

Volume 239 Issue 8 cover: The BDA Library

By Helen Nield, London, UK

When the British Dental Association (BDA) moved into its new premises at Wimpole Street the Library was approaching its golden jubilee. It had been heralded in 1920 in a *BDJ* piece entitled 'A Library at Last' as 'an invaluable asset in the stimulation of research, as well as in the promotion of that wider outlook so necessary to all humane and progressive thought and action.'¹ Thirty years later one member wrote, 'The Library service is now so efficient and so broad that it is one of the outstanding reasons for belonging to the BDA.'² However, as it grew and outgrew its premises both at Russell Square and Hill Street the thoughts of those BDA staff who had to clamber round the collection in basement cupboards, corridors and even garage space may not have been quite so enthusiastic!

With the architects' plans for the new building providing the breadth and space required by both the BDA's Library and Museum the collection was packed up and reshelved in its new premises by a handful of staff under the efficient eye of Muriel Spencer, the librarian at the time. Once installed it was declared to be 'a most beautiful and well-equipped library [that] was obviously going to be a very great asset to the building and to the Association.'³ The larger premises led to an increase in the number of visitors and the collection began once again to expand to fill the space allotted to it. In the 1990s two sets of roller racking consisting of 1,134 metres of shelving replaced the original static shelves in the basement area. By the time the library collection was moved out of Wimpole Street into storage this year it was occupying around 1,430 metres of shelving.

In the photograph, Muriel Spencer can be seen interrogating the card catalogue to find a book – there were in fact three catalogues: for authors, titles and subjects. If a member wished to know what the Library held on a particular topic they would either telephone or post a letter. A librarian would then have to go to the card catalogue, write down anything useful and either post a letter back detailing what was available or read a list out over the phone. Nowadays with the library holdings on a far more flexible online catalogue, members from all over the world can see what is in the main collection and click out to view ebooks and recommended documents as well as reserve hard copy items just by using their smartphones.

The desk to the right shows two hardworking library staff overshadowed by two large telephones – a far cry from the slim headsets we use today. We still receive journals that have to be checked in (as shown on the top of the desk) but instead of writing on them (spot the ink bottle!) we use a printed label. The dumb waiter behind the desk, still working when we left the building, was much used to move heavy journals up and down from the basement. Recently an engineer repairing the lift was admiring it and commented on the fact that they never broke down – we had in fact managed to stop it working by overfilling the shelves and jamming the mechanism!

When the building was renovated in the early 2000s the foyer space was expanded out over the original open courtyard and the Museum became the Board Room. The whole space shown in this photograph became the welcome area for the BDA Museum with the library reception desk moving to the other side of the bookcase. The Museum itself was then moved into what had been in turn an office for the FDI and the Library's Multimedia room through a door just in front of and to the left of the card catalogue in the image.

Here then in one picture is a snapshot of how the world is constantly changing. Lilian Lindsay, herself a herald of change as the first woman to qualify as a dentist in the UK (1895), the first BDA librarian and first female BDA president, looks down from her place on the wall watching, and I hope approving of the way in which the library continues to service the diverse educational needs of members albeit in a different place and in many different ways.

References

1. Notes; A library at last. *Br Dent J* 1920; **41**: 168.
2. Notes and comments; A tribute to the library. *Br Dent J* 1952; **93**: 248.
3. Proceedings of the Representative Board; Library and museum committee report; Discussion *Br Dent J* 1967; **122** (Suppl Feb 21): 17.



BDA AGMs

East of Scotland Branch

The East of Scotland BDA Branch will hold their AGM and a lecture on Wednesday 12 November 2025.

Join the Branch and other local dental professionals at 13:00 for the Branch AGM (available to BDA members only) followed by a lecture (14:00–17:00) from Louise O'Dowd and David Offord, who will talk about the links between periodontitis and general health, and periodontitis and dental implants. There will be a dinner after the lecture.



For further information and to book please visit: <https://www.bda.org/learning/courses-and-events/east-of-scotland-branch-ill-by-mouth-and-branch-agm/> or www.bda.org and enter 'East of Scotland' in the search bar.

East Midland Branch

The East Midland BDA Branch AGM will be held online via Zoom on Wednesday 14 January 2026 from 19:00–20:00. All BDA members are welcome.

For further information and to book please visit www.bda.org and search 'East Midland' or visit <https://www.bda.org/learning/courses-and-events/east-midland-branch-agm/>.