

◆ The Lewes Library Society in the Victorian Period, 1831–97

by Daniel Waley

This article is a continuation of D. Waley and J. Goring, 'Lewes Library Society: the early years, 1785–1831', Sussex Archaeological Collections 138 (2000), 153–64. The Society encountered some financial difficulties in this period and slowly and reluctantly certain organizational changes were achieved, the principal one being the installation of a newsroom in 1857. In 1863 the Library moved as tenant to the newly built Fitzroy Memorial Library. In 1897 the Society was dissolved and the books were transferred to the corporation of Lewes under the terms of the Public Library Acts. This development was typical; except in a few major cities, subscription libraries no longer had a role since they had been superseded by municipal, commercial and academic libraries.

This article continues and completes the investigation published in 'Lewes Library Society: the early years, 1785–1831', *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 138 (2000), 153–64, by Jeremy Goring and myself. That article sketched the Society's beginnings and emphasized that its origins were marked by a strong dissenting and radical connection. Here the Society is depicted in its Victorian phase.

1831–1863

The premises in Albion Street which the Lewes Library Society purchased in 1831 were to be its home for some thirty years, part of the house being leased out. A move to 'more commodious' quarters was suggested in 1857 and in the following year this was agreed in principle.¹ But the proposed move to the old railway station was forestalled by an unexpected development. In 1862 the Hon. Mrs Hannah Fitzroy, widow of Lewes' former (1837–59) member of parliament Henry Fitzroy, made a deed of gift which was to provide 'a Library and Reading Room . . . for the use of all respectable Inhabitants of the Town and Borough of Lewes' and the new building, the 'Fitzroy Memorial Library' at the corner of the east end of Friars Walk and Lewes High Street was then leased by the trustees to the Library Society.² The three Albion Street decades were a time of continuity also in that the Librarian Louisa Grayling (born 1801, appointed 1829) remained in office throughout this period.³

In the matter of acquisitions this was in general a time of contraction, for reasons which will be

discussed below. Purchases were more spasmodic than they had been in the Society's first half-century, but there was no serious decline in their total numbers. Twice the Society's financial situation dictated that there should be no acquisitions at all for a period of three months (July 1849, July 1851) and once an upper limit of £8 was agreed (July 1855), but these decisions were exceptional. Despite such periodic crises, the number of new titles ordered, which had been 60 in 1836 and 58 in 1846, rose in 1856 to 85.⁴

Meanwhile, in 1838, it had been decided to contract out a good deal of the lighter reading by the means — now becoming conventional — of loans made through the big London circulating libraries. The Society's first arrangement was made with Churton's, who were paid £10 per annum for loans of a period of two months each.⁵ The Churton borrowings averaged around eleven volumes at a time. The very considerable majority of the titles requested and sent were novels, but there were exceptions, such as the *Despatches of the Duke of Wellington* and *Rambles in the South of Ireland*.⁶ These London loans continued for the remainder of the Society's existence, with little alteration in the nature of the volumes borrowed. The fiction from London tended to be on what might be styled a lower level than the novels purchased, for example an author much borrowed was the prolific G. P. R. James (1799–1860). In 1845 the Society took its custom from Churton's to Bull's, then to the famous Mudie's Select Library (1850), where the annual subscription was ten guineas.⁷

In an attempt to solve recurrent disputes about

fields in which the Society should make purchases an ingenious formula was evolved in 1849. It was decided to allocate acquisitions expenditure according to a system of categories, the percentages agreed being as follows:

Poetry and Fiction: 33 per cent

History and Biography: 17 per cent

Science and Arts: 17 per cent

Voyages, Travels, General Literature: 33 per cent

The main effect would be an increase in Poetry and Fiction (already strongly represented in the loans from the London circulating libraries) at the expense of History and Biography. Expenditure in the previous years on the first of these categories was estimated at 28 per cent, on the second at 24 per cent. The new targets did not signal a general swing in the direction of lighter fare, since the allocation for 'Science and Arts' ('Arts' including what would now be defined as 'Crafts') would be higher than its estimated previous share of 14 per cent. At the same time responsibility for decisions on purchases was devolved to a standing committee, presumably a realistic reflection of the superior knowledge and commitment of a handful of the Society's members.⁸

