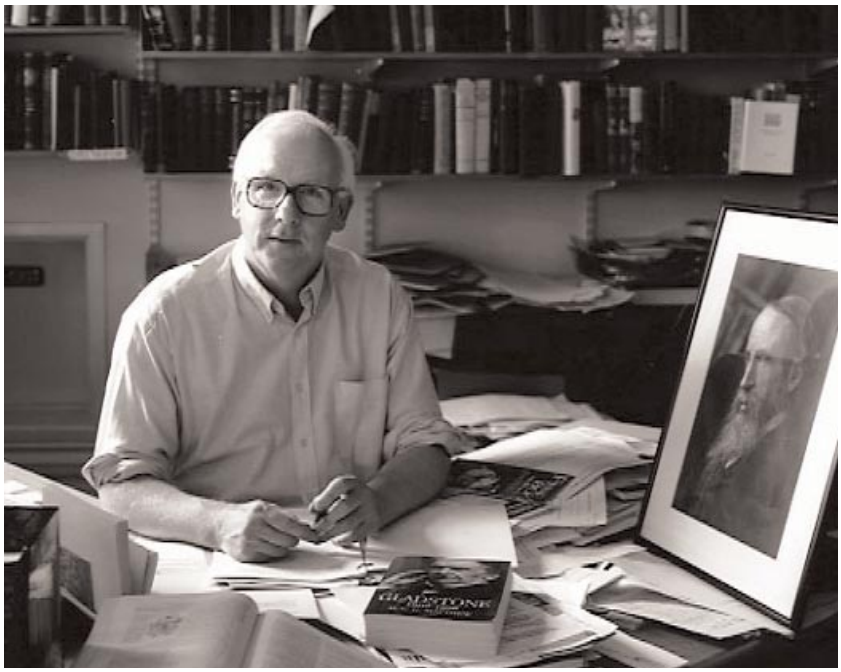
The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: New Technology, Enhanced Scholarship

Professor Brian Harrison, *Editor of the* Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, in association with the British Academy, *describes how the new dictionary has been compiled, comparing the modern experience with that of the editors of the original DNB.*

Computerised databases, word-processors, the internet and all the paraphernalia of the modern office have transformed the working practices of scholars in the arts and social sciences. Yet have they really changed the essentials of what we do? The *Dictionary of National Biography* is a reference work so large, with a history so long, that its experience can perhaps shed light on this question. Even today the punctual publication of a complex scholarly reference work in 63 quarterly volumes during fifteen years would be a feat. How was it done?

