

'A GOOD BARGAIN': THE STRUGGLE FOR A PUBLIC LIBRARY, 1850–1924

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Libraries financed from local rates were established in this country following the passing of the first Public Library Act in 1850. Town Councils able to obtain a two-thirds majority of ratepayers in favour of adoption were permitted under the Act to levy a halfpenny rate, the product of which could be used to purchase or rent premises, to buy equipment and to pay staff, though not to buy books. It was assumed that the books would come from benevolent well-wishers. Not surprisingly there was no great rush to set up libraries and in 1855 a further Public Library Act raised the rate limit to one penny and allowed Councils to purchase books.

It was the Midlands and North which set the pace. The great opening ceremony at Manchester in September 1852 attended by Dickens, Thackeray and many other celebrities was followed by Liverpool in the following month and Sheffield (1856), Birmingham (1865), Leeds (1870). Before 1880 Bolton, Birkenhead, Blackburn, Sunderland, Walsall and other places had followed suit, and by 1889 153 municipal authorities had adopted the Acts. All this is in stark contrast to what happened in Bath.

Bath at mid-century had reached a very low point in its fortunes. Unemployment was rife; epidemics in the 1830s and 1840s and repeated flooding in the lower parts of the city made life especially grim for the poorer population. The coming of the railways had raised hopes of a revival of prosperity which had not been fulfilled. As the *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette* put it: 'The numbers of the unemployed poor are scarcely guessed at by the passing visitor, but a very brief survey of some of the streets, lanes and courts of the crowded parts of our city, would convince them that the extent of destitution is very great'.¹

Given this background it is not surprising that opposition to a public library came mainly from the poorer citizens who saw it as an irrelevance, an excuse for raising the rates to provide an amenity which would be used, for the most part, by those who could well afford to provide their own literature. Opposition to public libraries was by no means unique to Bath. What was exceptional was its vehemence and persistence.

At this date the city had no affordable library facilities for the less well-off. There were about twelve commercial circulating libraries, some of which had been in business for 80 or 90 years. These were concentrated in the centre of the city and followed, remarkably closely, the routes which for a century or more most visitors would have followed: for example, Abbey Churchyard (two libraries), Old Bond Street, New Bond Street, Milsom Street (two), George Street, Brock Street. Subscription rates were, by agreement, the same at all of them: 2s.6d. per week, 7s. per month, 15s. for 3 months, £1 for 6 months and £1.10s.0d for a year. The Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution, struggling to survive, also had a library. Predominantly comprising reference books and learned journals, this was becoming increasingly moribund, and indeed there was a suggestion that the Institution should either provide a public library itself or hand over its books to such a library.² The Athenaeum, in the Orange Grove, offered its two hundred members a room in which to read the newspapers, chat, or drink a cup of tea, but its very small library consisted of the remnants of the collection of the old Mechanics Institution. The Commercial and Literary Institution in Upper Borough Walls, next to the Mineral Water Hospital, had started life in 1839 as the Commercial Rooms, but by 1850 was already in decline. It had no money for books and when the Institution was finally wound up in 1874 its tiny members' library was sold to help pay off debts.

The first proposal for a public library in Bath came in 1852. A sub-committee of the Bath Literary Club met at the Guildhall to consider the establishing of a free library, art gallery, museum and lecture room at 19 Queen Square.

Elaborate plans for this ambitious project were drawn up by the architect G.P. Manners. Estimates of building alterations and equipment amounted to £550 and running expenses to £350 per annum, with another £2000 for an additional building at the rear postponed until later. It was calculated that £450 per annum would be raised by a halfpenny rate, assuming the Act of 1850 was adopted, while the remainder would come from voluntary donations. The sub-committee also believed that the other institutions in the city might transfer all their collections to the new enterprise.

The initiative was nevertheless doomed from the start. Though the first, and apparently only, report had a list promising donations of £104 and other gifts, the promoters made no attempt to seek the adoption of the Public Library Acts. In the end the only significance of this first

attempt was that associated with it were men who would continue for many years to support the public library cause, especially William Long, Wilbraham Falconer, Jerom Murch, Thomas Jolly, and R.E.M. Peach.

