

Public Library facilities in Oxford before 1914

By MALCOLM GRAHAM

READING rooms for newspapers and periodicals in Oxford date back to about 1780, when the bookseller, James Fletcher, operated one for fifty members. To a greater or lesser degree, however, all such establishments were exclusive—the University, City and County Reading Room (1823) for example, insisting upon an 80% membership of Oxford University graduates, and ordering ‘that the name and quality of each candidate for admission, with the signatures of six subscribers, be set down in writing, and fixed up in a conspicuous part of the Room for seven days previously to the election’.¹ Others were less restrictive, and the City Reading Room, dating from 1831 and refounded on a more elaborate scale in 1845, could perhaps be described as a direct fore-runner of the public library. It was founded by an energetic local auctioneer, Joseph Plowman, under the patronage of the two city Members of Parliament, for the benefit of inhabitants and visitors at a cost of 2 guineas per annum.²

From the first, it seems to have included reference works as well as newspapers and magazines, and, by May 1847, Plowman was announcing that a circulating library was ‘now open with all the new Books of the Season just published, and a collection of the best works of Fiction, Tales, Travels, History, Biography &c.’.³

Circulating libraries were becoming increasingly common, three being listed in an 1830 directory,⁴ four in 1835,⁵ and seven in 1852.⁶ Like reading rooms, they tended to be ephemeral institutions depending upon the initiative of one man, and the fickleness of the public in Oxford, where ‘literary societies . . . appear to be of a short-lived character, and after the novelty has ceased on their establishment, they invariably fall to decay’.⁷ They are important, however, because they formed the professional training grounds of B. H. Blackwell and John Dewe, the first two City Librarians, and because they reveal a growing demand for books and information by Oxford citizens.

This demand first becomes apparent in 1846 with the inauguration of winter series of public lectures, which were held in the Town Hall, with the Council’s permission.⁸ From the first, Joseph Plowman of the City Reading Room was closely connected with these lectures, and became secretary of the Public Lectures

¹ Bodl. Lib. G.A. Oxon., c.40.

² R. Gardner, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of the County of Oxford* (1852), 326.

³ *JOJ*, 9 March 1846, 3.

⁴ Pigot & Co., *National Commercial Directory . . . (Oxfordshire)* (1830), 654.

⁵ J. Vincent, *Oxford Univ., City & County Directory* (1835), 50.

⁶ Gardner, *op. cit.* note 2, 378.

⁷ *OUCCH*, 21 December 1844, 3.

⁸ *JOJ*, 31 October 1846, 3.

Committee⁹ which met in the City Reading Room itself. This connection probably made it much more obvious that the Public Library Committee, when formed, should take over responsibility for what would now be regarded as extra-mural activities. The lectures were 'on popular and interesting subjects by the best lecturers that can be obtained—the lectures to take place once a fortnight . . . and the expenses to be defrayed by a trifling subscription'.¹⁰ Inauspiciously, the first lecture was held on Friday, 13 November 1846,¹¹ but the series was an immediate success, and even a lecture on 'Combustion' by Dr. Ryan 'gave great satisfaction', although it 'was in some measure curtailed by the Doctor inhaling rather more of the gases that he was experimenting upon than was agreeable. . .'.¹² The popularity of these series of lectures grew year by year, and the number of Season tickets sold rose from 217 in 1846/7 to more than 500 in 1849/50.¹³

If, as newspaper reports often emphasized, these lectures were attended by 'highly respectable audiences',¹⁴ middle-class concern for the under-privileged labouring man was also growing. In December 1846, for example, *Jackson's Oxford Journal* noted that 'Dr. Ryan has with great liberality volunteered to give a gratuitous lecture (to which the public is to be admitted without charge) on heat, ventilation, and the best modes of promoting cleanliness and health, especially among the humble classes of society'.¹⁵ On a less severely practical level, a Church of England Library and Reading Room was established in 1847, its sponsors including the Rev. W. Hayward Cox, rector of Carfax church, 'several of the parochial clergy, and many of the most respectable inhabitants of the city, who seemed to take a warm interest in the successful attempt now making to provide on a large scale the means of moral and intellectual improvement for the class of our fellow citizens for whose advantage the Institute is principally designed'.¹⁶ In 1849, an Oxford Society for the Acquisition and Diffusion of Useful Knowledge issued an appeal to the young men of Oxford, 'hoping they will not be content to lie under the stigma of being behind their contemporaries of other towns in their endeavours to acquire useful knowledge'. If they did not want to join the Society itself, the committee would help them 'to form another branch, so that they may see springing up in their native city, *from their own exertions*, a flourishing and prosperous Mechanics' Institute'.¹⁷ By November 1849, adult education classes in the useful arts and sciences were proposed 'for the advancement of the education of the young men of this city . . . which from various causes may have been retarded or unaccomplished'.¹⁸ The indefatigable Joseph Plowman had agreed to make all the necessary arrangements for these classes—once again fore-shadowing the future link between the Public Library and adult education.

⁹ *JOJ*, 12 December 1846, 3.

¹⁰ *JOJ*, 31 October 1846, 3.

¹¹ *JOJ*, 21 November 1846, 4.

¹² *JOJ*, 19 December 1846, 3.

¹³ *JOJ*, 6 October 1849, 3.

¹⁴ *JOJ*, 10 March 1849, 3.

¹⁵ *JOJ*, 19 December 1846, 3.

¹⁶ *JOJ*, 8 January 1848, 3.

¹⁷ *JOJ*, 13 October 1849, 3.

¹⁸ *JOJ*, 3 November 1849, 3.

The Public Libraries Act of 1850, enabling towns of over 10,000 to establish public libraries and to finance them by a $\frac{1}{2}d.$ rate, must therefore have been welcomed by an important minority in Oxford, although the preliminary moves towards a public library did not begin until the following year. In May 1851, *Jackson's Oxford Journal* published two letters about library provision in Oxford written under the pseudonym, Publicola, and addressed to Alderman Charles James Sadler, 'from a conviction of the deep interest you have on all occasions manifested in promoting the welfare of your fellow-citizens'.¹⁹ Publicola remarked that 'It has long been a matter of astonishment and regret that the city of Oxford, everywhere so renowned, and from whose wealthy University have gone forth so many distinguished characters, has not up to this present time one institution available for the benefit of her citizens in literature, science, or art'.²⁰ To remedy this situation he recommended an appeal to raise not less than £2,000 'for the erection of a commodious building, to consist of a library, a reading room, museum, and offices, and a lecture room capable of accommodating from 1,000 to 2,000 persons'. He envisaged subscriptions of one guinea a year, and hoped for help from wealthy and retired people as well as from members of the University.²¹

