



Libraries

In the early nineteenth century, an essential part of the burgeoning tourist trade in the sea-side towns of Devon was the circulating library. These libraries were commercial ventures, maintained by subscription. Unlike libraries as we know them, the early proprietors included ball-rooms, billiard tables and shops as part of the library complex. Certainly people flocked to read the latest newspapers and borrow the latest publications, but they also came to socialise, to take the air, be seen in local society and catch up with the latest gossip. The Somers Cocks collection contains prints which vividly capture the lively nature of these libraries in the towns of Sidmouth, Dawlish and Teignmouth.

The entrepreneurs who opened these beach-side circulating libraries vied with each other in self-promotion. In Sidmouth rival libraries were set up by Mr. John Wallis (freshly down from London, the son of another John Wallis, a publisher there,) and Mr. John Marsh. Both published Sidmouth guide books in which their own library was highly praised. That published by Mr. Marsh openly criticised Mr. Wallis's library: "This building is on a more contracted scale; the views from it are good, but rather inferior to those of the library of Mr. John Marsh." The Revd. Edmund Butcher, writing on behalf of Mr. Wallis, retaliated with other criticisms, clearly aimed at Mr. Marsh.

Whether these circulating libraries were really as excellent as their publications made out is another matter. Certainly Jane Austen didn't think so when she wrote dismissively of the Dawlish library in 1814: "The Library [at Dawlish] was particularly pitiful and wretched 12 years ago."

Prior to the Free Libraries Acts of 1850 and 1855, the so-called Public Libraries and Literary Institutions were not at all free to the public. As in the case of the circulating libraries, they were maintained by subscribers. The earliest surviving subscription library is at Tavistock. This library was founded in 1799 by a group of learned and literary friends, and originally based in a building on the site of the present Town Hall. Later, at the request of the sixth Duke of Bedford, it was moved to its present site in the old Abbey Gatehouse. It remains as it was founded - for the use of its subscribers alone.

The older world of the private library is glimpsed in the print of Exeter Cathedral Library. Traditionally wealth sat in the hands of the aristocracy and religious foundations. Their libraries were a reflection of this wealth, revealing status, as well as a love of learning in the case of the church. A view of the library in Flete House, by Kell Brothers, dating from about 1860 is recorded (SC1151B), but no copy has been located by the project. However the text accompanying one of the prints of Killerton House indicates a sense of humour as far as that particular private library was concerned.

The Free Libraries Act of 1850 required a town over a certain size to vote whether to adopt the Act. Once an act was adopted, premises had to be found, and the new free library was

to be funded by a half-penny in the pound increase to the rates. The conservative city of Exeter initially voted by 853 votes to 118 against adopting the act. However, in 1868 a free library was finally opened in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum. Plymouth and Exeter's pride in their own public library is reflected in the fine prints included in the Somers Cocks catalogue.

1. Tavistock Public Library

- *The Western Gate of Dartmoor: Tavistock and Its Surroundings*
Crossing, William
London: The Homeland Association, Ltd., 1903. p. 36

As before mentioned, the chamber over the abbey gateway now forms one of the rooms of the Tavistock Library. This was founded in 1799, by Mr. John Taylor, of Holwell, the brother of Mrs. Austen and cousin of Miss Martineau; the Rev. William Evans, of Parkwood, minister of the Abbey Chapel, and father of Miss Rachel Evans, the authoress of *Home Scenes*, a local work of great merit; Mr. E. A. Bray, at that time a law student, but afterwards the vicar of Tavistock; and Mr. John Commins, a zealous worker for the welfare of the town. The library had its home in the abbey buildings, during the first thirty years of its existence; but in 1829, John, sixth Duke of Bedford, proposed its removal to its present site.

This image shows the old Abbey building which houses Tavistock Subscription Library.



