Historic England

The English Public Library 1850-1939

Introductions to Heritage Assets

Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which lack such a summary. This can either be where the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood. Many of these are what might be thought of as 'new heritage', that is they date from after the Second World War.

Among the many important political and social reforms of the mid 19th century concerning working conditions, public health and education was the Public Libraries Act of 1850. However, while this allowed municipal boroughs in England and Wales to establish public libraries, few were built until Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 precipitated the setting up of several dozen. Then, during the 1880s and 90s private philanthropy saw the construction of a vast number of small and medium sized libraries, and by 1914, 62 per cent of the England's population lived within a library authority area. This selection guide looks at the external architecture of the libraries built under these and later initiatives, and how they were fitted out and used as access to their book-stock was opened up to readers.

Front cover
Central Library, Manchester, listed Grade II*. One of the most significant inter-war library buildings. Its classical appearance belies its steel-framed construction and use of new library technologies introduced from the United States. The design by E. Vincent Harris of 1930-4 includes a large, double-height, circular reading room, with reference books in stacks below. It also housed an exhibition space and theatre. In 2010-14 the library underwent substantial refurbishment.

Contents

Introduction

For over a century and a half public libraries have been at the heart of English life; in cities, towns and villages across the land they were and are places of learning, leisure, enlightenment and betterment, open to all. As used here, the term 'public library' refers to purpose-built structures erected under the terms of the 1850 Public Libraries Act and its principal successor, the 1919 Public Libraries Act, including central, branch and village libraries in England, from 1850 until 1939. Often originally referred to as free libraries, free public libraries or institutes (the latter often named after a philanthropic benefactor), the impetus behind the early free library movement was the education and improvement of the working-classes, in which temperance played a part. It formed part of the liberal-driven body of reforming legislation which characterised much of the state agenda during the second half of the 19th century. The first purpose-built public library in England opened in 1857, but local adoption of the Act progressed slowly for much of the rest of the century, although the rate increased considerably in the late 1880s at the time of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. It subsequently accelerated with the advent of co-ordinated philanthropic endowment, the chief benefactor being Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish-American steel magnate. Construction continued at varying rates, albeit interrupted by the First World War, until 1939, with virtually all architectural styles being employed for buildings which ranged from the extremely modest to the ostentatious and grandiose. The eighty-year period also saw the shift from closed-access libraries, in which access to books was tightly controlled and users were segregated by class, sex and age, to the more egalitarian open-access system in use today.

English public library history and architecture prior to the Second World War has been extensively researched, and much has been published on the subject from the late 19th century to the present. Certain library buildings have benefited from statutory protection since the 1960s but it was not until the early 1990s that the need for the comprehensive preservation of library buildings began to be recognised, when the Library History Group of what was then the Library Association – but later became the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) – began to explore ways of promoting better understanding and appreciation of the significance of historic library buildings and the need for preservation strategies. English Heritage conducted a survey of pre-Second World War Libraries in London in 1990, the results of which (including recommendations for statutory protection) were reported in June 1992. The increasing rate of municipal disposals in the early 21st century further underlined the need for national protection initiatives, and the heritage asset type is discussed in Historic England's Listing Selection Guide Culture and Entertainment.

This survey is complemented by one treating the later 20th century, The English Public Library 1945-85

1 Historical Background

The Public Libraries Act of 1850 was just one of a plethora of liberal-driven political and social reform initiatives which emerged during the 19th century, as the social ramifications of the mature industrial revolution became all too manifest. The expanding and migrating working populations – generally moving from rural to burgeoning urban environments – the development of vast new suburbs and the mushroom growth of towns and consequent overcrowding in urban centres, many of which developed slum districts, characterised these effects in many areas, especially expanding industrial and commercial centres. The physical and moral health of people in these unprecedented circumstances became topics of great concern to sections of the elite and governing classes, and the years from 1832 until 1850 (the year of the Libraries Act) saw the passing of the Parliamentary Reform Act in 1832, the Factory Acts of 1833, 1844, 1847 and 1850, and the Public Health Act of 1848, amongst significant others. Later the century would witness the passing of the Elementary Education Act (1870), the first concerted attempt by the state to achieve universal literacy in England.

