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The Library



A group taken at the opening of the Public Library on January 24th, 1906. In the photo are: Front row: Mr. J. Turner Taylor (Town Clerk), Ald. Neville Williams (Mayor), the Bishop of Bath and Wells (Dr. Kennion), who performed the ceremony, and Ald. D. S. Ward; Second row: Rev. J. T. Cox, Mr. Fortune (Macebearer), Ald. C. Fortune, Rev. F. Rothwell Dean; Third row: Mr. F. Bentz, Mr. W. Birch, —, Mr. P. Idle, Mr. H. T. Hare (architect), Mr. C. E. Rivers (Surveyor), Dr. A. F. Dimmock, Dr. H. Walker, Mr. J. H. Wilson, Mr. George W.



Harrogate's public library in Victoria Avenue has its origin in an 1886 decision by the Council to adopt the Public Libraries Act of 1850, the town's first library being in Princes Street.

The library moved to Victoria Avenue in 1890, when it was housed in a double-fronted single storey building which was moved after the building in 1906 of the present structure. The old building may still be seen on the east side of Skipton Road, near to the junction with Bilton Lane.

The Victoria Avenue building was designed by architect Henry Hare as the first part of a magnificent 'Municipal Palace', but after the library section opened in 1906 following a generous grant from Andrew Carnegie, the rest of the site was never built and gradually became a pleasant garden. In 1930, Harrogate's Council approved the construction of an art gallery above the ground floor lending library, where it remained until 1991 when the new Mercer Art Gallery opened in Swan Road.

Between 1939 and 1969, Harrogate's librarian, art curator and museum director was John Stuffins, who, like all professional librarians who had been educated in the shadows of the great Victorian Library boom and the hard times of the early 1930's, believed that public libraries should be people's

universities, where ordinary people not privileged with university educations could access the finest products of the human mind. Consequently, books were bought to last, rather than to satisfy fashionable demand or whim, and the idea of a library sale would have been regarded as a sign of incompetent stock-buying and squandering of scarce resources. With John Stuffins, there was no dumbing-down in an attempt at populism, as he had too much respect for human intelligence to compromise standards.

Harrogate Borough Council opened a branch library at Starbeck as early as 1902, which was replaced in 1921 when an old Wesleyan Chapel was acquired for the purpose. In 1923 the service was introduced to New Park, and Pannal received one in 1938. After the phenomenally busy years between the Second World War and the 1960's, when among other improvements, lending services for children, gramophone records and pictures were introduced, North Yorkshire assumed control of the town's library services in 1974, which it retains to the present time.

