

THE DEVON & EXETER INSTITUTION, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

Last year a national paper ran a competition: Sum up Britain today in five words. My favourite entry was '*Ipsos Fatso, Bingo, Tesco, ASBO*'. If that really reflects modern society in Britain today, what future for independent libraries, let alone other cultural jewels in the British crown? This paper deals with the Devon & Exeter Institution, its past, its present and hopefully, its bright future, but what is said here will have many echoes across the heritage library sector.

Before involving ourselves with where we are now and anticipating the future, we need to make a brief examination of what was happening to Exeter in the years leading up to the establishment of the DEI (aficionados of the Devon & Exeter Institution use this acronym and it will crop up frequently when referring to the old place within this document from here on).

Throughout the eighteenth century much of Exeter life revolved around the cloth industry. The Quay was busy with imports and exports, in particular the export of serge. A grand customs house was built in 1681. It still stands today and recently became the home of the Exeter Archaeological Field Unit. Above the Quay there were rack fields for the drying of serge and wealthy merchant's houses stood in an area known as the West Quarter. At one stage shipping was lost at Exeter when a weir was built just above Topsham thus diverting trade to the Quay in that town. The building of a canal in 1676 saw the return of the shipping trade to the city, but international events in the early nineteenth century were destined to sound the death knell for the Exeter's main industry.

In 1913, F. Morris – Drake, author of 'A History Of stained Glass' commented in the centenary book on the Devon & Exeter Institution about the social changes that had taken place since the establishment of the DEI in August 1813. Exeter he asserted still preserved some of the individuality of a country metropolis; whereas the coming of the railway had meant that the country between Rugby, Bath and the Cinque Ports 'may almost be regarded as 'suburban to London. Their good wives go to London shopping, their young men and

maidens go to London a – pleasuring (!); their burgesses look to London for their opinions’.

If Bath and Rugby question the veracity of this statement, we should also question his views on the state Exeter of 1813 when he asserts that the city was at its most prosperous. In fact the Napoleonic wars had been a disaster for Exeter. The exporting of serge had all but dried up leaving the city’s main industry in ruins, whilst the war had meant government money had been pouring into Portsmouth and closer to home, the three towns of Devonport, Stonehouse and Plymouth.

The early years of the nineteenth century were a turning point for Exeter. To survive as Devon’s capital it had to change direction and do so rapidly. The city embarked upon the move from industry to gentrification. By 1813 builders were engaged in building fine town houses and sweeping crescents – Exeter was looking to Bath.

The once fine houses in the West Quarter were given over to multiple - occupancy, conditions soon became overcrowded and later in the nineteenth century two tenement blocks were built which just added to the general squalor. By the first part of the twentieth century the West Quarter had gained notoriety, a place where police patrolled in pairs and was considered a cause of shame by the City Council who in the 1930’s relocated its residents to new housing estates on the edges of the city. In more recent times someone who was a councillor during that period was asked why the city did not make a photographic record before demolishing most of the West Quarter. He replied they were ‘too ashamed’ of the appalling conditions that existed there and that to photograph it for posterity was ‘unthinkable’ at the time.

Exeter, however, was not barren of industry. There were tanneries, breweries, paper mills and at least five major iron foundries along with some smaller enterprises, all working during the nineteenth century and all survived in to the twentieth. The city as a whole had changed from being positively medieval in the eighteenth century, into something more fashionable and learned in the nineteenth, with modern industries to match.

What was fashionable among the gentry in the early 1800’s and would become burgeoning forces through to the twentieth century were science, literature

and the arts. Upwardly mobile Plymouth stole a march on Exeter and established two libraries in the town before 1813. The Proprietary Library in 1810 and the Athenaeum in 1812. Both, happily, still with us. The local press in Exeter poured scorn on the city for having been left behind and so it was with some shame and not a little jealousy of Plymouth that on the (glorious) twelfth of August in 1813, a meeting was called, chaired by local MP James Buller.

Held in the evening at the Royal Clarence Hotel (then simply known as 'The Hotel') it was agreed by '*several gentlemen*' (*Trewman's Flying Post*) that '*an Institution for the general diffusion of Science, Literature and the Arts and for illustrating the Natural and Civil History of Exeter and the County of Devon and the History of the City of Exeter*' (*Flindell's Western Luminary*), would be established. That original mission statement still holds true today although the remit for the collection now extends to the whole of the South West.

It was also agreed at the meeting that it should be a Proprietor's Institution and that shares in it should be offered at twenty-five pounds each. A month later, at the first meeting of the proprietors, one-hundred-and-twenty-six shares had already been snapped up. Sir Thomas Dyke – Acland Bart. MP was elected first president of the DEI.

