

Richmond Public Library

When the Richmond Free Library opened on the Little Green on 18th June 1881, it gave a service to the ordinary inhabitants of Richmond that certain select sections of the population had enjoyed on and off for nearly 400 hundred years.

The first library to exist in the area was almost certainly that belonging to the Palace. It was founded by Henry VIII, whose considerable expenditure on both manuscripts and printed books is recorded in the Privy Purse accounts. Quentin Paulet was the first of a number of librarians to be appointed by Tudor monarchs. Items from this library survive in the collections of the British Library. Having been removed from Richmond after Elizabeth I's death, they escaped the ravages that befell the palace and its contents during the Commonwealth period.

The large houses of Richmond all had their own libraries and a traveller in the early 18th century recorded that the owners were generous in making them available to visitors.

The Mechanics' Institute

The lower classes had to wait until 1838 when a small library was opened to serve members of the Richmond Mechanics Institute which met at the Church Rooms, Church Walk. The Reading Room was open every evening between 6 and 10pm with a subscription of 10s per year, ladies and minors 6s a year. Concerts were held at various venues in Richmond. By 1840, it was decided that larger and more convenient premises were needed and a committee was set up to deal with the matter. Queen Victoria - who was the Lady of the Manor – gave a piece of land on an open space known as The Square and which had formerly been the site of the old town pond. The foundation stone at 2 The Square was laid on 26th August 1843. A description of the building was given in the Illustrated London News on 9th September – “The new building...is in the Italian style of architecture, and consists of a theatre, about 40 feet by 27 feet, and is capable of accommodating upwards of 300 persons. On each side of the theatre are rooms 20 feet by 16 feet, intended, the one for a museum, the other the library.” The new building was opened on 11th December 1843. In 1846 the committee issued a report that stated that although a large portion of the debt incurred for the building remained unpaid, they were hopeful that, through the generosity of the patrons, it would soon be cleared. Sadly it seems this did not happen and the Institute came to an end about the beginning of 1849. What happened to the books is not known – some were probably returned to their owners and others were given to the Richmond Young Men's Society, established in 1851.

The freehold was brought by James Wade in 1851 and in 1854 the Richmond Public Baths and Lavatory Company became the lessees and in 1855 the building had been converted to the public baths – ‘The Baths’ - which remained there until 1867. An upper floor was added and, in 1908, a dome, giving the building its present name of Dome Buildings.

Richmond Parochial Library and Reading Room

On 15th October 1855, the Rev. Harry Dupuis (the Vicar of Richmond) called for a meeting at which it was resolved “that this meeting thinks it highly desirable that a Parochial

Reading Room and Library should at once be opened in Richmond for the purposes of religious and secular instruction and mutual improvement. And that its Government be rested in the subscribing Parochial Clergy and seven laymen, members of the Church of England to be chosen from among its members.”

The library opened within a few weeks and was located in the National Schools at the corner of Eton Street and Paradise Road. Books were donated by various members as well as being purchased after approval from the committee. The rules of the Reading Room and Library were as follows:

- annual subscription of 6s for gentlemen and 5s for ladies, payable quarterly in advance with a 6d entrance fee
- the Reading Room be open every evening from 7 till 10 o'clock except Sundays, Christmas Day and Good Friday
- new books would remain in the library for 1 month before being taken away for perusal
- no serial could be taken away till bound.

The Librarian would be paid £6 per annum with free membership. 2 lads were appointed as assistants to attend on alternate weeks in the Reading Room at a salary of 6d per week and free admission to lectures. A cleaner was hired at a yearly wage of £4.

Lectures and other entertainments were also organised by the committee and took place in the School. The price of admittance to these for members was 6d, 3d and schools half-price. There were 40 seats at each lecture that could be reserved for 1s.

By 1876 the rules had been amended several times, so a new list was issued:

- the subscription was 6s per annum or 2s for each of the winter quarters and 2s for the summer half-year. This gave members the use of the Reading Room and Library with the loan of 1 volume at a time and free admission for himself or a friend to all the lectures.
- ladies paid the same subscription, but were not allowed to use the Reading Room
- the Reading Room was open 6-10 o'clock in winter and 7-10 o'clock in summer except Sundays, Christmas Day and Good Friday
- the Library to be open whenever the Reading Room was open as well as 12-1 o'clock on Wednesdays
- members would pay a fine of 1d per volume per day when books were overdue after a fortnight.

