

6th FEBRUARY 2019: SPEAKER DAVID CLIFFE

“THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO CAVERSHAM”

David Cliffe, a former Librarian at Reading Library, gave an informative and amusing illustrated talk on the development of the public libraries in Reading. Most of the photographs came from the Reading Library archives.

The Public Libraries Act was passed in 1850 and there had been library provision on a subscription basis at the old Atheneum since 1807, thanks to the generous provision of William Palmer (of Huntley and Palmer's). No public action was taken in Reading until 1855 when, after a public consultation, the first public library was opened at the bottom of London Street next door to what is now the Great Expectations restaurant. It was open six days a week from 8am to 6pm.

David then went on to explain how 8 different libraries developed around Reading beginning with Battle in 1908 and finally Whitley in 1935. The first library to open in Caversham was in 1883 in a room provided by St. Peter's church and staffed by volunteers. The present library opened in 1907, thanks to funding from the Andrew Carnegie Foundation. Despite the cuts from central government Reading Borough Council is determined to keep all 8 local libraries open, albeit with reduced opening hours. Some have also now become community centres as well.

Much of the talk centred on the library development in the Old Town Hall with its cramped conditions, antiquated equipment, mice and cockroaches, a far cry from the new library on King's Road which came about because Reading Borough Council refused to hand over its responsibilities for library provision to Berkshire County Council following the 1974 Local Government Reform Act.

This was a fascinating and interesting talk which was enjoyed by all.

