

A HUNDRED YEARS OF LIBRARY SERVICE.

ON 14th August, 1850, the first Public Library Act received the Royal Assent. In February the following year Winchester City Council, empowered by this Act, took over the property of the Hampshire Museum which had existed since 1847 as an institution supported by voluntary subscriptions. To commemorate the occasion "the old Winchester bushel was filled with strong beer with part of which the parties assembled regaled and the remainder distributed among the neighbouring poor." On 10th November, 1851, the new Library and Museum was opened in the converted Governor's House of the old gaol in Jewry Street. Winchester thereby achieved the distinction of being the second authority in the country to adopt the 1850 Act and the first actually to open the doors of its library to the public.

As a library service, however, it was insignificant. The Library occupied the top floor in quarters described as "studiously inaccessible." It was little more than an adjunct to the Museum. In 1853 the stock consisted of rather more than 300 books. Eighteen years later it still consisted of only 1,447 volumes.

Not until 1873 was the long-standing partnership between the Museum and the Library severed. The Museum was transferred to the new Guildhall, the Library to the old Guildhall. There the Library languished for two years before being moved to the new Guildhall extension. Conditions, however were little better. A contemporary report states "The small room cannot be really used in the evening owing to the want of light. There is one burner in the room and that is as far from the reading table as it can be." And some years later, "We have 2,000 reference volumes but they are all stored in the Abbey House and only available after a lot of trouble."

Under Mr. J. T. Burchett, who became librarian in 1884, the Library slowly gained popularity, but it was not until 1914, with the appointment of a trained and qualified librarian, Mr. A. C. Piper, that the history of the Library as we know it to-day can be said to have begun. Additional accommodation was provided and a complete reorganisation effected. By 1920 the book stock was nearly 13,000 and annual issues exceeded 50,000.

Aided by the 1919 Act which abolished the 1d. rate limit, the library service grew rapidly under Mr. F. W. C. Pepper who succeeded Mr. Piper in 1921. A junior section and a music collection were added and the local collection, the foundations of which had been laid by Mr. Piper, was considerably augmented

in 1926 by the purchase of the late Alderman Stopher's collection and again in 1938 by the Miss Annie M. Johnson bequest. To-day the Hampshire Collection consists of nearly 5,000 books and pamphlets. It is probably the most important collection of printed material on Hampshire in the country.

By 1935 the book stock reached 30,000 and the annual issue 165,000. The problem of accommodation, long rendered acute by the increasing stock and increasing use of the Library, was finally solved by converting the Corn Exchange in Jewry Street into a library. The transfer took place in October 1936. It was fortunate that in its new premises the Library was capable of meeting heavy demands on its services for on the outbreak of war in 1939 and the subsequent arrival of refugees, membership nearly doubled and in the peak year 1941-42 book issues rose to 355,000.

By 1946 a normal peace-time service was restored. In that year a prison library service was introduced whereby books were loaned in bulk for the use of the prisoners in Winchester Prison. Winchester was one of the first authorities in the country to introduce such a scheme. About the same time the first of a series of photographic exhibitions was shown. They proved so popular that exhibition work is now a normal feature of the service. To-day the Library possesses 47,000 volumes, it has a membership of 9,800 and some 300,000 books a year are issued, altogether a considerable contribution to the cultural life of the city. Last year (1950) the centenary of the passing of the first Public Library Act was celebrated throughout the country. It is a matter for some pride that the centenary of the opening of Winchester Public Library can be celebrated only one year later.

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