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Edward Edwards

Excerpt

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CHAPTER XV.

THE OLDER LIBRARIES OF ENGLISH TOWNS,
AND THEIR MANAGEMENT BY MUNICIPAL
CORPORATIONS.

.... Hyde, Clifford, and Danby found a Parliament full of lewd young men, chosen by a furious people, in spite to the Puritans, whose severity had disgusted them. Many knew not what they did, when they made the Act for Corporations, by which the greatest part of the nation was brought under the worst men in it, drunk or sober.

ALGERNON SYDNEY. *Discourses on Government* (Hollis' edition), p. 502.

SEVERAL of the ancient Corporate Towns of England possess Libraries, which were originally founded—either by the munificence of individuals, or by a public and joint-stock contribution,—and then entrusted to the guardianship of the respective municipalities. Most of these Libraries date from the early part of the seventeenth century. At that period, studious and even learned men were occasionally seen to take their share in the business of Town Councils. Others, sitting with them, who laid no claim to distinction of this sort, were forward to show their respect for it. No very elaborate argument was thought necessary to prove

BOOK III.
Chapter XV.
The older Libraries of English Towns.

Several Town Libraries founded early in the 17th century.

Cambridge University Press

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Edward Edwards

Excerpt

[More information](#)

736 THE OLDER LIBRARIES OF ENGLISH TOWNS.

BOOK III.
Chapter XV.
The Older Libraries
of English
Towns.

that all the townspeople had a common interest in the provision of facilities for study; or that this common interest was wholly independent of gradations in social position.

Outchecked by
the Civil Wars,
and profligacy of
the Restoration.

Neglect by Cor-
porations of their
literary trusts.

But this recognition of a common want which we find to have been made in several towns at nearly the same period, was soon checked in its natural results by the political strife then fast gathering head. The temporary lull in the great struggle, which occurred between the death of Cromwell and the call of William of Orange, is too full of public infamy to admit of surprise that the municipalities of the day had little attention to bestow on trusts of this kind. Algernon Sydney has truly depicted the then state of things, in his incisive way, by the statement that “the greatest part of the nation was brought under the power of the worst men in it.” A fact so pregnant leaves small room for wonder that scarcely one of these Municipal Libraries was even decently cared for.

Norwich, Leicester, and Bristol may here serve as sufficient examples of the treatment of Town Libraries by Corporations of such a stamp. Each of them possessed a Library founded within the first third of the seventeenth century. It would be hard to decide which has the pre-eminence in neglect of its advantage, but, as will be seen hereafter, Norwich, at least, has had a near prospect of distancing, in the present generation, the supineness and puerility of a past one.

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[More information](#)

§. 1. THE CITY LIBRARY OF NORWICH.

This Library was commenced in the year 1608, during the mayoralty of Sir John Pettus. It seems to have enlisted very general good will in its favour. The donation-book records, in all, the names of no fewer than a hundred and forty-four donors. Most of the gifts, however, were small. The most important bequests appear to have been those of the Rev. Richard Ireland, in 1692, and of the Rev. Thomas Nelson, in 1714.

The distinguished but eccentric antiquary Peter Le Neve (Norroy) is said to have directed the preservation in Norwich, for public use, of his extensive and curious collections on the topography and antiquities of the county. There is some obscurity about the precise circumstances which impeded his purpose. Bishop Tanner, one of his Executors, says expressly: "Part of his Will relates to the putting his papers into some Public Library at Norwich." Subsequently, the Bishop writes to Dr. Rawlinson: "There was an ugly codicil, made a few days before his death, in favour of his wife, upon which she set up a claim for several of his Norfolk collections, and hindered the execution of that part of his Will." ... "But I have hopes," he adds, "that she is coming into better temper, and will let us perform our trust without entering into a Chancery suit." The lady, however, persisted. The Library, or great part of it, was sold by auction, in 1731. Some of the Norfolk MSS. had already passed, with the fair widow herself, into the possession of "Honest Tom Martin of Palgrave,"

BOOK III.
Chapter XV.
The Older Libraries of English
Towns.