Image 1 SC2764, Tavistock Abbey Devonshire, S Fisher, 1830

2. Wallis's Library Shed, Sidmouth.



Image 2(a) SC2473, Sidmouth Devon, R Havell, 1815



Image 2(b) SC2473-1, Sidmouth Devon, R Havell, 1840

- *The Beauties of Sidmouth Displayed.*
Butcher, Rev. Edmund
Sidmouth: John Wallis, 1820, Third Edition. pp. 36-7

Wallis's, The Royal Marine Library. When Sidmouth had no establishment of this description, the present proprietor embarked his property under the most favorable [sic] patronage; among whom he had the honor [sic] to boast, Lord Gwydir, Lady Willoughby, Lord and Lady Le Despenser, Emanuel Baruh Lousada, Esq. and the principal nobility of the town and neighbourhood. The Library was first opened to the Public, June 20th, 1809, and this romantic watering-place at length boasted what it had long desired, a lounging place in a conspicuous and pleasant situation, where articles of fancy, as well as information and utility, may be met with; where the news of the day may be collected and discussed, and and [sic] opportunity given to saunterers to chat and gossip together. No situation can be more favourable for all these purposes than the Royal Marine Library, it has a veranda 42 feet in length, under one half of which is a retreat from the sun 15 feet deep, surrounded with seats. From hence the spectator commands a near and utterly unimpeded view of the sea, comprehending the immense bay within Portland and the Berry-head. Large parties are often chatting on its benches: the gay and healthy are amused, and the invalid finds a spot from which he can inhale those salubrious breezes which so frequently suspend the ravages of disease, pour fresh oil into the lamp of life, and send him back, with renovated energies, to both the cares and the joys of mortality.

The Library opens directly upon that charming *promenade* the *Beach*, where all the beauty and fashion of the place are often collected. It is well supplied *every day* with the London and provincial newspapers. Several of the most popular periodical publications are to be found upon its tables. A variety of elegant toys and trinkets, and some articles of greater utility, occupy its shelves. Books of education, dissected maps, and a circulating library, to which *new* works are regularly added, complete an establishment which, with a continuance of the liberal encouragement so long experienced, will be, every season, increasing in variety and value. In the summer season a room behind the Library, is appropriated to the readers of the newspapers, and in winter a good fire is always kept.

3. Gore's Library, Dawlish

- *Early Tours in Devon and Cornwall*
Pearse Chope, R. (ed.)
Exeter: James G. Commin, 1918
- *Letters from England*
Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella
(Robert Southey)1802. p.307

In most of the English towns they have what they call circulating libraries: the subscribers, for an annual or quarterly payment, have two or more volumes at a time, according to the terms; and strangers may be accommodated on depositing the value of the book they choose.