Publicola's elaborate scheme was far beyond the city's resources, and nothing more was heard of it, but his letters may well have drawn Sadler's attention to the question of library provision. At a Council meeting on 17 November 1851, he proposed a motion that 'a Committee be formed to report on the practicability of appropriating part of some of their useless buildings and ground to a better purpose, namely, for a reading room and library for the people'. He suggested the Town Hall yard as a suitable site, and went on to say, 'It was a reproach that so large and noted a city as Oxford had no public reading room or library for the mass of the people and it behoved the Council to originate some plan to remedy this, and to provide some place for the people to go to, instead of driving them to the public house'.²² A committee was duly formed, but delay ensued because of the difficulties in obtaining part of the Town Hall site.²³

The next move came from a vocal minority of influential citizens, with the help of at least one important figure from University circles. On 28 August 1852, a public meeting in favour of establishing a public library and reading room was held in the Town Hall under the chairmanship of Professor Baden Powell, Savilian Professor of Geometry. The professor began by emphasizing to the 400 people present the importance of spreading 'useful knowledge among all classes, and more especially the working classes, who were not able to pursue the object so effectually as was done by other classes who were more fortunately circumstanced. It was most desirable that, without distinction of class, or of rich and poor, means should be supplied in a public way for gaining an acquaintance with literature, science, and art, and even with amusement. . . .' He therefore read out a petition to the Town Council which pointed out 'that there is at the present time felt to be a great want

¹⁹ *JOJ*, 17 May 1851, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *JOJ*, 24 May 1851, 3.

²² *JOJ*, 22 November 1851, 3.

²³ *JOJ*, 28 August 1852, 3.

in Oxford of public means of mental recreation and improvement available to the industrious mechanic and working men, and that, consequently, an urgent necessity exists for placing within the reach of this class (and most especially within reach of its rising population) materials for sound and wholesome instruction'. The petitioners therefore begged the Council to adopt the Public Libraries Act on behalf of the city. Baden Powell's emphasis on the benefits of a public library for the working man was echoed by Joseph Taylor, who moved the adoption of the petition, and 'lamented that there was no place of resort for the working men or the youth of Oxford, except the tavern, where vicious habits were contracted, and former good impression obliterated'. The seconder, Joseph Castle, felt that 'the working classes, to whom he had the honour to belong' needed intellectual recreation and moral culture in their leisure hours, but at present, had 'nothing but the attractions of the ale-house or the blandishments of pleasure (Hear, hear)'. As a result of the meeting, Alderman Sadler was asked to present the petition to the Council, and willingly agreed to do so.²⁴

After the Council had received and accepted the petition, the procedure for adopting the Public Libraries Act required a poll of ratepayers at which at least two-thirds of the votes taken had to be in favour. The campaign does not seem to have excited any great fervour in the city, although Joseph Taylor issued a spirited poster, urging the adoption of the act as a question 'of knowledge against ignorance; of means of enlightenment against utter destitution of means of self-improvement, felt by the masses of Society. Literature, Art and Science ought to belong to all classes, and to all sects and parties. A Free Public Library seems in its right place as one of our Municipal Institutions.'²⁵ Another five or six working men, although themselves teetotallers, held meetings in the different wards at public houses, 'knowing that if they had the interest of the beer-drinkers with them they must be successful'.²⁶ On the other hand, there was little opposition to the idea of setting up a public library and Colonel Sibthorpe who 'disliked reading as an occupation',²⁷ found no echoes in Oxford. Doubts did exist, however, and just as Sir R. H. Inglis, one of the Members of Parliament for Oxford University, had feared the creation of 'lecture rooms which might give rise to an unhealthy agitation',²⁸ so G. P. Hester, the Town Clerk, felt that 'there appears to be some danger of a reading room in a small Town degenerating into a mere News room'.²⁹ On 6 October 1852, these doubts were temporarily forgotten when the burgesses voted by 596 to 72 in favour of adopting the Act, but it was not a good sign that 1,401 others had abstained.³⁰

Within nine days of the poll, preparations for the establishment of the library were under way, but unexpected delays ensued. On 25 October 1852, a joint meeting of the Public Libraries and Town Hall Improvements Committees recommended approval of the City Surveyor's plan for the conversion of part of the open

²⁴ *JOJ*, 28 August 1852, 3.

²⁵ Oxford City Libraries, 1854-1954, 2.

²⁶ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

²⁷ W. A. Mumford, *Penny Rate* (1951), 26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁹ O.C.A. T4 3 General Business Letter Book 1839-61, 138.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

loggia under the Town Hall into a library,³¹ and the full Estates Committee expressed its satisfaction with the scheme four days later.³² On 22 November, however, the Public Libraries committee found itself 'unable to proceed with any business in consequence of the absence of the City Surveyor and his offices being locked up'. The Mayor, Alderman Sadler and Mr. Green were deputed to take such measures as might be necessary to obtain the plans and papers relating to the proposed library,³³ but they clearly failed, since the Estates Committee had still not received the plans from the City Surveyor on the 26th.³⁴ The Surveyor had, in fact, resigned and a new one was appointed in January 1853, but the Estates and Library Committee had by then asked a local builder, John Fisher, to draw up plans which were accepted, with modifications, on 26 January.³⁵ Even now, trouble was not over, and, on 12 May, 'the City Surveyor having objected to carry out the plans for the Public Library prepared by Messrs. Fisher, the (Estates) Committee recommend that Messrs. Fisher by (*sic*) employed to carry out their own plans'.³⁶ By August, work was in progress, but it was not until 11 March 1854 that Fisher was ordered to 'obtain Tenders for the Grates, Gas Fittings, Tables, Chairs, Bookshelves, &c., according to the Plans & Specifications'.³⁷

As the library approached completion, its future organization and management became an urgent priority. On 17 April 1854, 'Mr. Somers, Librarian of the Marylebone Free Library, attended and being examined at great length on the mode of conducting the said Library, afforded the (Town Hall Improvement) Committee much valuable information'.³⁸ The next step was to appoint a sub-committee, chaired by Ald. Sadler, to draw up rules and regulations, for approval by the Estates Committee, and to advertise for a Librarian whose salary was to be £54 12s. *od.* Candidates were to be informed that 'the whole of their time must be given to the Library and Reading Room, the hours being 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. in Summer and from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. in winter except for meals'.³⁹ On 6 May, the successful candidate was Benjamin H. Blackwell, bookseller and proprietor of a circulating library in St. Clement's, who was 'elected to the office at a salary of £60 *p.a.*, instead of £54 12s. recommended by the Sub-committee'. At the same time, Henry Collins was appointed as Mr. Blackwell's assistant at 7s. a week, and Sunday opening from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. was approved after an amendment.⁴⁰ Then followed a hectic month of publicity before the City Library opened its doors on 1 June 1854. On 9 May, Alderman Sadler appealed for voluntary subscriptions or donations to help an 'Institution which cannot fail to be of great value to the large population of this City and its vicinity', since the 1850 Public Libraries Act 'provides amply for its permanence, security and utility when formed but affords no means and grants no powers for the formation of the same, by purchase of books

³¹ O.C.A. CC4.1 Estates Committee Minute Book 1850-65, 25 October 1852.

