

Hitchin Public Library & Museum - the early days

by Robert F. Ashby

Some time in 1936 or 1937 the then Urban District Council of Hitchin took an innovative, and, some would say, overdue, decision: this was to establish a Library and Museum in the town. That Hitchin, with its long and meticulously researched history, its ancient streets and well-known literary and artistic associations had not taken this step long before, as its Johnny-come-lately neighbour Letchworth had done, is a matter of some wonder. Perhaps the prudent Council and the influential householders were disinclined to put yet another charge on the Rates.

The Council of that time had a very good reason for the step they were about to take. Two generous citizens, Mr Herbert and Mr Wallace Moss, both local business men, had offered to give to the town a mansion and its surrounding grounds for the purpose.

The house, called 'Charnwood', stood, as it does now, on a triangular site only a few minutes' walk from the Market Place and the main shopping centres, an ideal place for its future function. It was part of the donors' intentions that this pleasant area should be preserved 'to prevent undesirable development and to secure a permanent open space in the built-up area'. There is a remarkably modern ring to this far-sighted intention, from which the people of Hitchin still benefit.

'Charnwood' in its original form dates from 1825, and has had several different occupants and names since then. The front door used to face south, i.e. towards Paynes Park. In converting the building to its two new uses, the then District Surveyor, Mr J. Whittle, had the ingenious idea of moving the door and entrance hall around so that they looked up the plot towards the Tilehouse-Street/ Luton Road junction, as the Museum's front door does now. This gave a convenient entrance lobby, as well as providing additional length to the ground floor room which was to become the Lending Library.

Interior walls were removed and replaced with steel joists which proved just about strong enough to cope with the not inconsiderable weight of the desk-type showcases later installed in the Museum room above.

Although this was to be the first rate-supported Public Library and Museum that the town had ever had, and in fact was the first Museum, there had been for a century or more some form of library provision available to the citizens. As with everything else in Hitchin this has a long history.

In 1824 there had been a 'Library for Tradesmen, Apprentices and Others', which had been succeeded by 'The Working Mens' Library', which in turn provided the basis for the Hitchin Mechanics' Institute. In 1828 there was a 'Public Library', of which little record remains, and a 'Permanent Book Society' ⁱⁿ ~~at~~ approximately 1835. These were of course supported by the subscriptions of members and by altruistic backing on the part of leading citizens, many of whom belonged to the Society of Friends.

In 1860 the various threads came together, and a room was built in Broad Street by public subscription especially for the Mechanics' Institution and Public Library (later to be called the Hitchin Library and Reading Room). The building is still there - but now it provides refreshment to the bodies rather than to the minds of its customers.

This building was serving as the town's public library in 1938 when the writer of this monograph arrived on the scene. It was a room of high windows and tall ladder-requiring bookshelves containing rows of books long out of date, but the service was amplified by the infusion of a regularly-changed collection of more modern books supplied by the Hertfordshire County Library. An annexe in the adjacent Old Town Hall was the Reading Room providing newspapers and magazines.

The Librarian was Miss M. Fitch, a gentle self-effacing, thoroughly efficient lady, who had been in post for 35 years i.e. almost from the beginning of the century. Some of the older present-day residents in the town must surely still remember Miss Fitch. Her services were never, I think, publicly recognised in the hustle and bustle of moving to the new building. It is a pleasure, though long overdue, to pay a tribute to her services to the town.

The two generous donors had given Charnwood to the town to provide a Museum and a Library, of which the order of the words may have been of significance, but the District Council could not just take over without formality. To run a Museum and Library and spend ratepayers' money on them, a legal procedure known as 'adopting the Acts' had to be gone through.

Over the years some boroughs and urban districts had adopted the Acts and thus become responsible for the provision of library and museum services within their areas: this is what Letchworth had done in 1906. For all the rest of the County of Hertfordshire the County Council, under a 1919 Act, established itself as the Library Authority for all those places which had not ^{already} taken powers unto themselves.