The first home of the Institution was a couple of rooms in Mrs. Bath's house, situated on the corner of High Street and Swan Alley. The house, along with Swan Alley, was swept away with the building of Queen Street in 1860. Two rooms were scarcely adequate for the initial book collection, let alone the other trophies that were being brought home from various expeditions by the more adventurous among the proprietors. The Institution in its early days was a museum as well as library.

A month had barely passed from the initial meeting, when the proprietors were informed of the availability of much more suitable premises. 7, The Close had been the town house of the Courtenay family, the Earls of Devon since 1672. Over the next year money was poured into converting what had been a medieval building into a library and reading rooms. Advice was sought from the Plymouth Proprietary Library and John Foulston's design of that building was the inspiration for the internal structure of the Institution.

The conversion work carried out during 1813/14 resulted in the layout we have today and a number of fixtures and fittings survive from that time, including all the clocks.

From the outset, the proprietors seemed to be divided into two factions: Those who saw the library with its books as the principle asset and others, who saw the museum artefacts as the more important part of the collection. As both parts of the collection grew the vying for what space was left inevitably became contentious. Another controversial issue arose over the daily papers. Some members complaining that certain individuals were spending an inordinate time over each newspaper whilst others were kept waiting. Interestingly, a quarrel erupted in the Outer Library in March 2009, when one reader accused another of spending too long reading *The Times* and resentment often simmers over *Country Life*! The continuity of controversy spanning nearly two hundred years is somehow strangely comforting....

The problem of the museum verses library was resolved in 1869 with the opening of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum. At this point most of the exhibits found a new home, including some infested stuffed birds that took their infestation with them. Something curators over at the Royal Albert Museum have never entirely forgotten.

The first librarian was John Squance. During thirty – six years of service he built the library's holdings to twenty – six thousand volumes. He retired in 1849, also the year of his death. He was succeeded by his daughter, Miss Eliza Squance. This was a controversial appointment. Out of eleven applicants for the post, she was the only female. A woman being given such a responsible post, carrying some influence in the city had been hitherto unheard of in Exeter.

Also there was the accusation of nepotism, some saying that during his last years Mr Squance had 'contrived to get a subservient committee'. The composition of the committee itself also came under fire in the local papers. 'Alas if the parsons have the reins, how badly do they govern' declared the *Western Times*. Eight of a committee of twenty were clergymen at that time.

As for appointing a woman to the post, it was left to a bishop to forecast that the 'proprietors would have 'the blood of this poor woman' on their hands as 'no woman could survive for long under the strain of such an office'.

Miss Squance held the post for eleven years, resigning in 1860 on her marriage to a wealthy proprietor, Mr. Edward Granger.

The committee were a little more cautious in their choice of the next incumbent. They advertised in no less than four local papers. There was now only one member of the clergy on a committee of eighteen. The lack of clerical influence on the committee was an indicator of other matters proving contentious in the Library. Certain authors did not meet with the approval of the local clergy and the signs of a rift between them and other more worldly proprietors. We will return to that later.

Mr Edward Parfitt was appointed. During his thirty – two years as librarian the collection which had previously consisted of weighty tomes, many theological, was now being leavened with popular novelists of the day. This was at the behest of the committee.

In the Institution's archive there is mention of his attending a Conference of Librarians in London in 1877. As Reverend Richard N Longridge notes in his *Devon & Exeter Institution, a short history from 1813*, attending such a conference demonstrated 'a sign of increasing professionalism in library management'.

Edward Parfitt was also a contributor to 'Notes and Queries' covering several different scholarly subjects. Sadly his last years in office were attended with poor health. An assistant librarian was appointed in 1892 to lighten his load and a nurse and servant were given financial recognition after his death in 1895. The records state that 'he died in office'.

During these years the library grew with notable journals such as *The Gentleman's magazine*, *The Athenaeum*, *The Edinburgh Review*, *The Clergy list*, and *Crockford's*. Important volumes on law were collected, a number including *State Trials*, in which is recorded the trial of Guy Fawkes and his cohorts, pre – date the establishment of DEI by a century or longer.

It was the novels of certain authors that caused a rift between the clergy and the rest of the proprietors. They didn't care for Dickens or Kingsley, social reformers with 'dangerous ideas' and when the works of Lord Byron with his not – so – private life hit the shelves, there was outrage and several among the clergy sold their shares.

This may have been one of the reasons for the Cathedral offering to sell the freehold of the building, thereby distancing themselves from the library and its dubious collection.

Visitors sometimes ask if that was a good thing. Surely it would be better to rent from the Cathedral and leave them with the heavy costs of the upkeep of the building? The majority of properties in the Close are rented from the Cathedral or Church Commissioners, who let them on a full repairing lease. So if there is a hole in the roof, the lessee still has to pay for it. Additionally, owning the property has enabled the Institution to claim any grants available towards its upkeep.