The next effort came not in the form of an elaborate scheme proposed by a group of middle-class enthusiasts but as part of a movement which had, as its driving force, one rather remarkable individual, the Rev. James Fleming. Fleming, born in Ireland in 1830, came to Bath with his widowed mother in 1838 and attended King Edward's School. After Cambridge University and ordination he returned to Bath as a curate at St Stephen's Lansdown, and later became Minister at the now destroyed All Saints Chapel nearby. In 1859 he began giving free elocution classes for working men and initiated his 'Penny Readings' – so called because a penny entrance fee was charged for sessions lasting up to two hours by a team of half-a-dozen readers from Fleming's class and one or two guest readers. The programme of extracts was varied and designed 'to interest, elevate and amuse'. The readings were held at the Guildhall and became so popular that wealthier residents began to show an interest and asked to be able to book seats in advance. Fleming's answer was to divide the seating down the middle so that those paying only a penny had an equal chance of sitting near the front with those able, and expected, to contribute more.

But the readings were only a means towards something much more ambitious and permanent, Fleming's project for a People's Hall. The People's Hall would contain a large room for lectures and concerts, smaller rooms for meetings, facilities for refreshments and meals, a reading room, a free library and some form of employment bureau,³ all to be financed by one-pound shares, profits from the readings and the sale of published anthologies of extracts. His target was £6,000 and negotiations were opened with the city authorities to acquire all or part of the site of the White Hart in Stall Street, then about to be demolished. None of this materialised since Fleming left Bath in 1866 for Camberwell and a distinguished ecclesiastical career including appointment as a Royal Chaplain. The money in hand was dispersed – £200 to various charities and £400 to complete a new ward at the Bath United Hospital. Yet there was one positive outcome. Among those present at the meeting held in 1864 to outline the People's Hall scheme had been Isaac Pitman, and from that moment until his death he was to lend his unstinting support to efforts to establish a public library. The day after the meeting he wrote to Jerom Murch:

I wish to strike the iron before it has lost the glow it acquired last night, especially in connection with a free library, by an appeal to the citizens who possess libraries, for a few volumes from each with which to commence. I will myself give a hundred volumes of a standard character and shall feel obliged if you will promise something in this way and allow me to print your note as my card of introduction to the public in asking for subscriptions in the form of books. My office affords shelf room for 10,000 volumes where they may be kept till wanted. I shall label the books inside the cover, as they arrive, Presented by ... to the Bath Free Library.⁴

When Fleming left Bath the Penny Readings were taken over by one of his staunchest supporters, Joseph William Morris, a teacher by profession, author of several books and pamphlets, and an expert botanist (who planned the layout of the city's Botanical Gardens and Henrietta Park). It was Morris who was to keep alive the idea of a public library for Bath in the next fifteen years.



1 J.W. Morris, 19th-century campaigner for a public library in Bath.
(Courtesy Bath Central Library)

But while the Penny Readings continued until mid-1869 they were never again as successful as under Fleming. Among Morris's many activities was the giving of free lectures in history one evening a week to a small class of members of the Church of England Young Mens' Society, out of which was formed the Free History Class. From 1868/69 he also gave a winter series of lectures at a charge not exceeding one shilling per season. The class began with 46 members and by the end of the first season had attracted 99. Morris's intention was that any profits should be used to purchase the nucleus of a rate-supported library.

