

A history of LIBRARIES IN LANGLEY

**for the centenary of the Carnegie building
1909 – 2009**

'Langley' is first recorded in the Halesowen Manor Rolls as a small settlement in the area we know as 'Langley Green'. It became part of Oldbury Manor when this was created in 1557, and remained a small rural community on the road between Smethwick and Halesowen. In 1837 the Telford Canal was opened, passing just north of this community and serving the coalmines that were developing in the area. The chemical industry arrived in 1835 with the opening of the Alkali Works to provide raw materials for Chance Brothers glassworks at Smethwick, and this was followed by the phosphorus works of Albright & Wilson in 1850.

To cater for the industrial workers and miners, Langley 'village' developed from the 1840s on the fields and farmland across the canal from Langley Green. Houses and shops were built around Trinity Church in the new parish of Langley and in 'Pit Lane', now renamed 'Langley High Street'. Thus, the new community came into being, with a high proportion of 'working-class' members.

Many of these men and women sought to 'improve' themselves, and this was encouraged by leading citizens and industrialists, such as the Albright, Chance and Wilson families. In the 1870s, the temperance movement established a coffee house to combat the widespread drunkenness, and this soon developed into the 'Langley Club and Institute'.



Langley Institute, High Street, Langley, late 19th century, home to first library

Langley Literary and Debating Society opened **the first library in 1879** at Langley Institute, following the gift of £200 worth of books and bookcases by John Edward Wilson of Albright & Wilson, and a further £20 of books by Walter Showell, who owned the local brewery! Use of the library was free to members of the Institute, and open to anyone living within two miles who had purchased a user's ticket at one shilling (5p) for six months.

This was the first library in Oldbury to have widespread, if not yet 'free', access.

Oldbury Urban District Council opened its first free public library in the new Municipal Buildings in Oldbury in 1891, and by the mid-nineties was looking to open a branch library in the rapidly expanding Langley. This coincided with the Institute running into difficulties, and the Council purchased the books and rented the room at the Institute. They added further stock and provided a catalogue, and so the **first public branch library** opened in the Institute in 1896 under the control of the Oldbury Librarian, George Burton.

The library proved popular, and its stock was enlarged until, by the early 1900s, there was pressure on the space available. Books were loaned for one week, with the option to renew for another week, or pay a one penny fine if they became overdue. By 1908, 90 books per day were being borrowed at Langley, and more space was essential.

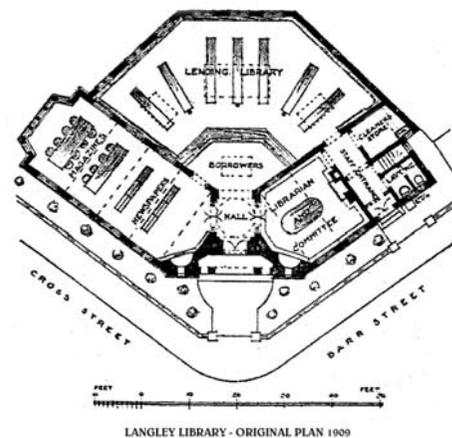
An excellent site for **a new building** was identified at Langley Green, close to the housing developments and the centre of the community. The land belonged to Mitchell & Butler's brewery, who owned 'The Old Cross' next door, but it was valued at £300, far beyond a figure that the Council could afford. After negotiations with the brewery to reduce the price, the brewery decided to give the site free of charge, provided that it was used solely for a public library.

With the site secured, application was made to the Andrew Carnegie Foundation in the USA for a grant for the building. Andrew Carnegie was a Scot who had emigrated to America and made a fortune in the steel business. His foundation provided funds for building libraries



Andrew Carnegie

worldwide. He agreed to give £1500 for the building, hence the words over the entrance 'Carnegie Library'.