In October 1878, the Managers of the National Schools informed the Committee that they could not allow the Parochial Library and Reading Room to continue to occupy the present room after Christmas as it was required by the school. The Committee also received a letter from Rev. H.W. Miller – Vicar of St. John's Church – suggesting the amalgamation of the Parochial Library with the Richmond Parochial Club and Institute which met in Verandah House, The Green. The Committee decided that they had 2 options – either accept Miller's offer or find alternative premises. At their next meeting, it was reported that 2 rooms on the first floor at Mr Tuohy's, Photographic Artist, at 2 The Quadrant had been taken from Christmas at an annual rent of £35 and that the front large room had been taken from the half-quarter day till Christmas for £3. The lectures and entertainment would

continue to be held at the National Schools for an annual payment of 2 guineas including the storage of chairs.

The move to 2 The Quadrant proved to be a financial disaster. By June 1880, the decision was being made to quit the rooms at Christmas, close the Reading Room and keep the library open in the evening in another room. Mr Eldridge, the Librarian resigned in October and, in the same month, Mr Tuohy offered the front room at his premises for £20 per annum plus £5 cleaning, the room to be open only in the evenings. A curator was appointed at 4s per week and the number of morning newspapers taken was cut to 1 - **The Times**.

The prospect of a Free Public Library being opened in Richmond in 1881 did nothing to improve the situation and so, in August 1881, the decision was made to discontinue the Reading Room at the end of September and move the Library back to the National Schools where a room for bookshelves in the Infants' School would be rented at the cost of £2 per annum. Miss Holt was offered ½ guinea per quarter for arranging the distribution of the books and the Library would open 12.30 – 1.30 on Wednesdays.

At the Annual General meeting, held on 6th October 1886, a discussion took place as to what to do with the books from the Library which was now rarely used. One possibility was that they could be shared between the Free Library, the Workhouse and the Hospital. But this would have to be done carefully and no duplicate books should be discarded as they might be useful somewhere else. In January 1887, the **Richmond and Twickenham Times** reported that nothing had been done with the books "which are now 'eating their heads off' for rent and caretaking, without being read by anybody." A decision was made in March to transfer all the books to Richmond Free Public Library. The lectures and entertainments continued until November 1887 when the managers at the school informed the Committee that extra conditions and requirements had been imposed by the magistrates before renewing the theatrical licence. In December the managers decided that they would not allow the use of the school after Christmas for any entertainment except such as did not require any licence. So only lectures took place during the next year and in October 1888, the decision was taken to wind up the affairs of the Richmond Parochial Library and Reading Room. Any effects were to be sold and any balance of cash in hand to be given to the Fund for the Enlargement of the Girls' and Infants' Schools, Eton Street and the chairs donated to the school.

Richmond Public Library

Mr Edward King, founder of both the Richmond Athenaeum and the local paper - the **Richmond and Twickenham Times** - turned his attention to the library needs of the community and on 23rd November 1878 he published a leader advocating the setting up of a public library. He followed this on 11th February 1879 with a public meeting at the Castle Hotel to which he invited representatives of the Parochial Library to join him on the platform. But Rev. Dupuis advised the Parochial Library Committee to remain strictly neutral, although the Vice-President, H.G. Bohn, announced that he was opposed to the plan. The local paper devoted 1½ pages to reporting this meeting as well as a leader. The Vestry decided to have a poll of ratepayers and voting papers would be delivered to every eligible ratepayer on 11th March and collected on 15th March. Meanwhile the Richmond Ratepayers' Association held an open meeting at the Greyhound Hotel, George Street on

5th March at which there was a large attendance and resolutions to use the product of a penny rate to fund a library were unanimously passed. The result of the poll was given at the Vestry meeting on 18th March - 1140 voted for the adoption of the Public Library Acts while 618 were against.