All this activity re-focussed attention on the public library question and on 8 November 1869 a public meeting was held at the Guildhall under the chairmanship of the Mayor, Alderman Jolly, to consider the adoption of the Public Library Acts. It was a risky procedure and the occasion proved something of a farce. The *Bath Chronicle* afterwards described the event as:

One of the largest ever assembled within the walls of the Guildhall and in point of disorder and disgraceful behaviour it perhaps surpassed any of its predecessors. Clamorous interruptions, insulting observations, and nasty taunts were the order of the evening. The office of Mayor was treated with contempt, the Rector of Bath ... was sorely insulted and actually called a liar, and other gentlemen ... were not only impatiently listened to, but shamefully reproached.⁵

When eventually the Mayor put the resolution to adopt the Acts it was rejected on a show of hands by an estimated three-to-one majority against. Nevertheless, undaunted, the enthusiasts pressed ahead. Pitman was appointed secretary of a committee; donations of books continued to come in; the Free History Class grew in size and popularity; and after three years the committee felt confident enough to test the water again. A meeting was arranged, again at the Guildhall, for 5 November 1872. On this occasion some care was taken to ensure that those attending were in fact on the burgesses roll and entitled to vote. By the start of the meeting there were an estimated 1200 people crammed into the banqueting room.

It soon became clear that despite all precautions this meeting was to be even noisier than the first. In the words of the *Chronicle*: 'The Mayor's opening speech was almost inaudible and Mr. Snook, who rose to second the motion for the adoption of the acts was met by derisive laughter and vociferations of every possible kind within the range of

the human voice'. Speaker after speaker, both for and against the motion, was howled down. 'The Mayor called for a show of hands in favour of the resolution, but not more than fifty, we should think, were held up, and only one, as we observed, in the body of the room'.⁶ So ended this second attempt to persuade Bath ratepayers that they should support a public library.

There were recriminations after the meeting, particularly from Peach, who not only criticized the committee for failing to prepare more detailed proposals for people to consider but also went so far as to describe the books which Pitman had been assembling as a heap of rubbish, 'the sweepings of the not very choice collections from which they have been ejected'.⁷ Pitman replied to this attack in a letter to which he appended a list of some of the titles received,⁸ which in its turn gave Peach the opportunity to respond sarcastically:

Would it not have been better that a list of the books should have been printed and circulated amongst the citizens at the meeting. If this had been done the result might have been averted. What bricklayer, or tailor, or tinker, could have withstood the proffered opportunity of indulging after his day's labour in such a literary repast as the perusal of Tryphiodorus's *Destruction of Troy*, especially the last five books which are 'scarce', whilst his wife varied her occupation of baby nursing, scrubbing and mending by taking a turn at Bentley's *Dissertations on the Epistles of Phalaris...*?⁹

Despite the setback the public library question was by no means dead. In fact, much committee activity was going on behind the scenes. Morris announced that though the seventh season of the Free History Class would be the last, there would shortly be opened a library and reading room free to all. Funds had been placed at their disposal for this purpose thanks to what he described as 'the unexpected and spontaneous assistance of a generous friend'.¹⁰

The generous friend was Charles William McKillop, a New Zealander, who had entered the Indian Civil Service but settled in London after the death of his brother in the Indian Mutiny. From his father, a colonial merchant, he inherited a large fortune and became even richer on the death of an uncle. He was a frequent visitor to Bath and moved there permanently, to 14 Royal Crescent, in 1877. What McKillop did was to give his adopted city £1,500 for the purchase and adaptation of suitable premises for a free library, only on condition that the library remained

open for three years and that during that time another vote be taken on the adoption of the Public Library Acts. Should they be adopted, the premises would be sold and the proceeds, with the books and furniture, transferred to the Corporation. The building chosen for the library was part of the premises of the National Provincial Bank, sometimes referred to as Bank House, in the Abbey Churchyard facing Kingston Buildings. Alterations were carried out under the direction of Major Davis, the city architect. The Library Committee had no fewer than 44 members, including Jerom Murch and Isaac Pitman, and with Morris as President. In agreeing to serve on the committee Pitman made a plaintive plea: 'I hope that a room will soon be prepared to receive the 3,500 volumes I have to be added to Mr. Morris's collection. They are now becoming dilapidated for want of a suitable place for storage. Half of them I have had to remove four times!'¹¹ Indeed Pitman had held many of them for over ten years.

