The Free Public Library, Wandsworth.¹

THE Wandsworth Public Library is interesting, as being the second in the metropolitan district founded under the Public Libraries Acts 1855-87. The Westminster Public Library has had a much longer existence, the Acts having been adopted on 10th March, 1856.

Wandsworth is both a manufacturing and residential suburb of London. On the Wandle are breweries, large corn mills, dye works, match factories, besides other important trades, including the manufacture of paper. As librarians, we are interested in the finished product, and here are made about 150 miles per week of paper for the *Times*, being about a quarter of that used, besides all the paper on which is printed both editions of the *Illustrated London News*. As a residential suburb East Hill and West Hill are covered with houses, from the modest villa to the stately mansion. George Eliot once lived here, and not far from the library live Henty and "John Strange Winter" (Mrs. Stannard). These facts are mentioned to show that all classes are to be found in the thriving parish of Wandsworth.*

The idea of the establishment of a Free Library in Wandsworth originated with the Vestry Clerk, Mr. E. E. Greville, who thought that it might perhaps be accommodated under the same roof as the New Town Hall. Early in 1881 Mr. Greville made enquiries of the librarians of all the public libraries in the United Kingdom, and obtained a mass of valuable information. At the Vestry meeting on October 27th, 1881, at the suggestion of Mr. Greville, Dr. Hooper moved for a committee to enquire into the working of the Public Libraries Acts, and the desirability of adopting them for Wandsworth. This committee reported,

¹ Read at the March Meeting of the L.A.U.K., 1888.

* Area, 2,478 acres. Inhabited Houses, 4,255. Population in 1881, 28,004; now estimated at 46,000. Rateable value in 1887, £233,757. 1d. in £ produced about £752 in 1887-8.

March 30th, 1882, in favour of adopting the Acts, and that the Town Hall would suffice for the library at its commencement. This report was received and adopted by the Vestry, but no further action was taken. Mr. Greville, however, persevered and gradually formed a large and representative committee, which met at the Town Hall on June 12th, 1883, Dr. Hooper being in the chair. A sub-committee was then appointed, which took the requisite steps to obtain a poll of the ratepayers, and caused a circular, which Mr. Greville had drawn up, to be left at every house in the parish. A public meeting at the Town Hall was called for the 2nd of July, and a resolution in favour of the library was passed. The poll was taken July 3rd, 1883, when the numbers were declared to be :—

For	-	-	1550
Against	-	-	482

Majority for the library 1068

On the 9th of August, 1883, the Vestry appointed the following gentlemen as Commissioners:—Dr. G. D. Longstaff, Mr. John Bell, Dr. J. Harward Hooper, Messrs. W. R. Selwood, G. W. Barnard, W. J. Gilks, Hy. Ellis, Chas. Woodhams, and Jas. Sinclair. The Commissioners elected Dr. G. D. Longstaff as their chairman, while Mr. Greville kindly acted as interim secretary, and conducted all legal business.

In November, 1883, a concert was given at the Town Hall by Miss Lilian Greville, and the sum of £26 was handed over by her towards the library funds.

It was soon found that the Town Hall would not afford sufficient accommodation, and could only be enlarged at a heavy cost. At length the Commissioners decided that Putney Lodge, lately belonging to Mr. Herman Rücker, was the most convenient and by far the cheapest available site. It was accordingly purchased, June 6th, 1884, and subsequently, 13th August, 1885, a piece of land adjoining was also bought with a view to securing light and giving space for the additions, the ultimate need of which the success of the library has already proved. The alterations required in the building were carried out by Mr. Parsons, under the superintendence of Professor Roger Smith. The internal fittings were as far as possible made by workmen directly paid by the Commissioners.

The Commissioners engaged Mr. Alfred Cotgreave as librarian.

The reading rooms were thrown open on the 21st of March, 1885, giving all comers free access to some 320 newspapers and periodicals, of which no less than 218 were presented; separate rooms being set apart for ladies. The attendance was unexpectedly large. On several Saturdays the persons who entered the building were counted, and the numbers varied from 1,014 to 1,610. With these numbers the rooms were, of course, most inconveniently crowded. When first opened one room was set apart as a Recreation Room, in which chess, draughts, and backgammon might be played. It was, however, soon found that a few boys took possession of the room, and made themselves a nuisance by unruly behaviour and gambling. After imposing various restrictions, with little result, the Commissioners were reluctantly compelled to allow no games but chess, and to use the room as a supplementary reading room.

The selection and purchase of books next occupied the attention of the Commissioners, and in this part of their work they received considerable assistance from Dr. G. D. Longstaff, who devoted much time to the subject. Lists were prepared and sent to the leading second-hand booksellers, and by this means the majority of the books were bought on very advantageous terms. Besides liberal gifts of money, amounting to nearly £600, as many as 2,828 volumes were presented. Thus towards the end of the summer of 1885 the Commissioners found themselves in possession of between 6,000 and 7,000 volumes, and Mr. Cotgreave was instructed to prepare a catalogue. Subsequently he prepared a "Key to the Indicator" for the departments of fiction and juvenile literature.

On the 1st October, 1885, the Lending and Reference Libraries were opened by the Lord Mayor, who dined in the library, and afterwards addressed a meeting in the Town Hall. It was very soon evident that, as in the case of the reading rooms, the library was used beyond the most sanguine expectations of its promoters; and, indeed, so far as reports and statistics can prove the point, it would appear that in Wandsworth the Free Library movement has proved at least as great a success as in any other town—certainly a greater success than in many.

In October, 1886, Mr. A. Cotgreave resigned, and Mr. Cecil T. Davis, of the Reference Department of the Birmingham Free Library, was selected out of a very large number of candidates, as his successor.

In 1886 the Local Government Board required the payment

of £2,500 borrowed on security of the freehold, as well as the overdraft at the bank, and sanctioned the borrowing of £3,700 on security of the rates, and repayable in thirty years.

The year 1887 was an eventful one. The opening of the handsome reading room, the gift of the chairman, Dr. Longstaff, by the Baroness Burdett-Coutts, on March 12th, was a notable event, not only in the history of the library, but in that of the town. This munificent gift, in the fiftieth year of his residence in the parish, is a fitting memorial of Her Majesty's Jubilee. It was built by Mr. Parsons, in accordance with designs prepared by Prof. Roger Smith, and has not only been deservedly admired, but has proved well suited to its purpose, and is evidently appreciated by the public. In the following October the Wandsworth Book Club filled in the space over the apse with ornamental encaustic tiles, on which the words "The Longstaff Reading Room" stand out boldly. At the same time the other Commissioners commemorated their chairman's generosity by placing a brass tablet over the entrance door which is inscribed as follows :—

"This Reading Room was presented to the parish of Wandsworth in H.M. Queen Victoria's Jubilee Year, by George Dixon Longstaff, M.D., First Chairman of the Library Commissioners, during the 50th year of his residence in the parish, and the 88th of his age."

In November, 1887, the commissioners placed a selection of works, such as the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, *Dictionary of National Biography*, with dictionaries, directories, &c., on open shelves in the Reference Library, so that readers might consult them without filling in a form; the plan has proved very successful.

No less than 1,481 volumes, many of them new books of great value, were presented during 1887.

The library now¹ contains 10,058 volumes—a respectable number for so young an institution, but far short of the demand of the numerous readers. 1,290 new readers' tickets have been issued during the year. In the Lending Library 91,878 volumes were issued during the twelve months ending June 20th, 1887. It is gratifying to learn that while the novels are more popular than ever, the demand for works of a more solid character has increased in a larger proportion. Twenty-three volumes were lost during 1887, mostly through the borrowers leaving the town,

¹ March, 1888.

but eight of them were paid for. It is a matter of great regret that eight volumes were stolen from the Reference Library early in the same year; the thief has never been discovered, but additional precautions were taken and nothing further has been missed.

It may fairly be taken as a proof of the success of the Wandsworth Library, that since its establishment the following neighbouring parishes have adopted the Public Libraries Acts—Wimbledon, 1885; Fulham, 1886; Lambeth, 1886; Battersea, 1887; Chelsea, 1887; Clapham, 1887, and Putney, 1887.

Six of the members of the original commission are still sitting, of the other three, two resigned through leaving the parish, and the third declined to offer himself for re-election.

The house converted to the uses of the library formed the mansion to a large estate, and one of the former owners, Mr. Sigismund Rücker, was devoted to horticulture. His hothouses were famed for the beauty, the rarity and variety of their contents—notably the orchids, four of which were named after himself. Alas! the onward march of the great metropolis has overtaken this fine estate; the orchids are gone, and there only remains the tall auracaria, the wisteria, whose lovely clusters of mauve flowers drape the Reference Library, the magnolias and some climbing plants. A few rhododendrons are all that are left of the magnificent hedge that was one of the glories of the place. The estate has shared the fate of many others in the suburbs and is now being covered with street after street of houses; the parterres of bright flowers, the greenhouses and hothouses filled with exotics have all been swept away by the advancing tide of bricks and mortar.

The house lies back some twenty yards off the main road from London to Kingston. It is approached by a semicircular drive, and somewhat hidden from the road by a cluster of trees—elms, whitethorn, and holly. It stands at the corner of a new road, Santos Road, and close by was a milestone, "6½ miles to Whitehall and 7 to the Exchange." A prominent object is the east wing, which the Longstaff Reading Room forms. The building is two-storied in front, the ground floor being devoted to library purposes, while two of the rooms on the first floor are reserved for ladies.

Passing through the porch you find facing you a glass case, which contains the books recently added, and a selection from the shelves, the librarian taking care to keep the interest of his

readers from flagging by putting on view works on any subject which may from time to time be much discussed. To the left are baize-covered doors leading to the Lending and Reference Libraries, alongside the case is the staircase to the ladies' rooms and librarian's apartments, and on the right are the swinging glazed doors to the Longstaff Reading Room. Near the entrance door is a constant supply of filtered water.¹

The Longstaff Reading Room is a handsome apartment, being 70 feet long, 25 feet wide, and 26 feet to the apex of the roof. It is built of white bricks with white stone dressings. The roof is waggon-shaped and made of pine stained in two colours. The walls are coloured terra cotta, with ivory white cornice and Corinthian pilasters. The wooden dado, which is 6 feet high, is in panels, stained alternately satin-wood and walnut. At the end of the room nearest to West Hill there is a semi-circular apse which is lighted by five windows, and the rest of the room is lighted by ten large windows. Artificial light is supplied by five pendant self-ventilating Wenham gas lamps. The heating is effected by hot water pipes, over which the cold air from outside passes before entering the room. The windows are on a patent ventilating principle. The flooring is of wood blocks embedded in pitch laid on concrete. On the end wall of the room opposite the apse is a clock, the gift of a watchmaker in the parish. On the same wall are placed day by day the contents bills of the leading London dailies. A double Cotgreave newspaper rack is between the first two windows, and between each of the others is a newspaper stand. Down the middle of the room are tables on which lie the papers in covers, the monthly magazines lying on the table in the apse. Austrian bent wood chairs complete the furnishing of the room. Readers are requested by means of notice blocks to keep all papers on their proper tables. Two copies of the London dailies are taken, but there are only stands for one copy of each, so that the second copy lies on the table. It is an advantage in a free public reading room to have the papers on stands rather than on tables, as they can be used by more than one at a time. Both cardboard and Cotgreave solid leather reading cases are in use; on several of the former the outside cover of the magazine has been placed: readers can thus find the magazines more easily.

¹ Now removed, as the privilege was abused.

Retracing our steps we pass into the Lending Library, where is the Cotgreave Indicator. Without an indicator the work of issuing books for home reading would not be effected with anything like the ease, rapidity, economy, and general satisfaction that is now experienced. With the Indicator a day or issue book is used.

In that which was formerly the conservatory is the public catalogue, and as the catalogue does not yet fill the frame, the rest of the space is utilized by exhibiting local views. On the walls are ordnance maps of the parish and district on various scales.

The Reference Reading Room is entered from the conservatory. This room is beautifully painted and gilded, a not disagreeable reminiscence of the former occupants of the house. There are three large mirrors and a white marble mantelpiece, over which is a clock, also a gift. On the walls are hung maps. Funds have not allowed of the erection of bookcases yet, but a Commissioner has kindly given one, and a bookcase from the old committee room has been placed here.

Behind the Indicator is the book store, or Lending Library. The books are ranged in classes, but the numbering is consecutive, gaps being left for additions. Beyond is the committee room, against the walls of which are shelved the rest of the Reference Library books.

On the first floor over the Lending Library and hall are two ladies' rooms; these call for no further comment except that they are well patronised.

The room formerly used as Reference Library is now the committee room and librarian's room.

I am indebted for much information respecting the library to the first and second annual reports, which, with the Catalogue and Key to Indicator (classes F and J), are all the publications of the library. A new edition of the Catalogue and Key to the Indicator are in hand. Dr. G. D. Longstaff issued in 1885 *Notes on the Contents of the Wandsworth Public Library*.

CECIL T. DAVIS, *Librarian*.

P.S.—I am happy to report that since this paper was read before the Library Association, the affairs of the library have materially improved.—C. T. D.