It is my impression, confirmed by later experience, that Hitchin was primarily interested in the first of the functions which the Moss brothers had specified i.e. the Museum. The County Council were, as already mentioned, exercising their library powers in the town by providing ^{the} collection of books in the former Mechanics' Institute in Brand Street. As library and museum powers ran together under the law at that time, it was not possible for a local authority to provide one without the other.

To solve this dilemma an arrangement was arrived at with the County Council whereby the Urban District Council could become the Library and Museum Authority, subject to agreeing to continue to take books from the County Library as if the town library were still a branch of the latter. In return, the town would pay a proportion of the County Library Rate. Apart from this the District Council were free to do as they liked.

From the library point of view this was not an entirely satisfactory position. County Library provision in those pre-war days was still little more than 'a box of books in the village hall' and unsuited to the more exacting requirements of a busy town. Not one box of books but many were exchanged every six months or so - a regular event quite laborious in its way - but there was little or no control over the selection and condition of what was provided, whilst library routines had to conform to the County Library's methods.

It also excused the District Council from making proper provision for the regular purchase of new stock - always the life-blood of any public library.

Nevertheless this is how Hitchin obtained its Public Library and Museum

The North Hertfordshire District Council's website says that the Museum was founded by the Hitchin & District Regional Survey Association. This may be true in the sense that they formed a powerful pressure group urging the Council to embark on the project. The main activists in this body were Reginald L. Hine (who because of his position in the town was undoubtedly the main moving spirit), Mr E.F.D. Bloom, the H.M. Inspector of Schools who had a large following in the town especially among the school teachers, and Dr A.H. Foster, a specialist in Natural History and particularly in Entomology. This triumvirate either had items suitable for the Museum in their possession or knew where to find them, but so far as I was aware there was no existing collection waiting for new premises. Thus the Museum was rather founded upon individual collections or single items held by specialists in their respective fields, supplemented by donations from well-disposed townspeople.

As soon as Charnwood had formally come into the Council's ownership the work of conversion began.

The museum came to occupy two rooms with a small office on the first floor. The public library on the ground floor consisted of a long room on the Paynes Park side which formed the lending library, a small room facing ~~Paynes Park~~ ^{Nun's Close} which became the reference library, and a room on the left of the entrance door which was fitted out as a reading room for newspapers and periodicals.

The larger of the museum rooms was fitted ~~out~~ with display cases built against the walls and with desk-type cases in the middle. The wall cases had a home-made look; one of the larger ones had early on had its glass front replaced because it consisted of an unframed sheet of glass which was dangerous to move. ~~It was and is~~ There were storage lockers underneath, and it says much for the trust placed in the general public in those days that they were not in fact locked. At one time they had masses of old documents stored in them which were soon removed by Col. Le Hardy, the County Council Archivist. The centre cases were custom-built by a firm of museum fitters, Edmonds I believe. These had drawers under and did lock. This room was devoted to 'bygones' i.e. household, agricultural and trade articles, with the larger items hung on the walls, where they could be touched and indeed handled by the public.

The other room, on the other side of the landing at the head of the stairs, was devoted to natural history. A large case built against the farther wall had a large array of stuffed birds in it, but I think these only came later. The wall-case opposite contained butterflies and moths and also stuffed animals. I well remember a splendid badger, perhaps one of the first exhibits.

NEW [
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In the library downstairs the fittings also had a home-made look. Most public libraries of those days gave the books the dignity of oak shelving, but Hitchin's were made of some ^{sort of} white wood which had been varnished to a pink hue. One unit was so cumbersome that it was too large to move and had to be shortened. A little two-sided counter between the entrance and exit doors had been designed as if the staff would spend their time sitting in it for most of the day. It even had a flap ~~across~~ ^{at} exit: that soon had to go.

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The reference library at the end of the lending library had been fitted out with all due considerations of economy, and the shelves had been brought in from the Brand Street premises and thus were over seventy years old. Their wood was rough with use and had darkened with age. It also had an odour about it which gave the 'Ref' a characteristic atmosphere.