Under its appointed librarian, Benjamin James Baker, the library was inaugurated on 25 February 1875. It was open daily except Sunday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and lent books between noon and 2 p.m. and between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m., books being issued for a month and charged at a penny a week if overdue. By March 1877 the number of readers had risen to 1,500, approximately 3.5% of the population, and book issues to almost 18,000. No fewer than 81 different occupations of readers are listed in the first year's report, ranging from carpenters (23), lodging-house keepers (27) and artists (12) to school mistresses (25), clerks (81), clergymen (6) and physicians (5).

Three catalogues, of the Reference, Lending and Donor's collections, were published for sale. The reference library contained c.800 titles, including most of the standard encyclopedias, dictionaries and biographical sources of the time. The periodical section was dominated by runs of the *Phonetic Journal*, the *American Phonetic Journal*, and *Phonotypic and Phonetic Journal*, so Isaac Pitman, at least, had no cause for complaint. The lending library offered some 2,300 titles. Perhaps the most interesting catalogue was of the donor's library, a collection of 750 titles chosen and purchased by the committee from money expressly set aside from McKillop's gift. It represented a real attempt to provide books of practical usefulness, such as the two hundred titles on science and technology.¹²

In May 1876 the committee announced their intention of keeping the library open until the end of 1877 'after which time it is hoped it will be maintained by a public rate'. At the City Council meeting in early April

1877 the Mayor therefore broached the subject. It may seem surprising that it was resolved to hold yet another public meeting with the events of 1869 and 1872 no doubt still fresh in the memories of many of those present. A mood of optimism prevailed however. Mr. Sturges 'anticipated that the forthcoming meeting, if it was not unanimous, would show a great majority in favour of the movement...' and the Mayor added that at Salisbury the previous week, when the public library question was voted upon at a public meeting, only five hands were held up against it. A similar result was confidently expected at Bath at the meeting which was arranged for Saturday 28 April.

Jerom Murch, now Mayor, was in the chair and from the moment he rose to begin the meeting it was obvious that it threatened to be quite as noisy and futile as the previous ones. Despite threatening to call on the police to eject persistent interrupters the Mayor could not make himself heard and Morris also gave up the attempt. When the motion was put the Mayor declared that the numbers of hands raised for and against were about equal. A poll would therefore be held on the following Wednesday and Thursday at the Guildhall.¹³ The poll went ahead and again proved negative – 1,644 for, 1,808 against the proposal – and the committee members now found themselves in a dilemma. In accordance with the conditions of McKillop's gift the books should now be dispersed and the premises sold. On the other hand the voting had perhaps been close enough to justify another attempt. A petition signed by over 1,300 people was presented to the trustees, and McKillop and other donors agreed to re-open the library for a further three years. It was to be named Bath Public Library, rather misleadingly since admission would be by ticket only at a nominal subscription of four shillings a year. An alternative one-guinea subscription gave the right to one member's ticket and four additional tickets which, it was hoped, the subscriber would give to those who could not otherwise afford to join. On these terms the library re-opened on 8 October 1877, Benjamin Baker continuing as librarian, now with the paid assistance of his wife. A year later out of 1,872 readers some four hundred were using free tickets, and almost 18,000 books had been issued from the lending library.

October 1880 brought the third anniversary of the re-opening and the need to test, for the fourth time, opinion on the adoption of the Acts. This time the lessons had been learned. There was to be no rowdy meeting at the Guildhall. The poll would be conducted by voting cards, delivered to all ratepayers on a Tuesday, collected the following Friday, and the result announced on Saturday 9 October. Throughout the

FREE LIBRARY.

TO THE WORKING MEN OF ST. JAMES' WARD.

Before you

VOTE "NO."

consider the following points:—

The proposed Half-penny Rate will cost you only a few pence every year, which cannot be increased without the sanction of the Ratepayers, and then only to One Penny. In any case the Ratepayers themselves will have to decide what Rate they will pay.

The trifling sum that you will be called on to pay will be the cheapest and most profitable investment you can possibly make for yourselves and your children. A fine collection of Books, both for amusement and instruction, will be at your service, for home reading, for nothing. All the newspapers and magazines will be provided without charge. The Library will be your own Property, and you will be beholden to no man for the use of it.

