

## St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016

Building:	The Old Library, 11 Victoria Street
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This research was undertaken by volunteers and is not an exhaustive history of the building but captures what intrigued them during the project. If you have any memories you'd like to share, or any queries about the research, please do let us know: <a href="mailto:museum@stalbans.gov.uk">museum@stalbans.gov.uk</a>	

### The Carnegie Library, the Philanthropist and Firkin, and O'Neill's

#### The Pub

O'Neill's pub in Victoria Street is an elegant neo-Georgian building, opened in 1911. Inside there are colourful encaustic floor tiles (ceramic tiles using different coloured clays), typical of its period. It's very large and popular. Older residents of St Albans will remember that this was their Carnegie public library until The Maltings shopping centre opened in 1988, when the library moved across Victoria Street to the second floor.

There is a delightful stained glass window on the staircase showing Andrew Carnegie holding the building in his hands, offering it to the town. The plaque underneath says that the window was given by the mayor and mayoress to celebrate Andrew Carnegie opening the building as a Free Library in October 1911. Unfortunately it is now too corroded to read easily, but there is a transcription displayed nearby, and a copy at the end of this article. The foundation stone by the entrance to the building is dated October 1910. The ground floor of the library had a big reception desk, and lending and children's libraries. Upstairs there was a reference library and library staff offices and in the basement there was a strong room for important local documents.

#### Subscription Libraries

Libraries were not new in 1911. There had been subscription libraries since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and by the end of the century there were over 1,000 in England. More recently Boots and WH Smith's both ran libraries in their stores. Boots libraries started in 1898, and by 1903 they had 300 stores. Of these, 143 had libraries. Subscriptions at this time varied according to the number of books you wanted to borrow; four books at a time, for example, could be borrowed for 42/- (£2.40) a year. The stock was mainly fiction, and members could borrow the latest books for an additional subscription. By 1920 Boots had half a million subscribers. They took over WH Smith's libraries in 1961 and Boots closed their libraries in 1966. At the other end of academic reading is the London Library, founded in 1841, which currently costs £495 a year. But recently, however, some previously free private libraries, such as those at universities, have started charging visitors.

Why did subscribers choose to pay for their books? And why did these libraries close? Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century books were expensive, even for the middle classes. These libraries were seen as safe places for gentlewomen to visit, and to meet their friends. The décor was as refined as the patrons.

There were also many deadly infectious childhood diseases at this time which were not fully understood or controlled. Even in the 1950s there was concern about polio being transmitted through library books, and subscription libraries advertised their books as 'clean'. But by the 1960s cheaper paperbacks were available, and infectious diseases were becoming rarer. It was also understood that library books would not harbour germs.

### **Literary life in St Albans**

The St Albans Literary Institute was founded in the early 1820s. This was a discussion and debating society which grew into the St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society, founded in 1845. SAHAAS has its own private reference [library](#), which is open to visitors by appointment.

The first free library in St Albans was established in 1837, when Harriet Martineau presented a large number of books and bookcases to the Mechanics Institute. Later it was based in Verulam Street, and also had a subscription library. St Albans first public library opened on the south side of Victoria Street in 1880. It was on the ground floor of the School of Art, opposite the site of the Carnegie library, in what is now the Maltings surgery. Books from the Mechanics Institute were added to this collection. There was a lending library, a reference library, a subscription library and a reading room. The building was paid for by public subscription of £2,500. Painting, drawing and building crafts were taught on the first floor.

In 1902 the County Council took over responsibility for education and by 1906 needed the whole of the School of Art building, when they bought the building from the Town Council. In 1909 the Town Council 'entered into correspondence' with Andrew Carnegie, who agreed to contribute £3,000 towards a new library.

### **Andrew Carnegie**

Andrew Carnegie is still remembered as a generous supporter of free public libraries. He was a Scotsman, born into poverty in Dunfermline in 1835. His family emigrated to America in 1848. He became one of the richest men in the world, and died in 1919. After 1901 he gave away \$350 million, 90% of his fortune. But his philanthropy actually started in the 1870s.

Andrew started work at thirteen in a cotton mill in Pittsburgh, then worked as a telegrapher for the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. He read widely, borrowing books from the personal library of Colonel James Anderson, who lent his books to poor boys on Saturdays.

