

History of the Public Library

By Nicola Cornick

THE ORIGINS of the library date back centuries to a time when people first started to keep written records. Societies such as ancient Greece and Rome believed in the ideals of the public library with access for all. Their libraries were housed in architecturally elegant buildings adorned with statues and paintings to reflect the beauty of the literature housed within. A Roman library generally stood next to a temple and consisted of a storage room for the books and a porch on which one might sit to read or recite to an audience.

With the fall of the Roman civilization, the library in the West became the preserve of private collections; monasteries, universities and individuals. The first public library in Europe was the Malatesta Novello Library in Italy, which was established in 1452 by private donation. In America, parish libraries opened across the colonies in the 18th century as part of the Anglican mission. The library founded in Boston between 1711 and 1725 by the Rev. John Checkley is said to have been the first in America. During this period, libraries were also established in Charleston, Annapolis and Philadelphia, and in 1743, a group of Quaker farmers and merchants set up the Darby Free Library in Pennsylvania.

In Britain, it was the circulating libraries of the 18th century that were responsible for making books available to a wider audience. Allan Ramsay opened the first in Edinburgh in 1725, quickly followed by the first one in England in 1728. These were also known as lending libraries or rental libraries and, as the name implies, they were not free. The intention of the owner was to profit from letting the public borrow books for a fee. The subscription could be high, but was cheaper than buying new books. One of the great benefits to a circulating library was that it rented out bestsellers in large numbers, which enabled publishers to increase both readership and earnings.

By the early 19th century, the growing literacy of the British population meant large numbers of readers who wanted to read new material but could not necessarily afford the price of new books. Many circulating libraries were castigated for providing sensationalist novels to a female readership. Georgian and Victorian society feared that people — mainly women and the comparatively ill-educated — would not be able to differentiate between fiction and reality and be provided unrealistic expectations of life.



This simplistic criticism was far from the truth. Many circulating libraries were created for scientific and literary purposes, as well as to provide all kinds of fiction, and those not necessarily “sensationalist” at all.

At this time, many communities across the U.K. and U.S. had libraries situated within a bookshop or newsagent, although sometimes they could be found within a shop that had no connection to books, such as a haberdashery. Books could be borrowed on long-term loan, although eventually the borrowing period was shortened to encourage people to visit more often and spend more money. Mudie’s Circulating Library, founded in 1842, sent boxes of books all over the country to its subscribers.

The first free public library that was supported by taxation was the Peterborough New Hampshire Town Library, founded in 1833. In the U.K., the Public Libraries Act of 1850 allowed local authorities to spend a penny of every pound on the establishment of a free public library. This was a reflection of the moral, social

and educative concerns of the era. The middle classes wanted to ensure that workers’ free time was well spent; reformers felt that encouraging the lower classes to spend their free time on morally approved activities such as reading would promote social benefits. In 1852, a man became the first person in England to borrow a book. The library, in Campfield, Manchester, was the first U.K. library funded by public rates. It was opened amidst great fanfare by Victorian authors Charles Dickens and William Thackeray.

From that day to this, the public library has been a vibrant and developing part of the community, now open to everyone, male or female, whatever their background and choice of reading material, a fact that is well worth celebrating. ✧

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Remains of the library of Celsus at Ephesus



Campfield Library Manchester