

# Downside Abbey, Somerset Monastery Library Project

Teasdale  
Environmental Design

**Client:** Trustees of Downside Abbey  
**Project dates:** 2012—2013



Downside Abbey is home to the senior Benedictine monastic community of the UK and has the largest monastery library in Britain. Religious archives constitute a very special part of our national heritage and the collection at Downside is exceptional. The library and archive have been collected over 400 years and, since 1970, have been housed in a library building designed by the respected Catholic architect, Francis Pollen.

The building is now showing signs of age and suffers from leaks and badly controlled internal environmental conditions: in particular, substantial seasonal and diurnal fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity. These conditions could cause the library and archive collections to deteriorate. Outbreaks of mould amongst the books in the lowest basement are a direct result of the poor environment.

The library has always been looked after by the monks of Downside but the community is dwindling. The last monastic archivist and librarian had to give up about ten years ago. Since then, the collections have been

little used but books and documents have continued to arrive. These need organising and a new digital catalogue system is needed.

The monastic community recognises that the riches of the library collections should no longer be hidden away, as the private resource for just a handful of scholars. Only by making the books and documents accessible to the outside world so that they can be appreciated and used by many more people, will their collective future be assured.

In 2012, Downside Abbey decided to apply for grant aid from the Heritage Lottery Fund to carry out remedial works to the library building, employ a professional librarian and archivist to organise and manage the collections, improve access through managed opening and on-line access, and develop a range of outreach activities and volunteer opportunities. Judith Teasdale was appointed as the project manager to steer the project through the HLF's Development Stage of detailed studies prepared and submitted in order to secure award of the main grant. The grant was awarded in June 2013.

