

WORKING IN LIBRARIES

by

Mrs Nancy Route (formerly Hosegood, nee Osborne)

(Mrs Route was born in December 2006 and died in August 2005. She wrote this account in 2002. She never continued her account to include her period in London (1931 – 37) and her subsequent work as founding Editor of the Catalogue for the South-Western Regional Library System from 1937.)

Part 1 - Derbyshire - March 1924 - May 1930

Although I didn't realise it then, my future was probably decided at a large charity bazaar at the Drill Hall, Derby, when I was about nine years old. Among the attractions was a guessing competition in which one was invited to state the contents of a brown-paper parcel. I won the prize by guessing a book. "Of course," said my mother, "that's just what you'd expect her to say."

I left boarding school at the Girls' Grammar School, Ashby-de-le-Zouch, in 1923, when I was sixteen, after passing the Senior Cambridge leaving examination. I then took a course in shorthand and typing in Derby, but could afford to stay only for about three months.

My conscience troubled me because I was not preparing to stay at home to help my mother as did most farmers' daughters in those days. I had not yet realised that my parents were no longer in a position to employ me.

My father approached Canon Adams to inquire whether he and his daughter needed help in the work of the "Division of the Diocese of Southwell" office. (It was planned to separate Derbyshire from Southwell and create a new Diocese of Derby.) He said they did, and so I stayed with them until the task was complete. I was pleased to be paid, as I thought I was working purely for experience!

Soon afterwards my father noticed in the evening paper an advertisement for a junior assistant in the newly-founded County Library. He encouraged me to apply. I did so and was successful. I returned from the interview with a copy of Brown's Manual of Library Economy bouncing about on the seat of the horse-drawn trap in which I had driven myself into town.

That was a cruel book if ever there was one! How could I, whose modest ambition had been to become the greatest living poet, really sink myself profitably into descriptions and discussions of the merits of this or that kind of library equipment? There was nowhere to be found any reference to the contents of books, for that was outside its scope. Soon I was spending my time in trying to adapt my impractical nature to the importance of organization and supply, and turning my back entirely upon those realms of imagination with which I had hoped to be concerned.

The new County Library was ensconced in a room on the top floor of the County Education Office in St Mary's Gate, Derby. (There was a lift to the top floor but it was only used for freight. The man who operated it was so tiny that his weight could scarcely have increased any danger there might have been.) The Library was staffed by Edgar Osborne, F.L.A., the newly-appointed County Librarian, and me. Oddly enough we shared the same surname, although we were not related.

Mr Osborne, in his thirties, was a native of Bournemouth and had lately been employed by the Sheffield Public Library under R.G. Gordon. He had served in the 1914-18 War (in the London Scottish). His service had been in the desert, where he had set eyes upon T.E. Lawrence, author of "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom". He was married to a successful actress, Mabel Jay (nee Jacobson). Her father was a prosperous member of the northern woollen industry, which may have accounted for the unmistakable air of quality of Mr Osborne's suits. A member of the County Office staff said Mr Osborne reminded her of Jack Buchanan, the musical-comedy actor, but he was a most dedicated librarian who took his job completely seriously.

Mr Osborne needed to spend much of that early time in preparing the ground for action. He went to London to buy books from the "Times" Book Club and Boot's Systems department. He also made contact with county librarians who had already established their libraries. Middlesex was a noteworthy case. He was very active in our own county in recruiting and encouraging helpers - mainly teachers - upon whom the success of the scheme largely depended. He was fortunate in often being taken along by Mr Speakman, Examiner in Woodwork and Handicrafts for Derbyshire. At that time Mr Osborne was living in digs in Derby and had not yet set up an establishment of his own.

I spent long days alone, except for the fairly frequent incursions of the Education staff, who were curious both about the growing book stock and the inexperienced guardian. Such was the concern over my solitary state that a girl from the Education Office's staff was allowed to bring her work up to the library for a while. After nine months I was joined by a girl of my own age who was officially on the Library's pay roll.

