
‘Books everywhere and always’: a history of London public libraries during the Second World War

Angie Shelton

The occasion

The following report is a summary of Angie Shelton's dissertation for a master's degree at University College London, which was highly commended in the LIRG Postgraduate Prize, 2003.

By 1945, nearly a hundred years after the beginnings of the public library movement in England, public libraries were an accepted and integral aspect of British life. The outbreak of the Second World War posed a serious threat to their survival, as premises were commandeered and buildings, stock and staff lost as a result of enemy action. Due, however, to a combination of factors - the wartime boom in reading, the maintenance of the service at a high level throughout the war, political endorsement for the libraries and, at a local level, the extension of the service into many aspects of wartime life - public libraries flourished during wartime.

This research focused on public libraries in Greater London. Using archival material from six London boroughs (Richmond, Westminster, Camden, the City, Tower Hamlets and Haringey), interviews with wartime library workers, and a range of secondary material, a detailed picture of the situation in London during the war years was established.

London's libraries suffered heavily from bomb damage, particularly in the Blitz. They were also threatened by book shortages, and by September 1940, a fifth of the library workforce had been lost to a combination of the Forces, civil defence and other war duties. Librarians also faced the requisitioning of library premises for vital war work. Public libraries were used not just as information centres but as ARP Enquiry Offices, Wardens' Posts, War Savings Centres and Report centres at various points during the war.

These obstacles, however, did not lead the public library service to cease its activities during wartime. The war years witnessed a boom in reading, not only amongst those seeking escape and relaxation but also in people requiring information on new practical situations such as gas attacks, food economy and civil defence duties. Whilst issue totals in London fell during the initial phase and during the Blitz, once the bombing ceased, issues began to rise again, and in several boroughs record figures were recorded in the early 1940s. The resilience of public librarians was evident from an early stage, with the establishment of

temporary branches in shops, churches and pubs, the extension of loan periods to reflect restrictions on travel, and the introduction of a London-wide borrower ticket.

The Library Association was keen to secure political endorsement for the public libraries, initiating correspondence with the Lord Privy Seal and the Board of Education. The government, clearly mindful of Churchill's words that 'books in all their variety offer the means by which civilization may be carried triumphantly forward', formally recognised the potential of libraries to raise morale. 'The Board of Education Circular of August 1940 called on public libraries to partake in 'maintaining, and where necessary, extending, the Public Library Service as part of the measures which the Minister of Labour is anxious to secure for the welfare of industrial workers'.²

But whilst political endorsement provided a huge moral boost, it was efforts at the local level that enabled the real expansion of the public library service. Books were dispatched to evacuees and the forces and to centres such as Warden's Posts and Fire Stations, and boroughs competed in book drives designed to help restock devastated libraries. Some boroughs co-ordinated full mobile library services, the most famous of which was at St Pancras. Their mobile library of several thousand books seemed to catch the public imagination and was the subject of a BBC radio interview; it outlived the war and was not disbanded until 1946. One of the most interesting aspects of the wartime service was the provision of books for shelterers. Whilst many of these were little more than collections of paperbacks managed by volunteers, in Bethnal Green a fully functioning lending library staffed by librarians was established in a Tube shelter.

Public libraries became cultural centres, hosting film showings, lectures, exhibitions, plays and concerts. They also helped plug the growing educational gap left by the destruction of schools and shortage of teachers, and many organised regular Children's Book Weeks. Adult education was also important; here

libraries worked in partnership with the Workers Education Authority and the Evening Institutes. Many boroughs participated in wider national campaigns. Military aspects and post-war development were popular themes for exhibitions, as were more practical domestic themes such as home economy and gardening, and several boroughs took part in themed events such as Salute the Soldier and Merchant Navy Week. Much library publicity was based around these themes, often taking the form of subject-linked book lists to promote the latest 'Holidays at Home' or 'Dig for Victory' campaign. Several boroughs were notable for their production of regular library news bulletins throughout the war.

What these factors ensured was that the London public library service flourished during the war, extending its role in a myriad of different directions. One of the results of this was a growing awareness as the war drew to a close of the importance of the public library service. The McColvin Report of 1942 acknowledged that libraries were promoters of 'true citizenship – of the community, of the nation, of the world...the basis of sound social co-operation'.³ The idealistic tone of this report was in no small part due to the wartime work of the public libraries. The resilience and initiative shown by the libraries during the war demonstrated their potential to act as a 'social force' in the post-war world.

References

- ¹ J. Brophy, *Britain needs books*. London: National Book Council, 1942, p.47
- ² Library Association Record 42 (1940), p.243
- ³ L.R. McColvin, *The public library system of Great Britain: a report on its present condition with proposals for post-war reorganization*. London: Library Association, 1942, p.5