

Free Public Carnegie Library – Pontefract

A brief history of the Carnegie Library in Pontefract

Early beginnings

Before the free Public Library, the first buildings in Pontefract to have libraries were schools and these were for the sole benefit of teachers and their pupils. In 1783 a public newsroom with library attached was founded in the Market Place and could be used by the general public for a small subscription. It was mostly used by tradesmen and was eventually incorporated into the Mechanics Institute in 1856.

In the early part of the nineteenth century there were two commercial circulating libraries which were operated by booksellers, stationers and printers. These both provided mainly fiction and were both situated in the Market Place. One was operated by William Hunt and ceased in the 1830's and the other was managed by John Fox and Sons. In 1835 a subscription library and newsroom was set up in Salter Row charging an annual fee of 21 shillings and had 40 members. Due to the fee it was only used by the wealthier people in the town and was taken over by the Mechanics Institute in 1857.



The Mechanics Institute was founded in 1832, again in the Market Place. Its aim was to provide education and instruction to the labouring classes and artisans for the fee of 1 shilling every quarter of the year. Whilst initially it was well used it soon declined in popularity and closed in 1871. In that same year a Young Men's Institute was formed which had a small library and a year later, in 1872, it was decided that the library could be used by the entire population of Pontefract. It's book stock was supplemented by the Yorkshire Village Library Service to which it gave a subscription of £1. This library finally closed in 1904 due to the building of the Free Library.

1897

A proposal is put forward to institute a Free Library as a memorial for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. When this is put to the vote 700 people vote against the Free Library and only 150 for.

Before 1902

Mr Carnegie is approached by the local newspaper editor for a grant towards the building of a Free Library but he replies that the attitude adopted by the townspeople in 1897 suggests that they do not want a Free Library.

1902

The Town Clerk of Pontefract writes to Mr Carnegie asking for money for a library. Mr Carnegie replies to Oswald Holmes, the newspaper editor, on 4th October 1902 saying that he "would be glad to furnish Twenty-two hundred and Fifty pounds sterling to erect a Free Public Library Building for Pontefract". (This initial sum of money proved to not be sufficient so he later gave a further £330 which totally covered the cost of the building).

1903

The Council accept the plans provided free of charge by local architects Garside and Pennington. The tender for the work is given to Henry Gundill which amounts to £1,744 4s 8d.

1905

The Library Committee recommends that the reading room be opened on 30th January 1905 from 9am to 10 pm, the lending department from 2 to 4 and 6 to 9 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays and the reference department at such times as the Librarian is in attendance. The Chief Librarian of Leeds prepares a list of recommended reference books, which are to be supplied by tender and an appeal is made to the public for donations of books for the lending and reference departments. Mr Herbert M. Brown is appointed as Librarian at a salary of £70 per annum. September 1905, Library officially opened by Mr J.G. Lyon (who incidentally also on that day received the Freedom of the Borough, the first man to do so), and he received a silver gilt key to commemorate the occasion. Mr Lyon had previously given £500 for books. When the library opened it had 2,700 volumes, including 450 reference books.

1927

Originally the library operated a closed access system. (Customers had to ask the staff to get books for them) This system remained in force until 1927 when it was decided that an open access system would be preferable. The library had to close for several months whilst the necessary alterations were made and it re-opened on 20th October 1927.

1933

A juvenile section is opened on the first floor.

1946

The reference library is moved into the ladies' reading room.

1949

The Town Council suggests that the current library is now obsolete and that the money would be better spent on a new building. They further recommend that branch libraries in the town should be considered.

1950

Official ceremony to mark the opening of extensions to the library on 13th December.

1973

A foundation stone is laid by Alderman R. Egan in December for a new library in Salter Row. The old library is to be converted into a museum.

1975

The new Library is officially opened to the public by Councillor Geoffrey Lofthouse on 23rd September.

Old Vs New

A comparison between the figures for the two libraries when they were opened makes interesting reading.

1905

Membership 2,035
Books borrowed 46,725
Total stock 2,947

1975

Membership 11,346
Books borrowed 324,742
Total stock 57,986

1977

The Library issue system changes from the manual 'Browne' issue ticket to a computerised in house system.

1978

The Carnegie library building re-opens as a museum on 25th April.

2004-

The library is still well used today by the townspeople with over 25,000 borrowers and an average of over 7,000 people come into the library every week.