Will you deprive yourselves and your families of these advantages for the sake of a few pence, or because some of your more favoured neighbours will be entitled to share in the benefit?

A good Public Library would help to attract new Residents, and thus contribute to the prosperity of the city and the Reduction of the Rates. To refuse it will be to proclaim that Bath is determined to be behind the times.

Don't be influenced by interested persons who attempt to frighten you by shrieking "Taxation," but close with a good bargain, and

Vote "YES."

A RATEPAYER.

FELLOW

CITIZENS.

Again the vexed question of a rate supported Library for the City is coming to the front, and soon you are to be asked, for the 3rd time, to vote yes or no. The answer you will give, I venture to say, will be more emphatically NO than ever. Such an institution means taxing the poor for the benefit of the well-to-do.

At the risk of ruffling the feelings of certain people, I assert that the present Public Library has miserably failed to do anything to encourage the adoption of the Libraries Act. In fact, it has helped the case for the opposition, by proving that the class of persons who would use the institution, are those who can well afford to pay yearly subscriptions to a Library. Paper statistics, although looking smart, do not blind persons of average intelligence. We have in Bath, as you know, several good Libraries and Reading-rooms crippled for want of Members. Why add to the difficulties of these institutions which have been doing such good work through so many years? I trust when the promoters of this Library have received the KICK which they deserve, and which I hope they will get, they will have the kindness and good taste to let the *Scheme* drop, at least for some years to come.

INTELLIGENCE.

VOTE AGAINST this Tax.

3 Anti-library handbill 1880. (Courtesy Bath Central Library)

Friends & Foes

OF THE

PUBLIC LIBRARY

Working Men, have you compared the Men who ask you to Vote for the Half-penny Rate with those who say don't?

The Mayor and all
the Corporation.

The whole of the
Clergy of all Denominations,

And all those who
usually help in
starting and supporting all plans
intended to help
the WORKING
CLASSES,

**SAY,
“YES.”**

Mr. OSMOND,
of the

Cremorne Tavern,

Mr. LEAKER,
of the Angel Inn

Mr. Wartenburg,
Beerseller,

Capt. Fitzgerald,
of the “Argus,”

Mr. Reuben Cook,
Commercial
Traveller,

**SAY,
“NO.”**

4 Pro-library poster 1880.
(Courtesy Bath Central Library)

summer and autumn the committee conducted a campaign of door-to-door canvassing, leaflets, handbills and posters. The leaflets bore such titles as: 'Free Libraries: are they luxuries or necessities?' and 'What is a Free Library?'. Perhaps the most interesting of their publications, 'What shall I get for my ninepence? A talk in the dinner hour', was written by Morris. It took the form of a dialogue between Jim, in favour of the library, and Bill, very sceptical, who nevertheless is converted by the end of the dinner hour discussion.

The opponents of the library, who were also better prepared, concentrated on posters and open air meetings. One evening there were three such meetings with a peripatetic chairman and platform party. They were often very lively affairs and usually held next to public

houses. The local press was divided: the *Bath Chronicle* and *Bath Herald* were always strong library supporters, but the *Bath Journal* and *Bath Argus* opposed. Whatever their views, the pages of all the papers were filled with letters and reports of meetings throughout September and early October. The *Herald* ran a gossip column which one week ended with the observation: 'Will the burgesses once more prove themselves swine and turn and rend with base insinuations those who cast pearls before them?'.¹⁴ This inevitably provoked replies on the lines: 'As one of the swine who opposed the placing of the library on the rates some three years ago... I intend doing the same piggish act again, Yours gruntingly'. Others were addressed from 'The Piggeries' or signed 'Grunder'.

