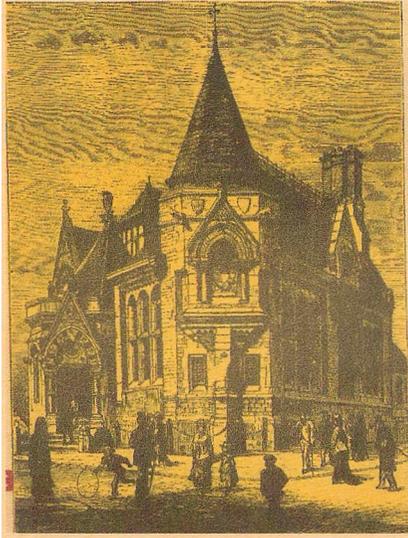


A BRIEF HISTORY OF LIBRARIES IN MACCLESFIELD



Macclesfield Library

From the earliest times the written word has had a profound influence, and because of this has either been treasured or destroyed. Ancient libraries contained scrolls, and the word itself is supposed to have come from 'liber', the inner bark of a tree, which the Romans acknowledged as having been used in the production of early writings.

The Early Years

The earliest reference to a library in connection with Macclesfield, albeit a personal one, is that of John de Macclesfield who created his mini-castle in Mill St. between the years 1391-93, during the reign of Richard II. His will dated 23rd. March 1421 mentions Higden's book entitled 'Polychronicon', which was a history of the world from its creation to 1327.

Ranulf Higden was a monk of St. Werburgh's Abbey, Chester, and his first shorter version was copied several times then added to by others, and was one of the earliest books to be printed by Caxton. In 1352 Higden enlarged his copy, but only two other versions of this are known, one of these being the one owned by John de Macclesfield; this he had lent to the Abbott of St. Werburgh's on 5th Aug. 1416.

So precious was the book that John had included it in his will, evidently to make sure everyone knew where it was, adding "and all my other books and goods be sold by my executors ... "

The first, which could be called a public library, had been provided by one of the Downes family of Pott Shrigley. Geoffrey Downes, a Fellow of Queen's College, Cambridge, whose will is dated 20th June 1492, had organised a lending library for those attending the chapel of Pott Shrigley. Anyone wishing to borrow a book was allowed 13 weeks to read it, but had to make a pledge to keep it safe. Although the books were few in number, and mostly religious, one is intriguing - it was a Wyclif or Lollard Bible.

His idea suggests that many people in the congregation could read. But early books were often beautifully illustrated, in fact works of art, so perhaps those who could not read enjoyed the pictures, which could encourage a desire to learn what was written on the pages, or ensure that their children did have some form of education.

The 18th and 19th Centuries

At present the canvas is blank until about 1770, when the first of the 'modern' libraries in Macclesfield made its appearance. It was housed in a Georgian property on Parsonage (Park) Green and was by subscription. This, by its nature, provided facilities for the educated gentlemen of the town and their families, particularly those in the business community. The building is still extant, but today is home to a partnership of solicitors.

On 1st. March 1811 it was announced that the library had moved to No.7 Back St. (now King Edward St.), next to the Post Office, where books were supplied as usual from 10 a.m. to 1 o'clock and from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. the subscription was 2 guineas each year. The library had an excellent collection, which had gradually increased over 40 years and Mrs. Martin was on duty. The president was Mr. W. Broadhurst.

As modes of travel increased, a rapidly expanding population saw an increased demand for newspapers, so an additional facility appeared, 'The Park Green News Rooms', which were well flourishing by the 1830s, and probably still connected with the old building which became a gentleman's club.

By 1835 the London papers arrived on the day following publication at 9 a.m. Evening papers arrived the next day. The daily morning papers were 'The Times' and " 'Morning Post'; the evening papers, 'The Standard' and 'Globe'. There was a variety of weekly editions, 'Macclesfield Courier & Herald'; both Manchester papers, the 'Guardian' and 'Times', the 'Leeds Mercury', 'Spectator' and not forgetting, 'John Bull'. Pamphlets and magazines were also available. One advantage was that with the advent of more newspapers the Macclesfield Courier began to report more local news and less of that from elsewhere.

The Useful Knowledge Society was finally established in 1835 to encourage further education. At last John Brocklehurst M.P. banker and silk manufacturer, saw his vision taking shape, for education was his great passion. Soon a vast library of hundreds of books on all sorts of subjects was established, but once again it was only available to those who supported or joined its classes.

In January 1837 the Angel Inn in the Market Place was host to the A.G.M. of the subscription library when W. Welsh was elected librarian. In the intervening years the annual subscription had increased to 3 guineas and now it was to be increased further to 4 and a half. The reason was that new premises on Park Green were now available and a large reading room had been 'fitted up'.

Thomas Grimsditch, a Macclesfield solicitor and future Tory M.P. wrote to the local paper on 15th June 1839 setting out the reason, with particular regard to education, why a Public Library was necessary for the town. But it took a further decade for legislation to be passed enabling corporations to

levy a rate for library buildings; the Act was passed in 1850. This was on the assumption by the government that private individuals would donate books.

A further 5 years produced a wider ranging Act, but as always the population of Macclesfield was reluctant to see a rate increase, and assumed that the town was well endowed with facilities for those who were interested. Even after a meeting chaired by the then mayor, Henry Brocklehurst in 1861, the answer was still a resounding 'No!'

Finally David Chadwick, Liberal M.P. paid for the building himself on Park Green (now the Registry Office), designed by the local architect A.J. Stevens. It was opened 27th May 1876 with the usual fanfare on such occasions. In due course its interior was considerably altered and enlarged and, as shown in 1914, the facility of reading newspapers was now part of the service.

The Library Committee met in March of that year and noted new books purchased and some donated. The question of a further provision of a newspaper stand in the Men's Reading Room was referred to a sub-committee and the Borough Surveyor was asked to submit the cost. The Committee also decided (and here one must assume that it was an all male committee) that the Reading Room and the Ladies' Reading Room should be closed Easter Monday, but the Men's Reading Room could remain open until 8 p.m. if the Chairman was able to arrange for a responsible man to look after the place!

The final move was of course in 1994, yet still modern facilities continue to outgrow the building. Now alongside books and newspapers, photocopying machines and DVDs etc. are representatives of the ever-increasing computer age. What surprises John de Macclesfield, Geoffrey Downes, John Brocklehurst, David Chadwick and all the rest would have if they were to return now.

Information compiled by Dorothy Bentley Smith.