

Kelso Earliest Library

The first record of a library in Kelso was in 1751, which was established by 20 local people. This library was a subscription library; these were propriety libraries whereby people paid a subscription to join and also an annual membership fee. In return the members were supplied with the works of the best authors, and the various periodical publications of the day.

This library was one of the earliest municipal libraries in Scotland, and is frequently mentioned in the diaries of the Rev. George Ridpath who was minister at Stichill

In 1759 he records *the transfer of the library to a room in the town house which Ramsay has procured us the use of, and at the expense of the Duke of Roxburgh made a very decent convenient place.* He writes in his diary of how he arranged and catalogued the books.

It would appear that this library moved from the town house to Chalkheugh terrace in 1795, to the building that is now the British Legion, at the time it was noted that it *"consisted of a collection of the most esteemed English authors, ancient as well as modern"*.

Other subscription libraries

The Kelso New Library was founded in 1778 and in 1794 the Kelso Modern Library was founded, the modern and the New Library amalgamated in 1859 to be called the United Library which was in Oven Wynd.

There was the Kelso book club which was administered from J & J H Rutherford who were at 17 the Square, this was founded around 1830. They also published Rutherfurds Southern Counties register.

Congregational Libraries

There were also Congregational Libraries in connection with the Parish, North Free, First United Presbyterian and East United Presbyterian Churches.

Kelso Free Library

At the end of the nineteenth century, the proposal to have a free library and reading room in Kelso had been before the public for some time. It was considered an essential thing in progressive town life and this gave Kelso the chance to put itself in *keeping with the spirit of the age*. The number of towns in Scotland with free libraries was rapidly increasing and wherever they had been established, testimony was borne to their great usefulness - they had been generally found to be a means of elevating and improving the working classes.

Many public libraries were being founded by money granted from Andrew Carnegie, the son of a handloom weaver, born in Dunfermline. The family moved to America where Carnegie made his fortune.

Carnegies wealth continued to grow, he set up a trust fund "for the improvement of mankind." Carnegie once said. *"No millionaire will go wrong in his search for one of the best forms of the use of his surplus who chooses to establish a free library in any community that is willing to maintain and develop it"*

After an approach had been made to him, in July 1901 Carnegie agreed to give a grant of £3500 toward the cost of a building, on condition that the Free Libraries Act was adopted.

The grant was to cover the cost of the building but the site, stock and all running expenses would have to be paid for by the burgh, this meant raising the money from the rates.

A library committee was established to report to Kelso Town Council. A Mr Brown who was a councillor had with *considerable foresight, acquired some properties on Bowmont Street, and these he had very kindly offered at the price paid. There was one small self-contained house and a tenement.*

It was agreed to *empower the library committee to acquire the site and proceed.*

However, in addition to the £500, which had to be found for the site, the gift of £3500 from Carnegie had the stipulation that £500 was to be spent on new books; £1000 was a lot of money.

Finally it all came together, the land was paid for, the money for books was available, all that they needed was the building.

Messrs Peddie & Washington Browne were appointed as architects. They had designed the Edinburgh Central Public Library on George iv Bridge,

Mr Carnegie did not come himself to open the library as he had in 1904 when he came to Hawick to perform the ceremony. His representative Dr Hew Morrison did the honours in Kelso, as he had the year before in Innerleithen. Dr Morrison was the chief librarian in Edinburgh.

According to the press report and the photograph, the *weather was dismal in the extreme... the pitiless rain detracted much of the pleasure from what promised to be an altogether pretty and interesting scene*

Dr Morrison said that Mr Carnegie *regrets exceedingly, that he is not able to be present today in this fine Border town. In the name of the donor and well aware of his good feeling towards you, I dedicate this library to the use of the people of Kelso in all time coming, and have pleasure in throwing open its portals to all the inhabitants without distinction of creed, politics or social condition.*

Librarians

The first librarian was a Mr Lindsay Hilson who came from Jedburgh,

Mr Hilson was succeeded by Mr Elliot Jackson

A Miss Jackson followed

Mr Stimpson in June 1928.

At the time of Mr Stimpsons appointment the library still operated under the closed access, Closed access meant that the public were not allowed near the shelves. Instead the intending reader had to consult a printed catalogue to get the number of the book they wanted. Once they had noted the number of the book of their choice, the reader then had to consult an "indicator" to check the status of the book. The reader then had to fill in a form and hand this to the librarian, who retrieved the book from the shelf. The

librarians at that time were held in awe, it has been said that “*readers did not dare reject their choice if the book was found unsuitable when it was handed over by the librarian*”

It even states in the catalogue - bye-law 14 that *no-one but the librarian shall take any books from the shelves*

Mr Stimpson retired in February 1954 after 25 years service. It must be noted that his determination to see through the change to the open access system and his continual promotion of the library were a great boon to the people of Kelso. He was held in great esteem and one of the gifts he received on his retirement was £24 in Bank of England £1 notes.

William P Bird took over, then Graham Johnstone.

Mr John Ross was appointed in 1977, due to this appointment the opening hours at Kelso were expanded to enable the library to open full time.

Marjorie Blake took up post in 1995, when local government reform saw the creation of Scottish Borders Council. The opening hours changed in 1995 when Saturday opening was re-introduced, Wednesday became half day.

Marjorie retired at the end of 2003 and in May 2004 Ruth Holmes MSc MCLIP became Kelso Librarian. Ruth oversaw the celebrations to mark the Kelso Library Centenary in May 2006 and worked with others to create the Kelso Library Centenary Garden which was opened by Alasdair Hutton in 2007. During her time at Kelso, Ruth organised many events including Friends of Kelso Library author talks, Veterans Day events and lots of children’s activities.

In October 2012, some Scottish Borders libraries integrated with the Council’s Customer services department. This saw a change in the way Kelso library was operated and Ruth moved to Library headquarters at Selkirk to become Communities Librarian.