The settlement of 1849 regulating acquisitions expenditure was not reached without controversy. In 1833 the Secretary Thomas Woollgar had entered his protest against a recent decision that limited the period of loan of the Society's volumes to one week: 'it seems framed to suit the purpose of the mere *novel readers*, at the expense of everyone else. It cannot be imagined that all, or even more than a few, Members of the Society have, generally, leisure to get through a book of real reading in a week'.⁹ Was it the case that the 'mere novel readers' were taking over control of the Society? Certainly plenty of novels were being purchased, as the 1849 allocations would imply. In the 1850s the fiction acquired included books by Dickens, Thackeray, Mrs Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte, Trollope, George Eliot, Charles Kingsley, as well as *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and much else. The readers of such works hardly deserved to be stigmatized as frivolous (as Mr Woollgar's formula surely implies). Other acquisitions of this decade — to select a few titles — included poetry by Tennyson, Matthew Arnold and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The Society was also adding to its holdings in the 1850s history written by Macaulay and Carlyle, with G. H. Lewes' *Life and Works of Goethe* among the biographies. 'Sciences and Arts' included Darwin's *Journal of a Naturalist on a Voyage round the World*, Ruskin's *Modern Painters* and Herbert Spencer's *Social*

Statics. Among works of travel was Sir Richard Burton's narrative of his pilgrimage to Mecca. Less easy to allocate are the Rawlinsons' edition of Herodotus and translations of the *Rig Veda*, Calderon, Heine and De Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime*.¹⁰ The catalogue of 1864 records a serious library, one which would not have shocked the 18th-century founders. There were more utilitarian works of reference, such as railway timetables, the *Army List* and the *Annual Register*, but such purchases had not altered fundamentally the nature of the library.

Meanwhile there were occasional bouts of 'de-accessioning', which probably had the effect of keeping the collections at approximately the same size. A committee to consider 'the expediency of exchanging and selling superfluous books' was appointed in July 1840 and seven years later an Inspector's Report recorded 575 volumes as sold, which must have represented some 10 per cent of the Society's holdings.¹¹

Although there was no dramatic change in the Society's holdings, there were ways in which it was changing as an organisation. These were linked with anxieties about the financial position, a particular problem being the cost of periodicals. As mentioned above, there were occasions when the budget left no margin at all for purchases. The earliest proposals for substantial changes date from 1832. A committee of eleven members was then appointed to recommend steps 'to increase the funds of the Society and to extend its benefits'.¹² The committee's report recommended that 'in order to make the Society become more extensively known and to induce persons to join it', there should be 'a more liberal circulation of books'. This proposal involved the one week maximum period of loan which so annoyed Mr Woollgar. Also one or more daily papers should be taken. A number of the committee's more radical proposals were rejected. These included the installation of a separate reading room for daily papers and periodicals (with an additional subscription for its users), a reduction of the normal membership fee, creation of a new category (at a lower fee) of holders of rights of admission to the library without full membership rights, and even the formation of a museum.¹³ In the following years proposals for change were frequently made and always defeated. The reforms most commonly suggested were the addition of a reading room for newspapers, the introduction of a new (voteless) category of user and an increase in subscriptions (proposed by the President in 1848).¹⁴

Throughout this time there were indications of *malaise*. The annual dinner was discontinued and in July 1852 the Secretary was the only person at what should have been a quarterly meeting,¹⁵ but again and again no majority could be raised in support of proposals for change. At last, in 1857, it was agreed that the Society should accept non-voting members, at a subscription of 25 shillings *per annum*. Advertisements were to be placed in the *Sussex Express* and the *Sussex Advertiser*.¹⁶ Nearly thirty years after the proposal had first been advanced, a 'newsroom' was opened. The 'newsroom readers' paid a separate subscription (18 shillings *per annum*, of which six shillings were allocated to general Library funds) and they were to hold their own meetings to debate acquisitions. These readers numbered 35 in 1861, after which year numbers fell slightly. Membership of the Society itself remained almost unchanged between the early 1840s and early 1860s, at between 86 and 88.¹⁷ Despite all the anxieties and the reluctance to change, Lewes Library Society, at the time of the move to the Fitzroy building, was still a going concern and still held a collection of serious works.