Although unthinkable at the beginning of the 19th century, by the time of the 1850 Libraries Act the idea of using public funds to provide public libraries had antecedents. In 1845, William Ewart's Museums Act provided the first opportunity for local authorities to provide 'free' libraries, albeit in or as annexes to buildings ostensibly designed for a different purpose; Canterbury, Warrington and Salford each exploited the Act to attach free libraries to local museums. The subsequent Pubic Libraries Act of 1850 allowed, but did not compel, municipal boroughs in England and Wales to establish public library facilities and staffing, but not books and other materials, using funds raised from the rates at a maximum of half a penny in the pound. Even then provision could only be made if a borough's population exceeded 10,000 and where at least two-thirds of rate payers had voted in favour of such a move in a specific poll. In 1853 the Act was extended to cover Ireland and Scotland, and the following year new legislation enabled Scottish boroughs to use a one-penny rate which could additionally be used to purchase books and other reading materials. In 1855, the same rules were applied in England and Wales and the population requirement was reduced to 5,000. In addition, local improvement boards and commissions, and parish vestries, were also allowed to become library authorities.

The first town to open a new library under the 1850 Act was Winchester, which adopted the Act in 1851 and opened its library in the same year. The first new building entirely funded under the Act was the public library, museum and art school at Norwich which opened in 1857. However, by 1867, only 27 authorities in Britain had adopted library legislation; the penny rate often limited the means of local authorities to provide library buildings, especially in depressed areas with many low-rated properties, even where the will to do so existed, without substantial private subsidy. The slow trend was reversed two decades later amidst the national excitement generated by the celebration of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887; in that year alone, 77 new libraries were established. It was during the 1880s and 90s, however, that a new pattern of organised private philanthropy

emerged in Britain which would provide both the motivation and means for previously sluggish or impoverished local authorities to adopt the Act. It was during this period that the previous level of provision was dramatically overtaken as a vast number of small and medium sized libraries were built – often bearing the name of the benefactor, chief among whom were Andrew Carnegie, John Passmore Edwards and Henry Tate, the Liverpudlian sugar merchant who established the Tate Gallery in London. The Cornishman John Passmore Edwards, who became a Liberal Member of Parliament and made a fortune as a newspaper owner, endowed 15 public libraries in his home county alone, most formally styled the 'Passmore Edwards Institute' (Fig 1). But by far the most prolific benefactor was the Scottish-American steel magnate Andrew Carnegie who gifted his first library, to his native Dunfermline, in 1883. It was not until 1904, however, that the first Carnegie library in England, at Keighley, West Yorkshire (Fig 2), opened. It was followed by a wave of new town and city, central and branch Carnegie Free Libraries – some small and modest in the extreme, others large and lavishly embellished (Figs 3 and 4) – which swept across the country until broken by the outbreak of the First World War. In 1913 the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust was established with a broad remit to generally improve the well-being of the mass of working-class people in Great Britain and Ireland by charitable means, one of which was the continued endowment of local free libraries; by 1914, 62 per cent of the population of England lived within a library authority area. County authorities, however, remained outside the scope of public library legislation and the lack of facilities in rural areas was highlighted in the new Carnegie Trust's 'Adams Report' of 1915. This was something the next major Public Libraries Act, of 1919, would, amongst other things, seek to address.

The 1919 Act was a landmark piece of legislation that consolidated all of the regulatory progress made up to that date into an enabling Act. It removed the 'penny rate' restriction of previous Acts that had capped the proportion of local taxation that a given authority could spend on library provision, which had created the reliance on philanthropic bodies for top-up investment.
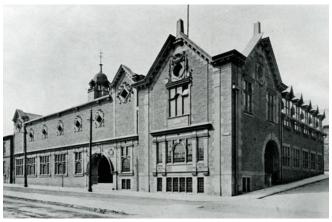

Figure 1 (top)
The Truro Free Library, listed Grade II. Silvanus Trevail designed many of the Passmore Edwards Institutions in Cornwall and elsewhere, including this one. Opened in 1896, it was entirely endowed by John Passmore Edwards, who laid the foundation stone. The adjoining Technical Schools of 1899 were also designed by Trevail.
© Phoebe Herring