Therefore at the same meeting the Vestry “Resolved that the Public Libraries Act 1855 and the Acts amending the same having come into operation in this Parish they be carried into effect by a Committee of the Vestry consisting of nine members.” The membership of this committee did not meet with the approval of King and in a leader in the **Richmond and Twickenham Times** on 22nd March, he wrote:

“Once more the Vestry of Richmond have endeavoured to baulk the wishes of the ratepayers, as recorded by vote, in the matter of adoption and application of the Public Libraries Acts. A majority of almost two ratepayers to one having compelled the Vestry to take some early action in the election of a Library Committee they have, with pitiable bad taste, shown their *spleen* by electing, in hot haste, an executive, the majority of which is in *avowed* opposition or, indifferent to the liberal and intelligent application of the Acts to Richmond. How in the name of common sense can the Vestry expect the ratepayers to have faith in a Library Committee the majority of which, up to the time of their appointment, have been dead against the present application of the Acts? Are we to expect that at a moment’s notice they will twist right round, like well-oiled weather cocks, to an opposite opinion.; and if not, why, by all that is just and manly, do they serve on the Committee at all?”

There was to be an election for Vestry seats on 12th April and King ends the piece exhorting the ratepayers to vote in candidates who were in favour of a public library. An advert in the 5th April edition of the paper gave the list of 9 new candidates plus 1 seeking re-election who supporters of a free library.

More condemnation came from the Ratepayers’ Association. At the Vestry meeting held on 8th April, a letter dated 27th March from Mr Parker, Secretary of the Ratepayers’ Association enclosing a resolution passed by the Association was read out “That the Committee appointed by the Vestry to carry the Public Library Acts, consisting as it does of Gentlemen who have declared the antagonism to the application of those Acts, are not entitled to the public confidence and their nomination indicates on the part of the Vestry a disposition to frustrate the wishes of the Town for a liberal, prompt and effective adoption of the Public Library Acts.”

At the Vestry meeting on 27th May the following resolution was put to the members – “that members be added to the Committee who are Ratepayers of Richmond though not Members of the Vestry so as to secure the services of persons, who from their well known interest in such an undertaking as the Richmond Free Library, would be most likely to promote its success according to the intention of the Legislation.” The motion was carried by 13 for with 11 against and the numbers increased to 12.

The first meeting of the Free Public Library Committee was on 21st March 1879 when it was announced that donations of money and/or books could be made and that full particulars of any suitable building in Richmond would be welcomed.

By the meeting of 9th April the Committee had 4 buildings and 2 houses to consider for the library:

1. Verandah House – the late Parochial Club and Institute situated on Richmond Green. Rejected as not being suitable as the size of the rooms were too small.
2. Mr Fowler's Offices and Auction Room situated in the Railway Station Yard. Was suitable for a Library and Reading Room, but had no accommodation for a librarian or an attendant to reside on the premises.
3. The College (late Cavalry College) opposite the Little Green and at the corner of Duke Street. The building could be adapted for use as a library on the ground floor and a Museum or Fine Arts Gallery on the first floor with other offices on the 2nd and 3rd floors. The building was available for purchase for £4,000 freehold or rented at £200 per annum with the option to buy after 3 years.
4. The building known as 'The Baths' situated in The Square [where the Mechanics' Institute had been housed]. There were 2 floors and space for accommodation. The rent was 100 guineas a year for each floor.
5. Mr Rollons' house at the end of George Street. Not considered suitable unless adjacent premises could be purchased.
6. Mr Ganthony's house is considered no way suitable for the purpose.

It was also reported that "if the plan is resorted to of borrowing a large sum of money for establishing the Free Public Library, they consider it would be well to make further enquiries as to any vacant plots of land in the Town available for the purpose of erecting a building on." The Committee decided to ascertain the price for purchasing 'The Baths' building as well as pursuing the possibility of finding land in the town.

At the 25th April Committee meeting 3 more sites were put forward for consideration:

1. The Vestry Hall [in Paradise Road] and its adaptability for the purpose
2. The piece of land at the corner of Eton Street and belonging to Mr. Ravenshaw and on lease to Mr Brewer
3. A property on George Street.

