

THE TRAVELING LIBRARY IN ENGLAND: A HISTORY

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Travelling libraries were the answer to the increasing concern of many librarians over the lack of books accessible to readers in the remote villages and hamlets of England. There had been book deposits over the years and boxes of books were sent out to be changed at intervals, but a greater need was recognized to provide a varied collection to the rural areas on a regular basis. This has developed over the years into a modern mobile van service which serves the population of rural England with not only light reading but a substantial amount of reference material as well.

The first recorded instance of readers borrowing books from a vehicle in England was from a horse drawn van in Warrington in 1859. This was purchased by the working men of Warrington through the offices of the Mechanics Institute. This van was used mainly within Warrington for the benefit of the working men who would not go to the Institute Library.¹ The idea of free public libraries travelling around the counties was first proposed by James Duff Brown in 1894. Brown was an outstanding librarian who served the cities of Clerkenwell and then Islington until his death in 1914. He developed a classification system about 1896 and played an important part in the development of the library profession.²

Brown's proposal for the travelling service stated in part,

"that each county council support a rate of one penny in the pound which would be enough to establish a series of travelling libraries, giving every inhabitant of the county access to thousands of well-selected books, instead of to a very few hundreds."³ Annual cost of maintenance was estimated at:

Van Complete	100	Librarian	78
1500 Volumes	187	Driver	65
One Horse	70	Horse	45
Charging System	<u>10</u>	Repairs	10
		Books	20
		Light and Heat	7
		Printing	<u>5</u>
Total Original		Maintenance	230
Outlay	367		

He also made note of the recent improvements in "electric traction": "Might get vans carrying their own motive power, thus dispensing with both horses and drivers and cut costs dramatically."⁴

Brown's idea of using horseless carriages for travelling libraries did not become reality until 1920. But travelling libraries using horse drawn vans were brought into service in connection with the Carnegie schemes for county libraries which preceded the 1919 Library Act. They were open in the evenings to serve outlying villages.⁵

In 1920, a book van, known as an exhibition van, with shelf accommodation for 1000-2000 volumes, was first introduced in Kent County and was followed by other pioneers. These vans were arranged with book shelves on each side of the van exterior to provide outside access to readers. The librarian in those days often had to drive the van because of shortage of staff. When it was decided to engage a chauffeur

in Lindsey, the committee prudently provided a folding table and a portable typewriter, so the librarian could deal with correspondence en route. "There is something heroic," comments the Carnegie report, "in the picture of a librarian typing letters and memoranda in a van doing thirty to forty miles an hour, even on the relatively level roads of Lincolnshire."⁶ It was most probable that the librarian on the early mobile library was not highly trained. According to Gray's recommendations for County Library staff in 1922, only the County Librarian and the cataloger needed the training provided in a two-year course at London University. The librarian should be a trained public librarian and, if possible, a Fellow of the Library Association.⁷

It has been recognized that the special work required of a mobile librarian demands a professional person. "It also demands one who is hardy, healthy, mentally and bodily active, flexible, and adaptable. Can such a person exist? Exist they do, with the added qualities of an unruffled temperament to deal not only with the volume of work but also with the difficult and cramped working conditions."⁸ The mobile library served a varied clientele from pre-school age to the very elderly which added to the stress of a working day.

By 1931, the areas of service were expanded as outer access vans gave way to inner access mobile units. "The first true mobile library in England was the converted bus which Manchester operated from 28th July, 1931."⁹ Most county librarians at this time did not accept the idea of the

mobile library as the best way to serve remote areas. The feeling seems to have been that the village library was the center of the community and should be maintained as the ideal center of service. Mobiles were considered to spoon-feed the general reader, and this was thought to be undesirable. "Partly this was due to the influence of the Carnegie Trust which was firmly behind the establishment of the village centre library."¹⁰ Even though the first mobile library, with service as we know it today, was introduced in Kent in 1935,¹¹ the Kent County Librarian was not wholly in favor of the project. "The Kent County vehicle had been refitted to enable books to be issued to the borrowers by an assistant working from inside the van. It visited four districts on the outskirts of the area, and remained on site for a few hours on two or three days a week."¹² Mobile Library service was introduced to Warrington, Manchester, Lincolnshire, and Burnley at about the same time. There was a dramatic increase in total number of county library readers between 1932 and 1939.¹³

With the advent of World War II, there were no further advances in mobile van service until the late 1940's. By then, attitudes toward readers in small and isolated communities had changed. In 1949, B. Oliph Smith, the County Librarian of the West Riding of Yorkshire stated that the countryman is entitled to just as good service as the urban dweller, and he set out to satisfy that demand. An ex-ambulance was outfitted as a travelling library van. It held 300 books, and travelled 225 miles of road on four routes.