³² *Ibid.*, 29 October 1852.

³³ *Ibid.*, 22 November 1852.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26 November 1852.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 26 January 1853.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 May 1853.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11 March 1854.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17 April 1854.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1 May 1854.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6 May 1854.

or otherwise, from the Borough Fund'.⁴¹ During the week before the opening, Mr. Blackwell was occupied in sending out 1,400 circulars to residents in the University, City and County.⁴² The result was that the library opened with 1,615 books, and on the first day, interest or curiosity attracted to the room a total of 650 people who read 67 books between them.⁴³

This busy start seemed to be a good omen for the success of the library which flourished for several years. The number of books in stock rose gradually from 3,071 in June 1855 to 5,668 by June 1858, while the average number of daily visitors rose from 358 to 408 during the same period.⁴⁴ In August 1854, the Public Library Sub-Committee took over the management of the City Public Lectures,⁴⁵ and profits from these events were devoted to the purchase of maps in 1856,⁴⁶ books for the Lending Library in 1858,⁴⁷ and a glass chandelier for the Town Hall in 1857.⁴⁸ A Working Men's association existed in conjunction with the library in 1856,⁴⁹ and lectures in various branches of science and art were given by 'University graduates and intelligent citizens'.⁵⁰ The Sub-Committee petitioned Parliament in favour of the Public Libraries Bill of 1855,⁵¹ which sought powers to raise a penny rate and to purchase . . . 'Books, Newspapers, Maps and specimens of Art and Science' with the proceeds, and, after the Bill became law, the Council was quick to adopt it.⁵² Donations continued to come in, and on 20 February 1856, the Sub-Committee chairman was asked to communicate to the Vice Chancellor 'The Cordial and Unanimous thanks of this Committee to the University for their handsome Donation of Books printed at the University Press'.⁵³ Little wonder then, that William Ewart, sponsor of the earlier Public Libraries Acts, wrote to Sadler: ' . . . how admirably you are situated, with a Liberal Municipality, and seemingly a Liberal-minded University'.⁵⁴ Sadler, himself, was in no doubt of the value of the new institution, and with forty years of public life behind him, felt that the library 'has proved of more real benefit (*sic*) and rendered more Solid advantages to the Middle and Working Classes of this City than any Measure that has been adopted . . . Here the Workingman finds (*sic*) rest after a day of Labour and Toil And a very large number of Young Men find Every Amusement and Instructor (*sic*) . . .'.⁵⁵ In still more euphoric tones, an anonymous correspondent to a local newspaper claimed that 'Many a young man had been reclaimed from the haunts of dissipation and vice, and habitual drunkards induced to spend their evenings in the Library'.⁵⁶

⁴¹ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

⁴² O.C.A. CC4.1 Estates Committee Minute Book, 1850-65, 26 May 1854.

⁴³ O.C.L. Statistics of the Reference Library, 1854-78.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ O.C.A. Estates Committee Minute Book, 1850-65, 28 August 1854.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9 May 1856.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 24 March 1858.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3 January 1857.

⁴⁹ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ O.C.A. CC4.1 Estates Committee Minute Book, 1850-65, 15 January 1855.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 14 September 1855.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 20 February 1856.

⁵⁴ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

In 1852, Professor Baden Powell had emphasized the need for a collection of books which could be taken home and read by the fire-side,⁵⁷ and, as soon as the library was firmly established, the Committee turned its attention to this aspect of library provision. By the end of May 1856, 189 volumes had been donated for the proposed lending library,⁵⁸ and, in the second annual report for 1855/6, Sadler appealed for further contributions. Some public response is witnessed by the fact that the Oxford Amateur Theatrical Society gave the 'entire proceeds' of the first night of their Christmas entertainment—a total of £5 19s. 6d.—'to the Oxford Free Library, to assist in establishing a Lending Library for the benefit of the working men's wives and families, who are unable to avail themselves of the Public Library'.⁵⁹ The embryonic loan collection totalled 929 volumes by June 1857,⁶⁰ and the transfer of 465 books from the Reference Library enabled the Lending Library to open on 5 November 1857.⁶¹ Use of the lending library was restricted to rate-payers, who had to obtain at least one guarantor, and paid 2d. for a printed set of rules.⁶² A printed catalogue again priced at 2d., appeared in 1858, and prefaced a list of works with an appeal to 'Readers of the Establishment' to 'use every attention and care to the Books confided to them'.⁶³ Opening hours were extended from an initial two hours a week to six hours by March 1858⁶⁴ and the number of borrowers 'availing themselves of the privilege of the Lending Library' rose steadily from 598 in June 1858 to 1,384 by June 1861. At the same time, the number of books in the collection rose from 1,609 to 2,997, providing a wider choice of reading matter.⁶⁵

The early achievement of the public library masked the various problems that it faced, but, in the long term, growth only served to emphasize that it lacked both space and funds. The imposing room beneath the Town Hall was scarcely large enough to accommodate the number of people who wished to use it, and poor ventilation was a problem from the very start.⁶⁶ With some 400 visitors a day, most of them leafing through newspapers and magazines, it was no place for serious study, and the average number of daily book readers fell steadily from 74 in 1854/5 to 56 in 1856/7, even before the Lending Library enabled people to take books home.⁶⁷ After 1857, the decline was reinforced and numbers fell still further from 51 in 1857/8 to 29 by 1860/1.⁶⁸ Commenting on this situation in 1860, the Librarian queried 'how far it is desirable to maintain the Reference Library on the existing scale as a distinct and separate department', and advocated transferring at least half of the stock to the Lending Library.⁶⁹

⁵⁷ *JOJ*, 28 August 1852, 3.

⁵⁸ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

⁵⁹ *JOJ*, 6 December 1856, 5.

⁶⁰ O.C.L. Statistics of the Reference Library, 1854-78.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² O.C.A. CC4.1 Estates Committee Minute Book, 1850-65, 3 November 1857.

⁶³ O.C.L. Catalogue of the Lending Library, 1858.

⁶⁴ O.C.A. CC4.1 Estates Committee Minute Book, 1850-65, 24 March 1858.

⁶⁵ O.C.L. Statistics of the Reference Library, 1854-78.

⁶⁶ O.C.A. CC4.1 Estates Committee Minute Book, 1850-65, 15 June 1854.

⁶⁷ O.C.L. Statistics of the Reference Library, 1854-78.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

Behind the scenes, there were arguments about political bias in the management of the library, and relations between the Committee and the second City Librarian, John Dewe, seem to have been poor. Dewe had applied for the post in 1853 without success, but, after the death of B. H. Blackwell in January 1855, he was chosen from a field of 16 candidates.⁷⁰ Like Blackwell, he had gained library experience by running a circulating library of his own, but he seems to have been anxious, perhaps over-anxious, to justify his position by an obsessive concern with statistics. The classification of books read was extended from Blackwell's simple 'Imaginative Works' or 'Writers of Fact' to five complex categories: 'Novels and tales', 'poetry', 'drama and light literature', 'history, travel and biography', 'theology, philosophy, science and art'.⁷¹ He was also much keener than the Committee, which published the briefest of Annual Reports, to provide newspapers with information about the library, and the *Morning Post* for 3 December 1856 published an article describing him as 'a zealous and indefatigable officer . . . , a very intelligent and painstaking librarian' who 'for attending to all the departments, including the public lectures and concerts . . . receives only the paltry pittance of 3s. 3d. per day'.⁷² Two days later, Dewe was ordered 'not to furnish Statistics of the library to any person whatever without the Authority and Sanction of this Committee'.⁷³ Incensed by this decision, the *Morning Post* returned to the fray on 10 December, criticizing 'the liberal conduct of a sub-committee of Liberals, who, not appointed by the Town Council, which constitute the general committee, but self-appointed, have assumed the control and directions of a public institution . . . which should not be organized on party lines'.⁷⁴ After this incident, the amount of statistical information about the use of the Library at once declined, and, on 5 July 1861, the committee ordered Dewe to 'discontinue making out statistics in order that he may devote more time to the other duties of his situation'.⁷⁵

Finance was, however, the major problem faced by the Library, and, although the penny rate levied by the Council after 1855 should have been adequate, it proved both difficult and expensive to collect. Rate payers already being separately rated by poor law authorities and by the Oxford Paving Commissioners did not take kindly to an additional City rate, and collectors found it so hard to obtain the money that they demanded a high percentage of the proceeds—12% in 1863⁷⁶ and 10% in 1864.⁷⁷ After his experiences in 1863, Mr. Williams decided to resign his 'situation at the close of the present year'.⁷⁸ The estimates for 1861/2 show that a total of £291 4s. was to be spent on the library in the coming year, of which £20 would be returned to the City as rent for the room, £100 4s. would be spent on salaries, £40 on coal and gas, £50 on periodicals and newspapers, and a mere £20 on books.⁷⁹ The Library had therefore to rely substantially on donations for its

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ O.C.L. Statistics of the Reference Library, 1854-78.

⁷² O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

⁷³ O.C.A. CC4.1 Estates Committee Minute Book, 1850-65, 6 December 1856.

⁷⁴ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

⁷⁵ O.C.A. CC4.1 Estates Committee Minute Book, 1850-65, 5 July 1861.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 20 February 1863.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 April 1864.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 18 December 1863.

⁷⁹ O.C.A. CC4.2 Estates Committee Minute Book, 1859-72, 28 August 1861.

books, and could only exercise minimal control over their quality. When donating a number of books to the library in 1855, Harry Verney of Claydon House, Buckinghamshire wrote: 'I know not how far the subjects of the books may interest the readers but as you were so good as to say that I might send them, I do so without hesitation'.⁸⁰ His reservations were probably shared by early users of the library as they scanned the first Lending Library catalogue for such alluring titles as *Self-Control* by Mrs. Brinton, *Mason on Self-Knowledge or Drunkenness: evidence presented to the House of Commons*.

Because of the Library's financial difficulties under the management of the Town Council, the Oxford Local Board established in 1864 was seized upon as being an alternative means of support. This new authority, which was composed of University, City and Parish representatives, was elected to deal primarily with sanitary matters, but the facts that it included the University, covered a wider area, and would be raising an Annual Rate of its own, all helped to persuade the Council on 20 March 1865 that the management of the Library should be transferred to the Local Board.⁸¹ Although fears were expressed during the debate that the Library Committee would be limited to members of the Board, and 'that clerical gentlemen would fill the Library with dry-as-dust books', the general feeling was that the rate would be reduced to under $\frac{1}{2}d.$ in the pound, and still produce more money than the City's penny rate. Ald. Thompson even expressed the hope that a more commodious Library building would be possible because of the borrowing powers of the Board.⁸² Section 22 of the 'Act to confirm provisional orders under the Local Government Act, 1858, relating to the districts of Nottingham . . . and Oxford . . .' therefore stated that 'The custody, care and management of the Public Library in Oxford shall be vested in the Local Board'.

The transfer of the management of the Library was followed in January 1866 by the death of John Dewe,⁸³ and his successor, Thomas Plowman, stamped a different personality on the job. Plowman's election at the age of 22 might seem to smack of nepotism since his father, Joseph, was on the Committee, but he was well-qualified, having spent four years as an assistant at the Bodleian Library, and saw it as his 'main mission to bring readers and books into happy conjunction'.⁸⁴ One committee member, Mr. Justice Towle did indeed fear that he was too well qualified, and warned that 'he would not bury his talent in their Public Library but would aspire to higher aims, and when his worth was appreciated and acknowledged, he would use this appointment as a stepping stone to a better one . . .'.⁸⁵ Plowman allayed these fears by immersing himself in his work, and by 4 June 1866, was able to submit a report on the state of the Reference and Lending Libraries. The bookstock, he found, is generally 'in good condition, and of a high class, though, as a natural consequence in a library composed almost entirely of donations a certain amount of rubbish is included'. Following enquiries made of other librarians, he suggested opening the Lending Library from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily

⁸⁰ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

⁸¹ *JOJ*, 25 March 1865, 5.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ O.C.A. R5.1 Local Board Minute Book, 1864-6, 145.

⁸⁴ T. F. Plowman, *In the days of Victoria* (1918), 77.

⁸⁵ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

instead of from noon to 2 p.m. thrice weekly, since this would be more convenient for borrowers and would avoid a crush of people at particular times. This radical alteration was accepted, and a one shilling annual subscription to the Lending Library was introduced to provide a sum for binding and upkeep and to deter families from having multiple tickets or out-dated guarantees.⁸⁶ Perhaps recalling the occasion when he had been ejected from the library 'on the ground that only persons of the mature age of sixteen or over were permitted to inhale the air of that hallowed spot',⁸⁷ Plowman also succeeded in having the minimum age for library users reduced to 14.

Under Plowman's direction, the Public Library made slow but undoubted progress. In his report for 1866-7, he noted that the changes made in 1866 had operated most satisfactorily, the longer opening hours of the Lending Library having been greatly appreciated by the Borrowers, 'whilst it has tended much to the comfort of the general Readers using the Room'. Probably for this reason, use of the Reference Library had increased, although 'I believe that if the room were sufficiently large to admit of increased accommodation, viz., additional tables &c., for readers, many more would avail themselves of its benefits'. 345 borrowers' tickets had been purchased during the year, and further growth must have been encouraged by Plowman's determination that, 'whilst every encouragement should be offered to the perusal of books of a higher class, the demand for those read chiefly for amusement should not be lost sight of. By providing works, pure and healthy in tone, of the kind most popular, the influence of those (obtained elsewhere) of a trashy and injurious character may be counteracted.'⁸⁸

A glimpse of the kind of people who used the Lending Library at this time is afforded by the partial survival of the register of borrowers for 1870. Of 142 people recorded, 32, or 23.9%, were women, and a comparison of their names with the 1871 census suggests that Plowman's policy of giving 'ill-behaved boys of all ages . . . a short shrift' made the room bearable not only for working women but also for a few ladies of independent means from North Oxford. The male borrowers included craftsmen, tradesmen, servants and a few professional people, and opposite poles of society are perhaps represented by a brewer's labourer from Hollybush Row and a District Agent for the United Kingdom Alliance for the Suppression of Liquor Traffic, who lived in Iffley Road. The best-known Oxford name in the register is probably that of William Lucy, ironfounder, from Walton Street.⁸⁹

After eleven 'comfortable years' in the service of the Local Board, Plowman regretfully resigned his post on 17 December 1877,⁹⁰ and was succeeded by Thomas Harwood.⁹¹ Harwood remains a shadowy figure, probably because his annual reports have rarely survived, but his 1879 report reveals a conscientious librarian with a sense of humour, who accompanied his thanks for generous donations with a

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Plowman, *op. cit.* note 84, 49.

⁸⁸ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

⁸⁹ O.C.L. Register of Borrowers, 1870.

⁹⁰ O.C.A. R5.7 Local Board Minute Book, 1876-9, 282.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 290.

plea for ‘“more, more”, for, like a horse-leach, I am never satisfied. I feel convinced there are many persons in Oxford that, if they knew that only *one* volume would be gladly accepted for the *good* of the *many*, would willingly send in some Book or Magazine that has interested them, but was now done with’.⁹² The Local Board clearly valued his services, and his application for a salary increase in June 1880 was supported by Ald. Eagleston on the grounds that ‘he had secured gifts of considerable value, and he had bestowed the whole of his time on the library . . . they had to keep down the rates, but they should not do so at the expense of justice, and . . . he considered £100 per annum was not sufficient to maintain a person holding this position’. Eagleston went on to move an amendment that Harwood’s salary should be increased by £20 not £10 as the Committee had suggested, and this was carried.⁹³

The modest growth in the use of the library recorded by both Plowman and Harwood would probably have been much more substantial if the institution’s budget had not remained almost static. City hopes that the library would prosper under Local Board management were sadly mistaken, and the penny rate was never spent on the service. The estimate for 1867/8 was only £264,⁹⁴ and it rose slowly to a peak of £325 between 1884/5 and 1885/6 before falling back to £298 in 1886/7.⁹⁵ This was only marginally higher than the £291 4s. of 1861, although salaries now totalled £198 instead of £106 4s. The effective result was that book purchase depended initially upon a donation of £10 a year by the Oxford M.P., Edward Cardwell, who discontinued the gift when he was elevated to the peerage in 1874. The Chairman of the Library Committee, Ald. Hughes, offered £10 for the year 1875/6, but trusted that, in future years, ‘other gentlemen interested in the welfare of this city will come forward and contribute from time to time towards a fund for the purchase of books for the library, which are much needed’.⁹⁶ Few seemed to show that degree of interest, however, and it was not until 1887 that part of the surplus of a Jubilee Fund was invested in Railway Preference Shares and provided a sum of between £16 and £17 a year to spend on books.⁹⁷

Complaints about the inadequate bookstock of the library, and the cramped conditions of its premises became increasingly frequent during the later years of the Local Board, but the growing volume of protest was met, at best, by unfulfilled promises. In December 1888, the *Oxford Chronicle* remarked: ‘No Oxonian can help feeling proud at the immense and priceless collections of books in the Bodleian and other University Institutions, but so far as the ordinary citizen is concerned these books might as well be in London or Constantinople, or anywhere else. The city . . . is, in this matter of books, in a despicable—and we had almost said disgraceful—condition.’ The editorial went on to compare Oxford’s ‘apology for a library’ with its counterpart in Cambridge, which in 1887/8, contained 34,840 books and issued 102,929 volumes while Oxford had a total of 8,600 books

⁹² O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

⁹³ O.C.A. City Engineer’s Cuttings Book, 1877–81, 96.

⁹⁴ O.C.A. R5.3 Local Board Minute Book, 1867–9, 334/5.

⁹⁵ O.C.A. R5.9–10 Local Board Minute Books, 1881–6.

⁹⁶ O.C.A. City Engineer’s Cuttings Book, 1873–7, 103.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1886–8, 66.

and issues of 12,452. In the same year, Cambridge had added 1,756 new books to Oxford's 250, and spent a total of £933 on its public library, more than three times as much as Oxford.⁹⁸ Working conditions in the library were no compensation for this miserliness, and, in 1874, Plowman reported that 'it was not only very dirty, but quite "alive."'⁹⁹ The problem of ventilation was alleviated in 1875,¹⁰⁰ but never solved, and Another Ratepayer, in March 1888, invited the editor of the *Oxford Times* to drop in 'some evening after the gas is lighted . . . when the room is full (that is if you have no objection to oppress your olfactories for once with as noxious an odour as was ever generated) and you will find an atmosphere as oppressive to the last degree with heat as well as being foetid'.¹⁰¹ As early as 1874, the Chairman of the Local Board was trusting that 'The time was not far distant when they would have a Library worthy of the City of Oxford',¹⁰² but this always seemed a very remote prospect.

Despite its shortcomings as a library authority, the Local Board made an attempt to revive the series of public lectures which had lapsed through lack of interest after the 1862/3 season. The revival was suggested by the Mayor, Ald. Galpin, in September 1879, and the Library Committee agreed to arrange the lectures, but with the reservation that 'there was no power to spend money from the rates for such a purpose, consequently they must be self-supporting'.¹⁰³ The experience of 1879/80, when a deficit of £3 5s. 6d. had to be made up by the Chairman and five Committee members, was not encouraging, but the Chairman bravely remarked that 'they could not spend a small sum of money in a more satisfying way than for the edification and amusement of the public'.¹⁰⁴ The lectures were again poorly attended in 1880/1, and ceased after the 1881/2 series, the popularity of musical entertainments, dismissed as 'singing and nonsense' by Ald. Spiers, having failed to outweigh the lack of interest in more abstruse lectures.¹⁰⁵

Following the Local Government Act of 1888, and the Provisional Orders Confirmation Act (1889), the Local Board ceased to exist on 30 November 1889, and its responsibilities, including the public library, were transferred to the new City Council. The new Library and Schools Committee was headed by an interested and able chairman, Rev. C. H. O. Daniel of Worcester College, and, instead of 'a nominal committee meeting twice a year for the purpose of passing accounts', library matters were henceforth to be directed, as Ald. R. Buckell had hoped, by 'an important and influential Committee taking real, genuine and active interest in the work of the Library'.¹⁰⁶ Sunday evening opening, which had ceased in 1859, was revived between January and March 1890, 'without any expense on the use of labour, as certain members of the Committee were prepared to give their services in trying this experiment'.¹⁰⁷ An average of between 100 and 130 people

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1888-91, 6.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1873-7, 4 July 1874.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 10 April 1875.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 1886-8, 99.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 1873-7, 7 February 1874.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 1877-81, 58.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1881-6, 8 October 1881.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 1886-8, 102.

¹⁰⁷ O.C.A. FF1.9 Library Committee Minute Book, 1889-1901, 6.

took advantage of these evenings, and 'The class of visitors was the same as on weekdays evenings—Mechanics, Shopmen, etc., with a number of boys'.¹⁰⁸ The experiment was therefore repeated in 1890/1 and 1891/2, but falling attendances—averaging only 52 in 1891/2, brought Sunday opening to an end.¹⁰⁹ In November 1890, the Committee expressed itself 'desirous of forming a collection of books, pamphlets, maps, prints and other publications having reference to the County, University and City of Oxford. Such a collection should in their opinion be an important function of the City Library.' Donations were solicited in the hope that the nucleus of a Local History Collection could be formed by the time 'the Library is housed in a manner more worthy of the City'.¹¹⁰ Winter entertainments were attempted again during 1890/1, and the modest profits enabled the Committee to buy Andrew Clark's *The Colleges of Oxford* for the Library.¹¹¹ In general terms, issues rose to 15,151 by 1890, and up to 90 people at a time were counted in the Reading Room, 'but the public very much complain of the great inconvenience and discomfort due to want of air, light and space'.¹¹²

The main obstacle to further development of the library's services was the library building itself, and its replacement was seen as a high priority. In April 1891, the Library Committee urged Council to find better premises for the library, which Daniel condemned as 'a mere newspaper room and nothing more... There was the scantiest accommodation for readers of magazines and light literature; there was absolutely no accommodation for students of a more serious character, and there was an absolute impossibility to provide any accommodation for female readers... The lighting was detestable... and owing to the large amount of gas it was necessary to burn the bindings of the books rotted upon the shelves. In their present circumstances, and with the room they had, it was an absolute impossibility for the Committee to take any serious steps either for the improvement of the room, for the extension of the room, for the accommodation of readers, for the extension of the library itself, or raising its character in any way.' He felt that two or three times as much accommodation was required—with room for further expansion, and thought that 'the £800 a year which they had the power by law of expending upon keeping up the library should be so devoted'.¹¹³ This sum was more than twice the library's budget of £373 for 1891/2,¹¹⁴ but most Councillors seem to have recognized the need for better premises, and the Library Committee was instructed to report to the General Purposes Committee on the additional accommodation required.¹¹⁵ On 19 May, the Library Committee suggested an extension of the library into William Parker's adjacent cycle shop,¹¹⁶ but this scheme was abandoned in June,¹¹⁷ and the search for new premises was brought to a

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 51–2.

¹¹² O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

¹¹³ O.C.A. City Engineer : Cuttings Book, 1891–3, 37–8.

¹¹⁴ O.C.A. FF1.9 Library Committee Minute Book, 1889–1901, 35.

¹¹⁵ O.C.A. City Engineer's Cuttings Book, 1891–3, 38.

¹¹⁶ O.C.A. FF1.9 Library Committee Minute Book, 1889–1901, 43–4.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

successful conclusion by the Council's decision to build new Municipal Buildings on 11 June.¹¹⁸

There can have been few regrets when the old library closed its doors for the last time on 25 March 1893, and began a period of exile in temporary premises. In May, the Lending Library re-opened in the Cattle Market Settling Room in Gloucester Green and the Reading Room in Bath Court, while Reference books were stored in the Examination Schools.¹¹⁹ Following complaints from readers about the filthy approaches to the Settling Room, the Market Bailiff was asked to keep them in a state of 'proper cleanliness',¹²⁰ but the difficulty of combining a library with a cattle market led to the Lending Library being moved to Bath Court by the end of 1893.¹²¹

While the new Municipal Buildings were under construction, the question of branch library provision in the City came to a head. Branch libraries and reading-rooms for North and East Oxford under the same management as the City Library had first been suggested in 1887,¹²² but the proposal was not taken up by the Local Board. In December 1889, the newly formed City Council invited electors to comment on their needs for branch libraries, and asked them 'to consider the question of site and help the Council by making suggestions and recommendations'.¹²³ When G. H. Morrell wrote to the Chairman of the Library Committee on 28 April 1890 stating that he had found suitable premises in East Oxford, and would place them 'free of rent for a term of five years certain at the disposal of the City for the purpose of a Free Library and Reading Room for Eastern Oxford',¹²⁴ it might therefore be anticipated that his proposal would have been gratefully accepted. Unfortunately, the premises concerned formed part of the East Oxford Constitutional Hall in Cowley Road, which was designed to strengthen the Conservative cause in East Ward, and many of the City's Liberals were therefore very uneasy about the scheme. Morrell's proposal seems to have been free from political motives, however, since a library had been planned as an integral part of the building, and could have been opened without any reference to the Council. This point was made in debate by Ald. Robert Buckell and Ald. Wilson, and Richard Bacon felt that the plan was being attacked for 'party reasons of the most fantastic and imaginary character'. He was aware that many people in East Ward 'did not care a straw for either of the parties', but 'would gladly see this spacious and well-ventilated reading room opened and set on foot'. Rev. Daniel warned the Council that the premises would probably be used as a library in any case, and that, 'if private enterprise opened a free library in that part of the town, even if it were only for a section of the population, it would be of such an excellent character that it would really take up the ground', and would make the establishment of a public library impossible. Nevertheless, Mr. Morrell's offer was rejected

¹¹⁸ O.C.A. C5.5 Council Minute Book, 1889-92, 348.

¹¹⁹ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

¹²⁰ O.C.A. FF1.9 Library Committee Minute Book, 1889-1901, 90.

¹²¹ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

¹²² *JOJ*, 10 May 1890, 6.

¹²³ O.C.A. City Engineer's Cuttings Book, 1888-91, 92.

¹²⁴ *JOJ*, 10 May 1890, 6.

by 24 votes to 20,¹²⁵ and, as Daniel had foreseen, a privately-run East Oxford Reading Room was established, and effectively stifled the development of public library provision in that area. In Summertown, on the other hand, no such facilities were available, and, in November 1894, residents presented a petition asking for a branch library to be established there.¹²⁶ More concerned, perhaps, with arrangements for the new Central Library, the Library Committee instructed a Sub-Committee to look into the question of starting only a branch reading room.¹²⁷ On 30 November, the Sub-Committee reported that the Temperance Hall in George Street, Summertown, would be ideal for the purpose, and, although the full Committee then recommended Council to postpone the matter until the new Library opened,¹²⁸ Council decided to spend up to £80 during 1895 on establishing and administering a Summertown branch reading room and library.¹²⁹ The room opened in January 1895, and a small lending library was started before March 1896 with the help of one or two generous contributors.¹³⁰ In May 1896, the Committee agreed that Summertown and Central Library tickets should be inter-changeable,¹³¹ and, from October 1897, a box containing books requested by Summertown readers was sent out from the Central Library each Thursday.¹³²

The opening of the new Central Library made possible a considerable improvement in services. Instead of one room, the Library now had four public rooms, including a Reading Room (opened on 11 November 1895), a Ladies' Room and Lending Library (opened on 16 December) and a Reference Library (opened on 3 February 1896).¹³³ In place of a single sub-Librarian, the City Librarian, Thomas Harwood, was now given an experienced Chief Assistant Librarian—J. L. Dougan—from Battersea Public Library, and two assistants,¹³⁴ increased to three in 1896.¹³⁵ A catalogue of the 4,706 volumes in the Lending Library was published in 1896, and it is a measure of the subsequent development of the Library that the 1907 edition contained nearly 12,000.¹³⁶ Issues rose from 55,207 in 1896/7,¹³⁷ the first full year after the opening of the new building, to 61,577 by 1899/1900,¹³⁸ 76,036 in 1906¹³⁹ and 100,313 in 1910.¹⁴⁰ A Cotgreave Indicator, which showed borrowers whether a book was on loan or not, was installed in 1896,¹⁴¹ and a second one was being considered for purchase by 1900.¹⁴² Visiting the Library in 1897, Councillor J. Moore 'found the convenience of all the

¹²⁵ *JOJ*, 7 June 1890, 6.

¹²⁶ O.C.A. FF1.9 Library Committee Minute Book, 1889–1901, 124.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 125–7.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 128–30.

¹³⁰ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

¹³¹ O.C.A. FF1.9 Library Committee Minute Book, 1889–1901, 181.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 219–20.

¹³³ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

¹³⁴ O.C.A. FF1.9 Library Committee Minute Book, 1889–1901, 146 and 150.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹³⁶ Catalogue of the Lending Department, 1907. Preface.

¹³⁷ Oxford City Libraries, 1854–1954, 25.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

¹⁴⁰ Oxford City Libraries, 1854–1954, 25.

¹⁴¹ O.C.A. FF1.9 Library Committee Minute Book, 1889–1901, 180.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 328–30.

departments much appreciated, especially the Lending Library, on Saturday evening last there were forty persons at one time, waiting for books'.¹⁴³ Later the same year, he spoke of 'the increased need of supplying the variable demand of the readers and borrowers', and paid tribute to the Library staff, 'a more deserving body of public servants one and all it would be difficult to find'.¹⁴⁴ Because of the increasing work, Dougan's salary was raised from £80 to £115 in 1900, Ald. Buckell remarking that they must view the matter as employers who had an employee 'who by exceeding diligence and assiduity in that business improved it'.¹⁴⁵

New developments, unforeseen when the library was built, added to the library's value to the community. The idea of a children's reading room was not suggested until September 1899,¹⁴⁶ but the Library Committee took up Councillor Dodd's proposal with enthusiasm, and appointed a Sub-Committee to 'organize a Reading Room for children between the ages of 8 and 14 years old . . . to be open on each week day from 5 to 8 p.m. except Saturday when it will be open from 3 to 8 p.m.'. ¹⁴⁷ The only space available for this purpose was in the basement, but by 2 November the reading room was in operation and an average of between 90 and 100 children were soon attending each session.¹⁴⁸ A user of the room later recalled that 'Down there, without any natural light, with the *Times* files and the archives generally, a whole generation of Oxford received with reverent and grateful docility in the dimly-lit subterranean bounties of our enlightened community'.¹⁴⁹ Apart from poor light and ventilation, children using the room in 1903 were also 'very much disturbed by other children outside looking and shouting through the windows', and a resourceful Councillor Lane suggested the purchase of dark curtains to prevent children in the street from seeing those inside.¹⁵⁰ The forbidding aspect of the room was probably matched to some degree by the quality of the bookstock, and, in 1911, Councillor Thompson suggested 'the provision of more books suitable for children'.¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, the service developed slowly, and, from December 1904, children were permitted to borrow books from the library if they obtained their Head teacher's recommendation and the signature of a parent or guardian.¹⁵²

A much more unusual development was the formation of a Braille Library, although this depended upon voluntary effort, and the Central Library acted merely as a home and distribution point for the books. The annual report for 1897/8 recorded that 'About 30 volumes of books for the blind, in the Braille system, have been presented by members of the University. These, by special arrangement, will be made available for home reading'.¹⁵³ By 1907, the collection had swelled to nearly 600 volumes,¹⁵⁴ and totalled almost 900 by the end of 1910.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴³ O.C.L. Visitors' Book, 30 March 1897.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1 September 1897.

¹⁴⁵ O.C.A. City Engineer's Cuttings Book, 1899-1901, 91.

¹⁴⁶ O.C.L. Visitors' Book, 21 September 1899.

¹⁴⁷ O.C.A. FF1.9, Library Committee Minute Book, 1889-1901, 285-7.

¹⁴⁸ O.C.L. Visitors' Book, 27 November 1899.

¹⁴⁹ *Sunday School Chronicle and Times*, 1 December 1927.

¹⁵⁰ O.C.L. Visitors' Book, 30 September 1903.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15 December 1911.

¹⁵² O.C.A. FF1.10 Library Committee Minute Book, 1901-13, 105-8.

¹⁵³ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Rules published in January 1908 show that the collection 'was for the use of Blind Citizens of Oxford and Members of the University, but under certain conditions books were lent to *bona fide* students elsewhere'.¹⁵⁶ The Braille Library 'gained not only a local, but a European reputation', and, in 1927, it was transferred to the National Library for the Blind where it would be put to greater use.¹⁵⁷

Increasing public use of the library and the development of new services began to reveal the inadequacies of the new building and soon made changes necessary. Although the Library Committee remarked that the Library was at last 'suitably and indeed handsomely housed' in 1896,¹⁵⁸ its misgivings were not far beneath the surface. In August 1894, for example, it had criticized the fact that, 'in the plans now submitted there appears to be no accommodation for the Librarian and his staff, no retiring room, no spare room'.¹⁵⁹ As has been shown, the Children's Reading Room had therefore to be sited in the basement—a room which the Postmaster refused to use as a temporary telegraph room in 1916 because 'the lighting conditions would prove prejudicial to the work, and, quite possibly, to the health of the staff'.¹⁶⁰ By 1900, more shelf room was required in the Lending Library,¹⁶¹ and, a year later, the Reference Library was in the same position.¹⁶² By 1909, the steady growth of the Lending Library had 'resulted in the congestion of the room specially devoted to this part of the work, and the Committee were obliged to appropriate the basement under the Lending Library as an additional store room. This extension necessitated the building of an iron staircase in order that 'the service of books might be as expeditious as possible'.¹⁶³ In 1910, the committee felt that 'they have quite reached the possible limits of expansion under present conditions',¹⁶⁴ and a report presented to the General Purposes Committee in December 1911 condemned the Lending Library in particular as 'the worst (room) in the building', small, dark and impossible to convert to open access. The Library as a whole was described as being 'over-crowded in almost every department', and the building as 'ill-adapted to the purpose of a modern public library'.¹⁶⁵ Some adaptation did prove possible, however, and in June 1913, the Lending Library was extended into the Ladies Room by removing a dividing wall. At the same time, the books were re-classified according to the Dewey Decimal Classification Scheme, and the Library became one of the first in England to give readers 'Safe-guarded Open Access' to the books.¹⁶⁶ As a result, the public flocked to the library in increasing numbers, and, during the next six months issues of fiction rose by 11%, and issues of non-fiction by 20%.¹⁶⁷ Ladies lost a room of their own by the re-organization, and were given part of the Reference Library instead. Accord-

¹⁵⁶ O.C.A. FF1.10 Library Committee Minute Book, 1901-13, 187-8.

¹⁵⁷ Oxford City Council. Council Reports, 21 October 1927.

¹⁵⁸ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

¹⁵⁹ O.C.A. FF1.9 Library Committee Minute Book, 1889-1901, 117-18.

¹⁶⁰ O.C.A. FF1.11 Library Committee Minute Book, 1913-17, 73-6.

¹⁶¹ O.C.L. Visitors' Book, 19 January 1900.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 18 June 1901.

¹⁶³ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

ing to Councillor F. W. Vincent, the 'arrangement for Females appears quite satisfactory, the Males keeping to the portion of the room provided for them without the necessity of ropes or grill (*sic*) . . .'.¹⁶⁸

If lack of accommodation soon became a problem in the new Central Library, lack of adequate finance remained a constant hindrance to the development of the library service. The annual budget of the Library rose annually from £140 in 1896/7¹⁶⁹ to £1,467 in 1911/2,¹⁷⁰ but any further increase was prevented by the penny rate limitation which about 30 other towns, including Cambridge, had circumvented by means of clauses in local Acts.¹⁷¹ As a result, the Library's book fund—excluding newspapers and periodicals—was only £135 in 1911/2, and strong reliance continued to be placed on donations. In 1896, for example, the Library Committee trusted that the Reference Library would one day be worthy of the city 'but this can only be done through voluntary donations'.¹⁷² Again, in 1913, Councillor B. H. Blackwell remarked that 'the classification of the Lending Library exhibits the nakedness of the land in many departments, and may possibly stimulate donors'.¹⁷³ To some extent, donors were forthcoming, and, in 1896, Convocation of the University presented to the Library books published by the Clarendon Press to the value of £100.¹⁷⁴ Another large-scale donor was Rev. H. G. Woods, President of Trinity College, who had made three donations of more than 100 books at a time by 1898.¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the quality of the bookstock was bound to remain very uneven, and in 1898 the *Oxford Journal* fulminated against the Reference Library, alleging that 'a meaner collection of books was never housed in a finer room, it is like lodging a ragged beggar in a palace'. For Physics, the library had no text book 'later than 1832, for Arithmetic 1857, for Architecture 1849, for Engineering the same date . . . Mechanics, Natural History . . ., Medicine, Anatomy, all tell the same tale, all being contributions to a pile of ancient rubbish'.¹⁷⁶ A similar attitude was shown by Councillor J. Michinson in 1905, when he entered a cry of despair into the Visitors Book: 'O why keep piles of books—rubbish that no human being will ever desire to look into'.¹⁷⁷

Financial constraints also prevented the Library from opening further branch libraries or from embarking upon projects which would have given it a wider role in the city and county. The lending library in Summertown was never developed, and the proposed expenditure of £60 in 1911/2¹⁷⁸ was the same as had been spent in its first year of operation. Local enthusiasm probably waned, and the Committee having concluded that 'the meagre attendance does not justify its continuance', closed the room on 30 June 1911.¹⁷⁹ Summertown residents petitioned for

¹⁶⁸ O.C.L. Visitors' Book, 30 July 1913.

¹⁶⁹ O.C.A. FF1.9 Library Committee Minute Book, 1889-1901, 169-70.

¹⁷⁰ O.C.A. FF1.10 Library Committee Minute Book, 1901-13, 292.

¹⁷¹ Mumford, *op. cit.* note 27, 34.

¹⁷² O.C.A. FF1.9 Library Committee Minute Book, 1889-1901, 171-5.

¹⁷³ O.C.L. Visitors' Book, 30 June 1913.

¹⁷⁴ O.C.A. City Engineer's Cuttings Book, 1895-7, 73.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1897-9, 94.

¹⁷⁶ *JOJ*, 23 July 1898, 5.

¹⁷⁷ O.C.L. Visitors' Book, 21 February 1905.

¹⁷⁸ O.C.A. FF1.10 Library Committee Minute Book, 1902-13, 292.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 277-80.

it to be re-opened,¹⁸⁰ however, and, in September, the Committee reluctantly agreed to do so pending a report to Council on branch library provision.¹⁸¹ The report in October was blunt: 'Whatever may be the feelings of the citizens and the Council as to the provision of branch libraries, the Corporation is precluded from entertaining any such proposition by want of funds. The expenditure on the public library is at present within £180 of the amount raised by the penny rate and this amount will soon be absorbed owing to the rapid growth and increased use of the present Library.'¹⁸² Summertown reading room died a lingering death, but the evening attendance fell from an average attendance of 27 in 1913 to 24 in 1914,¹⁸³ and it was closed permanently at the end of April 1915 owing to 'the paucity of readers'.¹⁸⁴ School library services were no more fortunate than branch libraries, and, in 1904, a Schools Management Sub-Committee proposal for the circulation of boxes of books from the Library to form lending libraries in schools was rejected because it 'would cause an extra charge on the revenue of the library'.¹⁸⁵ In 1901, the suggestion to allow borrowers from outside the city to use the Lending department suffered a similar fate, although Cambridge had had a scheme of that kind three years earlier.¹⁸⁶ Committee members probably felt, like the editor of *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, that the stock was too small to allow it.¹⁸⁷

By 1914, Oxford City Library had been in existence for sixty years, and was an established community institution. In its premises, in its bookstock, and in its membership, it had grown markedly from humble beginnings but it still faced the twin problems of accommodation and finance that had plagued it ever since 1854. The penny rate limitation still stifled, or provided an excuse for stifling, every new initiative, and further development could not take place until the Public Libraries Act of 1919 swept it aside.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 286-8.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 289-92.

¹⁸³ O.C.L. Library Scrapbook.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ O.C.A. FF1.10 Library Committee Minute Book, 1901-13, 105-8.

¹⁸⁶ O.C.A. FF1.9, *Ibid.*, 1889-1901, 337-8.

¹⁸⁷ *JOJ*, 23 July 1898, 5.