There were other visitors to the top floor. It was not uncommon to open the door to a farmer who drew from the pocket of his flapping coat a bottle of ropy milk which he wanted the Agricultural Office to investigate. We directed him to the office further along the corridor, from which bounded the clerk who spent part of his days in the basement where he rotated cows' stomachs on some sort of a machine before the results were studied.

Another near neighbour was the School Attendance Officer, but who appeared rarely. He was a large, tall man, who had only one arm. I think he lost the other in what was still called "The War", i.e. that of 1914-18. Once or twice a week, the room adjoining the Library was occupied by the instructor of pupil teachers. I can't remember his official designation, but the clerk from Agriculture referred to "Old Harry and his harem."

As the Library stock grew, so did the visits of County Office staff who wanted to borrow. As many of them were county residents, this seemed reasonable, but before long it was necessary to enforce fixed hours during which they could do so. Even so, a small number of "higher-ups" who thought themselves "well in" with the County Librarian continued to roam in when it suited them. Here, too, there was some justification for those who were out in the county just when the Library was open.

Some of the new staff recruited by the Library were senior to earlier members who were still struggling to pass the six sectional certificates of the Library Association which it was necessary to acquire in order to become a Fellow. Only one branch of this study pleased me, namely English Literary History, and in this connection an American book by Long was more helpful than some of the recognised set books. About this time, my youngest brother was born. Contrary to my mother's fears, he was hailed with joy, and provided a welcome diversion from the gloom we suffered after our removal from a large to a small farm, with subsequent drop in income. I well remember pacing the village cinder-path, which linked the railway station and a country lane, while clutching a copy of Long in one hand and the handle of a perambulator in the other.

My own particular library duties included supplying study books to W.E.A. and other adult education classes, as well as acting as Secretary to the Librarian. One nightmare (or rather day mare) of my job was to rope large wooden or cardboard boxes for dispatch by rail. It was often a race against time as one heard the approach of the van over the large asphalt yard and saw the waving mane and fetlocks of the splendid railway horse driven by a complaining driver. The supply of books to village centres was normally by motor van, but there was the danger of this becoming snowbound. In winter it was not uncommon to receive a telephone call stating that the van was stuck on the Snake Pass or some other part of the High Peak.

Our first Assistant Librarian was Muriel Sherwood (No, not from Nottingham!) who had qualified at Cheltenham Ladies' College. She did not stay very long, but married a Unitarian minister whom she had met in the boarding-house where they were both staying. The Assistant Librarian usually vetted the general collections of books made up by a junior. Although our stock at that time was predominantly of fiction, we always tried to include a little non-fiction in every consignment.

One day, a junior dipped into a novel she was supposed to be packing. "Oh, do let me find out what happened," she pleaded. "Well, be quick," said the senior. The junior closed the book very soon. "Well, what did happen?", we asked. "Oh, she promised to be a sister to him," she replied disgustedly.

To get rid of the need for repetitious typing, a temporary helper was recruited to write a small pink ticket ("The pink peril") for inclusion in each book. Then, when a consignment was sent out, the pink tickets were retained at H.Q. as a record, a standard ticket for use at the centre or branch library being left in each book for use of the local librarian.

As a growing organization, we were always extended, always with more work than we could do. From supplying village centres with periodically-exchanged boxes of books, each accompanied by a typewritten list, the services progressed to the establishment of regional centres with a proportion of permanent book stock and with a qualified member of library staff in charge of each centre. The first regional centre to be opened was at Heanor in 1929, but nobody was quite sure how to pronounce the name. It seems that the reference books stated that it should be "HAYNOR", but when trying to reach it by public transport one was told "You mean Eena."

Lack of space was not our only problem. The weight of the book-filled Venesta boxes with their metal corner strengthening (of the type used by the Everest Expedition), stacked seven or eight high, caused the floor boards to buckle in an alarming way. Alderman Bames of Chesterfield came to inspect the damage, but I cannot remember, or perhaps I have never known, what his report was.

Part 2 - Leicester, June 1930 - Nov. 1931

In order to make personal progress in the library world, it seemed necessary to have public (i.e. urban) library experience.