Figure 2 (bottom)
Keighley Carnegie Library, listed Grade II. Opened in 1904, this was the first Carnegie Library in England. The architects were McKewan and Swan of Birmingham. Carnegie gave £10,000, and a large white marble bust of him, on a substantial pedestal, stands within. Several decorative murals adorn the interior.
© maggieblank.com

Charitable bodies such as the Carnegie UK Trust (a formal amalgamation of Andrew Carnegie's various trusts, formed in 1913) provided far fewer grants for the library sector after 1919, although it retained its importance, especially in lobbying on wider issues of public literacy. This shift in funding influenced the design of libraries as the emphasis changed subtly from one of endowed

Figure 3 (top)
The library at Kettering (Northamptonshire) by Goddard, Paget and Catlow, an Arts and Crafts essay in brick and Ketton stone with a Collyweston slate roof, seen here soon after its 1904 opening by Andrew Carnegie. The library is the focus of a fine civic group with the Dryland fountain (c.1907), the neoclassical Alfred East Art Gallery (1913) and Kettering's war memorial (1921). All are Grade-II listed.
© Paul Stamper

Figure 4 (bottom)
Islington Public Library, Fieldway Crescent, Holloway, London (listed Grade II). This handsome Portland stone-fronted library of 1906 was built in an Edwardian Baroque style to the designs of Henry T. Hare, the facade adorned with statues of English Literary figures Francis Bacon and Edmund Spenser. Its former reading room retains its Doric columns and compartmented ceiling, and accommodates modern bookcases and desks.
© Susie Barson

institutions with 'improving' (and sometimes imposing) architecture to one of a less symbolic municipal functionality, albeit often executed with a good deal of contemporary flair and architectural élan.

The 1919 Act also enabled County Councils to become library authorities, a major boon for rural areas as it permitted small parish authorities to relinquish their existing responsibilities to counties, which could make provision across wider and less populated areas more realistic based on a broader tax base and more sensible economies of scale. Even so, few counties built much before 1939 and the first new county library, at Ashford (Kent), was not built until the late 1920s. County authorities tended instead to use part-time premises, such as schools, or mobile van services. Also, along with the trend in major towns and cities to spread provision into suburban areas – often newly-created suburbs built by private enterprise and municipalities – rural libraries of the inter-war period were by their nature much smaller than earlier central libraries with multiple functions. There were, however, several major cities and towns, such as Manchester, Southampton, Sheffield and Huddersfield, that found themselves in need of new central libraries after the First World War, either because older facilities had outlived their usefulness or because they had failed to provide a service under earlier legislation.

All of this expansion took place within a context of national enthusiasm for public libraries that reached a peak in the 1930s. This could be measured by the number of library visits and books being lent – data collected by the Board of Education – which indicated that the services being offered had never been more popular as they became essentially universal across the country, with an 84 per cent increase in total issues between 1923-4 and 1931-2. Increased use and increased provision were of course inseparable trends, although there were still shortages in rural areas, but they amounted to a final maturation of the library service as national in scope serving communities of varying sizes and offering a service that was broadly similar everywhere, depending on available funding and the size of the building. In institutional terms, and in certain core design terms, the public library had reached an equilibrium that would not be substantially challenged until the growth of new media in the 1990s.

2 Development of the Building Type

The passing of the first Public Libraries Act in 1850 and its immediate successor presented British architects with a new challenge. The high ideals of the free library movement, when combined with the burgeoning, and competitive, civic pride of mid 19th-century England, required buildings of an appropriate monumentality which incorporated and displayed scholastic iconography, celebrated and revered literary heroes, and embodied the prevailing establishment ideals of spiritual nobility. The idea that the concepts of wisdom and knowledge became an almost tangible mass, greater than the sum of their parts, when inanimate objects – books as the essence of learned civilisation – were concentrated in one place, also had to be expressed in architecture. The architectural profession, by-and-large, jumped at this new opportunity to experiment and shine, and virtually all architectural styles were ultimately employed

Figure 5
The William Brown Library and Museum, Liverpool, listed Grade II*. Built in 1857-60 and designed by Thomas Allom and John Weightman, the Liverpool Corporation Surveyor, its severe neo-classical façade reflects the mid 19th-century preference for pure Neoclassical civic buildings. The museum included stuffed animals and birds, donated by the Earl of Derby, is left of the entrance, the smaller library to the right.
© Dave Went

for early public libraries. But, as with many other civic building types of the mid 19th century, the first substantial batch, which included Liverpool's Brown Free Library and Museum of 1860 (Fig 5), were favoured with pure classical styles, a conscious attempt to associate them with the scholarly and artistic flowerings of Antiquity and the European Renaissance – the Free Library movement was, after all, a conscious attempt to bring culture to the masses. Neo-Gothic examples followed slightly later in the century, as the style became nationally fashionable. By 1900, as noted above, almost all contemporary architectural styles had been employed somewhere.