By the 1860s he had extensive investments in railways, bridges and oil. He created the Carnegie Steel Company which he sold to JP Morgan in 1901 to become US Steel. He then devoted the remainder of his life to philanthropy, focusing on public libraries, and other educational and cultural projects such as the Carnegie Hall, and what became Carnegie Mellon University.

During the Civil War he was involved in laying train track through Washington, building the Long Bridge across the Potomac, and setting up rail and telegraph lines in Northern Virginia. After the war he focused on iron and steel production, becoming hugely rich. He argued that the wealthy should become philanthropists. He is quoted as saying 'The man who died thus rich, dies disgraced'.

His literary interests developed throughout his lifetime and he became friends with Matthew Arnold and WE Gladstone. He wrote books and articles for literary magazines, arguing against the British monarchy, and for a republic. He also argued against the USA having colonies such as the Philippines and supported spelling reform. His earliest generosity – in 1875 - was to the people of Dunfermline when he funded a swimming pool, and a free library, which opened in 1881. In 1903 he gave the town the 76 acre Pittencreiff Park.

His generosity to Scotland continued. He established three foundations based in Dunfermline: the Carnegie UK Trust, the Carnegie Dunfermline Trust, and Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.

### **Carnegie Libraries**

In St Albans Andrew Carnegie is best known as the benefactor of the Free Library in Victoria Street. A total of 2,811 Carnegie libraries were built, 660 of these were in the UK and Ireland. After 1900 he gave grants to meet the building costs to almost all those communities that applied. But they had to agree to his conditions. The local administration had to:

- demonstrate a need for a public library in their community
- provide a building site
- pay staff and maintain the library
- provide 10% of the cost of construction annually to support the library
- run the library from public funds, not donations
- and provide a free service for all.

Carnegie's libraries had open access shelves so readers could browse, rather than the closed stack system where borrowers had to request books from staff. This created anxiety about theft, so the main desk was large and placed by the entrance. But it was reported to have been a great success, encouraging an increasing number of borrowers.

Some Carnegie libraries in the UK have either been closed or demolished as they were considered less suited to a modern library service. The difficulties in installing IT until recently, local authority spending cuts, and their site value, led to their demise. In Victoria Street, St Albans now has a large pub in the library building, and a modern library on the second floor of The Maltings shopping centre.

### **The Carnegie library in St Albans**

In August 1909 an approach was made to Andrew Carnegie by the Council for funding, and in October the Mayor and several councillors visited Carnegie libraries in Hove and Worthing, which had both opened in 1908. The Luton library was opened by Andrew Carnegie in 1910, a year before St Albans. He donated £10,000 to Luton but the library was much larger than the one proposed for St Albans.

The Victoria Street site proposed by the Council had been the location of St Peter's Brewery, which closed in 1898 and had been demolished for road widening. It was built in 1832 and owned by Francis Parsons. It was bought by Adey and White in 1898, who also owned the Chequer Street brewery at that time.

An application was made to Andrew Carnegie for funding and he agreed to donate £3,000 towards the building costs, which were later reported to have been £4,290. In 1912 a second application was made to Mr Carnegie, who contributed a further £597, almost half the overspend.

In April 1910 an architectural competition was held and the architect chosen. Guilford W Dudley, the son of the vicar of St Stephen's Church and a pupil of Sir Aston Webb was offered the project. Twenty three tenders were received for the construction of the Library and Mr OP Drover of Kettering was chosen. A Georgian-style building was agreed and construction started in August 1910. The foundation stone was laid by the Mayor in

October 1910, and a bottle placed underneath with civic papers and a copy of the day's programme. A year later the library was opened.

The interior was large, Edwardian and impressive, with high ceilings. The reference library was on the first floor, together with staff offices and a 'room reserved for ladies'. The basement held the boiler and 'sanitary accommodation'. It also had a strong room where valuable St Albans documents were stored.

### **Andrew Carnegie is given the Freedom of St Albans and opens the library**

On the morning of October 10<sup>th</sup> 1911, Andrew Carnegie motored from London with the American Ambassador and his wife, the Hon. Whitelaw Reid and Mrs Whitelaw Reid. He was given the Freedom of the City of St Albans and opened the library in the afternoon.

A special meeting of the City Council was convened. The Freedom of the City was conferred by the Mayor, and Mr Carnegie took the Freeman's Oath:

*'I, Andrew Carnegie, declare that I will be faithful and true to our sovereign lord King George V, his heirs and successors. I will, to the best of my power, preserve and maintain the rights and privileges of the City of St Albans, and will in all things act as a true Freeman of the City.'*

He was then presented with a solid silver casket which contained the Certificate of Freedom. Mr Carnegie thanked the Mayor. He contrasted modern life with the time that St Albans was founded in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. He proposed that modern life with its newspapers, books and postal services enabled us to keep informed about the world easily and cheaply, and that public libraries made this knowledge available to all. He was reported as finishing his speech by saying:

*'... that the progress of man was upward, and that the ascent would continue towards perfection. We are on the eve of the age when man will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and in this noble change the English speaking peoples were to be the leaders.'*

A celebratory lunch was held in the Assembly Room for 135 people.

After lunch he opened the Carnegie Library. First, Mrs Whitelaw Reid was given a silver key by the Mayor to open the front door. Everyone went upstairs to the reference library, bouquets were given and speeches made. A stained glass window showing Dr Carnegie in his University of Aberdeen doctoral robes, and a descriptive plaque – given by the Mayor and Mayoress to the people of St Albans - were unveiled by the Mayoress. The window was made by Burlison and Grylls, renowned makers of stained glass windows. Mr Carnegie was reported to have been delighted with the library, and with the stained glass window.

In his speech at the opening he is reported as returning to the themes of progress and improvement: *'... Mr Carnegie said there was little excuse for ignorance in these days. The public library, free to all the people, was an institution of the English-speaking race alone. He maintained that the progress of man was upward, and that the ascent would continue to perfection. We heard of prophets of evil predicting calamity in the future, and preachers descanting on the degradation of human life and expressing great fears as to human destiny. We might safely disregard them, and pity their lack of faith.'*

Sadly, this was written less than three years before the beginning of the First World War.

Later in the afternoon school children from all over the town assembled outside in the Market Place to listen to Mr Carnegie. He spoke about the importance of libraries in their lives. He finished by saying:

*'Now, boys and girls, goodbye. I hope some day, before long, when I come back, that I shall see you all as well and as happy as you are now. Goodbye, and remember to go to the Library, and read good books.'*

A month earlier, in September, 1911, a celebration had been held in Dunfermline by the Carnegie Dunfermline Trustees thanking Mr Carnegie for his donations to 50 towns and cities in England and Scotland. He had been given the freedom of the town or city by each one. He commented that 50 freedoms 'established a record' and that St Albans would be the 51<sup>st</sup>.

### **Library: Questions of Policy and Purpose**

Issues around the purpose of a public library were raised in St Albans in the years immediately after its opening which still have echoes today:

- Is a public library a necessity or a luxury?
- Were the oak fittings and floor too grand for their purpose?
- Should Hansard (reports of proceedings in the House of Commons and House of Lords) be held, described as 'heavy ballast' by Canon Papillon (Honorary Canon of St Albans Cathedral)?
- Should it hold fiction? Or just non-fiction?
- Should 'propaganda books' be kept?
- Should musical scores be included? Comic songs, waltzes and ragtime music, or Beethoven sonatas? Or records for gramophones?
- Should there be a public appeal to buy more books, and should the working classes be asked to contribute?
- Should people be encouraged to give books?
- Should libraries be transferred to the Education Committee?
- Should visitors to the town be allowed to use the reference library or borrow books?
- How much should the librarian and library staff be paid?

But in 1912 the library was still short of books. There was space for 15,000, but it only held 7,000.

### **After 1984 ...**

The Hertfordshire County Council wanted a new library, which was regularly discussed from 1984. The new library was to be twice the size of the Carnegie Library. Building started in June 1986 as part of the Maltings Shopping Centre.

The Carnegie library closed on April 18<sup>th</sup> 1988, and the building was sold to fund the new library. It became a Firkin group pub, ninety years after the site had been the location of St Peter's brewery. It was first called the Philanthropist and Firkin, but after several changes of ownership became O'Neill's, which is the trading name of Mitchell and Butler.

The library moved to the second floor of the Maltings shopping centre and was opened by the Welsh actor Philip Madoc on May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1988. Some of its reference material was moved to the Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (HALS) in Hertford.

The Maltings was opened by Diana, Princess of Wales on April 14<sup>th</sup> 1988.

**Stained glass window and plaque on the staircase of O'Neill's / The Carnegie Library**



**OPENING OF THE CARNEGIE LIBRARY**  
THE WINDOW ABOVE THIS TABLET WAS  
PRESENTED

BY THE MAYOR AND MAYORESS OF THIS CITY  
ALDERMAN AND MRS ARTHUR FAULKNER  
TO COMMEMORATE THE ERECTION OF THIS FREE  
LIBRARY WHICH WAS ACCOMPLISHED THROUGH  
THE MUNIFICENCE OF DR ANDREW CARNEGIE  
AND THE PUBLIC SPIRIT OF THE TOWN COUNCIL  
THE BUILDING WAS COMMENCED IN 1910  
DURING  
THE MAYORALTY OF DR EUSTACE H LIPSCOMB  
JP  
AND OPENED BY DR CARNEGIE OCTOBER 10<sup>TH</sup>  
1911

MEMBERS OF THE TOWN COUNCIL

MAYOR

ALDERMAN ARTHUR FAULKNER JP FRGS

ALDERMEN

WILLIAM SAMUEL GREEN JP                      HENRY  
PARTRIDGE SMITH

COUNCILLORS

FREDERICK DANGERFIELD	WILLIAM HITCHCOCK
EZRA DUNHAM	EDWIN LEE
BERTIE CHARLES EDWARDS	SAMUEL RYDER JP
ARTHUR EDWARD EKINS JP	WILLIAM ROSE JP
WILLIAM FISK	HENRY JOHN WORSSAM
MATTHIAS THOMAS HODDING	JOSEPH WHEELHOUSE
TOWN CLERK EDWARD PERCY DEBENHAM	LIBRARIAN ERNEST WILLIAM GREEN

**Casket presented to Andrew Carnegie October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1911**

(photo from the Carnegie Birthplace Museum, Dunfermline)



(Made by the Goldsmiths and Silversmiths Co Ltd, London: H 11cm, W 20.5cm, D 11.5cm)

## Sources

### Books

Freeman, M (2008) *St Albans: a history* Lancaster: Carnegie House

Richmond, L and Turton, A (1990) *The Brewing Industry: a guide to historical records*

Manchester: Manchester University Press (also online)

Roberts, E (1979) *Chequer Street: historical background of the Central Area*

*Redevelopment site* Hertford: Herts CC

Whitaker, A (2005) *Brewers in Hertfordshire* Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press

**St Albans Library** holds a very large collection of newspaper cuttings about the Carnegie Library mainly from the Herts Advertiser October 1911.

### Online

Andrew Carnegie Birthplace Museum <http://www.carnegiebirthplace.com/>

Andrew Carnegie biography <https://www.carnegie.org/interactives/foundersstory/#>

Carnegie Dunfermline Trust <http://www.andrewcarnegie.co.uk/>

Boots libraries <http://usvsth3m.com/post/did-you-know-that-until-the-1960s-boots-the-chemist-was-also-a-library>

### Websites of some of the organisations Carnegie funded:

Bellevue Hospital, New York

<http://www.nychealthandhospitals.org/bellevue/html/about/history.shtml>

Carnegie Hall, New York <http://www.carnegiehall.org/History/Timeline/>

Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh <https://www.cmu.edu/about/history.html>

Luton Carnegie Public Library

<http://www.bedfordshire.gov.uk/CommunityAndLiving/ArchivesAndRecordOffice/CommunityArchives/Luton/InterestingbuildingsinLuton/TheCarnegieLibraryLuton.aspx>

### Personal contacts and thanks

Janet would also like to thank:

Kirke Kook, curator of the Andrew Carnegie Birthplace Museum, Dunfermline and a national expert on Carnegie's life and legacy. She welcomed me to the museum and made a major contribution by commenting on the final draft of this article. She also showed me the beautiful silver casket which holds the certificate of the Freedom of St Albans presented to Carnegie in October 1911.

St Albans Library staff, who provided me with access to many relevant press cuttings and photographs, and the Manager of O'Neills in Victoria Street who welcomed me to his pub.