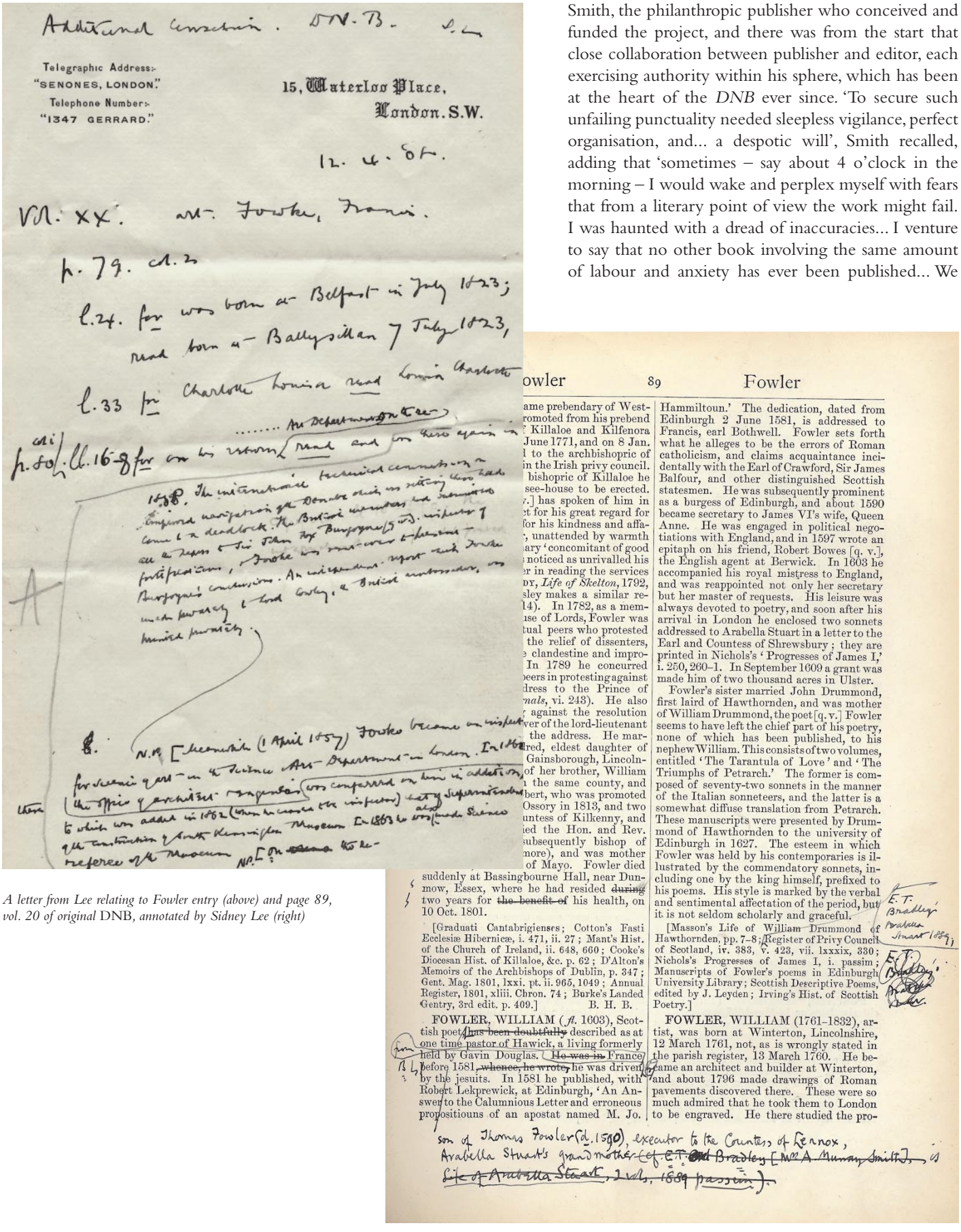
Unfortunately the loss of the *DNB*'s early records limits what we know about its early years, but there is no doubt that marvels were achieved with what now seem modest resources. Its publication from 1885 to 1900 was organised from three rooms on the top floor of 14 Waterloo Place, next door to the premises of the publishers Smith, Elder, to which it was linked by what was then the hi-tech device of a speaking tube. The editor occupied the small back room, with his staff working in the large front room. The narrow side room opening out of the front room accommodated reference works, and such periodicals as the *Gentleman's Magazine* and *Notes and Queries*. The front room housed several large tables, many inkpots, piles of proofs and manuscripts on chairs and tables and at each end of the chimney piece pyramids of pipes belonging to the first and second editors, Leslie Stephen, and Sidney Lee. When a typist was recruited in 1888, Stephen thought that 'our typewriter will want some grooming. It may be a little rusty and the blacking has to be done. But I suppose your young lady is up to that'. By the time the future Tudor historian A.F. Pollard was working there as a young man in the early 1890s he found the door between the front and back rooms 'generally open as we have continually to refer to each other and to books in the other's room'. Lee 'never can put a book back in the right place', Pollard grumbled in a letter to his parents: 'fortunately he never puts them back at all so that if a book isn't in its proper place we always look on his table or in his room and find the book'. On these premises the lists were compiled of the articles needed for forthcoming volumes, building up to the total of 29,120 articles written by the *DNB*'s 653 contributors. There too the articles were edited and often also written. For if the editors frequently spent the mornings working in the British Museum Library, they returned to Waterloo Place in the afternoon. 'We have a pleasant time of it on the whole', wrote Pollard in 1892, 'and in some ways it is much more comfortable than the Bodleian e.g. we can smoke as much as we like, we always keep a good fire going and we can also talk a little i.e. there is no rigid rule of silence'.