The committee's campaign culminated in a big meeting at the Guildhall at which Morris, in the chair, read telegrams of good wishes from the Town Clerks of Birmingham and Liverpool confirming that they levied only a penny rate, the maximum allowed. About 8,000 polling papers were delivered and the result was conclusive: for the library 2,298, against 3,857. The disappointed committee took immediate steps to disperse the collections and return various gifts to their donors. The books paid for by McKillop were given to Bath College. As the *Bath Herald* noted: 'It is the irony of fate that the gift which the working classes of Bath refused is going to strengthen the hands of the privileged class in the struggle to get on in the world'.¹⁵ The books which Pitman had been collecting for so many years were offered to public libraries throughout the country by means of a catalogue which he printed and bitterly titled 'Catalogue of Books (Rejected by Bath)'. The librarian, Benjamin Baker, was given one month's notice and presented with a suitably inscribed gold watch by McKillop. He found a new occupation as a relieving officer for the Bath Poor Law Union. Happily his son, E.A. Baker, did not allow his father's experience to deter him from the library profession, for in due course he became the first Principal of the University College School of Librarianship and Archives in London.

The free library's chief opponents went on to form the Ratepayers Protection Society, and regarded the defeat they had inflicted as their first achievement. The Mayor, W.C. Jolly, lost his seat on the Council at the next election due, it was claimed, to his staunch advocacy of the library.

The Public Library question dropped from public view for several years and only re-surfaced in 1893 when Murch, Morris and Peach proposed bringing together several collections relating to Bath (held variously by the Athenaeum, the Royal Literary and Scientific Institution,

Bath Abbey, and elsewhere) to form the nucleus of a reference library located in a small room high under the dome of the newly-built north wing of the Guildhall. These collections, which were in fact to form the basis of the present Reference Library's Local Collection, were brought together by Peach with the assistance of Joseph Davis, a 45-year-old, small-scale dealer in secondhand books. From July 1895 Davis was engaged to prepare a catalogue and to supervise the library during the opening hours of 10–1 Mondays and Wednesdays and 2–5 Thursdays and Saturdays. He was, therefore, the first librarian to be employed by the Council.

The Guildhall Library, as it was called, aroused very little interest. In a series of articles on the library published by the *Chronicle*, William Tyte wrote that:

It appears to be by no means understood that the library which, by a combined effort, has been formed and presented to the city, really belongs to the burgesses ... Again and again it has happened that persons wandering through the Municipal Buildings, and finding themselves on the upper floor, peep into the half-open door of the library with a sort of 'Hope-I-don't-intrude' apology and prepare at once to retreat on being recognised. ... When told ... that it is free to all comers they express astonishment that the fact of such a privilege existing had not reached them.

Even Tyte felt obliged to admit that 'Only a select few, those who like to study the history and antiquities of the locality, or to peruse books of an informing kind, will find the library attractive'.¹⁶

Sir Jerom Murch, knighted at the very end of his life, died in May 1895 and probably never saw the library in operation. For over fifty years he had worked for the public library cause and in his will he left £1000 to be used for its establishment. Sir Isaac Pitman, knighted at the same time as Murch, died early in 1897. His biographer records that:

In 1897 he arranged for the January issue of his periodical and he then performed the last public act of his life by presenting through Mr. J.W. Morris a valuable collection of works of reference to the Bath Corporation, which had at that time realised one portion at least of the scheme for which he had worked with Mr. Morris in earlier years, by establishing a free reference library in the Municipal Buildings.¹⁷

This gift comprised some 800 volumes selected by Morris.

1897 marked the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria's accession and prompted the building of art galleries, museums, swimming baths, town halls, and libraries up and down the country as each authority competed to provide a fitting memorial of the anniversary. The decision on the form of Bath's memorial was effectively taken for them in a letter read to the Council in December 1896 explaining that Mrs Arabella Roxburgh, late of 15 Daniel Street, had bequeathed three-quarters of the residue of her estate to the city 'towards the erection or equipment or otherwise of a public art gallery with or without a free or public library', provided that the Council began such building within five years of her death.¹⁸ Her trustees were Morris and W.C. Jolly and the bequest was expected to amount to not less than £8,000. The idea of an art gallery for the city was supported unanimously; the combination of art gallery and library was a different matter.

