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NEXSAN
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TREASURE TROVE OF KNOWLEDGE

THE BRITISH LIBRARY HAS
TURNED TO NEXSAN
TECHNOLOGY TO PRESERVE
A VITAL RESOURCE FOR
FUTURE GENERATIONS

The British Library is not only the national library of the UK - it is a national treasure and institution, long revered for its role in preserving the written word. It receives a copy of every printed publication produced in the UK and Ireland, while also purchasing materials extensively from around the world. In fact, the library's collection includes more than 150 million items in most languages.

But times have moved on and the emergence of the digital era means the library is now collecting an ever-increasing amount of electronic material. That includes digital matter sourced in the UK and obtained under a voluntary agreement with a number of publishers, and the digitisation of parts of its own collections. Then there are the e-journals, cartographic data, audio CDs and other sound items, along with the products of Web archiving.

All in all, it's a massive undertaking for, above and beyond this, the Legal Deposit Libraries Act 2003 places further obligations on the library. Effectively, the

act enshrines the principle that electronic publications and other non-print material will be deposited in the library and be saved as part of the published archive, becoming a vital resource for future generations of researchers and scholars.

To ensure it meets these strictures, the British Library has set up the Digital Object Management (DOM) Programme, whose mission is to enable the UK to preserve and use its digital output in perpetuity. According to the library's technical analyst Paul Wooler, it is difficult to predict the scope of the project, but it is planning for up to 300TB of digital material during the next five years, although its storage sub-systems have been designed to accommodate much larger quantities.

DIGITISING HISTORY

In tandem with the DOM Programme, and feeding directly into it, is a large-scale partnership project with funding from Microsoft to digitise approximately 100,000 historical books, which will be made available worldwide via MSN

through a new feature called Live Search Books. "The project started out with a pilot, but will shortly ramp up to full production and take about two years to complete," states Wooler.

Handling such vast quantities of data demands not only powerful storage-handling technology, but also high levels of resilience - something that Nexsan Technology was able to offer and at a price that outstripped its rivals.

"We carried out an extensive evaluation of all the main storage vendors and even beyond that," says Wooler. "Both the DOM Programme and the Microsoft Digitisation Project require that we keep more than one copy of the data, replicated between our sites at Boston Spa in Yorkshire, St Pancras in London and a third site at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth."

The British Library and Nexsan reseller S3, entered into detailed discussions to establish the library's precise needs and budget. As a result, the library has now standardised on Nexsan SATABeasts as its storage system of choice, with twelve currently in action, which includes six for the Microsoft digitisation and four for the DOM System. S3 has also provided the SAN fabric (Brocade switches/HBAs) and the replication software (Veritas Volume Replicator) required as part of the overall package.

"One of the things that interested us when looking for the right solution was the MAID power-saving technology that is now available," adds Wooler. "This is something we see as very important. Nexsan's solution, SATABeast with AutoMAID, was priced very competitively. We felt it offered excellent value per terabyte and was one of the key reasons the British Library chose the Nexsan units. The AutoMAID technology gives us ready capacity and power, while the other significant advantage of the Nexsan array is its density; it takes up far less space and that is a vital consideration for us."

The British Library, as for many organisations, is acutely aware of the need to minimise the environmental impact of the modern data centre, so the benefits Nexsan is delivering in that area are much prized. "Before investing in the SATABeasts, our UPSs and computer rooms were reaching capacity, and we were looking at a significant investment to expand this. Nexsan has helped us to mitigate against that investment, greatly reducing the power consumption on the Microsoft and DOM arrays [split equally between London and Boston Spa] and bringing important savings."

The DOM System Storage layer, developed in-house, was originally built around different technology, as Wooler

explains. "We were using a leading storage vendor's solution, but unfortunately it failed performance tests, so we installed another of the company's storage products instead, which had high levels of performance and resilience, but was very expensive technology. To have met our future mass storage needs using these products would have been very costly, so the decision was taken to implement Nexsan's SATABeasts instead and that is showing itself to be really successful."

Of the other two SATABeasts in operation, one is located within the library's VPN test LAN, segmented off from the main live network. Here, it is helping to investigate the relative merits of iSCSI and Fibre Channel performance. "Nexsan's arrays support connectivity to both of these," Wooler points out, "so we have the opportunity to see ways in which, potentially, we can dramatically lower storage area networking costs."

The final SATABeast is based at the library's off-site disaster recovery facility. "We are becoming increasingly

dependent on this, because any potential data disaster would have wide consequences, especially as we offer more customer-based access to information, with the revenues this generates."

Major users of that information include universities, public libraries and large pharmaceuticals and chemicals companies - mainly for scientific, technical and research purposes. This brings in substantial revenues for the library that, along with government financial support, helps sustain its operations.

With Wooler estimating that the British Library will eventually be measuring its storage requirements in petabytes, further investment in Nexsan's SATBeasts is likely to be sooner, rather than later. "We are only in the early stages of digitisation and simply don't know what volumes of storage will be needed over time, but it will no doubt be substantial," concludes Wooler. "What Nexsan has given us is a fast, reliable technology to make that happen, at a low cost." ST

