

WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON AT THE MITCHELL LIBRARY?



Ever since the Mitchell Library opened in 1910 it has been a beacon for writers and researchers. Indeed in the first half of the 20th century it was often described as the National Library, such was the standing of its collections and the reputation for excellence of its staff.

Yet the services it has provided to its readers over the past 103 years have always evolved, never remained static. Their evolution has obviously reflected contemporary library practices and taken advantage of new technologies, but the complexity of the Mitchell collections has always required extra levels of commitment, training and knowledge to help readers access them.

THE MITCHELL LIBRARY WILL CONTINUE TO BE A CORNERSTONE OF SYDNEY'S INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL LIFE.

Prior to the 1950s readers wanting to consult the Manuscripts catalogue had to ask library staff to search the catalogue for them; until the late 1980s the Mitchell Library was a post-graduate research library and undergraduates (like myself at the time) needed special exemptions to be allowed to use it. The 1980s saw the rise of family historians and services to cater to their particular needs while the 2000s have been underwritten by fundamental changes enabled by new technologies with research now a mixture of online enquiry, increasing use of digital resources and onsite consultation.

Over the past decades new types of readers have emerged, such as public historians, heritage consultants and creatives. Another group of readers – people who simply relish the opportunity to work quietly on their own projects using their own material (although perhaps consulting the library's extensive resources) in a sympathetic space – also occupy the reading rooms in increasing numbers. All are our public as we continue to be 'The Public Library of New South Wales', our earlier name.

The Mitchell Library Reading Room has itself changed location. The original 1910 Reading Room was closed in 1988 when the Mitchell moved to the old General Reference Library Reading Room (which had opened in 1942), where

it has been ever since. The General Reference Library Reading Room (now the State Reference Library) moved to the library's new building on Macquarie Street. Indeed the whole Mitchell Wing complex, constructed between 1906 and 1963, has seen many changes of usage and emphasis. But it is now at a point where the function and services provided in this wonderful building, richly symbolic of learning and culture, need to be reconsidered.

Compounding these issues are substantial budget constraints which will see the staff complement reduce from around 400 to 312, the majority through a voluntary redundancy program and retirements.

The challenge for the library is how to use its resources wisely to maintain the same high quality of service and access to the Mitchell Library collections in times of significant constraint. To this end it has been decided to move the delivery of special collections out of the Mitchell Library Reading Room, with a limited service book remaining. Books from the Mitchell collection can be requested on weekdays at set times in the Mitchell Library Reading Room or any time during opening hours in the State Reference Library. Manuscripts, pictorial and unpublished collections will be delivered to a new space, the David Scott Mitchell Research Library, where librarians will assist readers in part of the 1910 Reading Room.

The Mitchell Library Reading Room will always remain a place for quiet inspiration, contemplation and work. The room will be cleared of various modern service points and stations, and returned to the elegant simplicity of its first iteration. This is the second stage of an upgrade to the entire Mitchell wing (the new AMAZE Gallery opened in 2013), to return to its rightful place as a cornerstone of Sydney's intellectual and cultural life.

For more information see www.sl.nsw.gov.au.

RICHARD NEVILLE
Mitchell Librarian, State Library of NSW
richard.neville@sl.nsw.gov.au