

from Citizen
cuttings
archive

26-10-88

STROUD LIBRARY CENTENARY

Books and access to the information in them have always been subject to controversy. To some they are the means to knowledge and understanding, to others they represent a threat because knowledge means power; to yet others they mean little or nothing. In Victorian Stroud the controversy centred around the possibility of opening a Free Library in the Town.

1887 saw Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee and some people in the Town thought that a Free Library would form a suitable commemoration. The main enthusiast was Mr. J. G. Strachan; and enthusiasm he would need. One section of the Town was very much against such an enterprise - especially if it meant raising the penny rate which had recently been permitted. The two newspapers took diametrically opposed views and in those days, when free-expression in the press seems to have been more vigorous, they reflected the two views forcefully.

In its report of the opening one states: "Our contemporary (newspaper) ...has at no period shown any great love for the Library. We think it lamentable that a newspaper should feel called upon to prophesy that a Free Library ... will not be 'properly maintained or patronised.' We are pleased to observe that Mr. Holloway MP, does not share the gloomy forebodings of the local organ which supports his politics ..."

This report appeared in September 1888. A great deal of thought and work had been necessary between then and February 18th 1887 when a letter from the Reverend G. T. B. Omerod had first made the idea public. A committee had been formed, composed, as so often, of those

who lent prestige and those who carried out the work. A major setback came when the ratepayers voted against the raising of a penny rate for maintaining the Library 615 to 511. In addition to finding a site and building a library there was now the additional problem of funding the library service. A "sustention fund" had now to be provided. The enthusiasm of the Committee was not, however, dimmed.

In the search for a site, there were suggestions that the Library should be combined with a School of Art. If that proved impossible then a separate site should be found. The School of Art offered "a small and altogether inadequate piece of land" and the Library Committee concluded that a temporary building should be provided. This obviously did not please the Chairman, Mr. Strachan. For on October 7th "Mr. Strachan with characteristic munificence, decided to present the town with the (old) Grammar School in Lansdown, to be used henceforth as a Free Library." On November 21st, Mr. Strachan's offer was accepted and Mr. Clissold, architect, produced plans of the proposed alterations to the School.

Meanwhile, the Sustention Fund had been steadily growing with small and large sums committed over five years from many of Stroud's ordinary citizens. Also, a book selection committee had been set up under the chairmanship of Sir William Marling. On 15th September 1888 all these endeavours culminated in the opening of the Free Library.

It seems that the summer of 1888 had been similar to this year's for the newspaper report remarks : "It was as if one real day of summer

had lingered in the train of a wet season in order that the celebration of opening our new library might be made as gay as possible".

The occasion obviously lasted for quite some time. It began before the official ceremony started, with the church bells being rung and "the Stroud Military Band, in all the glory of their new scarlet uniforms, discoursed sweet music for the delectation of the gathering crowds."

The formal part of the proceedings took place in the Subscription Rooms. "As the leading promoters of the library ascended the platform the audience burst forth into applause." The Chairman for the Meeting was Colonel Kingscote who began with a speech. The Report says that he "felt this would be one of those interesting occasions ... when all classes, all opinions and all religions might meet together for one common good. He ventured to think their country would hold its own ... as long as these institutions were started. Some people said that a Free Library was only a Club. He thought that if this was so it was a very good sort of club (hear, hear and applause) - and one which was not easily surpassed.

Mr. Strachan then gave a speech and concluded by formally handing over the library to Mr. George Holloway MP, one of the new Trustees. In his turn, the Member of Parliament addressed the meeting and was followed by several others, the last one being by Mr. Peter Wood "a working man."

The speeches over, a procession was formed up behind the Band and made its way via George Street and King Street to the door of the new library in Lansdown. "At the door to the library Mr. Strachan said, 'It is my pleasing duty to hand the key to Colonel Kingtsote that he may declare the building formally opened. It is my earnest wish that for many years the Town of Stroud may find the Free Library a source of benefit and pleasure."

The contemporary report tells us that the book stock of the original library was just 3,343 (the present stock is over 38,000). Of that about 40% was fiction. A house was provided for the Librarian who was not a professional Librarian but a retired army man - Sergeant Major Twissel.

The Rules and Regulations did not allow browsing through books before borrowing them. "No person shall be allowed to pass within the enclosure of the library or take any book from the shelves.

The borrower ... having chosen his book from the catalogue will look at its number on the Indicator to ascertain if the book is in stock: if so he will then write on his tablet (a form of library ticket) the shelf number and give this tablet to the librarian who will place it in the Indicator, enter the book and hand it over to the Borrower."

The modern library is more congenial to the borrower and is very well used - 714 people or 80 an hour visited Stroud Library on Monday, 17th October this year. The Services offered are much wider: not only

books but also spoken-word cassettes, CD's, videos, on-line information services and fax transmission. But this is all done in the same spirit as Mr. Strachan's a hundred years ago - to provide the Town of Stroud with a source of benefit and pleasure.

Alan WELSFORD

Divisional Librarian - South Gloucestershire