Each route was to be covered once a fortnight. Owing to the lack of materials, the authorities had to convert almost anything on wheels into a mobile library or had to argue very convincingly for a custom-built vehicle.¹⁴

Expansion of services continued through the fifties. In the sixties according to Murison, "service was now being offered through more than five hundred mobile units touring the rural areas of the counties and the new housing districts of the towns visiting thousands of service points regularly."¹⁵ Vans were now made to order for library service and some included such amenities as a small kitchen or wash basin for the staff.

As has been noted, the staffing of a mobile service required a person or persons of many talents. Those advocating standards for library service recognized that mobile staff for rural areas must also have a detailed knowledge of the library's stock and potentialities as there are only a limited number of reference books available for consultation on a mobile unit. For these reasons they should be staffed by qualified librarians.¹⁶ The mobile librarian has the best access to the reader and will get to know the reader and the community in which the reader lives. The attitude of this librarian towards the reader is as important as the professionalism displayed. All the modern equipment, the varied collection of books and other materials, will not serve its purpose without the presence of a librarian who cares about people as well as books.

In Oxfordshire today, for example, there are seven mobile

vans circulating books and other materials to 380 service points throughout the county, either on a weekly or a fortnightly basis. These are staffed with well-trained librarians, professionals where possible, and accompanied by a knowledgeable driver who aids the librarian and reader as needed. The vans carry a large variety of adult books and smaller collections of children's books and reference materials. Requests are taken, are referred to the headquarters and, if possible, are brought to the reader on the next trip. A micro-fiche reader is used by the mobile librarian to locate a particular title in the collection maintained by the county. Coverage of the rural areas is extensive with some stops of only ten or fifteen minutes and others as long as three hours. High circulation reports show that the service is appreciated and used by those living in the rural areas. A turnover of each collection is guaranteed as each van librarian goes to headquarters once a month and chooses about one hundred new books for the collection, returning the same number from the mobile unit.

Professional attitudes, including those of the county librarians, have shown a complete reversal--from the earlier rejection of the travelling library (which was not thought to be the type of service needed in the villages), to enthusiastic support of the mobile service throughout England. In 1976, the County Librarian of West Sussex said, "experience shows that the mobile library gives a far better selection of books to a community, attracts borrowers from a wider cross-section of the population and issues more books than a static

village centre."¹⁷ Mobile libraries have come a long way from Warrington and Manchester and are still moving with the times. That they are capable of doing so is a measure of their effectiveness.

NOTES

1. G. I. J. Orton, An Illustrated History of Mobile Library Services in the United Kingdom with Notes on Traveling Libraries and Early Public Library Transport (Letchworth, Herts: Garden City Press, 1980), p. 10.

2. W. A. Munford, James Duff Brown, 1862-1914; Portrait of a Library Pioneer (London: The Library Assoc., 1968), p. 17.

3. James Duff Brown, "The Village Library Problem," The Library VI (1894), p. 103.

4. Ibid., p. 105.

5. Thomas Kelly, A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain, 1845-1975 (London: The Library Assoc., 1977), p. 175.

6. Ibid., p. 223.

7. Duncan Gray, County Library Systems: Their History, Organization and Administration (London: Coptic House, 1922), pp. 48-51.

8. C. R. Eastwood, Mobile Libraries and Other Public Library Transport (London: Assoc. of Assistant Librarians, 1967), p. 128.

9. Ibid., p. 36.

10. Ibid., p. 38.

11. Orton, p. 37.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. W. J. Murison, The Public Library; Its Origins, Purpose, and Significance, 2nd ed. revised (London: Harrap & Co., 1971), p. 124.

16. Public Library Service Points: A Report with Some Notes on Staffing (London: Dept. of Education and Science, Library Advisory Council, 1971), p. 23.

17. Orton, p. 85.

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