A delicate balance had to be struck, then as now, between creating a pleasant working environment for the writers and researchers, and inducing the sense of urgency needed for tangible results. 'We do absolutely no work at the office or anywhere else except for the Dictionary', wrote Pollard in 1893: 'we have nothing [to] do with any other part of Smith's business and never see him at all'. None the less, the *Dictionary*'s drive came from George



Founding Editor Colin Matthew FBA. Photo: Graham Piggott

Smith, the philanthropic publisher who conceived and funded the project, and there was from the start that close collaboration between publisher and editor, each exercising authority within his sphere, which has been at the heart of the *DNB* ever since. 'To secure such unfailing punctuality needed sleepless vigilance, perfect organisation, and... a despotic will', Smith recalled, adding that 'sometimes – say about 4 o'clock in the morning – I would wake and perplex myself with fears that from a literary point of view the work might fail. I was haunted with a dread of inaccuracies... I venture to say that no other book involving the same amount of labour and anxiety has ever been published... We



A letter from Lee relating to Fowler entry (above) and page 89, vol. 20 of original DNB, *annotated by Sidney Lee (right)*

Team of keyboarders (left) and filing in the old wine cellar in the basement of 37A St Giles'. Photos: Norman McBeath

have taken infinite pains; we have never grudged toil or expense'. For the *DNB*'s staff it was a demanding regime: a five-and-a-half-day week, with proofs sometimes taken home in the evenings, and with no tea allowed in the office until the letters XYZ had been reached. Leslie Stephen's private correspondence reveals a *DNB* that for him meant frustration: he hated losing his donnish freedom to work at his own pace and in his own time, lost patience with time-consuming 'drudgery' and petty detail, and was a poor proof-reader. Fortunately the *Dictionary*'s printers, Spottiswoode and Co, had a good proof-reader in Frederick Adams, who corrected the proofs for the entire work. Sidney Lee, too, proved an admirably calm and industrious lieutenant for Stephen and took over from him in 1891.

Smith claimed to have set out on the venture expecting to lose £50,000, but this grew to more like £70,000 – in present-day terms about £5,000,000. Now leap forward a century, across the even more modest staffing and premises of the twentieth century's supplements, and into the world of what will in 2004 become the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography in Association with the British Academy*. On the surface, the scene is very different. Smith, Elder has long gone, and the Oxford University Press has been in command since 1917, and there are no printers next door; instead there is a text-keyboarding company in Pondicherry, India. There are other contrasts: the *Oxford DNB* costs a lot more than its predecessor. Launched by my predecessor Colin Matthew in 1992 with public funds of £3m administered by the British Academy, it has required an additional £19m from the OUP. A team of 30 research staff (at its peak) works at desks on three floors and in the annexe of the *Dictionary*'s building in 37A St Giles', Oxford, complemented by up to 21 publishing and computing staff and scores of freelance editors. There are telephones on every desk, but they ring less frequently now because largely superseded since the mid-1990s by e-mailing. Books still line the walls, nor has paper vanished, given that we do not edit on the screen. But there are numerous photocopiers and printers (electronic not human), and no typewriters or card-indexes in shoeboxes. Instead, the editors work directly on computers, magic casements opening on to a huge *Dictionary* database. This offers not only immediate access to the old *DNB* but to the (now) complete text of its successor, together with all the management information needed to initiate and track the work of 13 consultant editors, about 400 associate editors and 10,000 contributors world-wide. Also on screen is the wealth of information now available in electronic databases: in short, we google.