At the age of twenty-three, I obtained a post in the Leicester City Library. The Leicester Museum was well known for its excellence and was the senior partner of the Library, our chief being its Director. Here was a very different world and colleagues of a much more congenial kind. Those of us who were living away from home, and who were mostly in our early twenties, found refuge from the pressures of work in taking country walks at week-ends. Our conversation was not solely concerned with library equipment and the pros and cons of different book classifications, but much more about world conditions, politics, works of literature and - most vital of all - the behaviour of the senior staff! By this time, most of us were fully qualified or nearly so. One or two were university graduates, and one non-graduate had been to a library school, then a rare phenomenon. (I believe that only London University School and that of Cheltenham Ladies' College were then in existence.)

At the lowest end of the staff scale were one or two small teen-age boys who were not expected to qualify; indeed, they had not the necessary school certificate to enable them to do so. They were expected to put away books and perform similar lowly tasks. In fact, they were by no means browbeaten, and were quite ready to grab responsibility as well as to lay down the law to the readers. One of them, handed over an application form, with the words: "Ooo-er-er, are you a bairjus?" "Whatever's that?" asked the would-be reader in some alarm. She was by no means the only one who had not previously encountered the term "burgess" in everyday life.

The first task of all the Lending Library staff in the morning was to check the book shelves and to put misplaced volumes in their correct positions. Provided the Head of the Department was not within earshot, much

interesting conversation could take place. One morning, the Chief Assistant discovered that a checked shelf had been left with a book UPSIDE DOWN! This horrible find was not in my section, and had it been so, I should have been in a great state of dejection and shame. To my surprise, the defaulter took the matter very lightly and had no difficulty in outliving the disgrace, which, in fact, became a matter of amusement. *Autres temps, autres moeurs.*

One characteristic which caused the senior staff to be underrated by their juniors was their obsession with their gardens. After checking cash or similar tasks which caused them to be gathered into a little knot near the issue-desk, they were to be found comparing notes as to the condition of their crops. It was rumoured that the Head had crept up to the Deputy's vase of flowers with a ruler in order to discover whether the blooms were of greater or smaller size than his own. Next morning, one of the younger men, who lived at home in Leicester, appeared with a three-inch-across passion-flower in his buttonhole.

All female members of the Library staff were required to wear long-sleeved green overalls while on duty. This had come about because a Reference Library assistant had been in the habit of wearing what were then called "pneumonia blouses", and this had offended the sensibilities of a member of the Library Committee. No doubt as a sop to the feelings of the women, the disliked overalls were made to measure by one of the best shops in the town, which was providentially near at hand. When staff left, their overalls were inherited by their successors, but at least these were altered professionally **if** they did not fit well.

One of these altered models became mine, but I did not stay long to wear it. About three weeks after leaving my home and previous post and being absorbed into the City Library system, I underwent a medical examination. I failed to pass it, owing to varicose veins which I had had since the age of seventeen. I was told that I must have treatment, but that if this were unsuccessful, I should have to leave.

Thereafter, I suffered much anxiety, particularly when the Deputy Librarian approached me from time to time to inquire: "Well, what does the doctor say NOW?" I applied for other posts, had an interview for one, but was not appointed. Then, while I was on holiday at Scarborough as a visitor (not a delegate) to the Annual Conference of the Labour Party, I was offered the post owing to the resignation of someone else. It was not a progressive position, but a temporary one for three years, but it was in London, so I took it (National Central Library, London Public Libraries Union Catalogue).

When I returned to Leicester, I learned that I had at last passed the medical exam. and that the maker of inquiries had been prompted only by genuine sympathy. Had I been too impulsive? Over ten years later, in Bristol, my doctor told me that the Leicester Hospital had injected something very dangerous and that I must never again allow further treatment. Leaving Leicester was the end of one of the happiest times I have experienced.

Additional

The Library Association Record, 1979, includes several obituaries of Edgar Osborne, County Librarian of Derbyshire. I should be grateful if this material could be copied and attached to what I have written here.

LA.R. volume 81, no. 2, Feb. 1979. Obituary by Keith ManteU.

LA.R. volume 81, no. 6. Obituary by F.A. Sharr; plus unsigned obituary by me (Nancy Osborne).