1863–97

The Library Society continued as tenant in the Fitzroy Library for the last 35 years of its existence; the original 25-year lease was presumably renewed in 1888. However the life and activities of the Society are much more difficult to recapture after 1861 owing to the loss of the volumes of minutes covering the following years. The survival of the catalogues, of lists of books borrowed from London circulating libraries and of lists of members, with some financial accounts, can do a little to fill in the story, but in general knowledge of the Society becomes sparse.

Membership held up reasonably well. The number of 'shareholders', i.e. those whose membership derived from succession to the Society's early members, fell to 64 in 1872, 51 in 1880, 38 in 1890, but the forms of subscription giving non-voting rights compensated for this fall. However the holders of newspaper rights also decreased in numbers, from 64 in 1872 to 47 in 1880 and to only 22 by 1895. Money from sales of books helped to subsidize acquisitions; various books were sold to the Sussex Archaeological Society, and the London Library purchased Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting* for £10. The Society's total income rose slightly above £200 *per annum* in the 1870s, to fall below it by 1885.¹⁸

This income made it possible to add acquisitions though on a rather smaller scale than before. Between 1860 and 1897 some 650 volumes were acquired, almost all by purchase.¹⁹ These continued to include scientific works, such as the writings of Charles Darwin and J. M. Tyndall (on *Heat and Sound*), as well as the proceedings of the Palaeontological Society. Travel and exploration remained favourite topics in the great days of African exploration; Baker's *Basin of the Nile* and Chaillu's *Adventures in Africa* are instances. More history was bought than in the past. There was plenty to choose from: Froude, E. A. Freeman, Motley, H. T. Buckle, Guizot — and, less obviously, Seebohm's *Oxford Reformers*.

The arrangement of receiving loans through London circulating libraries continued, from Mudie's till 1861, then with Marshall's Library (1861–69) and thereafter the English and Foreign Library Company (15 Old Bond Street).²⁰ Mudie's sent a consignment twice weekly, Marshall's once a week. By no means all the titles sent from London were for light reading, though the novels tended to be from the less serious end of the scale: Surtees, Ouida, Henty, Mrs Henry Wood, Fenimore Cooper, Harrison Ainsworth. But Thomas Hardy's first published novel, *Desperate Remedies*, was ordered in 1872, quite soon after publication. Much writing on travel also came from the London suppliers. About three quarters of the books supplied in the years 1865–9 consisted of fiction, but non-fiction included Ruskin (*Sesame and Lilies*, *Stones of Venice*), J. S. Mill (*The Subjection of Women*), Matthew Arnold (*Essays in Criticism*), Renan's *Vie de Jésus* in French, and Leone Levi's *Wages and Earnings of the Working Classes*.

In 1897 it was decided that the Society should be dissolved and its books transferred to a Lewes library set up on the same premises under the terms of the Public Library Acts of 1892 and 1893. The corporation formally took over the building and collections on 22 June 1897, the ceremony forming part of Lewes' commemoration of the diamond anniversary of Queen Victoria's succession. The premises were conveyed by a deed of 1 January 1898. By that date only 32 members of the Society were full members, i.e. 'shareholders', one of whom, Alderman C. R. Kemp, generously footed the bill for the Society's outstanding liabilities; including the cost of putting the Fitzroy building in good repair; these amounted to over £200.²¹

With the advent of a Public Library, Lewes had no need for a Library Society. The decline of the Public Library as a British institution after a century

of admirable achievement was marked by the foundation in 1991 of a new private lending library in Lewes — the Common Reader in Pipe Passage.

APPENDIX 1: MISS LOUISA GRAYLING

Miss Grayling (born 1801) was the daughter of William Grayling, a hairdresser in the Cliffe, Lewes. She was appointed librarian to the Society in 1829. References to her in the Society's minutes are rare. Her duties included the preparation of catalogues.²² Her salary crept up from £17 16s. *per annum* in 1832 to £30 (1854) and in 1856 she was voted a *douceur* of 3 guineas in recognition of her 'long continued services'.²³ Her post was certainly not an enviable one in all respects. When she was ill (1842–43) her salary was suspended and the sum saved was used to pay a substitute.²⁴ At the date of the 1851 census she was living at 4, High Street, Cliffe, with her younger sister Susannah. An account book of 1861 contains a note recording that £5 had been deducted from her salary (then £7 10s. a quarter) by the Society's Treasurer on account of a '£5 note lost between the 5th April and the 8th ditto 1861 by L. Grayling'.²⁵ The sparse materials surviving for the 1860s contain no further reference to Miss Grayling, but she must have retired within a few years of the episode of the missing banknote. She died at Lewes on 17 January 1868, the notice of her death ('formerly for many years the respected librarian of

