

A History of Sutton Coldfield Library

It is interesting to note that the initial setting up of a permanent public library in Sutton Coldfield was due to Dr Richard Williamson, one of the Rectors of Holy Trinity Parish Church, who presided from 1843 till 1850. As a former headmaster of the prestigious Westminster School, it is probably not surprising that any project that could promote learning and education, particularly within his parish, would be close to his heart.

Today, in Sutton Reference Library, his proud handwritten opening address of Sutton's first 'Permanent Library', on 3rd April 1850, can be found. In it, he explains how the project came to fruition and of his hopes and aspirations for its future. He states how, "This institution goes far to fill up a void long felt by many of us in this parish" (p7) and that "now the want is supplied". (p8) For him the establishing of a library enabled the sustainability and extension of a limited school education, beyond not just the exposure to newspaper and pamphlets and would "assist and direct the humble learned along the path which leads to heaven". (p8)

Dr Williamson was fervent that the young should be exposed to books and that they should "feed the mind like the body". (p14) In his address he emphasises that "simple possession of a book is not enough" and that one "should read it!" (p14) He strongly advocated "using time wisely" and "getting into the habit of reading" (p15), particularly of fact books, which could link with improving experiences at work and the world beyond. He further encouraged the reading of poetry and classical literature and stated that even "judging books will add to the improvement of the mind". (p17)

The pursuit of education in his parish became his passion. At the opening ceremony of the library, he gave a warning to all those who thought reading and learning would give people a boastful sense of 'conceit'. He proclaimed that in this, the reverse is true, for it only goes to show the student how much they don't know! For him, "The true philosopher is humble" and "the ignorant or shallow- learned is the conceited man" (p11), thinking he doesn't need to improve his mind.

Naturally as a man of the church, he was also hopeful that a library in Sutton would enhance the religious well-being and morality of his parishioners, with it being "pleasing to God to read Holy Scriptures". (p21)

The first 'Sutton Library' was originally set up by the Sutton Book Club, an established Society in the town and from them, a committee was formed to spearhead the project. The Society donated £50 to start buying books and at first, with the warden's permission, a Book Room was set up in the Town Hall.

The library boasted that it was available to "all ranks and classes, if they but be respectable in character" (p6 address) and Dr Williamson was keen that those people on the outskirts of the parish should enjoy similar access. However, the library was not free and subscribers had to pay a small annual fee for the privilege of its use. It was not until the opening of the public library in the premises of the old Sutton Methodist Church in 1937, that free membership was granted.

It is clear from Dr Williamson's address though, that he was not only content with establishing a library. His aspirations went much further, for he later advocates that the library could include "specimens on

the walls” such as “busts, coins, models, medals, stuffed birds, minerals, shells” and “things connected to the neighbourhood, specimens of local history”. (p26-7) He was therefore, keen to combine the library with a museum, incorporating a provision for lectures and suggested that even the ‘Black Country’ “would supply us with a host of curiosities”. (p27) This was no doubt the forerunner of how the later model of Sutton Library was to evolve, where the concept of not only books, but exhibitions could be envisaged and the loan of pictures and music - items of beauty and culture, could be seen, heard and even borrowed, for the additional enrichment and enjoyment of members.

However, he was realistic in stating, that this could only be achieved, “when we get a permanent place for our library”. (p26) Indeed the venue for the first permanent library in Sutton Coldfield was an issue. Dr Williamson states in his address that “Our worthy warden has readily promised us the use of the Town Hall for our Book Room”(p3), but this was only ever a temporary arrangement. During its early stages, this, the church and other random premises were used and it wasn’t till nearly ninety years later that a permanent residence was found.

At the turn of the century, the Town Council took up this challenge and keen to establish a permanent and this time ‘free’ library, they approached the Carnegie Trust for support. This had been founded in 1913, by Andrew Carnegie, a Scot from Dunfermline and was a charitable organisation that had been created for the purpose of “the improvement of the well-being of the masses of the people of Great Britain and Ireland”. It provided a substantial annual endowment of £100,000, for charitable causes, most of which had (in its earlier stages), tended to be used for educational purposes, such as the setting up of libraries, the first pre-school playgroups, several universities and the funding of the Workers Educational Association.

The Trust offered £3,500 to the Town Council, on the proviso that they should raise a further £235 and that the Borough should adopt the recommendations of the 1892 & 1901 Public Library Acts. However, objections were made by varied sources, such as the Boldmere Burgesses’ Association and the grant was refused. Remonstrations were made that there was no need for a library, it would prove too expensive and it could not practically serve the outer districts.

In 1931, the Council attempted to purchase Vesey Houses on the High Street, for the establishment of a library, but due to the economics of the time, this was not successful.

In 1934, Councillor Mrs F.M Lowe offered to apply for “Oak Hurst” House for the purpose, on the stipulation that she could reside there, but residents in the local vicinity raised objections and the notion was quashed.

In the same year, the General Purposes Committee of the Council, searched for a site and on 30th October, they agreed with the Trustees of the Methodist Church, to lease their old building for a public library, at a cost of £7,200. An application to the Minister of Health was made, for the loan of the sum. With a lease of 56 years and a ground rent of £14.5s per year, the Council reviewed the contract and decided it would be more beneficial to obtain the freehold. This was eventually done and in February 1936, the purchase was completed. In August, work on converting the church building to a library began and on Saturday 6th March 1937, it was officially opened to the public.

This was to serve as Sutton’s permanent free public Library, for 38 years. However, in June 1964, the Council began to search for a site that could accommodate a perhaps more modern functional library

building. In February 1967, plans to develop what was the ABC Empress Cinema site, were issued and five years later work began on the new building.

On 26th October 1974, the Old Library in Sutton was closed and its jurisdiction was transferred to Birmingham Public Libraries. Two months later, the new library opened officially on 14th December and is still used today, offering the loan of music, dvds and many other facilities, besides books.

Over the past decade, its existence has been threatened by political restraints and by 2018 closure seemed imminent.

However in 2018/9, a collaborative effort made by FOLIO (Friends of Libraries in our Sutton Coldfield), the Library Lobby (its predecessor), Sutton Town Council and Birmingham City Council, came to the rescue and injected funds, ensuring its salvation and renovation. It now houses a cafeteria, 'The Little Green Bookworm Play Café', which was opened on 3rd April, and has enabled an extension to library opening hours for the benefit of all residents.

Sue Ingley, Holy Trinity Parish Church, 2020

SOURCES

- 1) 'Opening Address of Sutton Permanent Library' (April 3rd 1850) by R Williamson. This is a handwritten booklet bound by Chivers of Bath.
- 2) SCF Library (3rd Annual Report 1939 -40) (SH5 3BOX)
- 3) Library Folder 1937 - 87
- 4) Annual Report 1978 -9 (QSH 53.31)
- 5) Newscuttings of SCF Libraries Vol 1 1937 - 78 (QSH53.31)