By the next meeting on 7th May, the number of sites to be considered had been reduced to 3 – The Vestry Hall; The College and the vacant plot of land adjacent to the College and facing the Little Green which measured 130ft by 50ft. The Town Surveyor – Mr Brunton - was requested to give the Committee a plan for building on this last site as well as the probable cost of alterations to the College and the proposed building behind the Vestry Hall. He reported on 21st May that alterations to the ground floor alone at the College would cost c. £150 and it was also decided not to proceed with the Vestry site. The Committee therefore recommended that the Vestry should go ahead with the site next to the College. The new building would provide a Newsroom; Reading room; Ladies Room; Librarian's Office; workroom and lavatories on the ground floor. The First floor would provide 2 sitting rooms; 3 bedrooms; kitchen and scullery for the accommodation of the librarian. The price for the land was £1000; the cost of the building was estimated at £1,600 and fittings would be £400.

The Vestry approved both the purchase of the land and the library plans on 7th July and by October had received permission of both the Local Government Board and the Treasury to raise £3,000 to pay for the land and the building. In March 1880 they decided to raise

£1,000 by issuing 20 debentures of £50 each, payable within 20 years and paying interest of 4% per annum. The other £2,000 would be raised by a mortgage with interest not exceeding 4½ per cent.

At the beginning of May adverts appeared in *The Builder* and the local papers inviting tenders for building the library and by the closing date at the end of the month 11 had been received, ranging in price from £1,970 to £2,360. The lowest tender – of £1,970 – from J.J. Osborne of Turnham Green was accepted.

On 16th June 1880 the following advertisement appeared:

“The Committee are prepared to receive applications, to be endorsed ‘Librarianship’ and forwarded to me before the 1st July next. Salary £120 per annum, with unfurnished residence in the new building about to be erected, coals, gas, and water. The Librarian will be required to devote his whole time to the duties of the office, and to act as secretary. State age, qualifications, present position, and previous employment, whether married or not.”

250 people applied for the post which was given to Alfred Cotgreave, formerly Librarian of Wednesbury, who is remembered today as an inventor and promoter of library equipment and methods. The library was opened on 18th June 1881 by Countess Russell. The opening hours for the newsroom was from 9am to 10pm except Sundays, Good Friday and Christmas Day with the Lending Library open from 10am till 9pm except Sundays, Fridays, Christmas Day and Bank Holidays. Membership was open to “persons Resident in, Employed in, or Rated for the Parish of Richmond.” It had a stock of 7,100 books of which 2,000 were donated and readers were entitled to select one book from the indicator board and to keep it for one week. The librarian’s accommodation had been reduced by 2 rooms so that they could be used by the public.

The success of the library was instant. Within 3 months, Mr Cotgreave was issuing 350 books a day and was pleading with the committee for an assistant. He was given permission to appoint a boy at 4s a week. Within a short time it became apparent that the building was much too small and it was extended by 45 feet towards Quadrant Road at the back; the extension was opened on 3rd August 1886 by Princess Mary Adelaide who was accompanied by her husband, the Duke of York, and her daughter, Princess Mary – the future Queen Mary and consort of King George V.

Mr Cotgreave did not remain long enough to attend this opening, having been appointed as the Librarian at Wandsworth. His place had been taken by Frank Pacy who was appointed in 1885. With the small population of the town and the restriction of the 1d rate, finances proved extremely difficult and various schemes such as a voluntary rate, a monthly shilling club and benefit performances at local halls were used to supplement the income.

On 7th March 1887, the Parochial Library Committee had to face the fact that it was now redundant. The library part of its activities was wound up and the books presented to the Free Library. Mr Pacy was appointed Librarian of the Parish of St. George’s, Hanover Square in 1891 and was succeeded at Richmond by Albert Atkins Barkas from Birmingham.

1893 saw the opening of branch libraries at Kew and Petersham, but they were not successful and closed in 1897 and 1899 respectively. By 1905 the library's accommodation was again woefully inadequate and this time it was remedied by the purchase of 'The Cottage' – the house adjacent to the library. The Librarian's living quarters were moved to the house and the Reference Library was opened. The renovated library was opened by the mayor, Cllr. W. Sandover, on 16th May 1906 when children's books were made available for the first time.

A.A. Barkas served as Librarian for 30 years and is remembered today for establishing the Local History Collection and being instrumental in obtaining the fine photographic survey of the town taken c.1900. The Local Studies Library at the Old Town Hall is named the 'Albert Barkas Room for Local Studies' in his memory. He committed suicide in 1921 – he was found in Richmond Park with a bullet wound to the head and died 2 days later without regaining consciousness - and A. Cecil Piper, Librarian of Winchester, was appointed in his place.