the Lewes Library Society') appearing four days later in the *Sussex Express, Surrey Standard, Weald of Kent Mail, Hants & County Advertiser*.

APPENDIX 2: THE LEWES MECHANICS INSTITUTION AND ITS LIBRARY

The Institution was founded in 1825. Its library of 240 titles in 1827 grew by 1846 to some 2300 books. There was certainly some overlap in holdings but there was no real clash between the two libraries, since it seems clear that whilst some prominent members of the Library Society gave much support to the Institution they would not have considered borrowing volumes from its library. The Institution was in decline by the 1870s. In 1877 it changed its name to the 'Lewes Institute'. It was wound up in 1881 and the volumes from the library eventually sold at auction in 1892.

The East Sussex Record Office holds the papers of the Institution (AMS 6006). These have been used in Alethea Tynan, 'Lewes Mechanics' Institution', *Rewley House Papers* 3(4), (1955–56), 12–24 (a copy is AMS 6006/8/2/7).

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NOTES

- ¹ East Sussex Record Office, records of the Lewes Library Society (hereafter cited as R/L), R/L11/1/7, 15 Oct. 1857, 16 Dec. 1858, 11 Apr. 1860.
- ² Deed of gift 18 Oct. 1862, lease (from Dec. 1862) 13 Feb. 1863 (in the possession of Mr James Franks, Lewes).
- ³ For Louisa Grayling, see Appendix 1.
- ⁴ R/L11/1/6 and 7.
- ⁵ R/L11/1/6, 11 Apr. and 7 Nov. 1838.
- ⁶ R/L11/3/1–2 (1838–46).
- ⁷ R/L11/3/1–2 *passim*; R/L11/1/7, 9 Oct. 1850. On Mudie's see A. Cruse, *The Victorians and their Books* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1935), 310–36 (but the author does not deal with Mudie's as an intermediary, lending to libraries as well as to individuals).
- ⁸ R/L11/1/7, 12 July 1848, 10 Jan 1849, 11 Apr 1849.
- ⁹ R/L11/2/5 (1833; the emphasis is Mr Woollgar's).
- ¹⁰ R/L11/1/7 (1850–59, *passim*).
- ¹¹ R/L11/1/6 and R/L11/1/7 (14 July 1847). In 1858 an Inspector's Report recorded some 570 volumes as sold (R/

- L11/4/4), but it seems likely that these were the sales recorded in 1847.
- ¹² R/L11/1/6 (11 Jan. 1832).
- ¹³ R/L11/1/6, 11 Jan. and 11 Apr. 1832, 9 Jan. 1833.
- ¹⁴ R/L11/1/6, 5 Apr. 1838; R/L11/1/7, 12 July 1838, 10 Apr. 1850, 12 Apr. 1852, 9 Apr. 1856.
- ¹⁵ R/L11/1/7, 14 July 1852.
- ¹⁶ R/L11/1/7, 8 Apr. 1857.
- ¹⁷ R/L11/5/4–6; R/L11/6/6–7.
- ¹⁸ R/L11/6/6–9.
- ¹⁹ R/L11/4/4 (manuscript additions).
- ²⁰ R/L11/3/3–4 and R/L11/5/21.
- ²¹ *Borough of Lewes: Commemoration of the 60th Year of the Reign of H. M. Queen Victoria, 20, 21, 22 June 1897* (programme); deed of 1 January 1898 (in possession of Mr J. Franks).
- ²² R/L11/2/6, Oct. 1841.
- ²³ R/L11/1/7, 12 Apr. 1854, 9 Jan. 1856.
- ²⁴ R/L11/1/6, 12 Oct. 1842, 11 Jan. 1843.
- ²⁵ R/L11/5/7, inside the back cover of the volume.