A public meeting at the Guildhall on 18 March 1897 debated the question of the public library component since it was generally accepted that Bath needed an art gallery. Morris introduced the motion proposing the erection of an art gallery alongside a public library as a fitting memorial of the Diamond Jubilee. Against this a Mr Hatt moved an amendment 'that in the opinion of this meeting of citizens the proposal of the Council to increase the rates for the purpose of supporting a public library is of so controversial a nature as to render the erection of such a library an unsuitable memorial of Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee'. The meeting then became increasingly unruly and the scenes of 1869 and 1877 might well have been repeated had the Rector of Bath not proposed a compromise resolution: 'That in the opinion of this meeting it is desirable to adopt the erection of an art gallery as a fitting momento of Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee, that in connection therewith there shall be the Guildhall Library for reference only, and that the consideration of the question of a public library be deferred for the present'.¹⁹ This was cheered and passed unanimously.

The site for the art gallery was a riverwards extension down Bridge Street of the existing north wing of the Guildhall and by the same architect, J.M. Bryden. The Roxburgh legacy amounted to about £10,000; H.O. Wills of the tobacco family donated £1,000; the surplus of a fund raised when the British Association met in Bath in 1888 produced another £1,000; Sir Jerom Murch had bequeathed £1,000; and £2,000 was raised by a public subscription. In all, a total of £14,368 was available, comfortably more than the lowest building tender. Progress was delayed by problems with foundations and later by a strike of plasterers

but the opening ceremony was eventually performed by the Marquis of Bath and Sir W.B. Richmond, R.A., on 29 May 1900. In spite of competition from news of the relief of Mafeking, the local press gave a full report of the speeches both at the opening and at the Mayor's luncheon which followed. None made any reference to the library. The newspapers detailed the pictures in the inaugural exhibition, the menu, and the list of guests, but the library was dismissed in a mere eight lines which informed the reader that the collections formerly in the Guildhall were now housed in new quarters and amounted to some 8,000 volumes.²⁰ The library was, in fact, a handsome room, 49' by 32', with its own imposing entrance in Bridge Street, and was modelled, according to tradition, on Gladstone's library at Hawarden.

Its staff consisted of a curator, a librarian, a custodian (i.e. porter), and a caretaker. Expenditure was limited to the product of a halfpenny rate which at this date came to £550 per annum. However, the cost of furniture and completion had been seriously underestimated and the necessary bank loan to cover this meant that for the first five years of its existence the library had no funds at all for the purchase of books. Furthermore, another humiliation was in the offing.

In May 1903 the Mayor, through the good offices of Cedric Chivers (the founder of the Bath bookbinding firm known to librarians all over the world), wrote to Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish philanthropist, asking if he would consider including Bath in his scheme of presenting libraries to British towns on the usual conditions that the city provide the site and devote at least a penny rate to its upkeep when built. Carnegie replied that he would be happy to contribute to the extension of the art gallery building to provide all those departments not yet provided, including a lending library and children's library. A special committee, including Chivers, submitted plans (for the extension of the building along Newmarket Row) to Carnegie in early 1905 and he offered £13,000 to cover all construction costs. The Council was informed but, not surprisingly, took no decision other than to refer the matter to another special meeting. Meanwhile, the offer had become public news and the protesters once more gathered at the Guildhall. In the tradition of all the previous occasions the meeting was very crowded and very noisy. Yet again the local press was full of letters on the subject.

