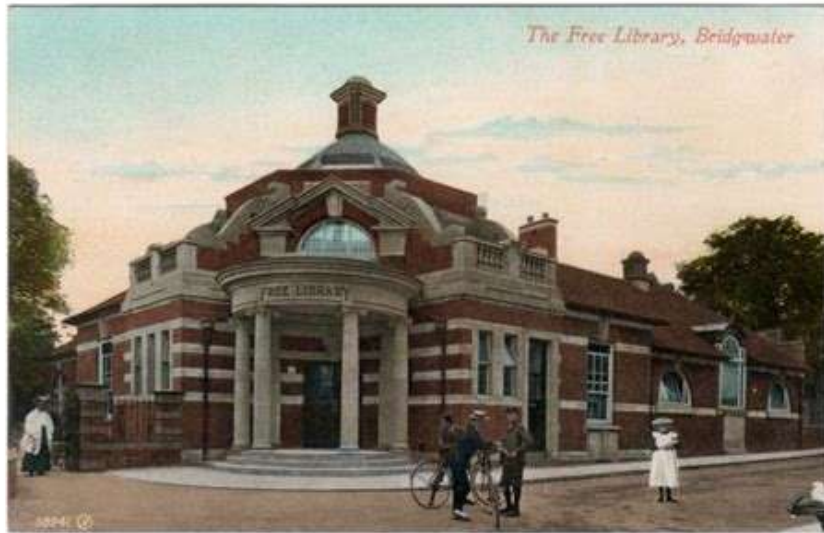


BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL
BLAKE MUSEUM



A Contemporary postcard of the Library, 1906

BRIDGWATER'S PUBLIC LIBRARIES TO 1974

While Bridgwater's public library service dates from 1860, in 1833 a private circulating library was established in the town, with the aim of buying books and circulating them to the members. Membership was restricted to twelve, and the subscription a guinea; after a year the books were sold. Members included Mr George Browne, a cordwainer; James Haviland, surgeon; William D. Champion, gentleman; John Browne, merchant; Robert Ford, timber merchant; Carey Bailey Mogg, merchant; William Stocker Robins, Lieut R. N.; Richard Horns, ironmonger, Henry Reed, attorney; Revd William James, Dissenting minister; Clement Heard, druggist and Joel Spiller, Merchant. [1]

In addition, the early nineteenth century was the period when technical education came to the fore, with Mechanics' Institutes being formed in many towns and villages, and the publications of organisations like the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge were

being written to serve the needs of the working classes.

In Bridgwater, reading-rooms were established in St John Street, Taunton Road and West Street. A short-lived Mechanics' Institute existed in 1825.

The longest-established reading room was located in the Market House by 1830 and by 1840 had become the Bridgwater Literary and Scientific Institution. By 1859 the Literary and Scientific Institution had moved to George Street next to the George Hotel, where it remained until 1869.

The Public Library Acts of 1850 and 1855 were adopted at a town meeting held in 1860. Bridgwater was one of the first, for by 1870 only 48 towns in England and Wales had done so. Between 1861 and 1883 four reading rooms were in operation, supplying newspapers and periodicals and a small number of books. These were in Friarn Street, St John Street, West Street and Northgate. In 1883 premises

opened in George Street to serve the west side of the town, leaving the St John Street one.

Under the terms of the Free Libraries Act of 1850, The Mayor and Town Council raised in 1869 a subscription in the town to pay off the Literary & Scientific Institution's liabilities, and renovate and refurbish the reading room. The Council transferred to itself the Institution's library of about 1000 volumes, a collection of fossils etc, purchased from the executors of the late Robert Anstice and other articles. There was a museum 1861-75 and a reading room in 1875.