All this has made it easier to build the *Oxford DNB*. If we had still been in the typewriter era, the building would indeed have been noisy, and the time-wasting and error-producing separation between typists and editors would have persisted, whereas most editors are now their own typists. Computer technology has helped to make the *Dictionary*'s jobs more interesting at every level. So we have produced 36,000 newly-written articles together with incorporating parts of the old *DNB* in twelve years as compared with the *DNB*'s eighteen, if its initial planning period from 1882 to 1885 is included. The technology greatly aids the search for consistency and accuracy, given that articles can be so easily compared, and it exposes gaps and defects in the data that would have been less visible in the past: inconsistent or wrong citations, for example. Given that in the *ancien régime* of hot-metal printing the text could not easily or cheaply be changed, most such errors went uncorrected after a revised reissue of the complete set in 1908–9. Almost from the beginning we have been able to scrutinise parts of the entire dictionary in a way that was impossible before: at first only the old *DNB* could be viewed on line, but gradually we saw the new dictionary building up beside it. Furthermore, we could use it when preparing later articles: the product became, so to speak, self-improving. So we have been able to consolidate the entire work in a way that eluded our predecessors, though more could still be done in the *Oxford DNB*'s on-line updates after 2004.

What intellectual gains does the new technology bring to the user? It has rendered accessible the greatly widened range of contributors that the worldwide growth of universities has generated; Stephen and Lee's technology could never have achieved that. We now have 10,000 contributors world-wide, and

Weekly meeting L-R Robert Faber (Project Director), Brian Harrison (Editor), Elizabeth Baigent (Research Director). Photo: Keith Barnes

Entry on Gadbury in new Oxford DNB

GADBURY, JOHN 130

Archives print, Harvard College Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA [illegible]

Gadbury, John (1627–1704), astrologer, was born on 31 December 1627 in Wheatley, Oxfordshire, the son of William Gadbury, a farmer, and his wife, who was the daughter of Sir John Curson of Waterperry and seems to have been disinherited as a result of the union. Her forename is unknown. Gadbury was briefly apprenticed to an Oxford tailor before a partial reconciliation with his maternal grandfather enabled him to take up studies with Nicholas Fiske at Oxford in 1644. This did not last for long, however; by 1648 he was working for a merchant adventurer living near Strand Bridge in London—very near the residence of the leading astrologer of the day, William Lilly, with whom he became acquainted in this period.

Gadbury's astrology and politics, c.1648–c.1690. Gadbury threw himself into the religious and political turmoil of the time, joining up successively with the presbyterians, the independents, the levellers, and finally the notorious 'Family of Love' under Abiezer Coppe. About this time he also married. His wife's name is not known. In 1652 he returned to Oxford, mended his fences with his grandfather, and took up the serious study of astrology under the mathematician and astrologer Nicholas Fiske. That year saw his first publication, *Philastrogus knavery epitomized*, which defended 'Mr. Culpepper, Mr. Lilly and the rest of the students in that noble Art' against an attack by William Brommerton. Two years later, he published *Animal cordatum, or, A Brief Method of the Grounds of Astrology*.

In 1655 (for the following year) there appeared *Speculum Astrologicum*, the first of his annual almanacs and ephemerides. After two issues it was replaced by *An Astrological Prediction* (1658), and for 1659 the title became *Ephemeris, or, A Diary Astronomical and Astrological*, which he continued to produce annually until the year before his death. About this time he moved back to London; he eventually settled in Brick Court, College Street, off Dean's Yard in Westminster, very close to St Margaret's Church, where he attended services.

Gadbury occasionally supplemented his regular almanac with special issues, as *The Jamaica Almanack, or, An Astrological Diary* (1673), *The West-India or Jamaica Almanack* (1674), and *Diarium astronomicum, or, A West India Almanack* (1675). In 1672 he also issued *Ephemerides of the Celestial Motions for X Years, 1672–81*—which listed all the planetary positions, movements and events without any prognostication—and followed this up in 1680 with *Ephemerides of the Celestial Motions for XX Years, 1682–1701*.

