

A HISTORY OF BITTERNE'S BRANCH LIBRARY

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Take a look at a nineteenth century Bitterne Park map of 1897 and what can be found there at a time when Queen Victoria was on the throne in her Diamond Anniversary year? Bitterne Park had been taken into the County Borough of Southampton the year prior, hence the map's availability. Bitterne Railway Station (originally named Bitterne Road Station at its opening in March 1866) with Station Road adjacent (renamed MacNaghten Road after the family who resided at Bitterne Manor House) is clearly visible, as are both Bullar Road and Cobbett Road running parallel, but there are very few houses, and only one large detached house is immediately obvious in that section of the main road leading from the station to Bitterne village. One other large detached house stood alone and distant that same side of Bitterne Road to keep it company -we know it today as Wayside Lodge Guest House on the corner at 2 Midanbury Lane.

Coming forwards in time, a map of 1933 shows how intensively developed that particular area had become, with hundreds of residences all now within the County Borough of Southampton since the further inclusion of more of the eastern suburbs in 1920. The Station Hotel has since been built at the bottom of Bullar Road, but there is nothing marked on Cobbett Road's corner site where it met the road leading from Northam Bridge to Bitterne village. The lone detached house referred to above in 1897's Bitterne Road was named 'Homelea' before numbering was introduced. By 1933 isolated 'Homelea', a large, detached, double-bay window fronted house with ample surrounding grounds, had some nearer neighbours than 1897.

Moving on fifty years to a 1947 map, that same Victorian residence is now stated to be 171 Bitterne Road, and an elongated building termed "Library" stands next to it at the junction of Bitterne Road with Cobbett Road. Perhaps you can remember the children's Wendy House that stood for decades on the verdant lawn in a spacious garden and under the shade



THE MARTIN HALL AT
19 BROOK ROAD

of splendid trees? Sadly, all that is gone now with 171 Bitterne Road replaced by modern apartment blocks after demolition in the 1990s.

So, how did Bitterne's first public branch library come to be constructed near the railway station, well away from the village up the hill and on an elongated, rectangular shaped, plot of land? On 25th July 1930 Southampton Borough Council's Public Libraries Committee considered a submitted report on the "suggested future development and extension of the Branch Library system." At Bitterne village such an arrangement as existed was only ever considered "temporary provision". There was a free library two evenings per week at the Martin Parish Hall, 19 Brook Road, which had opened to the general public from 6 pm on Tuesday 11th October 1921 but, nine years later, the Libraries Committee still surprisingly decided only to take the ever-expanding Bitterne Park area into consideration once even greater demand justified the necessity!

There had been a great deal of house building in the entire area both sides of the Northam to Bitterne road during the 1920s and 1930s following the National Liberal Land Company's development of Bitterne Park, plus gradual development of the former Chessel Estate as the Bitterne Garden Suburb, and so their decision to wait further was astonishing. It would actually be a further nine years yet before a brand-new purpose-built library for Bitterne at Cobbett Road came to fruition despite recommendation in the 1930 report.

Naturally existing residents were upset by this decision. Outside of the town centre, there was one Branch Library established at Portswood with another at Burgess Road - neither really served such fast-growing populations. To wait seemed absurd. To catch the tram to Portswood or walk there from Bitterne was not considered so difficult in those days, but ratepayers wanted more facilities to hand. Thus it was that the Library Committee was urged on again, this time more strongly by Councillor Reaney in his letter read out on 28th October 1932 requesting specifically that it "build a new Public Library for the use of residents of Bitterne Manor, Bitterne Park, and Bitterne". Regretfully, they replied, a suitable site could not be found in the right area. This did not thwart Bitterne's ratepayers and councillors since, in January 1933, Mr S.G. Stanton, Southampton's Borough Engineer, passed on a letter from Rev. Mr F.C. Vaughan-Jenkins of Nottingham offering the Corporation donation of a Bitterne Road site previously used as tennis courts. Mrs Lilly Vaughan-Jenkins, his widowed mother, had been a Bitterne Road resident from at least 1922 until 1930 when, aged 61, her death was Southampton registered in the June quarter of 1930. Originally from London, Lilly Ada Colmer's birth was registered in Hackney district during the last quarter of 1868, but her 1900 marriage to William Vaughan Jenkins had taken place in Bristol, where births of the couple's two children were subsequently registered; Gladys Vaughan Jenkins in 1902,

Followed by Frederick Colmer Vaughan Jenkins in 1905. William Vaughan Jenkins, her husband, died during 1920 (death registered Keynsham, Bristol, September 1920 quarter)

and a short while afterwards Lilly made the move away to reside at Bitterne Road, Southampton. [Source: FreeBMD website 2009]

Once settled in Bitterne, she purchased the plot of land between her home and Cobbett Road, perhaps to stop others building there. A legal conveyance deed dated 14th February 1922 details the sale of a rectangular piece of land in Bitterne Road from Sir James Lemon of The Avenue, Southampton to Mrs Lilly Ada Jenkins of Homelea, Bitterne Road for £50. The detailed plan drawing on the 1922 deed shows it to be Cobbett Road site that was eventually donated for the library. Lilly Jenkins' estate was left to her two children: Frederick in England, and Gladys who emigrated to Canada.



In 1934 questions were again being asked officially whether the proposed Branch Library was to be started in the near future. The Town Clerk specifically received a letter on 27th April 1934 from the Southampton Ratepayers' Association asking if the building of the proposed branch library (in Bitterne Road) "is included in this year's estimate". Meanwhile, in July 1934, Library Committee minutes record the generous gift from the Rev. Vaughan-Jenkins of the site inherited from his late mother.

Progress was slow with delays and difficulties encountered through restrictive covenants attached to the donated land, but the Town Clerk managed to resolve these complications and legal matters so that finally, on 26th July 1935, Mr Stanton was asked to prepare plans and estimate costs. His department's chief architectural assistant, Stuart Bentley ARIBA, was responsible for designing the building with Mr. E. W. Edwards. August 1936 Library Committee Minutes record that Town Council approval was now being sought to sanction the necessary loan with the Ministry of Health to build the library. A special Building Subcommittee held on Friday 30th October 1936 reported in due course that the Borough Engineer had submitted plans for the proposed new Branch Library at Bitterne. Thus eventually Alderman Lewis, seconded by Alderman McDonnell, recommended that these plans should be approved and that the Council should be requested to apply to the Ministry of Health for consent to borrow £8,210 for their proposed erection of a branch library in Bitterne Road, Southampton. On 27th November 1936 the Public Libraries Committee at last reported it all satisfactorily passed, and so building work actually commenced in March 1938, after both the Ministry and Board of Education had given all necessary approvals.

After all these problems and difficulties encountered over the years, the building took just

over one year to construct, fit out and furnish! The Martin Hall in Brook Road subsequently ceased its temporary library duties closing completely for library business at the end of the evening on Friday 17th November 1939. Known later as the Gordon Hall, it is still in use today by Scouts, although somewhat extended.

INTERIOR PLAQUE TO COMMEMORATE THE MAY 1939 OPENING DAY.



The Southern Daily Echo newspaper of May 11, 1939 carried a detailed report headed "Southampton's Newest Branch Library" describing the built-in oak bookcases, shelves and fittings of "Bitterne Park's Handsome Building". Chief Librarian, Mr R.W. Lynn, announced two days later in 13th May's newspaper that a "New Branch Library at Bitterne will be open to the public from 6 pm on Tuesday 16th May." The opening ceremony was carried out

that day at 3 p.m. by the Mayor, Councillor Arthur Henry Powdrill, who was photographed as he unlocked the double doors, and this was reported in even greater depth when the "Attractive Premises Opened" – a quote taken directly from the newspaper heading. The library always remained closed Thursdays. However, the adult lending library was open from ten in the morning to 8.30 p.m. every weekday, while the separate reading room, which could "accommodate 27 readers in comfort", was open later to 9 p.m. daily. Junior Library hours were from 3.30 p.m. to 8 p.m. daily. Chief Librarian Lynn, writing in October 1939's *Library Association Record*, advised that the total expenditure had amounted to £9,520 and included £1,330 for furniture with seating upholstered in plush red leather. Underfloor heating was installed so that bulky radiators were unnecessary and this maximised the floor space for book shelving.

Mayor Powdrill paid a glowing tribute to the building contractors, Messrs Jenkins & Sons of Waterloo Terrace, plus the Southampton Steam Joinery Works who made and supplied furniture and fittings. Two hundred guests were invited to attend the opening, inspect the library interior and continue on afterwards to the Masonic Hall in Rampart Road, Bitterne Manor, for tea courtesy of the Libraries Committee. Councillor W. Lewis, Chairman of that Committee, is named on the May 1939 commemorative plaque inside the library, and well-known Alderman, Sir Sidney Kimber, also attended.



ADULT LENDING LIBRARY
(FROM THE OFFICIAL
OPENING CATALOGUE)

A list of contractors from the 1939 official opening programme shows that Jenkins & Sons used several local firms in building the library; Mr A. Buckett, an Electrical Engineer and Contractor, had his premises at 106 St Catherine's Road, Bitterne Park. He advertised in the Echo newspaper very prominently alongside the newspaper article concerning the library's opening.

William Dibben & Sons (subsequently trading as UBM Dibben) has long gone from Antelope House on Bursledon Road; Shepherd and Hedger in the High Street below the Bargate was renowned for quality furniture and carpets; The Southampton Steam Joinery Works employed many local men, one of whom was carpenter W.R. Grundy. Mrs D. Le Huquet is his daughter Doreen, who became a Cobbett Road librarian and still lives locally.

The bronze letters supplied by the Morris Singer Company refer to the exterior words "Public Library" at the front of the building. "Roof Lights" supplied by King & Company form a very important part of the building's fabric and design as the building is flooded with natural light in all three large library rooms courtesy of these.

It has been suggested that the building itself is meant to resemble an ocean liner. When looking at the exterior of the building, it becomes apparently clear that it was designed in the 1930s - a golden era of ocean-going liners with glamorous people aboard leaving "The Gateway to the World", the port of Southampton, for equally glamorous destinations in America and beyond. No doubt that art deco period, in addition to the shape of the building plot, influenced the building's design, which is single storey with elongated low lines plus horizontally opening windows throughout. Two small rounded windows at the front of the building on the left certainly have the appearance of portholes and so reflect the maritime theme.

LIST OF CONTRACTORS

The General Contractors were Messrs. JENKINS & SONS, WATERLOO TERRACE, whose tender was £8,189

The sub-contractors under the general contract were :

BLOKCRETE CO. LTD., SOUTHAMPTON : Artificial stone

A. BUCKETT, BITTERNE : Electrical installation

WM. DIBBEN & SONS, LTD. : Steel framework and ironmongery

GRANWOOD FLOORING CO., LTD., DERBY : Patent underfloor heating and floor finishes

GENERAL ELECTRIC CO., LTD., SOUTHAMPTON : Electrical equipment

I.C.I. LTD. : "Pioneer" plaster finishes

J. A. KING & CO., LTD., LONDON : Roof lights

LIMMER & TRINIDAD LAKE ASPHALT CO., LTD., SOUTHAMPTON : Asphalt roof coverings

MORRIS SINGER CO., LONDON : Bronze letters

STRONGCRETE CO., LTD., BOURNEMOUTH : Concrete construction

The Furnishing Contractors were Messrs. SOUTHAMPTON STEAM JOINERY WORKS, whose tender was £1,330

The sub-contractors under the furnishing contract were :

LIBRACO LTD., LONDON : Loose furniture and special library equipment

SHEPHERD & HEDGER, SOUTHAMPTON : Chairs

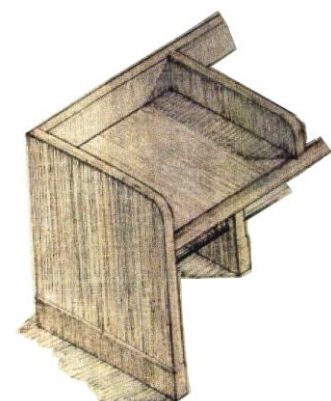
DALE, BRIGHTON : Lettering

The impressive new Bitterne Library, as Cobbett Road Library was known until September 2003, was only the third in the Borough to contain a designated Children's Library; it included single tables for their homework and two thousand children's books were stocked.

An epidiascope (an optical lantern) was available in the Children's Library to project images. This was absolutely cutting edge technology at that time! In the main adult lending library wall cases were designed to have bottom shelves specifically tilted for better display of the 7,000 volumes available. Certainly every thought went into making the design of both the library and its furniture as effective as possible for purpose. Everything, even the display cabinets and homework study desks, were designed by the architectural team and appear in detail on the plans.



CHILDREN'S LIBRARY
FEATURED IN 1939
OPENING DAY CATALOGUE



A 'JUVENILE STUDY DESK' ON ARCHITECT'S PLANS

Bitterne's splendid new library at Cobbett Road had barely been open four months before war was declared in September 1939. Southampton, as a major port and south coast town, was terribly afflicted during World War II; its town centre utterly destroyed and its people threatened constantly with death from the air. Indeed, Woolston's Supermarine Aviation factory, totally destroyed by enemy bombing in a third attack on September 26th 1940, was seconds away by enemy planes following the River Itchen inland from Southampton Water. Fortunately the library survived those dreadful years without any damage although numerous bombs fell in local roads. Houses were bombed or destroyed in Bitterne Road, Bitterne Way, Bullar Road, Chessel Avenue, Chessel Crescent, Garfield Road, and MacNaghten Road; all such addresses in the immediate area surrounding the new library are recorded in official archives listing the numerous civilian deaths that occurred during the Southampton Blitz. The Blitz victims' Roll of Honour illustrates so clearly the Bitterne area where they died.

With many incendiary bombs dropped in raids, the library's flat roof proved useful for fire watching and a tiny upstairs section accessed through the Children's Library was used apparently as an ARP station. Librarian Betty Harris, there since before the 1939 opening recalled personally, when asked by Mrs Doreen Le Huquet in November 2008, that she frequently had to sit in the air raid shelter all night from 6 p.m. until the All Clear siren sounded at 2 a.m. Her family had initially resided at nearby Portswood but to protect themselves from bombing raids, they had decamped to rural Chandler's Ford, so poor Betty had an extremely long, tiring walk home in the dark after a day's work. No wonder that she consequently left her job there for another library position.

Library Committee Minutes record exactly that Miss B.E. Harris was appointed as a junior female assistant on one month's trial from 27th September 1936, and her employment was later confirmed at Southampton's Central Library. She was subsequently transferred to Burgess Road Library and came under the supervision of Miss Higgins. Betty Harris stated that Miss Higgins was given absolute control of the new Bitterne Branch Library once completed and told that she could choose her own assistant so, when she started work a few months prior to the May 1939 opening of the brand new building, Miss Higgins selected Betty Harris, who joined her two weeks before the grand official opening day on 16th May 1939. Betty named Miss Rackham as another early colleague. On a lighter note, Betty also recalls that the Mayor was asked to select two books on the opening day to keep as a personal souvenir – however, to her utmost surprise, he selected two 'Westerns' - stories about cowboys – and nothing in the least highbrow or academic.

Statistics show that the splendid new building was breaking all Southampton branch library records in issuing its books to a large population in 1939. After war ended in 1945, times were fairly uneventful for Bitterne Library at Cobbett Road. However, the Southern Daily Echo of 6th September 1950 reported that the library had been given a place of honour at a London exhibition to celebrate the centenary of the public library service in this country. Bitterne Library's photo was prominently displayed "to emphasise the convenience of its

structure” at the exhibition organised jointly by the Library Association and the National Book League. In 1963 the building received further accolade with honourable mention in an international study of library buildings published by Butterworth. Author Anthony Thompson found it “difficult to find any faults” with the building in Library Buildings of Britain and Europe, attributing its success completely to “the active collaboration of the Chief Librarian with the borough architects throughout the planning.” Despite these glowing words of praise, 1963 is better remembered as the year the Eastern Library was built in Bitterne.

The Eastern Library eventually took over the name of Bitterne Library in 2003, which was promptly renamed more sensibly for its location. Bitterne Library became Cobbett Road Library. Eastern (now Bitterne Library) was built to be considerably nearer to Bitterne’s centre of commerce since, in the forty years since 1963, Bitterne’s centre of population had spread further eastwards still. People’s habits had also changed and few walked from the Railway Station to Bitterne village, but took car or bus straight home past the original library. Cobbett Library’s usage reduced unsurprisingly as Eastern’s increased. Cobbett Library’s pre-war designers never considered catering for the personal vehicle parking considered so essential in 2003.

Cobbett Road Library today soldiers on with a small staff and thriving continual community involvement supported by the ‘Friends of Cobbett Road Library.’ The reading room has become the community room after decoration and renovation, whilst the original wooden window frames have very recently been replaced with pristine, white plastic, double-glazed windows and the exterior smartened up. The building faces the future, face-lift complete, having served the people of the area brilliantly for 71 years with lots of life left in the old girl yet as she marches strongly towards her centenary.



2007: LIBRARY BEFORE WINDOW REPLACEMENT