

THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF
LIBRARIES IN BRITAIN
AND IRELAND

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VOLUME II
1640–1850

This volume charts the story of libraries from the Civil War to the time of the Chartist riots by way of the French Revolution. The social impact of these historical changes affected libraries and their users, for example in the damage caused to libraries in the Civil War and the formation of a 'mass reading public'. Two important themes are the establishment of libraries 'for the people' (for example, circulating libraries, and Sunday school and parish libraries) as well as for the privileged (for example, proprietary subscription libraries and gentlemen's clubs) and the consolidation of national reference collections for the academic community, such as the British Museum. The volume also pays attention to British libraries abroad, to serve British settlers, garrisons and merchants. The period saw great changes in the size and uses of libraries, with many private libraries being incorporated into public and academic collections, and this volume provides the most comprehensive overview available of the riches of early modern library history up to the 1850 Libraries Act.

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General Editor
PETER HOARE

Libraries pervade the culture of all literate societies. Their history illuminates that culture and many of its facets – the spread of literacy, the growth of scholarship, changes in educational practices – as well as reflecting changing social and political philosophies and practices. As a result, they have often developed in ways which could not have been foreseen by their founders.

The fundamental principle, of collecting for immediate and future use and enjoyment, has usually been combined with a social aim, the sharing of books and information among a wider group, which has become one of the characteristics of libraries today. This is one reason why libraries cannot simply be seen as a discrete phenomenon: throughout their history they must be considered part of the society they serve. This context includes the whole reading environment, the vital connection of libraries with social or cultural development, and the political framework which has become increasingly important in the past hundred years; economic and commercial aspects have also become more significant, as they have for the history of the book. The profession of librarianship has matured, especially in the last century, and has in turn affected the development of libraries: indeed it is the interaction of librarians and users that has provided much of the dynamic for that development. Changing methodologies of scholarship and the vicissitudes of private reading, too, affect the way libraries have developed.

Libraries vary enormously in form, in size and in purpose, and their nature has inevitably changed over the fifteen centuries encompassed in these volumes. In consequence the three volumes have different emphases and reflect different approaches to the historical record, but they share a common theme. This has inspired the project since its first inception on the initiative of Professor Robin Alston (whose library history database has been invaluable to many contributors), and under the aegis of the then Library History Group of the Library Association and its former Honorary Secretary Graham Jefcoate. Notwithstanding these differences in approach, the history of libraries is a continuum, and the divisions between the three volumes of what is essentially a single work are less precise than the volume titles may indicate. Developments for some years around the mid-seventeenth century may be treated in both Volume I and Volume II, though often in different contexts; and a similar overlap for the mid-nineteenth century exists between Volume II and Volume III. Readers concerned with these periods should be sure to consult both volumes.

The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland does not set out to be an exhaustive history of individual libraries: it is, rather, a general history charting the various trends and patterns of development, which studies different types of libraries and individual libraries as part of that broader view. In this way it aims to illuminate not only libraries and their users but also the wider history of the British Isles. Only in understanding their purpose and their context can the role of libraries be properly comprehended.

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Edited by
GILES MANDELBROTE
and
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