate student of History and a member of St Chad's College, he showed not only uncommon enthusiasm for even the most mundane aspects of being a Chad's student librarian - cleaning, tidying, the accurate reshelving of books - but also began an ambitious programme of re-organising and conserving the older part of the college library which culminated in an exhibition in the Palace Green Library of a range of St Chad's oldest and most notable books. Richard was undeterred by the unfortunate fact that he had to prepare this exhibition while he was supposed to be preparing for his finals. Even then, his capacity to work under competing pressures ensured he delivered.

His vocation confirmed in these humble beginnings here in Durham, Richard moved on through the House of Lord's Library, the National Library for Scotland, Edinburgh University Library and, since 2003, has served at the Bodleian Library in Oxford where now, as Bodley's Librarian, he is responsible for all of Oxford University's 26 Bodleian Libraries' collections - and all of their Gardens, Libraries and Museums as well!

Richard has been brilliant at building collections: acquiring the archives of Mary Shelley and her parents Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin (including the manuscript of Frankenstein); the papers of writers such as Alan Bennett and John le Carre; the institutional archives of Marconi and Oxfam; and the Travelling library of Charles I.

Not satisfied with building collections of books and papers, Richard has also been a leading champion of the monumental challenge of digital preservation - how do we save our online records for posterity and public benefit, and ensure that the glorious diversity of our personal digital lives can be passed on to the next generation? He has also championed the preservation of photographic collections - a particular interest of his.

Richard has been a remarkable fundraiser. The endowment of the Bodleian has tripled under his leadership, and this has enabled some inspiring building projects. Most

impressive (so far) has been the renovation of the Weston Library (£75m raised philanthropically) which won RIBA's Building of the Year for the South East and was shortlisted for the Stirling Prize in 2015.

And somehow, amidst all of this, Richard has found time to write books himself. His *Burning of the Books: A History of Knowledge Under Attack*, in 2020 (published in 13 languages and shortlisted for the Wolfson Prize) is a gripping articulation of why libraries matter. They matter because they are a testament to human achievement, experience, identity - specific cultural and historical identity, the stories of individuals and communities. Any erasure - whether the deliberate result of genocidal intent or through incompetent negligence - matters because it results in the obliteration of human dignity and diversity, the snuffing out of truth and freedom. Throughout history, librarians have often been the unsung heroes standing in the way of such erasure, the faithful keepers of humankind's memories.

It is this vision - passionately humane, expansive in its sympathies, unwavering in its integrity - that is at the heart of all Richard Ovenden's inspiring leadership and outstanding achievement. It's a timely reminder that the preserving of our books and our knowledge is fundamental to preserving of our human freedom, dignity, and the hope of justice for us all.

Chancellor, I present Richard Ovenden to receive the degree of Doctor of Letters *honoris causa*.