Plans for the corner site were sought in open competition, and those of a Birmingham architect, Abel Round, who lived in Warley, were chosen. His drawing of the proposed building appeared in the 'Weekly News', and the 'Building News' showed both the drawing and the original layout of the library. A tender from the Langley Green builder William

Jackson was accepted after he had reduced it down to £1390.



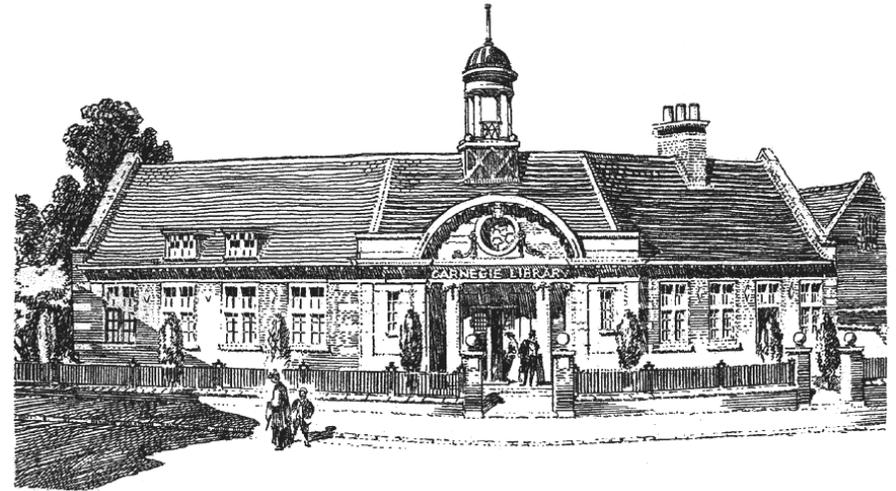
By mid-1908 the building had reached a stage where **the foundation stone** could be laid. The 23rd July was a lovely sunny day, and, according to the 'Weekly News', "an appropriate display of flags and bunting gave quite a holiday aspect to the scene...". The Chairman of Oldbury Public Libraries Committee, Joseph Gill, was

handed an inscribed silver trowel by the architect and an inscribed silver-mounted mallet by the builder, and he duly laid the foundation stone. This commemorated the gift of the building by Andrew Carnegie. A second stone had already been placed in position on the opposite side off the entrance recording the gift of the land by Mitchell & Butler.



The Chairman's speech emphasised the role of libraries in improving people's lives: "... if the juveniles would read the books selected for them in the juvenile department they could not fail to bring brightness to their homes ... there were books for the aged suitable for the eventide of life, books that would give diversion and solace in their declining years ... there were books for the sorrowful, for those who wanted an hour's comfort in reading ...". And Cllr W T Davies was even more direct: "... there was no doubt as to the benefit of the highest literature, and in regard to technical literature if they followed the example of other nations there was no doubt they would benefit, but if they did not they would soon slip back into the position of the unskilled labourer ... they were rather interested in unskilled labour in Oldbury, but it was their own fault if, in their early days, they did not give attention to their own improvement ... it was in providing facilities for improvement that a library was of such value ...".

Six months later work was complete, and the library was ready for the public. **The opening ceremony** on Friday 26th February 1909 was marred by two events, the enforced absence of the opener, Sir Alexander Macomb Chance, confined to bed by his doctor, and the presence of a snowstorm. William Arthur Albright deputised as opener, but the formal opening of the doors was abandoned and the guests hurriedly gathered inside in the 'News Room' for the opening speeches and the formal handing



Architect's drawing for Langley Library, 1908

over of the building to Oldbury Urban District Council. The whole company then repaired to St Michael's School for refreshments.

