

FRESHWATER LIBRARY - A BRIEF HISTORY

The first ever meeting of the Library Sub-committee of the County Council's Education Committee was held on 2nd July 1936. At this meeting the councillor for West Wight, Miss O'Connor, raised doubts about the arrangements then in place for providing library books to local residents.

From 1904 book collections had been sent in boxes from the Seely Library in Newport, and had in turn been displayed at the West Wight Social Club and in local schools. Alternatively books could be borrowed from Elliotts Newsagents at a subscription rate of 2d. per week. Many locals were to face the embarrassing task of cancelling their long-standing subscriptions on the opening of the Council's free library service. In fact, a Mrs Elliott wrote to the Council in 1938 complaining about the siting of a new library in Freshwater!

The Library Sub-committee set up a working party to "report to the next meeting upon the means by which the library service in the Freshwater district may be improved."

This group reported that they were of the unanimous opinion that library accommodation should be provided in the village, and proposed that a room should be added to the new Central School, currently under construction. After some delay however, the County Architect announced in October 1937 that there was insufficient space at the school to build an extension.

The breakthrough came in January 1938, when the Library Sub-committee was informed that "the Council had agreed to the erection of a public free library in Freshwater at an estimated cost not exceeding £3,000 (including site and equipment)". This was to be the first purpose-built branch of the County Seely Library, opened in Newport in 1904.

The first site to be considered for the library was opposite Freshwater Station. However, with agreement near to pay £650 for this plot, another piece of land became available in School Green, "offered freehold by Messrs Henry J. Way and Son at a price of £3 10s. per foot frontage", totalling around £455. This land was previously known as Cooper's Field and was a popular children's playground, as well as a source of animal dung which locals used as fuel!

The County Architect produced sketch plans for the new West Wight Branch Library, including Entrance Hall, Reading Room, Lending Room with open access to the shelves, Reference Room, Children's' Room and Staff Room. The plans were approved, as was the Architect's proposal to build the library predominantly of timber, with a pantiled roof. The style of the building was to be New England Colonial, weather-boarded and set back from the road in attractive grounds.

An application, along with a statement justifying the need for the new library, was sent to the Ministry for Health for a loan of £3,000 to cover building work. The Ministry consented to the loan in May 1939, after the Council had accepted a tender from A. E. Jukes & Son Ltd of Southampton to undertake the building, at an estimated cost of £2,736 7s. 7d. The work was due for completion by late August 1939.

As work began, the Library Sub-committee started to order books and equipment for the new library. Over £1,500 was made available to spend on a stock of 4,000 books during the first year - this compares to the current bookstock of almost 18,000, in addition to DVDs and computers which are squeezed into the same building! Newspapers and magazines to be stocked included titles such as "The Daily Sketch", "Picture Post" and "The Strand", while children's' magazines were to include "Boy's Own", "Girl's Own" and "Merry Go Round". The delivery contract - worth about £36 per year was awarded to the Mrs. Elliott who had earlier objected to the building of the new library, and whose family firm hold the contract to this day!

The growing likelihood of war had almost persuaded councillors to abandon the building of the library, and difficulties with the supply of labour - armed forces call-ups having started - now meant that the building work was not completed until October 1939. Work was further delayed by the arrest by police of a mysterious painter, who arrived for work each day in an expensive car, and who was generally believed to be a German spy! In addition, three elm trees in the grounds were felled by a violent storm in September 1939, damaging builders' scaffolding.

Because of the imminence of war, included in the building were shutters at the

doors and windows, and an entrance hall light lock "for blacking out purposes", while the edges of the entrance steps were painted white "in accordance with lighting restrictions" .

A special meeting of the Library Sub-committee, held in October 1939, ironed out the arrangements for the library's opening ceremony, and discussed practical matters such as the appointment of a professionally qualified Library Assistant who was later named as Mrs. Muriel Mullins - and the planned opening times. Other staff were to be sent to Freshwater on relief from Newport, either travelling by train or bus, or even cycling to the new outpost.

Following the opening ceremony, conducted by the Chairman of the Council Sir Godfrey Baring on 16th November 1939, West Wight Branch Library opened its doors to the public the following day at 11 am. The opening of the library was celebrated with a dinner at West Wight School, an event only slightly spoiled by a waitress spilling soup over Sir Godfrey!

During the Second World War the library grounds were dug up, and used to grow vegetables in aid of the war effort. One year a plague of Cabbage White butterflies destroyed the entire cabbage patch, and the library was infested by caterpillars, which appeared inside many book covers!

Over the years the interior of the library has changed dramatically from the first layout - as shown in the opening ceremony brochure. By the time we had our 60th anniversary celebration in 1999 the adult lending section has expanded into the original children's' section, and included videos, CDs, talking books and jigsaws for loan, while the reading room had been converted into a smaller children's' library and gallery. We also housed the Council's Community Information Point, acted as a Job Centre agency, and offered photocopying and fax facilities.

Further developments have taken place since 1999. In time for the millennium we at last dispensed with the time-consuming cardboard ticket system (Brown issue) and had computerised book issuing and catalogue facilities installed.

The library was built on large grounds, with the intention that it could one day be extended. That happened in 2003 when in exchange for some ground to

make an access road to new houses behind the library, namely Dall square, we received funding for a small extension to be built. At the same time the junior room and gallery was converted into a bigger junior room. The interior of the library had a complete revamp with new carpets and décor, and the wooden shelves were replaced with new white & purple shelves, some of which were sloping to better display books. We also had People's Network computers installed in the reference room along with a selection of the non-fiction books. The room contained a picture rail enabling us to continue having displays and artwork.

The Library Service now has its own website (http://www.iwight.com/living_here/libraries/) which allows people to renew and reserve their own books on line at home. Freshwater Library also has its own web page which includes details of new books, opening times, events and activities.

Non-fiction books are now grouped together into various subjects ie Arts & Crafts, Home & Gardens to make it easier for people to browse. Our latest change came in May 2009 when the reference library was made smaller (as one can find so much on the internet!) and moved along with its seating into the main library. Some more non-fiction books were moved into the extension to increase usage of that area of the library.

Since our 60 years celebration we have stopped stocking videos and CDs but now have DVDs to hire and talking books in CD format. The Library has found space for the Freshwater Information Centre which is manned by council staff. Various organisations hold surgeries in the library, for example Inland Revenue, Next Step and Age Concern. Computer courses and various events including author visits are also held regularly.

Freshwater Library remains central to the well-being of the West Wight community, being an invaluable source of information about the Isle of Wight and the rest of the world. It is somewhere people can borrow spoken word CDs and dvds to increase enjoyment of their leisure time, and last but not least find a book to entertain or enlighten them, whatever their age.

It is no wonder that libraries are the most used service of choice on the Island!