Throughout the nineteenth century there were peaks and troughs. With the opening of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Queen Street, and the subsequent dismantling of most of the museum exhibits in the DEI, space was won for more books, but with the closure of other learned societies in the city during the late nineteenth century, what future for the Devon & Exeter Institution?

There is no doubt that Exeter's capacity to sustain the number of intellectual societies that had sprouted in early 1800's had been overrated. Given that several had not attracted many members from the outset and others never achieved a permanent home, coupled with the fact that this was a small rural city, it was now a case of survival of the fittest.

The Institution certainly kept pace with the times. Central heating was installed in 1886. This went out of use due to decay and leaks in the late 1930's. When a new system was installed in the 1980's, the original cast iron feeder pipe was found running centrally under the two library floors. This was so solid and in such good condition that it was put back into use to supply the hot water for the new radiators. We are now having new boilers fitted and this 115 year old

pipe has just passed a pressure test with flying colours and will continue to be used for its original purpose.

Electricity was installed for lighting in 1898. Initially they were not welcomed by members who complained they were too bright. The lamp brackets fitted in both libraries are the ones still in use today, now rewired to comply with current electrical standards and employing compact fluorescent lamps instead of tungsten light bulbs.

The telephone followed in 1899 and was a source of great fascination. Members paid a small fee to make calls. The problem was who to telephone in those early days? This was resolved by the Devon & Somerset stores in the High Street. When they acquired a phone it is said that members would go in to the shop, examine the produce and then rush across to the Institution, telephone the store and give their order!

History has echoes, even when it comes to technology. In those early days, several members were eager to sign - up and pay for the use of the telephone. The number wishing to use this service declined as they had the telephone installed in their own homes.

In 1998 the Internet reached the Institution in the form of a Windows 95 computer in the Outer Library. A number of members eagerly signed – up and pay a quarterly fee to surf the net, then melted away as they bought their own home computers.

The twentieth century brought its own challenges. The DEI was regarded as an old fashioned place as early as the 1860's. A century later it was gathering dust and no longer a fully functioning library. In those intervening years some of the family jewels were sold to keep the Institution going. Whilst it was very sad that such sales took place, it did stave off closure and had this not happened I would probably not be standing here talking about it today. During the twentieth century three notable events would add up to a rescue package ensuring the Institution's safe passage into the twenty – first.

The first was in the early hours of the 5th May 1942 when Exeter was to suffer the worst air raid of the Second World War. On that night bombs rained down

on the city and incendiaries fell on the roof of the Institution. You can access the roof from the bathroom window of the housekeeper's cottage. On that night the caretaker's husband and also her brother were home on leave from the army and they climbed through the window onto the roof, extinguishing fires and throwing incendiaries down into the garden. This was a heroic act that undoubtedly saved the Devon & Exeter Institution from almost certain destruction as the local fire service was overwhelmed and supplies of water were running out.

The next rescue came in the 1973 when there was concern that the library would wither away due to lack of use. The University of Exeter was approached to see if they could help.

The University agreed to take responsibility for the day – to day running of the library providing there was a focus for the collection. The obvious choice was local history as the Institution already had significant holdings, including local newspapers spanning nearly three centuries.

The University wisely made it clear from the outset that they would not take responsibility for the building, the maintenance of which is a significant sum each year. They also stipulated that no more of the collection should be sold off to raise funds, something the proprietors were still prone to doing whenever there was heavy expenditure on the building. The library would also focus on local history, in particular that of the South West. Under the auspices of University Librarian: Sheila Stirling the library catalogue was updated and long forgotten books added to the system. Large bound newspapers stored on the gallery, the most inaccessible place for volumes of such size and weight, were moved downstairs with the help of the University rugby team!

Sheila recalls that there was only one telephone in the whole place back then and when a call came for the Devonshire Association, who rented an upstairs office, an old school hand bell was rung violently by the Institution's Secretary.

The third part in this rescue story comes in the late 1980's when the system of proprietors laid open the Institution to crippling business taxes. The granting of charitable status came in 1989 and saved the DEI financial disaster.

In 2001 the University withdrew from the administration of Cathedral Library. At first sight it left the DEI dangerously exposed and everyone wondered if this was next on the list of cost cutting exercises. In fact although withdrawing from Cathedral Library would make some modest savings, the main reason seemed that with little University use, it was getting harder to justify running costs.

By contrast, the Institution was and still is, enjoying weekly usage from members of the University, whether staff, post grads or students.

This very brief history hardly does the Institution justice, but serves as a basis to now talk about where we find ourselves today.

The relationship between the University and the Institution continues to prosper. In the last few years with the support of the Universities IT services we have increased our computing facilities including wireless broadband facilities for our members.