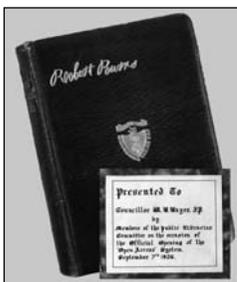
Frank Taylor, who had taken over as Oldbury Borough Librarian, oversaw the operation of the library on a similar basis to that at Oldbury. The opening times for the library were very restricted initially, 6 pm to 9 pm on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. The reading room opened on Saturday morning, suggesting that it was open more extensively than the library. Lists of new books were published in the 'Weekly News', although some of the titles were not too exciting "Italian Letters of a Diplomat's Wife", "Five Famous French Women", "Lectures and Essays of Lord Iddlesleigh", "Via Crucis" and "Evil of the Millionaire". Light relief was provided by W Morgan's "Our Anuk" and a good supply of other fiction!



The new library from Barrs Street in 1912

The lists in the newspaper allowed borrowers to do a little 'homework' before going to borrow a book. The procedure in the early days was to make a selection from the catalogue in the 'borrower's area', and then ask politely at the counter for the library staff to fetch the book; there was no opportunity to browse. This situation continued

until September 1926 when 'open access' was introduced to all the libraries in



'The Poems of Robert Burns', presented to Cllr W B Hayes when he inaugurated 'Open Access'

Oldbury. 'Open access' was a recent, but growing, trend in public libraries, and in most places it had resulted in increased usage. Now borrowers were allowed to browse through the books before choosing one, despite the Library Committee's concerns that this would result in more wear and tear on the volumes.

The new system required the counters to be modified to allow public access through to the bookshelves. In Langley this was probably when the high glass glass-fronted counter was moved closer to the door in the layout that it had until 2003. It was probably also the time when the separate children's library was created in the room originally reserved for the librarian and committee.

Frank Taylor, the librarian, seems to have gained exemption from the army in WWI and became heavily involved in the wartime fund-raising efforts in Oldbury such as 'Aeroplane Week' in 1918. About this time he was succeeded by as Borough Librarian by Miss Maude A Jones, who occupied the position until WW2.



Miss M. R. JONES, A.L.A., Librarian



MR. FRANK TAYLOR

Between the wars, libraries were quiet places with somewhat forbidding staff intent on maintaining the silence. Young borrowers could not join until they were aged eight and able to read. Even so, they were likely to be 'shushed' or sent packing. **The reading room** was a warm place for elderly men to pass an afternoon, many calling in on their return journey from the 'Old Cross' or the 'Royal Oak'. This provided some amusement for the local children who crept unobserved into the forbidden reading room and hid there until removed by a patrolling staff member.

The racing pages were usually removed from the newspapers to discourage the men from a visit to the 'bookie'. Censorship extended to the choice of stock as well, at least one Library Chairman vetting the books to make sure nothing of a dubious nature reached the shelves. Marginal items would be transferred to 'reserved stock' leaving readers to ask for such items and brave the disapproving looks of the staff. More scurrilous items disappeared without trace.

Library development was not a high priority in the austerity of the 1940s and 1950s, and Langley Library continued largely unchanged in this period. Change was afoot outside, however, and in 1966 Oldbury Borough was subsumed into the **County**

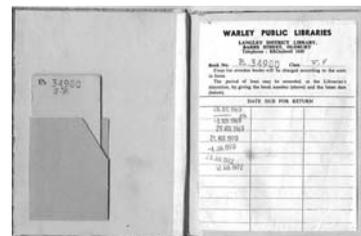
Borough of Warley, with Rowley Regis and Smethwick. By the time of the merger Oldbury had five libraries, having added new libraries at Warley (Bleakhouse) in 1938, Brandhall in 1961 and Rounds Green in 1966. The Council claimed that no-one in Oldbury was more than a mile from a library. Oldbury had become one section in a larger library structure, and it became an even smaller part of a larger whole when further reorganisation combined Warley and West Bromwich into **the Metropolitan Borough of Sandwell** in 1974.



Arthur Blakeway

Under Warley CB and the early days of Sandwell MBC, Langley was a District Library managed by Arthur Blakeway, and every library had its own branch librarian. In 1992 a major restructuring of the library service removed the district status of Langley Library, which was then 'twinned' with Rounds Green library under a 'community librarian', Suzie Sloane (later Drew). Further rounds of restructuring have led to the present arrangement of the 'Oldbury Town' libraries, comprising the same five libraries as at the demise of Oldbury Borough in 1966!