It is interesting that whatever the individual working man of Bath may have felt about public libraries, organised labour was strongly in favour. When the Council met in October it had before it resolutions supporting acceptance of the offer from the Labourers' Union, the

Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, and Bath Trades Council, as well as from Bath Chamber of Commerce and the Free Church Council. It was decided to hold another poll of the ratepayers. Reply-paid postcards would be delivered on Sunday 25 February 1906 to be returned to the Guildhall by 10 o'clock the following Tuesday. Both sides again produced propaganda and held meetings. The library supporters formed themselves into the Bath Library League while opponents adopted a more cumbersome title: The Committee for securing the rejection of the Carnegie rate-supported Library Scheme. Particularly interesting in the propaganda is the note in bold type appended to one of the Bath Library League's handbills. 'Contingent upon the acceptance of the Carnegie gift and the levying of a 1d rate an offer has been made by a Bath citizen of a special library of children's books, to be selected by American and British bibliographical experts: one that would be unique in the country in its completeness and effectiveness for the delight and advantage of our Bath children'. Cedric Chivers, the Bath citizen in question, repeated this offer in 1913 when it was once more declined on the grounds that a suitable room could not be found.

The result of the postcard poll was 2,109 votes in favour, 4,761 votes against, and Carnegie received a polite letter declining his offer. Morris did not live to experience this latest disappointment. He died in 1902 and a committee formed by his former pupils purchased a collection of 2,700 volumes of standard works, chiefly English literature, which was presented to the reference library as a memorial. The Carnegie episode on the other hand did have the effect of drawing attention to the reference library. Donations arrived regularly. Outstanding was the gift, in 1903, of two hundred books from Captain F.H. Huth, among them incunabula and other interesting early printed books. Following the repayment of the bank loan, the library received an annual bookfund of £100, a sum not improved upon until the First World War. All the same, as early as 1907 books were being stored in the basement, and in 1908 it became necessary to appoint an assistant librarian, the young Reginald William Makepeace Wright, who subsequently became the first Director of Libraries and Art Gallery until his retirement in 1953.

The idea of extending the library along Newmarket Row was revived in 1913 but came to nothing. The war had little effect on the library; Wright was away in the army for one year and exactly 90 books were bought. 1919, however, saw the library virtually doubled in size through the gift of the collection of Michael Oppenheim, a retired naval



5 Bath Lending Library in the years after its opening in 1924. (Courtesy Bath Central Library)

surgeon and writer on naval history. This donation of 9,500 scholarly items contained within it separate collections on Napoleon, reports of trials, and other topics. Oppenheim himself helped to sort the collection and the only condition attached to his gift was that it should never form part of a lending library. The following year the widow of Col. Samuel Barrett Miles presented his library of 2,500 volumes, an outstanding collection of travel books and literature of the Middle East, many of them in fine bindings which contrasted with the deplorable state of many of Oppenheim's books. This sudden growth meant the appointment of extra staff. Joseph Davis, now 70, was still at his desk but took a less and less active role. He finally retired in 1931, aged 81.

Cedric Chivers, Mayor of Bath for most of the twenties, was in office when the decision was taken in 1923 that Bath should, at long last, have

a public lending library. Such a decision had long ceased to require a vote of the ratepayers. No new building was involved and the library was to be provided as economically as possible by converting the print room, next to the reference library, for this purpose. In introducing the plan Councillor T. Sturge Cotterell confessed that Bath was 'the largest city in the kingdom without a public lending library'.²¹ In saying this he was strictly accurate. Of the 22 boroughs which had still not fully adopted the Acts at this time Bath, with its population of some 69,000, was the largest. Even so, the decision was not unanimous. Councillor Mr Kenward suggested that the scheme proved either that the print room had never been necessary or that they were going to spoil the art gallery. Either way he considered it a place they should be ashamed to call a free library for a city like Bath.

The library opened on 3 July 1924, the Mayor receiving the first book issued, Sarah Grand's novel *The Heavenly Twins*. The stock amounted to 9,200 volumes of which about 4,600 had been purchased, 1,700 presented, and 2,800 transferred from the reference library. The total cost of the library, books and all, was £2,366. In announcing this figure the Chairman of the Libraries and Art Gallery Committee stated that he doubted if any library had been started on such a small sum for a city the size of Bath.²² (One speculates whether this was boasting or apologizing.) Apparently the Council saw the arrangements as only temporary. The resolution passed in June 1923 proposed the conversion of the print room into a lending library 'until the Council otherwise determine'. Another forty years were to pass before the Council did, in fact, otherwise determine.

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