The opportunity was taken at this time to dispense with the librarian's accommodation and to use the space for a lecture room and book stores. Piper was responsible for the introduction of the Dewey Decimal Classification system and, after 4 years of battling with certain members of the Committee, was successful in introducing open-access into the Lending Library. This meant that the large main hall had to be divided into two with the front portion being used for newspapers and magazines and the rear for the lending library. The Lord Chancellor, Lord Cave, opened the adapted Lending Library on 26th November 1924. On 22nd December the Children's Library (in what had originally been the lecture hall) was opened in The Cottage by the schoolgirl mayoress, Bettie Howitt – it was upstairs, not very practical for a Children's Library! No further developments were made before the outbreak of the war.

The library service continued throughout the Second World War, only interrupted by a break of a week at the end of November 1940 when the buildings were hit by incendiary bombs. The roofs were set on fire and many of the books were damaged by water. The Local Collection Room - housing files of newspapers, maps and prints – was one of the main areas to suffer, as was the Newspaper Room which was not reopened until 18th June 1943, after much agitation owing to the lack of newspaper and magazine provision. During this period, the library gained some 'branches' as collections of books were deposited in the communal air raid shelters.

A. Cecil Piper retired in 1947 [he died in 1977] having kept the war-time service going despite losing many of his staff to war service. He was succeeded by Gilbert Turner who became only the 3rd librarian at Richmond over a period of 82 years.

The first significant development of the post-war years occurred in 1947 with the introduction of open-access to the Reference Library and the appointment of a Reference Librarian. The lending library was refurbished, the old high bookcases giving way to shelves. The only addition to the shelving in the lending library since then was in May 1978 when some of the shelving from the temporary library in Parkshot was introduced. In 1961 the Reference Library was extended into what had been a small exhibition room.

1965 saw the reorganisation of London local government and the amalgamation of the Boroughs of Richmond, Twickenham and Barnes. Gilbert Turner was appointed the new Borough Librarian and the administrative department of the library service was moved from Richmond Library to Parkshot Rooms in Parkshot. Richmond Reference Library became the central reference library for the new borough. In 1970 the department was relocated to The Retreat in Retreat Road as the Rooms were demolished to make way for a new Magistrates Court on the site.

The Retreat was a large double-fronted house standing in its own grounds. The original house had been built by 1838 and other buildings added to it by 1894. The Council had planned to buy it in 1968 for £50,000 and build a multi-storey carpark on the site, but that idea had been shelved because of local opposition. It was finally bought in 1970 for £40,000. A proposed new Central Library for the borough on The Retreat site was put forward by the Amenities Committee to the Council in November 1970. Again there was much local opposition to the scheme and in 1972 a new plan was submitted to build new Central Reference Library, administration offices and a central book store there and then to rebuilt Richmond Library as a District Library.

In September 1976 the Chief Executive reported to the Amenities Committee that £41,000 was included in the estimates for architects' fees in connection with the proposed new Central Library, but due to current restrictions on capital expenditure, it was unlikely to be built in the foreseeable future. It was therefore suggested that the sum should be used to improve the Reference Library facilities by constructing a first-floor and the provision of fittings at an estimated cost of £22,300. The new mezzanine floor was completed and opened on 9th September 1977.

In January 1978, the building was closed for just over 3 months following a severe outbreak of dry rot found during the previous work – a much reduced lending and reference service was provided in the present Richmond Adult College building in Parkshot (formerly the Richmond County School for Girls).

In the 1980s the whole of the riverside area between Water Lane and Richmond Bridge was redeveloped to a design by Quinlan Terry. In March 1987 the Central Reference Library was opened on the first floor of the Old Town Hall. The Local Studies section was separated from the Reference Library and given its own space on the top floor of the building together with a small museum dedicated to the history of Richmond. The mezzanine was then extended to make a complete floor and in May of that year the Children's and Teenage Library moved into the space. Finally, in September 1995, the Children's library moved downstairs into the area previously occupied by the Reference Library and the first-floor room was divided between an adult study room and a computer hire facility. The latter has now closed and the space is used as a staff training centre.