

# *Account of Purley on Thames*

## Libraries

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### *The Demand for Books*

Ever since printing was invented there has been a strong popular demand for books. However there has always been a problem of affordability. The Library concept addresses this problem head on. By making the same book available to many people the 'cost per read' can be reduced dramatically. Hard luck perhaps on the author and publisher but good news for the reader.

### *Circulating Libraries*

Over the years there have been a number of private circulating libraries. The Womens Institute operated one for many years and in recent years there has been one in the church.

Before the Second World War it was quite common for shops such as W H Smiths and Boots to operate their own libraries, charging a few pence for each loan.

### *The Mobile Libraries*

The Mobile library service operated a number of vans which contain a small stock of books and which follows a regular pattern of calls.

In June 1970 the calling places were:-

- Pangbourne -1500-1630 Tuesday
- Long Lane/Orchard Close 1050-1110 Thursdays
- River Estate 1000-1025 Alternate Fridays
- School 1030-1045 Alternate Fridays.

Starting June 6th 1972 the library at the Memorial Hall was closed and the mobile service called instead on alternate Tuesdays.

In May 1973 the library called at:-

- Long Lane/Orchard Close 1050-1100 Wednesdays
- River Estate 1000-1035 Alternate Fridays
- Purley C of E School 1040-1100 Alternate Fridays
- Memorial Hall 1000-1045 Alternate Tuesdays

### *Public Libraries*

The first public library for Purley was set up in Purley Church of England School in 1934 and was run by Mrs Tidbury, the school mistress. It opened for an hour after school on a Wednesday. This was transferred later to the Memorial Hall and from 6th June 1972 was replaced by the county mobile library service.

Purley is now served principally by three public libraries. There are local branches at Pangbourne and Tilehurst which are well patronised by people from Purley and the main centre is the Reading

Central Library.

The Pangbourne Library is built on the site of the old firestation and was opened around 1972. It has a comparatively small collection.

Local Government Finance has meant a considerable cut back in library services. The Pangbourne branch struggles on by the use of volunteers. When the Parish Council was asked to provide support based upon population, the council flatly refused as Purley was being asked to provide considerably more than Pangbourne but only a very few Purley residents used the facility, most preferring to use Tilehurst or Reading.

As well as providing books to borrow most libraries have a reference section and in recent years have provided VCRs and CDs as well as books. Now most provide free internet access.

## *Specialist Libraries*

There are a number of specialist libraries in the area. The largest by far is the Reading University Library which is open to the public although most of the public are unaware of this.

The Local Studies collection forming part of Reading Central Library is an endless source of pleasure and reference to the local historian and is one of the best such collections in the country.

The Royal Berkshire Hospital has a very special collection of medical texts and original research material. However because of the personal and confidential nature of much of its material it is not open to the public and can be consulted only by appointment.

Most local schools have their own libraries. These are partly stocked from the schools own resources and gifts and partly from a special reserve collection of the District Council Library Service who recycle the stock occasionally.

Many companies in the area also maintain their own libraries which may often be consulted by appointment.

Most libraries are backed up by a central reserve library whereby books can be reserved and if necessary retrieved from the reserve collection at any of the branch libraries. Almost any book can be obtained from the British Library system based at York but one often has to push the staff at the public library to get them to make the request on your behalf.

## *Jumble Sales*

For many people the jumble sale was the most efficient form of public library. Books could be bought for a song and when read could be returned to the next jumble sale. However nowadays jumble sales are very much out of fashion although to a limited extent car boot sales fulfil a similar function.

## *Books and more books*

Prior to the invention of the printing press books had to be hand written and copied, mainly by monks. As a result they were very rare and available only to a very select group. Printing made books much more available and by the 18th century had become quite common. Owners of big houses tended to buy everything that a publisher produced and placed the books in their library. However they were rarely accessed and read and if you ever get to handle one the chances are that many of the pages will be uncut.

By the mid 20th century the paper-back had been invented and popular books were printed in huge numbers. The number of titles published each year has increased dramatically and there is a huge market for them.

For many years there were lots of new and second hand book sellers who made a decent living, but as the price of new paper-back books dropped the bookshop declined and most places nowadays is lucky to have more than one national chain such as Waterstones or W H Smith.

In recent years e-books which can be read from a tablet computer have been very popular and the geeks forecast the total demise of the printed book. However that seems highly unlikely. Another reason for the disappearance of the bookseller is that almost all the books published before 1900 have been digitised by a number of academic institutions and can be downloaded from the internet for free. Thus it is now only the specialist book collector that has any real interest in the second hand market.



