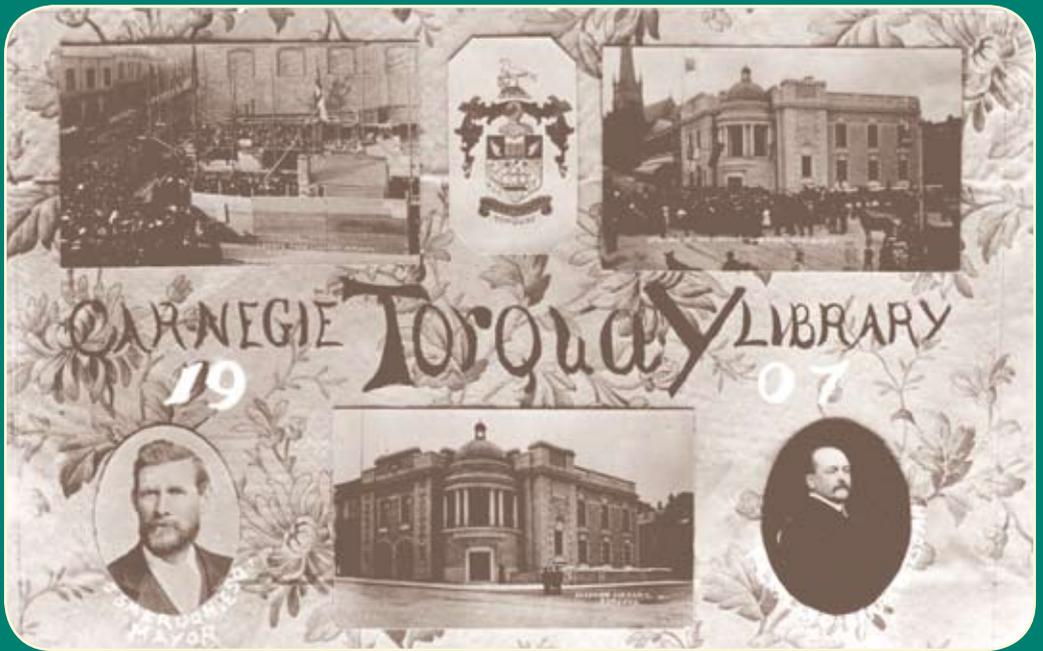


A CENTURY OF SERVICE



A postcard commemorating the opening of Torquay Library, 2nd October 1907

Main image: Opening ceremony of Carnegie Library, 1907; inset: computer stations at Torquay Library, 2007.



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The Development of Torbay Library Services

Although the Public Libraries Act was passed in 1850, financial constraints remained a barrier to progress in Torbay until American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie generously agreed to donate £8,900 for the provision of a building to bear his name in Torquay. The Carnegie Library, erected on a plot at Castle Circus (now part of the town hall), was officially opened by Francis Layland-Barratt MP on 2 October 1907.

People residing elsewhere in Torbay were charged an annual subscription to join the 'free' library, unless they were working or studying in the town. This state of affairs

continued until Brixham was provided with a library room manned by volunteers in 1929, before moving to a hall alongside the town hall in 1934. A year later Paignton obtained two floors of a former Liberal Club for use as a library. Torquay moved to new premises in 1938 while Paignton, Churston and Brixham obtained purpose-built libraries in 1961, 1973 and 1993 respectively.

During the 1950s there was concern that reading habits would reduce due to the growing popularity of television. Writing in a brochure produced for the Golden Jubilee entitled *Torquay Public Library - Fifty years of Service*, the then Deputy Borough Librarian John Pike viewed the future with optimism: 'with the continued



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emphasis on education, the development of culture and science, the need for the printed book will increase rather than decrease, as no visual aid can fully take its place’.