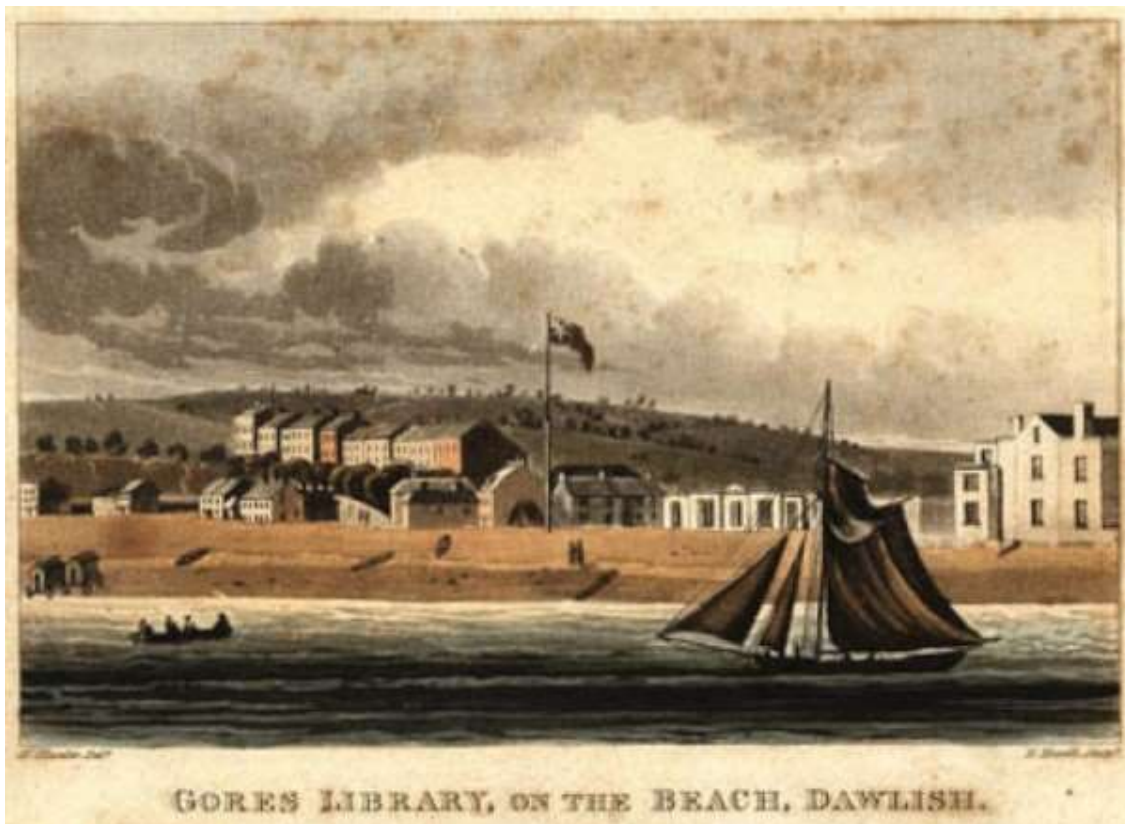


Image 3 SC0652, Gores Library on the Beach Dawlish, D Havell, 1819

4. Croydon's Library, Teignmouth

- *The Teignmouth, Dawlish, and Torquay Guide*
Carrington, N. T., and others
Teignmouth: E. Croydon, 1829

The Public Library

Connected with which, are a News-Room, Billiard-Rooms, and Shew-Shops, kept by Mr. Croydon, the proprietor, stands in Regent Place, and is an elegant building, designed and erected by the late W. Rolfe, Esq., of London. It was first opened to the public in June, 1815, and this favourite [sic] watering place, at length, obtained an object which had been long desirable. Articles of fancy may be purchased here; the news of the day collected, and discussed; and opportunities afforded of obtaining the pleasures of social and profitable intercourse.

The entire print of Croydon's library and adjoining News-room, Billiard-Rooms, and Shoe-shops.



Image 4 SC2826, Croydon's Public Library, J Shury, 1817

5. Plymouth Public Library

- *Catalogue of the Plymouth Public Library, Cornwall Street*
Hunt, William
Plymouth: J. B. Rowe, 1854. pp. vii-viii

"The Plymouth Public Library" was originally established at a Public Meeting, convened for that purpose, at the Guildhall, on the 20th day of November, 1810, when several Gentlemen, subscribing for Shares of the amount of 30 guineas each, became Proprietors of the Institution.

The amount thus raised was applied towards the purchase of a piece of ground in Cornwall Street, the site of the present Buildings, and the erection and fitting up of a Library and News-room, with a Committee-room, and Apartments for the residence of an Attendant, which were completed in 1813, after the designs of Mr. Foulston.[...]

The Funds originally subscribed proving inadequate to the completion of the Buildings, it was found necessary to raise a further sum, by way of loan, by which the entire outlay was augmented to about £5000. The debt thus incurred was discharged by successive instalments, the last portion being paid off in 1833.