However, for all the effort that was put into external appearance, early library designers often overlooked, or failed to adequately appreciate, the intrinsic needs of readers and borrowers (the public in general), librarians and their assistants, and the simple spatial requirements of a building designed for the storage of books. In a truly public library, books needed to be easily and efficiently accessed, read and returned. Early in the period this led to a degree of conflict between the architectural fraternity and librarians, the former failing to fully acknowledge the needs of the latter. This was, after all, an almost entirely new building type in terms of purpose, aims and user base. Furthermore, early public libraries usually served a number of different functions and catered, eventually, for clients of both sexes, of both the working and middle classes, and for both children and adults of all classes – all within a single structure. Early public library design was greatly influenced by the 'Panoptican' reading room of the library of the British Museum (the Round Reading Room, as it was generally known) which had its antecedents in Oxford's Radcliffe Camera and the domed circular library of Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia. The British Museum Library design was based on the principal of central supervision, and this influenced the design of many other libraries: Liverpool's Picton Reading Room of 1879 (Fig 6) and the surprisingly late (1934) Manchester Central Library (see cover) are famous examples.

Until the 1890s, nearly all new public libraries, for reasons of security and for the efficient use of expensive space, operated on the closed-access system, under which the bulk of the book-stock was kept in a dense book room or store, latterly known as a 'stack', beyond the reach of, and often out of sight of, the reading public. Naturally enough, early libraries were specifically designed to accommodate this system, except where, by necessity, a library building was so small that all activities had to take place in a single space. Closed-access libraries were typically based around the centrally-supervised reading room, usually lined with shelves to walls and in alcoves. Other rooms included a separate 'magazine' room for ladies and sometimes a separate gentlemen's conversation/games/smoking room, the borrowers' lobby and a newspaper, or 'news' room. The different rooms matched gender and class distinctions; thus the reading room was intended for the use of serious students (by implication men) while women and their

Figure 6
The Picton Reading Room, Liverpool, listed Grade II*. Built in 1875-9 to designs by Cornelius Sherlock, this is a reduced version of the British Museum reading room, 30.5 metres across, with a 1,200-seat lecture theatre below. Along with the Brown Library and Museum (Fig 5), Walker Art Gallery (1877) and St George's Hall (1841-51) it forms one of England's most important Victorian civic groupings.
© Dave Went

Figure 7
The Harris Library, Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, listed Grade I. Designed by James Hibbert and built in 1881-93, the Harris is an entirely classical building employing Greek orders on a grand scale. Planned around a vast atrium for exhibits, the lending library was accessed from the street while the reference library and art gallery occupied the first and second floors.
© Dave Went

Figure 8
The Edward Pease Public Library, Darlington, listed Grade II. Opened in 1885 and designed by George Gordon Hoskins, this design was on the 'open book' plan. This was influenced by its corner site, which lent prominence to the building and allowed natural light to flood in. Typically, wings containing the main reading rooms radiate from a narrow portico and entrance lobby.
© Dave Went

magazines were kept away in a room of their own. Working-class males were the principal users of the newspaper room while borrowers were of both sexes but did not expect to spend much time in the building itself, once the selection and collection – usually via a hatch above a counter – process had been completed. To facilitate this, catalogues let readers know what stock was held and the availability of individual volumes was logged using an 'indicator'. The best known version was invented by Alfred Cotgreave in 1879, and comprised a series of tall wooden frames containing reversible compartments, representing books, with different colour-coded ends to indicate whether or not the book was available. The compartments held mini ledgers in which successive readers' names were logged.

The designers of library buildings were therefore required to prepare a layout which allowed supervised segregation by function, sex and class, but which also met librarians' expressed practical wishes and reservations regarding fires, lighting and ventilation. In spite of these new technical challenges, few architects specialised in library

design until the surge of interest which began in 1887 with the Golden Jubilee. Prior to this, Alfred Waterhouse perhaps stands out, having designed a number of libraries and institutes in the north of England during the 1850s and 60s.