While the demand for books has not diminished during the intervening period, there have been increasing challenges for libraries to keep pace with a range of technological advances that could not have been anticipated in 1957. Members of the public now have access to talking books, music on compact discs, film and television productions on video tape and DVD, whilst the biggest change has come about through the use of computers which have an increasing impact on people’s lives. Word processing, communication by e-mail,

retrieval of reference information from on-line resources, are just a few of the facilities readily available to library users.

A century ago, when the library service opened in Torquay, a quote by local author Eden Phillpotts was chosen to be inscribed on the exterior of the building; ‘Read wisely; for a good book is a faithful friend’. In an age of rapidly evolving innovations, perhaps the philosophy of the same author defines the ever widening role of libraries:

‘The universe is full of magical things, patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper’.

by father and son William and Edmund Froude who started experimental work for the Admiralty using model ships in a water tank installed at their home Chelston Cross, Torquay.

June

Venford Reservoir, Holne Moor, is officially opened to supply Paignton with water.

In the year that the late sewing machine magnate Isaac Singer's home The Wigwam is transformed by his son Paris into the magnificent Versailles-inspired Oldway Mansion, Isaac's daughter Winnaretta, now by marriage the Princess de Polignac, opens a rifle range at Walls Hill, Babbacombe.

July

Colonel Lucius Cary takes up residence at Torre Abbey. The ancestral home of his family since 1662, he leaves no direct heir and the property is purchased by Torquay Council in 1930.

The vessel Nimrod leaves London to make its last English port of call at Torquay before embarking on the first leg of an expedition to Antarctica. Leader Ernest Shackleton stays at his brother's Torquay home The Knoll for three months before rejoining his team in New Zealand.

August

Lord Churston's heir Captain John Yarde-Buller is embroiled in scandal when it is revealed that he has recently married music hall singer Denise Orme. Having also been named as co-respondent in a divorce case, Yarde-Buller is sued for breach of promise by the former wife of his fellow officer Colonel Atherton.

Death of America's leading actor Richard Mansfield who appeared in the first

production of Gilbert & Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* at The Royal Bijou Theatre, Paignton in 1879.

September

Opening of Trenchford Reservoir, near Bovey Tracey, supplying water to Torquay. The site had been recommended thirty years earlier by Henry Marc Brunel, son of former Watcombe landowner Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

October

Torquay's first public library service is officially opened. With a stock of 6,700 books and 3,900 members in the first year, subsequent growth results in a move to larger premises in Lymington Road in 1938.

Announcement that golf links are to be provided alongside a racecourse at Petitor. The course opens in 1909 and is re-designed by golfing legend James Braid in 1921.

November

Succumbing to the competition of trams, the Motor Omnibus Company winds up. With future traffic congestion increasing due to the growing popularity of the motor car, a more flexible form of public transport is required and buses return to replace trams in 1934.

December

Former Torquay resident Rudyard Kipling and author of the *Jungle Book* and *Just So* stories becomes the first English-language recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

John 'Babbacombe' Lee is released from prison. Sentenced to death for murder in 1885, the scaffold mysteriously failed to operate and he gains notoriety as 'The Man They Could Not Hang'.

1907 - True Stories from the Library Archives - 2007

- In 100 years a succession of only five men have been appointed head of the local library service:

1907-19: Joseph Jones was given leave of absence to become an army paymaster and chose not to return to the library service after World War One.

1919-47: Richard Halliday collapsed and died while playing snooker at a local club.

1947-61: Edward Burt joined the library staff in 1911 and fifty years later took 'early retirement'.

1961-80: John Pike began as a junior assistant in 1939 when his duties included the discouragement of gambling by obliterating racing tips and results from newspapers.

1980- : Peter Bottrill broke the chain of internal promotion and was recruited from Surrey.

- Torquay Reference Library was utilised as a Red Cross Hospital ward for casualties of the First World War (1914-18). On the home front a man charged with defacing a *Boys Own* magazine at Torquay Library was fined 10/6 (52p) in 1916.

Clockwise from top:
Churston Library, Paignton
Library, Brixham Library.