A curious feature of this library is that it did not appear in the list of libraries in the county in receipt of sets of publications of the Patents Commissioners. Following the Patent Law Amendment Act of 1852 the Commissioners embarked on an ambitious programme of publishing all the patents so far granted in England -- some 13,227. In addition they published 99 volumes of abridgements, divided by class of manufacture. In order to foster manufacture and invention they gave complete sets of the abridgments volumes to Mechanics, Literary and Scientific Institutions throughout the country. In Somerset they were given to libraries in Bath, Cheddar, Frome, Glastonbury, and Mere, nr Bath. In view of Bridgwater's commercial importance then, this lack is strange. [2]

Here it remained until 1885, when new reading room and library was constructed in the rebuilt part of the Town Hall that had been occupied by the Judges' lodgings in the Assize days. This was superseded in 1906 by the opening of the Carnegie Library in Binford Place.

Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) was an American industrialist and philanthropist whose benefactions exceeded £70 million. Some 380 libraries are associated with him in the United Kingdom.

The Bridgwater library is the only Carnegie library in Somerset, and was designed by local architect E Godfrey Page in the Edwardian Baroque style. The foundation stone reads:

"This Library was erected in 1905 by the liberality of Andrew Carnegie Esq. LLD. This stone was laid by Henry W Pollard Esq. Mayor August 10 1905".

It is a Grade II listed building. At the rear of the building is a public drinking fountain.



The rear of the building

For the first thirty years, newspapers and periodicals formed the bulk of the material consulted in the new library. Books might be borrowed after the reader had consulted a catalogue and asked for the book by number. The entrance hall had an indicator board which showed of the book was IN or OUT. If in, the book was fetched from a store-room by a librarian.

In 1933 a delegation from the Borough Council visited the Bristol Public Library to see how things were run there,[3] and in 1934 the Indicator board and barriers were removed, and the public was allowed free access to the bookshelves.[4]

Book lending peaked in the war years, 1939-1945, and in 1961 modifications were made to give more space. In 1970 an extension was added, almost doubling the space.

Somerset County Library was established at Burnham on Sea, in 1918, and the library headquarters moved to the old Dr Morgan's school in Mount Street in 1938.

The local government changes of 1974 meant the abolition of Bridgwater Borough Council, and as a consequence the Borough Library was amalgamated with the County Library.[4]

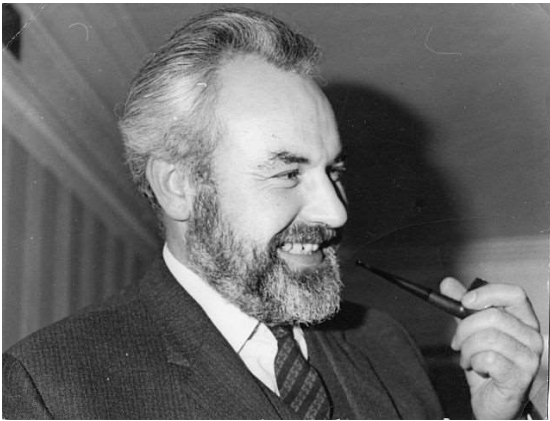
Afterwards

After amalgamation, it was damaged by fire in 1978, after an arson attack. The undamaged

books were moved to rooms in the King Street Methodist Church, opposite, and a service maintained from there while repairs were made. The library building was again expanded upstairs by filling the space surrounded by the mezzanine. More computers were added in 2002, and self-service technology was installed in 2013.

The Borough Librarians.

Mr Gerald D. Cuzner was appointed Borough Librarian on 21 December 1923 for a salary of £120 per annum. He succeeded Mrs Butler. [5] He was succeeded in 1956 by Mr Angus Dunn, who remained until the amalgamation with the County Library in 1974.



Angus Dunn, Borough Librarian 1956-1974



Caxton, the book horse

References

[1] Angus Dunn, Borough of Bridgwater. Annual Report of the Borough Librarian and Curator for 1967-68, pp 1-2

[2] Catalogue of the Patent Office Library, 1882

[3] Western Daily Press, 1 April, 1933

[4] Taunton Courier, 12 December 1934

[5] Angus Dunn, Borough of Bridgwater. Annual Report of the Borough Librarian and Curator for 1972-73, pp 4-6

[6] Western Daily Press, 21 December 1923

Further reading

Thomas & Edith Kelly, *Books for the people*, 1977

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