City Library
of Norwich.

Cambridge University Press

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Volume 2

Edward Edwards

Excerpt

[More information](#)

738 THE OLDER LIBRARIES OF ENGLISH TOWNS.

BOOK III.
Chapter XV.
The Older Librar-
ies of English
Towns

and he seems to have bought more of them at the sale. Others were purchased by the Duke of Norfolk. Some MSS. of a different class were bought by the Earl of Oxford, and now form part of the Harleian collection in the British Museum. Martin's books were dispersed, in their turn, and several of them are in the Chetham Library at Manchester.

Book Rarities of
Norwich.

Amongst the old books in the Norwich Library are the Polyglott Bibles of Antwerp and London; Taverner's English Bible of 1549; many fine specimens of early English Topography; choice copies of Hakluyt, Purchas, and of many of our national Chronicles. In short, though small, it is a curious and valuable collection. But the Corporation of a byegone day betrayed its trust by permitting it to pass into the custody of a private Society, and the Society thus illegitimately favoured has tried hard to induce the present Corporation to follow in the old track.

Under the provisions of a recent Act of Parliament—the "Public Libraries Act,"—the history of which will be found in a subsequent chapter,—a majority of the Corporation has, after much discussion, determined to repair the *laches* of its predecessor by reclaiming the two thousand volumes thus temporarily alienated, but has met with sturdy opposition on pretexts the most futile. The opponents may tell their own story, which to an observant reader carries its refutation on its face. It is framed, as a Memorial to the City Council, in the following terms:—

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

MEMORIAL OF THE NORWICH LIBRARY. 739

*To the Mayor, Aldermen, and Citizens of Norwich, in Council assembled..**The Memorial of the Committee of the Norwich Public Library*

Sheweth,—That at a quarterly assembly of the Corporation, held June 19th, 1815, a certain Report of the Library Committee was agreed to, and consent given for the City books to be taken to the Public Library under the direction of the said Committee.

That your memorialists have learned with deep regret that it is contemplated to apply to the Council for power to remove the City books to the Free Library.

That upon the faith of their tenure of these books, as long as the conditions imposed were satisfactorily complied with, various sums of money, to a considerable amount, have from time to time been expended by your memorialists from the funds of the Public Library in their preservation.

That the books of the City Library have been embodied in the catalogues of 1825 and 1847, under the same scientific arrangement as the books which are the property of the Public Library, distinguishing those which are the property of the Corporation by a prominent and appropriate designation; and that therefore by the removal of the City Library, the catalogue, to which your memorialists have recently published the first appendix, will be rendered quite useless, and an expense, otherwise unnecessary, will be incurred.

That although the books of the City Library were recently found in a very dusty condition; yet that during the 40 years they have been in the custody of your memorialists, they have suffered no deterioration from damp, loss, or otherwise.

That the contiguity of the Public Library to the Guildhall affords the greatest convenience of application to the Town Clerk for permission to take out books from the City Library, and of the access of the Library Committee of the Corporation to inspect their property.

That it is in contemplation to place a fire in the room appropriated to the City Library, and further to improve it by the insertion of a large bay-window, which will make it a light and cheerful place for all who need reference to these ancient and valuable books.

That your memorialists venture to point out the entire unsuitableness, in their judgment, of works in learned languages, on abstruse subjects or in black letter, to the objects of the Free Library.

And your memorialists therefore pray that the books of the City Library be allowed to remain, as heretofore, in their keeping.

Signed on behalf of the Public Library Committee.

Norwich, Nov. 10th, 1856.

G. W. W. FIRTH, President.

BOOK III.
Chapter XV.
The Older Libraries of English Towns.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01055-9 - Memoirs of Libraries: Including a Handbook of Library Economy,
Volume 2

Edward Edwards

Excerpt

[More information](#)

740 THE OLDER LIBRARIES OF ENGLISH TOWNS.

BOOK III.
Chapter XV.
The Older Libra-
ries of English
Towns.

On so puerile a production it were idle to waste words. One remark, however, may be appropriate in anticipation of the history and objects of the Act of Parliament in pursuance of which the Free City Library of Norwich has been created. No Institution established under that Act can with justice address itself to any "class" of the population in particular. Rate-supported Libraries are *ipso facto* "Town Libraries." Their cost is defrayed by rate-payers of all degrees. It is the imperative duty of every Town-Council so to manage them as to make them conduce, in the utmost possible measure, to the researches, the pursuits, and the profit of every class of the townspeople. For some readers it may also be desirable to add that the so-called "Public" Library by whose managers this Memorial is drawn up, is Public in name only.

The decision of the Council may, I believe, be regarded as conclusive of the matter, notwithstanding the attempts which have been made to rescind it. As will be inferred from the recital, the indirect importance of the question thus raised, in its relation to the future working of the "Public Libraries Act" of 1855, is considerable, however comparatively trivial the immediate point in dispute.

§. 2. THE CITY LIBRARY AT BRISTOL.

City Library of
Bristol, founded
by Robert
Redwood.

The City Library of Bristol is in origin nearly contemporaneous with that of Norwich, and its ill fortunes under Corporate management have been very similar. It was founded by Robert Redwood, an eminent citizen,

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[More information](#)

in 1614.¹ The first recorded proceeding on the subject is to be found in the following Council Minute:—"Convocatio Domus Consilii xv. die Decembris 1613. It is this day agreed that, if Mr. Roberte Redwoode will give his Lodge adjoyninge to the Towne Hall, neere the Marsh of Bristol, to the Mayor and Commonalty, to be converted to a Librarye, or place to put bookes for the furtherance of Learninge, then the same shal be thankfully accepted, and that then there shal be a dore made through the wall on suche sorte as shal be thought convenient by the Surveyors of the Landes of the Cytie, and that such bookes as shal be gyven to the Cytie by the reverende Father in God, the Lord Archbishop of York, or any other well-disposed person, for the furnishinge of a Library, shal be thankfully accepted, and preserved in the place aforesayed."

BOOK III.
Chapter XV.
The Older Libraries of English Towns.

The next entry occurs in the Mayor's Register Book of 1614. It records that "this year was erected and builded the Library in the Marsh; Doctor Toby Matthew and Robert Redwood were the founders thereof, and Richard Williams, Vicar of St. Leonards, was the first .. Keeper thereof." The precise extent of the aid accorded by Archbishop Matthew does not appear, but it was obviously liberal. He was the son of a Bristol mercer, and had been born on Bristol Bridge, which in the sixteenth century was covered with houses. His gifts were described by himself as intended "for the benefit of his native city by the dissemination of know-

Benefaction of
Archbishop
Matthew.

¹ *Letters from the Bodleian*, ii, 104; Blomfield, *Essay towards a Topographical History of Norfolk*, iv, 343; Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, 415, 416; Botfield, *Notes on Libraries*, in the *Philobiblon Miscellanies*, 1-10.

Cambridge University Press

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Volume 2

Edward Edwards

Excerpt

[More information](#)

742 THE OLDER LIBRARIES OF ENGLISH TOWNS.

BOOK III.
Chapter XV.
The Older Librar-
ies of English
Towns.

ledge, and for the purpose of founding a Library of sound divinity and other learning, for the use of the Aldermen and shopkeepers. Many of the works he gave contain, in his autograph, the words:—

Tobias Eboracum.

Vita mihi Christus, Mors lucrum.

The Archbishop died in 1628, in the 83rd year of his age, after governing the See of York for twenty-two years. His fellow labourer in the foundation of Bristol Library, Robert Redwood, died two years afterwards; bequeathing, as an addition to his former gifts, ten pounds towards the further augmentation of the Library.

Early purchases
by the Cor-
poration.

The first entry of the purchase of books by the Corporation occurred in 1622, and runs thus:—"Paid Mr. Brown for 117 books for the provision of the Library, £14 10s 0d." In 1640 there is an entry of payment to an ironmonger "for 15 dozen and a half of book-chains for the Library, £3 17s. 6d." There are also other entries which show the enlargement of the Library building, and the gift of ground for the purpose by Richard Vickris, one of Redwood's Executors. A long blank ensues.

In the year 1725, the then Librarian and Vicar of St. Leonards, the Rev. Robert Clarke, called the attention of the City Council, by Memorial, to the fact that "the Library was become ruinous, the books much damaged, and in danger of being spoiled, and the building itself unsafe for persons to resort to." After nearly *fifteen years'* consideration, (the petition had been referred to a "Committee" with instructions to consider and report,) it was recommended to the Council that

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the Library should be entirely rebuilt; which was accordingly done, in 1740, at an expense of £1300. In addition to the expenditure of the Corporation, private liberality appears to have enlisted itself in the undertaking. The building contains a chimney-piece which is a noble specimen of the carving in wood of Grinling Gibbons. It seems to have been one of the choice works which he had retained in his own gallery until his death, and to have been given by the subsequent purchaser.

BOOK III.
Chapter XV.
The Older Libraries of English Towns.

The most considerable bequest which Bristol Library has received, possesses a melancholy interest, from the death of the donor by his own hand. John Heylin was a descendant of the well-known (but by no means popular) author of *Microcosmus*, of *Cyprianus Anglicus*, and of a host of other laborious books, Dr. Peter Heylin. Although that sturdy divine, like many of his brethren, lost his Library during the Civil Wars, it seems probable that some of his lost books were recovered, and, with his subsequent acquisitions, inherited by his family. John Heylin's legacy is worded thus:—"I do hereby give to the Library in King Street in the parish of St. Leonard, in the City of Bristol, under the direction of the Mayor, Burgesses, and Commonalty of the same City, all my Father's Dr. [John] Heylin's manuscripts and manuscript sermons, and all my Library of printed books, which I judge may be about fourteen hundred in number."

Bequest of a descendant of Dr. Peter Heylin.

The folly and scandal of converting the public-spirited foundation of Redwood and Matthew into a private Subscription Library belongs to the Town Council

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Edward Edwards

Excerpt

[More information](#)

744 THE OLDER LIBRARIES OF ENGLISH TOWNS.

BOOK III.
Chapter XV.
The Older Librar-
ies of English
Towns.

Pretexts on
which the Librar-
y was turned
over to a pri-
vate Society.

of 1773. The promoters of the new institution—laudable in itself—made it one of their first steps to obtain possession of the City Library, and in their memorial to the Corporation coolly express their persuasion that such “an attempt to *promote Literature* requires only to be mentioned in order to recommend itself to the patronage and support of the Magistracy.” Quite as coolly the pliant Corporation accedes to the request by granting the “use of the Library House, and of the books therein deposited,” and by expending the sum of a hundred and sixty pounds in fittings and bookbinding, prior to the transfer. Four years later, a further sum of three hundred pounds is expended in the removal of a coachhouse and stables, in order to “lay open the said Library.” Shortly afterwards, the entrance money, the payment of which became the preliminary of access to the Library, was advanced by the Society to four guineas. Another demand on the public purse kept by the City Council followed, and was as successful as before. Well may the historian of these transactions note that they evince “the natural tendency of power unrestrained, or not subject to public controul, to creep into abuse.” The Corporations created by the Carolinian politicians were, in truth, so many snug little coteries. The gentlemen to whose discretion the Bristol Corporation had thus yielded up a sacred trust, displayed their capacity to deal with it by passing a formal Resolution, “That no person keeping a lodging-house, inn, tavern, coffeehouse, or other place of public entertainment, be permitted to subscribe to this Society.” So that had William Roscoe been born in Bristol, his