- During the Second World War (1939-45), Torquay Library staff were instructed to ignore air raid warnings and take shelter in the basement only if bombs started falling. In 1941, a female librarian who got married was the first to be allowed to remain in post due to a shortage of staff caused by male members joining the armed forces.

- The opening ceremony of Paignton Library in 1935 was interrupted by a Congregational Minister, who was led away from the proceedings protesting that the closure of the reading room at 7:30pm was too early to allow shop workers to make use of the facility.

- Celebrations for the Golden Jubilee of Torquay Library in 1957 were tempered by concerns that the growing popularity of television might adversely effect reading habits. In 2006 a large wide screen television was installed for the benefit of library users.

- In 1966, nine female members of staff at Torquay Library staged a brief walkout in protest at remarks made by the chairman of the library committee who was critical of girls who did not 'give service with a smile'. The incident was believed to be the first instance of industrial action by library staff in Britain.

- Bruce Reynolds, mastermind of the Great Train Robbery, escaped from prison and rented a house in Torquay. Adopting the alias Keith Miller he became a member of the library until recaptured in November 1968. Torquay Library stocked a first edition of the career criminal's *Autobiography of a*

Thief (1995) - which was promptly stolen by a disciple!

Library Service Chronology 1907-2007

1907 Official opening of Torquay Library with funding provided by Andrew Carnegie.

1929 Brixham Library opens twice a week in the Magistrates Room at the Town Hall.

1934 Brixham Library moves to a former drill hall alongside the Town Hall.

1935 Paignton Library opens in former Liberal Club, Victoria Square, Totnes Road.

1938 Official opening of new Torquay Public Library in Lymington Road.

1957 Golden Jubilee of library service in Torquay.

1961 Purpose-built library for Paignton opens in Courtland Road.

1968 The County Borough of Torbay amalgamates the former Borough of Torquay, the Urban District Councils of Paignton and Brixham, and the Parish Council of Churston Ferrers leading to the formation of a united Torbay Library Service.

1973 Purpose-built Churston Library provided in Broadsands Road.

1974 A further local government review results in Torbay libraries coming under control of Devon County Council.

- 1991 Mobile Library destroyed by arsonist.
- 1993 Brixham Library re-opens in new state of the art building.
- 1998 Local government review results in the formation of Torbay Council as a unitary authority and the launch of Torbay Library Services.
- 2002 Torbay becomes the first library service in the South West to be awarded a Charter Mark for excellence in customer service.
- 2003 Local history website launched 'Caught In The Web - bytes of Torbay's past' (available at www.torbytes.com).
- 2004 New Mobile Library replaces model purchased in 1992.
- 2005 The John Pike Local Studies Room named in memory of former head librarian and local historian in a ceremony at Torquay Library. Torbay Mobile Librarian Ted Brown awarded the MBE. Friends of Brixham Library group formed.
- 2006 Torquay Library closes for six weeks for major revamp incorporating an interactive zone with computers, television and computer games console. Author Dick Francis unveils a plaque to commemorate the re-launch.
- 2007 Centenary of library service in Torbay.
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Text by Mike Holgate

Sources:

Holgate, Mike. Torquay, Tempus Publishing 1998

Pike, John. Fifty Years of Service. Torquay Public Library 1957

Smith, Lorna. History of Torbay Library Services. 2006

(full text available online @ torbay.gov.uk/libraries).

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more about the history of Torbay, visit the Local History Collection at Torquay Library or view the website (www.torbay.gov.uk) for information on the following subjects: History of Torquay/Torbay's Heritage/People and Places/Famous People. The site also contains opening times, news of forthcoming events and general information about the following historic buildings and museums that are well worth a visit:

Torre Abbey Historic House & Gallery, King's Drive, Torquay. Tel: 01803 293593

Torquay Museum, 529 Babbacombe Road, Torquay. Tel: 01803 293975

Oldway Mansion, Paignton. Tel: 01803 201201

Brixham Heritage Museum, Bolton Cross, Brixham. Tel: 01803 856267