In addition to intrinsic design challenges, the library itself might comprise but a part of a much larger complex of public amenities, especially in cities and medium to large towns with multiple civic functions. Thus, as well as a library, a single building might accommodate a museum, art gallery, technical schools, town hall, gymnasium (later in the 19th century) or even public baths (Fig 7). Even if a library did not share a building it might be constructed butting hard up on one side against another civic building (the town hall or police and fire stations, for example), and find another built beside it in turn. However, later in the century, as mass philanthropy increasingly provided more endowed libraries in suburbs and small towns, it was not uncommon for smaller libraries to stand in civic isolation, on prominent street corners – where the angle often dictated a fan or wedge-shaped plan (which became known

Figure 9
Withington Public Library (Greater Manchester; 1927 by Harry Price) was designed on the 'open-book' plan, typical of many small to medium-sized libraries. It included a pioneering juvenile room and a general reading room with newspaper reading slopes lining the walls, seen here. The display of newspapers on slopes, either fastened to walls or on stands, saved space and discouraged loitering.
© Withington Library public collection

as the 'open book' plan: Fig 8) – in parks or even in the middle of rows of houses in otherwise entirely residential streets.

The first break with the closely regulated closed-access system of public library management occurred on 1 May 1894 when Clerkenwell Library, in the London Borough of Islington (opened in 1890), adopted a system described by James Duff Brown, its librarian, as 'safeguarded open access'. The open-access system had been developing, and growing in popularity, in the United States of America for some years before this, and Brown's enthusiasm for it had been cemented during a professional trip to the States in 1893. Clerkenwell was a small library of irregular plan, roughly wedge-shaped on an acutely angled corner site, and had to be carefully remodelled to accommodate the new system. In the lending library, the counter and indicators were removed, while the former lobby and book store areas were combined to create a single large room in which segregated fiction and non-fiction books were openly available for browsing on free-standing and wall-lining bookshelves. The issue desk was placed just beyond a small entrance hall, at the 'point' of the wedge, a location which allowed the bookshelves to be monitored. The public entered on one side of the desk, returning books as they did so, and exited on the other side, checking books out as they went. Although the remodelled Clerkenwell Library was an early success, the open-access system was initially frowned upon as an incitement to chaos, crime and inappropriate fraternisation, and held up for public derision in such publications as an anonymous 1895 pamphlet entitled *The Truth about giving Readers Free Access to the Books in a Public Library*. Open access represented a significant break with a tradition that had become entrenched after nearly half a century of thoughtful use and refinement; a bitter debate over the relative merits of each system raged on beyond 1900, and new closed-access libraries continued to open throughout this period. Ultimately, however, the open-access system prevailed, and by the early 20th century it was being employed in some libraries both for loan and reference collections.

The inter-war years saw a mature architectural response to open access. Even small suburban libraries were now conceived from scratch with a common-sense approach to how they would be used, and two main plan types typified design in this period. The first was a radial plan in which a central issue desk was surrounded by sections of shelving and reading spaces of differing shapes and sizes, but usually adding up to an overall symmetrical result. The second, and much more common, was achieved through the continued use of corner sites and the open-book or a V-shaped plan; here a central entrance, on the corner, gave access to the issue desk, with public space fanning out beyond – a refinement of Clerkenwell's wedge-shaped plan of the 1890s. These competing plan forms aside, some key commonalities emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. There was a trend away from divided rooms with specialist functions towards more open-plan space and reading areas (Fig 9). More thought and attention were expended on children's libraries (sometimes called children's or juvenile rooms). Specialist fittings and furniture aimed at comfort and informality were sometimes employed,

Figure 10
Muswell Hill Library, London Borough of Haringey, listed Grade II. The inter-war trend for providing a richer library experience for readers produced this mural in Muswell Hill's first-floor children's library; it depicts scenes from local history, painted by students from Hornsey School of Arts and Crafts in 1937-8. The library itself was designed by W. H. Adams for Hornsey Borough Council in 1931.
© Jo Smith

sometimes alongside decorative murals – as at Muswell Hill in north London – in recognition of the need for younger readers to experience delight in, and emotional engagement with, their environment as well as having access to age-appropriate books (Fig 10).