As these publications imply, Gadbury's interests extended beyond judicial astrology to other aspects of the seventeenth-century intellectual ferment: navigation and exploration, astronomy, and natural philosophy. His books thus also included *Natura prodigiorum, or, A Discourse Touching the Nature of Prodigies* (1660) and *De cometis, or, A Discourse on the Natures and Effects of Comets* (1665). In another such work, *Nuncius astrologicus, or, The Astrological Seaman* (1689), he confessed that:

> My inclinations aim at a certainty in Science: and I can truly say, that I have found more in Astrology than in all others put together. But such is my ill Fortune … that I want Parts to Demonstrate that to be certain and true to others, which by assiduous Experience I am myself convinced of. (*Nuncius astrologicus*, 1689, A3r)

John Gadbury (1627–1704), by Thomas Cross, (pub.) 1658

The thread uniting these concerns thus remained astrology. Indeed Gadbury, together with Lilly and John Partridge, was one of the three best-known English astrologers of the second half of the seventeenth century. But his attitude towards his subject changed radically in close parallel to the transformation in his religious and political opinions. Thus in 1658 he published a thoroughly traditional textbook of judicial astrology, *Genethlialogia, or, The doctrine of nativities … together with the doctrine of horarie questions*. Building on William Lilly's *Christian Astrology* of 1647, it appeared with that master's imprimatur. By the Restoration two years later, however, he had broken with the radicalism of Lilly, and set out his stall as a royalist and high Anglican. Indeed, he was frequently accused of being a Jacobite and crypto-Catholic, in whose opinion 'the Coelestial Orbs disown all Anti-Monarchical, Bishopal and Rebellious Principles' (*Diary*, 1689). Accordingly, in 1659 he attacked Lilly rancorously in *The Novice-Astrologer Instructed* and issued a regretful analysis of *The Nativity of the Late King Charls*, while *Britain's Royal Star* (1661) found promising portents in the planetary positions at the accession of Charles II.

In this capacity Gadbury became Lilly's bitterest enemy and rival, as he was later to become that of the radical

our relations with them can be much closer than the *DNB*'s was with its 653. We have in effect built up a 'virtual community' of friends and allies, and we communicate with them regularly as a group, ensuring that they are fully informed on our progress. Flexibility is the second great gain, for after 2004 the *Dictionary* will no longer be set in lead as it was in 1900. Revision and updating to the on-line version will be continuous and will traverse the entire work, whereas the twentieth century could add only supplements for the recently deceased. Thirdly, searching at many levels will be possible as never before: new combinations of people, interests, and ideas will be highlighted – located for example by place or date of birth, education, place of residence, institution or company. The impact of individual works of science, art or literature upon the influential will be made manifest. So new research agendas will emerge, and the value of the *Dictionary* will be enhanced still further beyond its original homes of history and literature into many other areas of study. Finally, links will be possible with the abundance of other reference works on the internet: a library catalogue, for example, or the National Portrait Gallery's data. Nor should I ignore our overseas counterparts. 'Dictionaries of national biography in some ways have perhaps an anachronistic ring to them', wrote Matthew in 1996. Our links with the national dictionaries of biography in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Scandinavia and the United States are close, and through spontaneous interlinking the 'dictionary of universal biography' or world dictionary that George Smith originally envisaged will slowly come about.

Has all this technology changed the essentials of what we do? No. Leslie Stephen's problems have throughout also been ours, and I often experience a fellow-feeling with him. We too had to decide who should be included and who should contribute, we too had to tease articles out of the selected contributors, edit what they had written, negotiate necessary changes with them, copy-edit the agreed text, check it with them again and then prepare it for publication. 'That damned thing goes on like a diabolical piece of machinery, always gaping for more copy', wrote Stephen in 1888. Sometimes I have been tempted to say the same *sotto voce*, but the new technology has in general made the *Dictionary*'s creation more enjoyable for Colin Matthew and for me than it was for Stephen, and that too must be counted as an intellectual gain.