Readers enjoying the library facilities (obviously social as well as literary) in Plymouth Public Library



Image 5 SC2163, Plymouth Public Library, William Le Petit, 1831

6. Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter

- *A free library for Bristol*

Tovey, Charles

London: Longman, Brown & Co.; Bristol: Evans & Arrowsmith, 1855. pp. 56, 62

The report [of the Select Committee on public Libraries of July 1849] commences by saying, that "Several years have now elapsed since the inquiries of Parliament, and the observations of the public, were directed to the formation of Free Galleries, and Museums of Art, as well as Schools of Design, as a means of enlightening the people of this country. There were not, at that time, wanting those who held that such institutions, however successfully established among foreign nations, would not be appreciated, and might be abused by our own. [...]"

It is now generally admitted, that no abuse has marked the change, but that much rational enjoyment, and much popular enlightenment have distinguished it. One improvement, however, yet remains to be accomplished, hitherto, almost untried in this country, - the establishment of Public Libraries, freely accessible to all the people. Such Libraries have long existed on the Continent.

The Royal Albert Memorial Museum was opened as a Free Library and Museum in 1868.



Image 6 SC1011, Royal Albert Museum & Post Office Exeter, C King, 1871

7. Exeter Cathedral Library

- *How to Increase the Attractions of Exeter*

Parker, Arthur S.

Exeter: Daily Western Times, 1893. (WCS stock: s080/DEV/DEV. Vol 2. No.2.) p. 23

The Chapter House, unlike those of nearly every other Cathedral, is ordinarily closed to visitors. [...]The very courteous librarian and sub-librarian have always been most willing to show any person over the Library, who may be specially desirous of seeing or referring to any particular objects therein. But these visits are infrequent and on a very limited scale. [...]

The Dean and Chapter possess about sixteen Anglo Saxon Charters and Manuscripts, the whole of which are translated into modern English in the Government photozincographic volume lying on the table adjoining the cases containing the originals. [...]There is also one of the most celebrated books in England - the Liber Exoniensis - being the original book of Saxon Poems compiled by Leofric. Another book of national importance is that of the "Exeter Domesday," the section of the great Domesday book containing the accounts of the five Western Counties of Wilts, Dorset, Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall.

This detail of the Chapter House shows clearly the booklined walls.



Image 7SC0868-1, Exeter Cathedral The Chapter Room, B Winkles, 1837

8. Private Library, Killerton House

- *Devonshire & Cornwall Illustrated from Original Drawings by Thomas Allom, W.H. Bartlett, &c Britton, J.*
J. Britton & E.W. Brayley (London: H. Fisher, R. Fisher & P. Jackson, 1832) pp. 34-5

The Library, which opens from the with-drawing room by folding doors, includes a well-chosen selection of the best authors, and many illustrated works; [...] From this apartment there is a secret entrance into a private library and sitting-room, through a bookcase, the sham books in which case, or door-way, have on them very ingeniously-devised titles, as may be evinced by a few, namely; Playfair on the late

Formation of Trap - Trap on Fictitious Entries - Friend's Right of Entrance - Continuation of Chambers - Pasquin at Home - Treatise on the Law of Partitions - Pleas in Vindication of Solitary Cells, by a Bachelor of the Inner Temple - Millington on Covered Ways - Noah's Log-Book, and Snug's the Word, by a Clerk of the Closet. The titles near the hinges are alike appropriate, but more quaint, viz: Squeak on Opening - Bang on Shuttings and Hinge's Orations.

Killerton House which contained a witty library catalogue.



Image 8 SC0254, Killerton Seat of Sir Thomas Dyke Ackland BT MP, John Gendall, 1828

Sources

- Austen-Leigh, William and Arthur, and Le Faye, Deirdre. *Jane Austen*. (The British Library, 1989)
- Griest, Guinevere. *Mudie's circulating library and the Victorian novel*. (David & Charles, 1970)
- Munford, W. A. *Penny rate*. (The Library Association, 1951).
The Sidmouth Guide. (John Marsh, 1818)