Small branch libraries of the 20th century could act as markers of civic pride just as much as the central libraries of the 19th century, albeit with a greater sense of architectural modesty. In many places, especially new suburban locations, libraries might stand alone without a wider civic context, but on prominent sites – especially significant corners and, notably, in the case of Low Hill branch library in Wolverhampton (Fig 11), at the edge of a landscaped circus. These libraries often created an important focus for newly-developed areas, particularly in municipal suburbs with a very formal plan, but also in other contexts. Much rarer, but of significance for the

way in which the planning of libraries evolved in the post-war period, was the integration of services into shopping parades with the library at first floor-level above a row of retail units. This could be executed as a part of a discrete suburban district centre, as at Dovecot in Liverpool, or be part of a scheme that was integrated into an older High Street, a model seen at Leytonstone library in north-east London (London Borough of Waltham Forest; listed Grade II*).

In certain authorities, strides were made to place libraries in a wider civic context, especially where other new facilities were being provided in a suburb or town centre. One combination was for a library to be placed alongside (or co-joined with) a medical clinic. This allowed savings to be made in building costs whilst increasing the potential for a strong architectural statement of civic purpose, as seen in the Bispham and Hawes Side branch libraries in Blackpool of 1937 and 1938.

Other combinations included new town halls or civic offices and leisure centres, as at Bowes Road, Arnos Grove (in the London Borough of Enfield since 1965 but designed by William Curtis, county architect for Middlesex and his assistant Howard Burchett), where a stylistically ambitious assemblage of library, juvenile employment bureau and swimming pool was built alongside a clinic (Fig 12). This complex, opened in 1939, was located close to Charles Holden's celebrated Modernist Arnos Grove underground station of 1932, and formed part of a characteristic inter-war suburban landscape of neo-Tudor housing, shops and pubs, supported by a more explicitly Modernist infrastructure.

As in other areas of public building between the wars, in terms of constructional method and architectural style there were certain instances of innovation and boldness where the ideas of northern European Modernism were applied with confidence, including the occasional use of steel framing and non-load bearing walls of brick and (occasionally) masonry with large windows placed with a horizontal emphasis. The stark use of simplified geometry in both plans and elevations – with circles, rectangles and occasionally triangles intersecting to create strong forms – echoed the work of Erich Mendelsohn, Gunnar Asplund, Willem Dudok and other proponents of the more expressionist wing of Modernism favoured by some English municipal architects from around 1930 onwards (Fig 13). In such cases, sculpture and other applied decoration was often kept to a minimum in order to maintain the simple lines of the building, but where it was employed it tended to be in simple, shallow reliefs that did not detract from the overall massing.

More prevalent were the re-worked traditional styles of neo-Georgian, the extreme tail-end of Edwardian Baroque and other variations on classical architectural language. Though often used imaginatively and with numerous modern inflections, these more retrospective designs represented a clear continuation of the

Figure 11
Low Hill, Wolverhampton, listed Grade II. Large municipal housing estates are characteristic of inter-war England. Low Hill was begun in the 1920s, and has a bold geometric street layout of circuses and avenues, low-density housing and generous landscaping. The branch library of 1930 by the Borough engineer, H. B. Robinson, responds to the geometry with its octagonal form, positioned beside eight radiating roads.
© Jo Smith

Figure 12
Bowes Road Library, London Borough of Enfield, listed Grade II. Constructed in 1935-9 to designs by Middlesex County Architect W.T. Curtis and H.W. Burchett, the building accommodates a library, swimming pool and caretaker's flat. It provided the new suburb of Arnos Grove, north London, with a set of municipal services in modern dress, inspired by the brick Modernism of Dutch architect Willem Dudok.
© Matthew Whitfield

library architecture of the 19th century, albeit often with interiors which were innovative, both in terms of design and facilities, relative to their predecessors. Where new libraries were large and prominently sited in town a classical style was more likely to be chosen as the arguments in favour of a conservative, 'in-keeping' approach within library authorities appeared to gain strength relative to the size and visibility of the scheme (Fig 14). Whilst many of these more conservatively-styled buildings were of a traditional, load-bearing construction, it was also the case that a rationalised, modern approach with a steel frame and concrete floors and/or roof could be masked with historicist dressings on the main elevations, as in the case of Manchester's Central Library of 1934 (cover image), designed by E. Vincent Harris.

