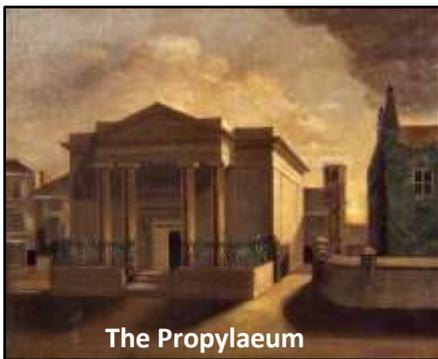


The story of Tavistock Subscription Library



Registered Charity 1118323

The Tavistock Subscription Library, as an organisation, was established in 1799. A building known as the Propylaeum had a brief life during the 1820s, but was demolished after the book collection was moved to Court Gate in 1831. Its appearance is known from an unsigned oil painting. It looked west over the road to Abbey Bridge. The site is now in the south-west corner of Bedford Square. Some of the railings were used to fence the garden of the replacement Library in Guildhall Square. A few of the stones they were set in survive, otherwise the only remains of the old building are fragments of stucco, dug up in 1997 and kept in the museum.



The significance of a library is of course not in the building but in the availability of a collection of books to interested persons, for purposes of study or recreation. The social interaction of the users is an important secondary function.

In the later 18th century, the mining industries in Cornwall and Devon, the French war and the naval dock at Plymouth gave impetus to technological development and corresponding intellectual activity, both among native sons and those attracted from elsewhere. Learned societies and libraries were founded. In Tavistock, the Unitarian minister, William Evans, and two young men of the town, Edward Atkins Bray the son of the Bedford agent Edward Bray, and John Commins, were stimulated by the arrival of a brilliant young engineer, John Taylor, to organise a public library to provide or lend books, periodicals and newspapers to subscribers, who paid an annual fee for the privilege.

A few such institutions then existed in other parts of the country, but Tavistock was earlier than either of the libraries in Plymouth, and that in Exeter. A number of prominent men from the town joined the four Founders.

Ladies were eligible, although not for office, and the families of members were admitted at a reduced fee. From 1810 the Duke and Duchess of Bedford became members. Over two centuries there have been fluctuations in numbers, and in fees, but a significant proportion of interested people in the town have continued to enjoy the facilities of the Library up to the present day. Administration was by a Librarian, Treasurer and Secretary, acting with a committee. Some of the Minutes and other records are still held in the archives.



Above. An early drawing of “Tavistock from Fitz Ford”, showing the tower of St Eustachius Church, and to the right (circled) the frontage of the short-lived library known as the Propylaeum.

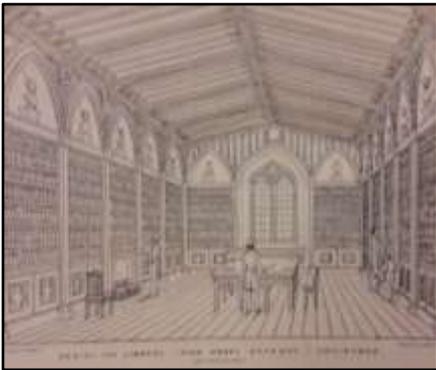
Right. An image of a group from the early nineteenth century, at the top of West Street near the foot of Rocky Hill.

The tower of St Eustachius Church is clearly visible. To the right of the seated man, in the distance, is the front of the Library building with its distinctive columns.



For the first twenty years the library occupied part of the premises of a local bookseller, William Tapson, who supplied the books and periodicals and acted as librarian. The first printed catalogue was issued in 1810, it was updated in 1817, and revised at intervals ever since, in 1845, 1873, 1886 and 1897. Over this time the number of books increased from a few hundreds to nearly five thousand. Titles were selected by the committee, but there were also many generous donations. Subjects were well-balanced between the arts, sciences, and fiction. It is much to be regretted that many of what would now be valuable 19th century books were lost to the collection at times of crisis, although happily some survived. In the 20th century the holdings were recorded on cards and later by modern technology. The proportion of fiction increased, and had to be culled from time to time, until the County organisation and commercial lending libraries reduced the demand for that type of reading.