Catering is provided by our housekeeper: Stephanie Beddoes, who provides excellent lunches for members. This service alone attracts new members each year. To be served fine food in the atmospheric surroundings of the Courtenay Room and in the summer to dine alfresco in the courtyard garden, weather permitting, is an added bonus of membership. Out of all of us, Stephanie would be the hardest member of staff to replace. I speak from bitter experience, not all her predecessors were as willing and able to undertake what she does.

As with most Independent Libraries, the social side is as important as the research function. There is tremendous support for the old place. This is reflected in the number of willing volunteers who come to staff the library and office. They are a great asset and we could not operate without them, especially as the University cannot provide cover when I'm on holiday.

There is a vibrant feel about the Institution which makes working there a sheer joy, but what does the future hold?

It is often said that change is needed to survive. My response when it comes to the DEI is that change is good, but in an ever changing world, continuity is even better. We have introduced new technology in the form of computers, a

photocopier, a microfilm scanner and a document scanner. What has not changed is the personal service we give to everyone who comes through our doors. It is this good old fashioned customer service that I believe will continue to secure the future of the DEI.

What will help a heritage library survive in the twenty – first century?

Let's start with the building. If the library is housed in an impressive old structure upkeep is likely to be a major financial headache. On the other hand it can also serve as an attraction in its own right. A loyal member of the Devon & Exeter Institution recently said it is the people, not the building that matter. Can we divorce the two? There is something about the very fabric of historic buildings that bring us together. In the same way that people flock each year to castles, stately homes and steam railways, the building can be both the attraction and the uniting factor that makes for healthy membership.

Then there is the collection itself. When the University tightened the remit for new acquisitions it gave the DEI collection a focus and a solid basis for attracting readers. When the collection was added to the University of Exeter's online catalogue it meant the world could now see our holdings. Twenty years ago we would not have believed that the Institution would reach out to such an audience.

Then there is the all – important social aspect. The Institution holds a series of Social evenings during the winter months. These are preceded by a buffet. There is also a programme of lunchtime lectures open to the public and advertised in the local press. Public lectures of this kind are particularly important as they help fulfil the charities remit on public access. As do Heritage Open Days each year.

I would like to see the DEI adopt the Bromley House model that Carol told us about at our meeting at Ipswich a couple of years ago. Instead of taking a couple of guided tours around the building as we do at present, it would be good to open it for a day in the style of a National Trust property with stewards

in each room. At present the trustees see this as a step too far, but one day, maybe.....

Then, of course, there is the Cinema Club! Formed just eighteen months ago and over - subscribed within three months (we have to keep membership to fifty to comply with both the film licence and more importantly, fire regulations). We took soundings from the membership before its establishment. Overall there was a positive response with the exception of a couple of trustees who tried to strangle it at birth, but *vox populi*, it not only survived, it has become one of the most popular social events. As well as the main film, there are trailers that include old public information films and advertisements, including Pearl & Dean. We are also embarking on a working relationship with ITV.

So what of the future?

It will be the bicentenary of the establishment of the Devon & Exeter Institution in 2013. I'm sure this will be attended by much celebration and perhaps for a day or two it will cease to be Exeter's best kept secret. For although it has never intended to be, as Exeter has developed into a modern city, the Institution has slipped into the background, people rushing past the double white doors with lantern above, having not the slightest idea what lies within. Paradoxically, this too is a selling point. The discovery of this hidden treasure brings joy to all who discover it. They join and then bring friends to show it off, who in turn, often leave grasping their application form.

The secret of the longevity of the DEI lies within its feeling of continuity. Changes, for the most part, have been subtle. Most have added more facilities for our members, whilst this week the installation of new boilers will assure their creature comforts whilst at the same time making us a bit more eco – friendly.

One of the concerns expressed by members over the years has been the average age of the members. 'We're all getting on, so who will replace us?' has been a familiar refrain. The answer is of course is the next generation of older people. The wisdom of years and variety of backgrounds are a valuable asset.

Membership is the main source of income and at present is fifty – six pounds a year and eighty - three pounds for joint membership. Junior membership is ten pounds and eighteen pounds for temporary membership of three months with no borrowing rights. We are proud to be a library where people can browse freely and approx seventy percent of the collection is available for borrowing.

All our libraries have something to offer. Whether it is our collection of rare books, an escape from the modern world, stimulating lectures or just somewhere to meet friends, they all have an important role to play.

Sometimes it is a matter of identifying what that role is. Perhaps making a few subtle changes to avoid stagnation. Other times it may involve making a brave step into something entirely new to ensure survival. Whatever the circumstances, I am confident that our Independent Libraries can have a secure and bright future.

Roger Brien

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