Figure 13
Southfields Branch Library, Leicester, listed Grade II. This 1939 design by Symington, Prince and Pike includes a central reading room within a high brick drum, echoing the work of Gunnar Asplund at Stockholm Central Library (1924-8). The restrained, more classical forms of Nordic modernism were often favoured by English local authorities. A rear entrance originally gave access to a child welfare clinic.

Figure 14
Central Library, York, listed Grade II. One of the major trends of inter-war library building was the continuation of classical styles, especially for central libraries where traditional civic grandeur was as much a concern as blending with historic surroundings.

This design of 1927 by Brierley and Rutherford, nestled just within the city's Roman walls, provided symmetrically arranged accommodation with many classical design features.
© Simon Taylor

3 Change and the Future

Public library service provision in the United Kingdom has been undergoing radical change, particularly since severe cuts to local authority budgets by the Government in 2010. A local authority is statutorily bound to provide a library service, but the extent of the service, how it should be provided, and where and when is not prescribed. Since 2010, local authorities have followed a range of options including direct provision of library services, outsourcing to commercial enterprise, asset transfer to community groups, or a mixture of these. Currently (2016) purpose-designed historic library buildings face a number of threats, risks and challenges. These include closure, asset transfer, re-modelling for continued use as a modern library, or one or more new uses. Refurbishment or conversion for a new use may involve re-configuration of internal spaces and loss of historic or architectural fixtures and fittings such as period shelving, panelling, fixed desks, light fittings, stained glass, ironwork, murals, decorative tiles, sculpture or reliefs. Historic plan forms comprising dedicated and segregated spaces such as a children's library, newspaper room, local archives room and the position of the staircases, door openings and so on, may be altered to make way for computer terminals, 'break out' spaces with modern, moveable furniture or areas for refreshment. Alterations for improved disabled access, drainage and plumbing are likely to form part of a refurbishment programme. Not least, new arrangements for maintaining the good condition and repair of the buildings will be made between the various parties. An overview of the impact of budget and service delivery changes for historic library buildings owned by local authorities was published by Historic England in 2016: https://historicengland. org.uk/images-books/publications/historic-local-authority-libraries-updated/

Figure 15
Torquay Library, Torbay (listed Grade II). This striking reinforced concrete Art Deco-style library of 1938 by P.W. Ladmore, Borough engineer, was described, when opened, as 'constructed on clean cut lines ... a striking example of modern space-saving architecture. The dignified exterior has been designed and built to tone with the rest of the municipal buildings while the interior contains a skilful and pleasant blending of efficiency and comfort.'
© Susie Barson

Figure 16
Torquay Library, Torbay (listed Grade II). This was refurbished in 2004 after close consultation with users. The aim was to update the facilities whilst retaining the Art Deco features. Where original wooden shelving was replaced, bespoke Art Deco wooden end panels were made for some of the new shelving units. The impressive central glazed ceiling was painted over for easier maintenance, and new Deco-style light fittings installed.
© Susie Barson

When making alterations to a listed library, a conservation plan or heritage asset management plan may sometimes be desirable. Historic England is updating its guidance on Managing Local Authority Heritage Assets: Some Guiding Principles for Decision-Makers (https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/managing-local-authority-heritage-assets-document/) , to encourage the adoption of such plans by local authorities for their heritage assets, including public libraries. In the meantime instructive examples of historic library refurbishment have been compiled and published in *Renewing our Libraries: Case Studies in re-Planning and Refurbishment* (2009), edited by librarian Michael Dewe. The case studies, such as Leek Library in Staffordshire (listed Grade II*), show how a listed library can be successfully refurbished and updated without a detrimental impact on the original features of the building. Other recent examples of the successful renovation of an historic library building were Manchester Central Library (see cover; listed Grade II*) in 2010-14, and Torquay (Listed Grade II) in 2005, where a refurbishment steering group was set up to ensure maximum value for money and benefit and to ensure change was in sympathy with the Art Deco style of the building (Fig 15). Art Deco colours were chosen for the interior (Fig16), and Art Deco-style panelling added to the ends of the shelving units. The feedback from the public on the refurbishment was generally good, with one visitor writing: 'I was worried the redesign would be too commercial, and I'd lose memories of a cosy place. But it's not – I really like it. Retains character but updates … Great job … thanks!'