William Tapson retired in 1819, by which time the accommodation he had provided was inadequate, so it was proposed to build anew.



In July 1820 a suggestion was made to the Duke, through his stewards, that the room over Court Gate arch be converted to a library, and the architect John Foulston was approached for advice. He provided a drawing showing how the room might be fitted up, which was later published and can be seen in the Library.

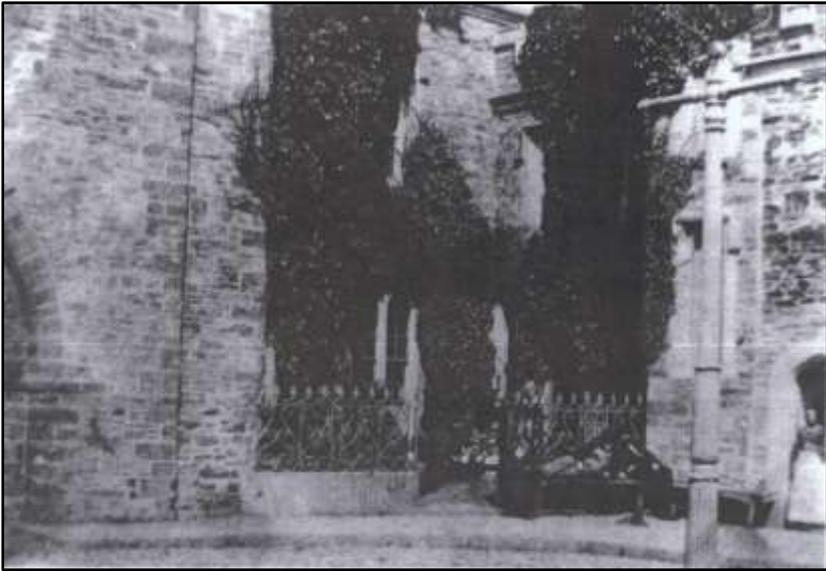
However, William Bray the Tavistock Steward was so slow to respond that late in that year it was decided instead to ask for a vacant plot behind the old Guildhall to be made available for a new building, which was to be paid for by the Library. This was allowed, despite the Duke being not wholly in favour. The Library Minutes show that the plans submitted were made by a builder, James Colling; he proposed a classical style resembling Foulston's Athenaeum in Plymouth, although the design is not identical.

The Library opened on July 1st 1822. The estimated cost of £500, to be covered from a reserve and by borrowing, had risen to near £1000 and was made up by donations and increased subscriptions. The building, top-lit from a dome, was appropriate for its purpose; it was nicknamed the Propylaeum.

The Library was sometimes referred to as an institution, in a general sense, but in 1827 a particular Tavistock Institution was formed “for the acquirement and diffusion of useful knowledge”, by means of lectures. Proprietors subscribed a guinea, a lesser fee gave admission to lectures, scientific specimens might be given in lieu. The Duke of Bedford became President. An elaborate set of rules was agreed. Although the administration of the Institution was separate from that of the Library, the same public-spirited people ran it, and cupboard space in the Library was lent for use by the Institution. The first lecture was delivered by William Evans; a printed copy survives. Subsequent lectures, mostly by Proprietors, covered a variety of scientific subjects, especially geology and chemistry. Detailed records of the Institution relate only to the first year, but it continued in existence into the 1850s. A separate Mechanics Institute was set up in the 1830s.

From 1822 the 6th Duke had been making improvements to the town, and the Propylaeum building was in the way. In 1829 he offered the Library the use of the room over the arch, suitably renovated, with additional new space, offering to compensate them the money spent on their building by a lease, rent free, for fifteen years. John Foulston had by then repaired Court Gate and now was responsible for the new Library premises. The members had some minor input. So in 1831 the Library was moved, and occupied two large and some small rooms, with a cottage for the Librarian.