The library had been solely a repository for the printed word in the form of books and newspapers until after WW2. Large-print books for the visually impaired were introduced in the late sixties. However, there was a growing demand for **the expansion of services** into other media, although these were not usually free of charge. One of the earliest additions was a loan scheme for pictures. Oldbury libraries did not stock gramophone records, but when the smaller and more robust cassette tapes were introduced, the libraries moved into this new medium, which, in turn, was succeeded by CDs and DVDs.



A children's book from the late '60s with its book card.



It was printed in the initial teaching alphabet (remember that fad?):

In 1992, Langley became the second library in Sandwell to have 'Bookshelf', a **computerised issue system**. The individual little pockets with the borrower's details to hold the book tickets disappeared, and staff no longer had to sort rapidly through the long wooden file boxes to retrieve tickets. Gone was the librarian's desperate "*You choose your books while I find your ticket*" when it had been misfiled, and the final despairing "*I'll have to make you a temporary ticket*" when it was irretrievable.

In October 1996, the centenary of the first public library in Langley was celebrated, with the Mayor and Town Crier in attendance.



The Mayor, Cllr R Badham, and Deputy Mayor, Cllr M Prestidge, with staff at the celebrations in 1996 in front of the old counter.

The greatest change of the last forty years, however, has been the gradual loss of formality and the conversion of the library into **a place to meet together**, rather than just a place to change a book. The newspaper stands disappeared from the reading room and it became a more flexible meeting room, ideal for new activities. The opportunities for the library to

work in partnership with schools, 'Sure-start', the Adult Education Service and other bodies increased significantly.

In the 1990s borrowers were given a greater say in the services provided by the library – the age of consultation was starting. **Langley Library User Group** was set up in 1994, following an open meeting of the local community. Interest in the group increased when library services came under threat, cuts seemed likely, and it was necessary to defend the library provision. Normally, however, it operates as a small group providing feedback on plans and proposals, and suggestions on improving the service. It changed to the **Friends of Langley Library** in 2006.

Langley Poetry Appreciation Society was started in 1995 following a Sandwell 'Poetry Festival'. This led to the publication of a book, 'Musings and Meanderings' in 1999 featuring the work of seven local poets, collected by Bill Hipkiss..



James Durrant, Chair of Langley LHS, launches their third book in 1999 in the meeting room before it became the 'learning centre'

At Langley library, informal reminiscence sessions soon turned into **Langley Local History Society** back in 1996. That year their first book, 'Langley and Langley Green Recalled' was published, and a steady stream of books followed, documenting the history of the Langley area. The society has outgrown the space available at the library,

and it has to meet elsewhere, even if in its heart it remains part of the library, and its management committee still continues to meet there.



'Silver surfers' in 2001 designing a web-site for the Poetry Appreciation Society

The 1990s saw another great change, the introduction of computer access for the public and the creation of the **learning centre**. The first tentative steps led to homework clubs for the young, 'silver surfers' instruction for the grey-haired, and an increasing range of courses and facilities for everyone.

In 2002 the ninety-three year old building was showing signs of age and the cast iron columns supporting it were corroding away. The library was moved to a temporary home at St Michael's Church, and a major **refurbishment** undertaken. The old high shelving was replaced by lower, brighter book cases, a new counter installed, the floor carpeted and the whole building given a fresh coat of paint.

The exterior is largely unchanged from that bequeathed to us in 1909, but the interior is brighter and more modern looking, as befits a library fit for purpose in the twenty-first century and ready for the second hundred years. **The centenary of the building** was celebrated on 27th February 2009 with a look at its long history, and Sir Jeremy Chance formally opening the doors to the library, just a hundred years late because of that snowstorm in 1909!

February 2009



A hundred years on!