4 Further Reading

There is a substantial and comprehensive body of published works on the history and architecture of the public libraries built in Britain prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. Amongst the most recent and comprehensive is Alistair Black, Simon Pepper and Kaye Bagshaw, *Books, Buildings and Social Engineering: Early Public Libraries in Britain from Past to Present* (2009), but several earlier works – S.G. Berriman and K.C. Harrison, *British Public Library Buildings* (1966), and T. Kelly, *History of Public Libraries in Great Britain 1845-1975* (2nd edn. 1977) are also useful. Published in three volumes in 2006, *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland* (edited by Alistair Black and Peter Hoare) covers every aspect of the history of libraries in Britain; Volume III, 1850-2000, especially Chapter 46 'Storehouses of knowledge: the free library movement and the birth of modern library architecture' by Simon Pepper, is particularly relevant. Other notable and recent publications include Anthony Thompson, *Library Buildings of Britain and Europe* (1969); Roger Bowdler and Steven Brindle, *A Survey of Pre-War Libraries in London* (1992), and Alistair Black, *A New History of the English Public Library: Social and Intellectual Contexts 1850-1914* (1996). A number of useful treatises on the design and fitting out of public libraries were also published in England in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, by which time the specialism of library design had achieved a degree of maturity and refinement and many lessons had been learned. Notable amongst then are F.J. Burgoyne, *Library Construction: Architecture, Fittings and Furniture* (1897) and Amian L. Champneys, *Libraries: A Treatise on their Design, Construction, and Fittings* (1907). Contemporary thinking on the subject is explored in Michael Dewe, *Planning Public Library Buildings: Concepts and Issues for the Librarian* (2006), and the same author's edited volume, *Renewing our Libraries: Case Studies in re-Planning and Refurbishment* (2009).

5 Acknowledgements

Contact Historic England

East Midlands
2nd Floor, Windsor House
Cliftonville
Northampton NN1 5BE
Tel: 01604 735460
Email: eastmidlands@HistoricEngland.org.uk

East of England
Brooklands
24 Brooklands Avenue
Cambridge CB2 8BU
Tel: 01223 582749
Email: eastofengland@HistoricEngland.org.uk

Fort Cumberland
Fort Cumberland Road
Eastney
Portsmouth PO4 9LD
Tel: 023 9285 6704
Email: fort.cumberland@HistoricEngland.org.uk

London
1 Waterhouse Square
138-142 Holborn
London EC1N 2ST
Tel: 020 7973 3700
Email: london@HistoricEngland.org.uk

North East
Bessie Surtees House
41-44 Sandhill
Newcastle Upon Tyne
NE1 3JF
Tel: 0191 269 1255
Email: northeast@HistoricEngland.org.uk

North West
3rd Floor, Canada House
3 Chepstow Street
Manchester M1 5FW
Tel: 0161 242 1416
Email: northwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk

South East
Eastgate Court
195-205 High Street
Guildford GU1 3EH
Tel: 01483 252020
Email: southeast@HistoricEngland.org.uk

South West
29 Queen Square
Bristol BS1 4ND
Tel: 0117 975 1308
Email: southwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk

Swindon
The Engine House
Fire Fly Avenue
Swindon SN2 2EH
Tel: 01793 445050
Email: swindon@HistoricEngland.org.uk

West Midlands
The Axis
10 Holliday Street
Birmingham B1 1TG
Tel: 0121 625 6870
Email: westmidlands@HistoricEngland.org.uk

Yorkshire
37 Tanner Row
York YO1 6WP
Tel: 01904 601948
Email: yorkshire@HistoricEngland.org.uk

Historic England

We are the public body that looks after England's historic environment. We champion historic places, helping people understand, value and care for them.

Please contact
guidance@HistoricEngland.org.uk
with any questions about this document.

HistoricEngland.org.uk

If you would like this document in a different format, please contact our customer services department on:

Tel: 0370 333 0607
Fax: 01793 414926
Textphone: 0800 015 0174
Email: customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk