

History of the Public Library Movement in Bristol.¹

THE city and county of Bristol enjoys the prestige of having, in the year 1613, established the first public library in the United Kingdom after the Reformation.

The writer of the article on "Libraries," in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, has wrongly attributed this position to the Chetham Library, Manchester, which was not in existence till forty years later. Were, however, priority of date questioned, it could be shown that a public library existed in Bristol early in the fifteenth century, which was maintained by a religious guild called the Kalendars. This guild, according to Walford's *Antiquarian*, was one of the oldest fraternities in England, dating from the year 700. To its care was committed the custody of the Archives of the city, and it was the office of the guild to keep a monthly register of local events and public Acts. The Kalendars were also a guild of literature, and the custodians of the *Public Library*.

Barrett, the Bristol historian, has recorded the fact that "every festival day at two hours before nine, and for two hours after *free access* and recess may be granted to all willing to enter for the sake of instruction; and the prior, or librarian, if duly required, shall lay open doubtful and obscure places of Scripture to all that ask him, according to the best of his knowledge, and shall read a *public lecture* every week in the said library, according to the appointment of the Bishop of Worcester." The library was situated over the north aisle of All Saints' Church; and we learn that three catalogues were to be kept, one to remain with the Dean of Augustinian canons (whose fourteenth century church is now the Bristol Cathedral), another with the mayor of the city for the time being, and the third with the prior who fulfilled the duties of librarian. The latter, for his attention to the library, was paid annually, by the Guild of Kalendars, the sum of ten pounds in quarterly portions. "If he absented himself from his duties for some honest cause, he was to declare the reason to be approved or not by the Bishop or the Mayor, so that

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he be not absent more than a month altogether in the year unless for some urgent cause to be accepted as sufficient by the Bishop or Mayor; and then, in his absence, the senior brother would have the keeping of the library." It was enjoined by the bishop that there should be a due collation of all the books with the catalogues by the dean, the prior, and another appointed by the mayor, between the Feast of St. Michael and All Saints, and if it should happen that through the neglect of the prior some book should be carried out of the library, or in any way alienated or stolen, the prior was to be answerable for the book under a penalty of forty shillings above its actual value; and if he were unable to restore the book then he was to pay its value and forty shillings to the mayor, and the rest in provision of chains for the books or otherwise for the benefit of the library.

The library was destroyed by fire in the year 1466, and the whole of the contents, with the catalogue, perished.

A century and a-half later, viz., in the year 1613, the following minute was recorded in the Minutes of the Council of Bristol:—
"It is this daye agreed that if Mr. Roberte Redwoode will give his Lodge adjoyning to the Towne Wall neere the Marsh of Bristol, to the Mayor and Commonalty to be converted to a Librayre, or place to put bookes for the furtherance of Learninge, then the same shal be thankfully accepted, and that then there shal be a dore made through the wall there on such sorte as shal be thought conveniente by the Surveyors of the landes of the Cytie, and Mr. John Hopkins, Aldⁿ. Mr. Robert Aldworth, late Mayor, and Hierome Ham, Towne Clerke; to passe from thence into the Marsh then, and that such bookes as shal be given to the Cytie, by the reverende father in God the Lord Archbishop of Yorke, or any other well disposed pson for the furnishinge of a librayre shal be thankfully accepted and preserved in the place aforesayed."

The library was opened to the public in the year 1615, under which date the following entry appears in the City Records:—
"This year was erected and builded the Library in the Marsh, Doctor Toby Mathews and Robert Redwood 'was' the founders thereof, and Richard Williams, Vicar of S. Leonard's, was the first Maker or Keeper thereof."

In regard to the history of the founders, the first-named Tobias Mathews, Archbishop of York, was the son of a Bristol shopkeeper, and was born in Bristol in 1546. He gave a considerable portion of his own private library "for the benefit of

his native city by the dissemination of knowledge and for the purpose of founding a Library of sound divinity and other learning for the use of the Aldermen and Shopkeepers." Many of these books may be readily identified by his handwriting and autograph on the title-page.¹ Of Robert Redwood there is little to record beyond the fact that he was a generous benefactor to the city. In addition to the gift of the library building, various bequests are recorded. Amongst others, £10 "to the Library in Bristol to purchase books to be used there." To the six preachers of the word of God in Bristol "to purchase books" the sum of 40s. each; and to the Church of St. Leonard, "to purchase a pott to serve at the Communion table there and to no other purpose," £8. He ordained that the Vicar of St. Leonard's, in whose parish he resided when in Bristol, should be librarian. Accordingly, the Rev. Richard Williams, vicar of that church, was appointed by the Corporation, the first librarian, at a salary of 40s. a year. This gentleman was succeeded, in 1631, by the Rev. Richard Pownel, Rector of St. John. The growth of the Bristol Library, even in those early days, cannot be doubted, for in 1634 appears another entry in the Council Records. "That out of a love for learning and desire to preserve the books £25 should be expended." This amount, it appears, was subsequently increased to £35. The Rev. Richard Pownel held the office of librarian until 1671, when the Rev. Samuel Crossman, Vicar of St. Nicholas, was appointed. The latter did not remain long in office, for in 1674 the Rev. N. Penwarne, D.D., succeeded him. The Rev. Samuel Paine, another Vicar of St. Leonard's, was the next librarian; and it was ordered that he was to have "the Library house to reside in during his continuing Vicar, to put the premises in repair, and keep and leave them so."

Six years later, an interesting fact is recorded in the following entry:—"Paid Thomas Jackson, Ironmonger, for fifteen dozen and a half of book-chains for the Library, £3 17s. 6d."

In the year 1656 an Act of Parliament was obtained for powers to erect a second public library in the centre of the city, on the site of the present Council House. Mr. Tovey, in his *History of the City Library*, has quoted from a Bristol document,

¹ This collection is of considerable interest, including, as it does, many rare works of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. A special catalogue of these is in course of preparation.

dated April 1st, 1656, as follows:—"Whereas there is a very small church and parish situated in the centre of the city called St. Ewen's or St. Advoen's, consisting of but twenty and two families, and in distance from two other churches but the breadth of a street, there not being any maintenance for a preaching minister belonging thereunto, and may with conveniency be united to another parish; and *whereas there is a great want of a library within the city for public use* and propagation of learning, it is ordered that Mr. Aldworth, now burgess in Parliament, be desired to use his best endeavour in Parliament, that the said church, with the appurtenances, may be given to the Mayor and Commonalty of this city to be employed in that use or other public uses." Mr. Taylor, in his pamphlet on the *Earliest Free Libraries of England*, adds: "The Act for the required conversion was passed in the year 1656. This we are enabled to point out by the kind information of Colonel Bramble, who possesses a copy of the Act in question, and we quote it as being the first instance of an enactment of Parliament for instituting a public free library. And whereas there is a certain church within the said cytty called by the name of St. Owin's, otherwise Audoen's, which for the smalles of it and little use made theareoff, may be conveniently united to the parish church of All Sts. [the church of the Kalendars, and situate opposite St. Ewen's, in the same street] being very fitt and near theareunto. And the said parish church of St. Owinge, being very convenient to be converted into a comon and public librerary for the use of the said cytty, it shall be lawful, &c." "Be it also enacted by the authority aforesaid, that it shall and may be lawfull to and for the person and persons named and appoynted to make the sd. assynments by virtue of this and the said Act, according to the powers thearein lymitted, to take order that the same ch. of St. Ewin's be converted and ymployed to and for a public library within the said cytty." This Act however, was never carried into effect. St. Ewin's Church was, in 1787, consolidated with Christ Church, and then taken down, the present Council House occupying its site.

After many years' consideration the Council determined to rebuild the library, and, in 1740, the present building, without the wing, was erected, the Rev. Samuel Jackson, Vicar of St. Leonard's, holding the office of librarian. He was succeeded by the Rev. William Pritchard, who was followed by the Rev. Thomas Redding. Mr. Benjamin Donn was the next librarian

appointed (the rule of selecting only clergymen for the office having been temporarily broken through). He remained until 1773. In that year a private subscription library was founded under the title of the Bristol Library Society. Upon their application permission for the free use of the rooms was granted them by the Bristol Council. Encouraged by their success the private society further moved for the appointment of the Rev. Thomas Johnes as librarian, in the place of Mr. Donn, which was also granted; and the following rules for administering the affairs of the library were adopted:—

“That the librarian live in the library house.

“That he attend in the library room from ten in the morning till one, on Tuesdays and Thursdays; and from six in the evening till nine, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

“That he keep a regular catalogue of the books that have been, or may be, given to the City Library, distinct from that of the Library Society.

“That he do not suffer any one to damage or deface any of the books in the library.

“That he do not suffer anyone to take away from the library any of the city books without leave first obtained in writing from ———, and in such case, that he take care that the same be returned in a reasonable time; if damaged to make a report thereof.

“That at the end of each year he report to the Mayor and Aldermen what books (if any) have been given to the City Library, and by whom.

“That he have some mark or stamp whereby to distinguish the City Library books from those of the Library Society.

“That on any damage or accident happening to any part of the library house he immediately acquaint therewith.

“That in the winter he keep a constant fire in the library room on those days that he attends there, and be allowed for that and other necessary expenses ——— over and above his salary of forty shillings per year.

“That these rules be fixed up in some conspicuous part of the library.”

On the resignation of the Rev. T. Johnes, in 1809, the Rev. James Carter was appointed. He was succeeded in 1815 by Mr. John Peace, who retained his position until the removal of the Library Society with their books in 1855 to private rooms at the top of Park Street.

From this time the library resumed its primary character as a *public* library for the citizens as intended by the founders. With the appointment of the late Mr. George Pryce, in 1856, to the office of City Librarian, it entered upon a new existence. With a limited income derived solely from an annual grant of the Corporation, Mr. Pryce contrived within a few years to add considerably to the library. He also collected upwards of 1,500 volumes and pamphlets relating to Bristol history

as the nucleus of a valuable local collection. The quaint book-plate and autograph of the donor in many of the volumes denote the fact that this worthy librarian collected and purchased himself the greater portion of the collection which he presented to the city. Although he did not live to see the Public Libraries Act adopted, Mr. Pryce may truly be said to be one of the early pioneers of the movement in Bristol. Upon Mr. Pryce's death, in 1868, the late Mr. J. F. Nicholls was appointed City Librarian, and six years later he had the satisfaction of seeing the Public Libraries Act adopted and carried through by the Town Council, headed by the late Sir Joseph Weston, without opposition.

In May, 1875, the Council resolved upon the purchase of the building previously known as the St. Philip's Library Institute. The year following, this was opened as a branch library. [A new building more worthy of the city, and proportionate to the needs of this large district, it is satisfactory to add, is now on the point of completion.] Following the opening of the St. Philip's Library the old City Library in King Street was re-opened to the citizens as the Central Public Library, with reference and lending departments and news room. From the time of its re-opening it was manifest that the old building, which doubtless was sufficient in its accommodation for the readers and students of an earlier period, was totally inadequate for the altered conditions of the present day. The attendances which, in the previous half-century, might have been counted by a score of persons at most, had now to be reckoned by thousands.

In 1876 premises were purchased in King Square for a branch library and reading rooms for the north district, and opened to the public with about 10,000 volumes. The same year the Libraries Committee secured premises at Bedminster, and a well-appointed library of about 9,000 volumes with a spacious reading room was opened for the south district.

In 1883 occurred the death of Mr. J. F. Nicholls, F.S.A., the chief librarian. Mr. Nicholls had achieved great success in starting and developing the public libraries in Bristol, and his loss to the city was a considerable one. The same year Mr. John Taylor, who for many years had been the much-respected librarian of the proprietary museum and library, was appointed chief librarian. This office he held until his death in 1893. Mr. Taylor earned a considerable reputation by his skill

and knowledge in archæological matters. He produced, jointly with Mr. Nicholls, *Bristol, Past and Present*, and contributed frequently to periodical literature.

It was not until 1885 that the burgesses of Redland and Clifton were able to secure in their own districts similar privileges to those already in existence in other parts of the City. A well-chosen site in the Whiteladies Road was built upon, and a handsome library containing about 13,000 volumes with reading and news rooms, was opened by the Mayor and Corporation in the summer of that year.