Most of the books were housed in the room over the arch, but there were additional shelves elsewhere. The Institution lectures were now given in the upstairs reading room. A succession of Librarians lived in the cottage, their salary boosted by free accommodation.



The Librarian's Cottage in Court Gate pictured in about 1890.

Samuel Best, who succeeded Tapson, died in 1829, followed by Thomas Knight for three years, until his death. William Physick took over until he died in 1841. His successor, William Merrifield, was the most remarkable incumbent of the 19th century, who for thirty years ran the Library, took daily meteorological observations, and recorded the life of the town by photography. The remains of some of his instruments can be seen by one of the windows in the Museum, which also has copies of a number of his photographs.



Left. The Merrifield family with William on the left.

On his retirement his place was taken by a Mr Reynolds, then by a Reynolds son, who unfortunately absconded with the funds in 1881. Mr R. Westington followed until he died in 1895, and another memorable Librarian was appointed in the form of Mr John Quick, a well-read man, an expert on Charles Dickens, and personally popular. He was responsible for the last printed catalogue, and served until 1920, continuing as an Honorary Member until his death in 1946. Mr J. Spurway was Librarian until 1929, when the offices of Librarian and Secretary were merged, both thereafter being in an honorary capacity, and the cottage was given over to a caretaker.

The finances of the Library came mainly from the subscriptions, which paid for the purchase of books and running expenses. From 1846 there was a yearly rent of £10. Membership fell in mid-century, and in 1868 the Duke reduced the rent to £8, but leased the lecture room to the Freemasons, who used it until their new premises in Barley Market Street were built in 1901. It is sometimes thought that the elaborate chair at the end of this room was masonic, but it was part of the early fittings of the room, and according to an account printed in the 1840s was carved by a local craftsman. The room on the ground floor housed a collection of natural history specimens, largely minerals, from the local interest in mining, and in 1852 became a temporary home for John Phillips' Savings Bank, as can be seen in a Merrifield photograph, in the Museum, of the Phillipses, father and son, standing by the archway. The Library still possesses some tiles from the Abbey, a collection of minerals (not the original one) and some pictures and busts.

Membership fluctuated; the minimum was about 60 for the Library to pay its way. In both world wars the finances were for a time in adverse balance, in 1916 and in 1940. In the first war, parts of the premises were lent to the military. The Plymouth City Museum hired the lecture room to store books and pictures for some years after the second war. In 1945 there had been discussion whether the Library should be joined with the County Library, but this was found impracticable. In 1949 there were celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the foundation, attended by the Duke of Bedford. Another financial crisis in 1957 was met by raising the subscription and making economies.

Crisis of a different order arose in the 1960s when the remaining Bedford Estate properties were sold, and it was feared that Court Gate would be lost to developers. With aid from an appeal, the town council bought the buildings, but the library could afford to rent only the ground floor room, which it still occupies as a reading room. Some furniture was moved from upstairs.

Policy changed so that the book collection was for reference only, and concentrated on local topics. In 1989 the Library became a member of the Association of Independent Libraries, which helped the 200th anniversary celebrations by meeting in Tavistock in 1999. A new catalogue was printed, with a history of the Library by Jean Wans. The catalogue is now kept also on computer and regularly updated. In 2007 the Library obtained charitable status; subscriptions can be set against Gift Aid.

The Library occasionally hosts visits from other learned bodies and can be used by researchers from elsewhere, by arrangement. The subscription in 2019 is at present £12 a year or £18 for family membership, and the financial situation is eased by holding regular coffee mornings. New books are acquired, by purchase or donation; there are now over 2,000 volumes plus reference material. A newsletter is circulated. There are now nearly a hundred members. For more information, or to apply for membership visit our website at www.tavistocksubscriptionlibrary.co.uk



This pamphlet is based upon the research and writing of the late Jeans Wans and Dr Mary Freeman who were both members of the Library.