Yorkshire Village Libraries.¹

IN 1837, the Mechanics' Institutes of Yorkshire were embraced in a Union to aid the Voluntary Work of Education. In the Institutes thus united a large proportion of the elementary instruction was done; the night schools in the institute comprising many thousands of students. The success attending the Union encouraged the Council to attempt to cultivate a love of reading in the villages of Yorkshire, and a special effort was made to establish the Yorkshire Village Library. Prince Albert entered into the idea with great interest, and at once sent 211 volumes to assist in starting the scheme. Sir Edward Baines, Mr. James Hole, the popular Vicar of Leeds (Dr. Hook), and Mr. Thomas Dawson, President of the Leeds Institution, actively co-operated. In a short time a central library was established, and visits, in many instances repeated again and again, have been paid by the Organising Secretary to nearly a thousand villages in Yorkshire. As the years went on the work sensibly increased, and it was soon found that, unaided by local rate or national grant, it was exceedingly difficult to sustain the work.

Her Majesty the Queen, with the sympathy she has always shown in every good work, from time to time sent special donations to the fund, in several cases selecting the books to be read by the poor villagers. At first it was difficult to find readers for the books. Now the claimants are so numerous that the supply becomes every year less adequate to the demand. The central store now occupies a suite of six rooms, and contains nearly 40,000 volumes. Of these 8,000 are always in circulation, and 2,000 volumes are always under repair. A person is daily engaged in the offices to renew the books. The boxes necessary for the transmission of the books number nearly 300, and the cost of each box, supplied by tender, is 10s. 6d. The boxes are cloth-lined, iron-bound at the edges, and clamped, fitted with special bolts and screws, able to contain 50 volumes. It has been adopted by the School Board for London and the University of Oxford. Every box of fifty books is accompanied with a tabulated form in which the circulation of the books can be accurately recorded.

¹ Read at the Twentieth Annual Meeting of the Library Association, London, October, 1897.

More than two hundred villages are always receiving books from the Library, and at least one hundred thousand readers are reached.

The most important consideration is the character of the literature sent to the villages. The books most popular with the villagers are Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Kingsley, Jules Verne, Marryat, Mayne Reid, Strange Winter, Edna Lyall, Mrs. Linnæus Banks, Rhoda Broughton, Annie Swan, Sir Walter Besant, Mrs. Henry Wood, Rider Haggard, Mrs. Oliphant, and Mrs. Hungerford. Of some of the more voluminous authors, only the very best works are bought. It is found that Scott and Dickens still retain a supreme place in the estimation of the villagers. It must be remembered that the readers in these remote and thinly peopled villages embrace every variety of the working population—ploughmen, boatmen, quarrymen, colliers, weavers, masons, and mechanics.

One room, containing three thousand volumes, is entirely devoted to works of a more solid kind—Science, especially text books on the textile industries, history, biography, poetry, travels, &c. This room is placed at the disposal of students from any of the affiliated institutes entirely free of charge, and into every box sent out some of the more serious works are included in order to encourage more serious reading.

To the more distant and sparsely peopled villages all hope of the adoption of the Public Libraries Act is out of the question, nor is it possible to group them, as the distances they are apart from each other renders circulation impossible, nor are the Parish Councils likely to be of any immediate or permanent use. Five hundred and twenty special appeals have been made to the Parish Councils of Yorkshire. Not a single response has followed, nor has any attempt been made to found a library.

Under these circumstances no other means of reaching these villages but an organisation similar to that of the Yorkshire Village Libraries is possible, and the work can never be made a commercial matter, or be anything but a partially benevolent institution.

The annual cost of the 200 volumes sent to each village is about £3. The money paid by each village is 21s. a year, and to this has to be added the expense of carriage, amounting to about 8s. more. The total annual cost of working the Yorkshire Village Libraries may be roughly estimated at £600.

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