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Across the entrance lobby there was what may have been the original dining room. This was provided with slopes for newspapers and tables and chairs for reading magazines. From this room a glass door led into an annexe, probably the former billiards room. ~~This~~ Used only for occasional meetings, it was never brought into full use till after the War when the Reading Room was transferred into it.

Having secured a building, a modest supply of books, and the expectation of a sufficiency of exhibits, the Council had to apply themselves to the question of staff. Guided by the County Librarian, Mr T.W. Muskett, advertisements were placed in the Times Literary,

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supplement and other appropriate places for a Qualified Librarian. After a competitive interview in February 1938 I was appointed at the tender age of 21½ on an equally tender salary scale of £210 to £285 per annum. This sounds indeed modest, and indeed it was, but when I had ^{paid} 35/- (£1.75) per week to my landlady in Chiltern Road, the good Mrs Brown, I had, as a young man with no ties, enough to conduct a pleasant and varied life.

It was at this ^u interview that I first met Mr Hine. I had heard of him from Mr Muskett, but he was quite unmistakable among the District Councillors. My recollection is that the meeting was chaired by Mr Bowman, Chairman of the Council and the head of the well-known firm of flour millers, under the guidance of Mr A. Percy Ruscoe, the Clerk of the Council who, whenever he spoke, prefaced his remarks with a loud 'Err-agh'.

Another essential member of staff - still no doubt remembered by older residents - was George Currell, the caretaker. Grey-haired and of a serious ^{with} ~~mind~~, he was not seldom thought to be the Librarian.

The Chairman of the Library and Museum Committee was Mr William Payne, the dentist, who lived in a lovely house in Brand Street, long since gone I suppose. He was a devoted member of the Society of Friends, then a strong influence in Hitchin. At the Opening Ceremony, which took place out of doors at the front of the building, he rather irrelevantly declared how important religion is in life. Reginald Hine tactfully followed this by relating it to the deeper spiritual aspects of learning exemplified by a library and museum.

In the founding of the Museum the District Council were fortunate in having at their disposal the experts in their various fields who have been mentioned above i.e. Dr Foster, Mr Bloom, and of course Mr Hine. There was a further adviser who willingly gave friendly and valuable help in the early days, quite informally and unofficially. This was Mr W. Percival West^eall, the Curator of Letchworth Museum. Although at our first meeting ^{he told me} that he did not approve in a multiplicity of museums, though not of libraries, he helped

enormously with installing the basic routines of a museum, such as the identification and description of exhibits, their numbering and registration. Even then rather an old-fashioned figure, he wrote and published a variety of simple natural history books, one of which was called 'Let's go for a walk' and another an 'Alphabetical Itinerary' which listed all the places he had ever visited. In ^{the} early days of radio he ^{had} attained some reputation as 'Mr Bumble' on children's programmes.

The North Hertfordshire District Council's website says that the Hitchin Library was opened in 1939 and the Museum in 1941. To my recollection this is not accurate, as the Library was certainly opened in 1938, and the public were admitted at least to the front room of the Museum before 1940. However, scarcely had the two services got really established and were beginning to find their place in the hearts and lives of Hitchin people, than the War came along. Hitchin being a reception area for evacuees, the Library played its part in offering the Reference Room and the little-used former billiards room for the accommodation of classes from North London schools.

On almost exactly the second anniversary of my taking up the appointment on 1st April 1938 I was swept into the Army, only to re-appear six years later; then, after the catastrophe of Mr Hine's death, I went on to fresh woods and pastures new.

In 1974 the Library was fully amalgamated with Hertfordshire County Library as a result of the Local Government re-organisation of that year. The present capacious and attractive premises were built on the adjacent site, and the former 'Charnwood' given over to the Museum, which together with the Letchworth Museum, has been substantially developed by the local authority, the North Hertfordshire District Council.

Mr Robert F. Ashby was the Librarian and Curator of Hitchin Library and Museum from 1938 to 1940 and from 1946 to 1950. He went on in due course to become County Librarian of Surrey.