At the opening ceremony a member of the Corporation (Mr. W. R. Barker) said that Bristol was not behind the age in respect to the public library movement but rather in the van, and in apt reference to an article on "What a penny will buy," written years ago by Charles Dickens, alluded to the fact that "in the public library movement, the power of the penny was illustrated in a most excellent and advantageous way. They could visit their libraries one after another, and when asked what were the working expenses of the establishment, they could reply that it was all covered by a penny."

The circulation of books for the first month after the opening of the Redland Branch reached a total of 7,500 volumes. Since then the issue has nearly doubled itself, reaching an average of 500 daily.

The movement being so successful in the Redland district, a library was opened for Clifton and Howells (making the fifth branch) in 1888. On this occasion, the disused church of St. Peter's, Clifton Wood, was brought into requisition for the purposes of a branch library and purchased by the Libraries Committee. The idea once expressed by a member of our association that the cathedral of the future would be the public library, has in this instance very nearly been realised—with results, however, that are probably scarcely so poetical as practical in character.

The Bristol Museum and Library, a proprietary institution, had for many years been in a languishing condition owing to lack of funds. In 1892, with the consent of the shareholders, and aided by the generosity of Sir Charles Wathen, who discharged the heavy mortgage debt, the entire property was transferred to the city. The library is a most valuable and extensive one, numbering about 50,000 volumes, and includes the entire collection of the Bristol Library Society, which, as already

stated, was originally formed in 1773. This would seem to be the only right and proper termination to a library that, while retaining most exclusively its private character to the end, had benefited so long in the past by the generous treatment of the Bristol Corporation.

The number of volumes in the Bristol Public Libraries, including the Museum Library, now reaches a total of close upon 150,000 volumes. The old City Library in King Street, although unequal to modern requirements in many respects as a Central Library, still has more than an antiquarian interest to the visitor, when it is remembered that such men as Coleridge, Southey, Walter Savage Landor, Sir Humphry Davy, and others of lesser note were constant readers in the library at the end of the last century. Readers and students of to-day have to mount the same old oak staircase, and in doing so, literally tread in the footsteps of those bygone celebrities. The finely carved mantelpiece by Grinling Gibbons, together with the oak book presses and panelling have been retained, thus maintaining the character of a typical last century library. The library, as may be anticipated, is rich in early printed books, the collection including: Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, printed at Parma in 1481; the *Promptorium Parvulorum*, printed by R. Pinson in 1499; a copy of the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, with Durer's illustrations; Milton's *Paradise Lost*, first edition; and a beautiful copy of the Complutensian Polyglot Bible of Cardinal Ximenes, six volumes, 1514-17 (*not* wanting the fourth volume as has been elsewhere publicly stated). The earliest printed book in the library is a medical work by J. Mesue, printed at Venice in 1479.

Brief reference to the statistics of the public libraries will best show their development since the Public Libraries Act was adopted. In 1876 the total issue of books numbered 74,252, while the attendance in magazine and news rooms numbered 100,000. During last year the total issues had reached to 494,583, exclusive of the books issued to students at the Museum Library; while the attendance in magazine and news rooms reached to close upon two millions.

The Bristol Libraries Committee may be proud of such results, which assuredly indicate their active sympathy in the work of the libraries and confidence in their librarians.

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DISCUSSION.

Mr. JOSEPH GILBERT: I am not competent to decide the question of priority in public libraries. It lies between Bristol and Manchester, and there are only few years between them. I incline to Bristol's arguments, but the question is an open one. I was sorry that in Mr. Mathews' paper so little mention was made of his predecessor, the late Mr. John Taylor. The value of his historical work is undoubted, and the establishment of the different branches of the Bristol Library carried out in his time showed his ability in management. The historical details in this paper remind us of what we heard from his lips in meetings of this Association, and his plan of collecting, in subject-volumes, the magazine articles appearing from time to time, has my heartiest approval, as resur-recting the objects in that cemetery—the magazine volume. Many of these volumes were shown at Nottingham to illustrate a paper I read at the time.

Mr. INKSTER (Battersea): I concur in Mr. Gilbert's tribute to the memory of the late Mr. John Taylor, who belonged to a race of librarians now rapidly disappearing. It is doubtful how far his methods would commend themselves to the "practical" librarian of the present day, whether of the "Indicator" or of the "Free Access" persuasion.

