

'Pop-guns can't fight cannons': *Liberals and the Highgate library 1903-06*

by John Collins

On 18 October 2006, Highgate branch library (Fig 1) celebrated its centenary. It might be assumed that the opening in 1906 was a triumph for the Public Libraries Act, Carnegie funding and St Pancras Council, but the reality was more complex. Free libraries were unpopular with the ratepayers, and the Liberals were voted out of office in St Pancras only two weeks after the new library opened, in the very same year as their landslide victory in the general election of 1906.

This article sets the library's genesis in the party political context of the first three elections to the new St Pancras Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) – 1900, 1903 and 1906. At that time Conservative candidates described themselves as "Moderates" (1900 and 1903) and then as "Municipal Reform" (1906) while Liberals used the label "Progressive".¹ For simplicity the two parties are

described here as Conservatives and Liberals – but the other descriptions are retained in direct quotations from contemporary documents.²

St Pancras MBC had 70 members – 60 councillors elected by registered voters for a three year term, and ten Aldermen elected by the councillors themselves, normally for a six year term. There were eight wards, four with nine seats and four with six. Those particularly relevant to the story of Highgate library are Ward No.1 (Highgate, St John's and Gospel Oak polling districts (PDs)) and Ward No.3 (Bartholomew, College and Camden Square PDs), both with nine seats.³

Early opposition to free libraries

The Public Library Act was passed in 1850, and the former Vestry of St Pancras could have adopted the Act at any time, but a meeting of ratepayers in 1856 voted 330 against, with only 24

in favour. They were overburdened by the rates and it was "inexpedient to increase the burden". There were further ballots in 1894 and 1898, but the idea was rejected each time.⁴

After the first elections to the new council in November 1900, St Pancras was controlled by the Conservatives, who won 38 seats against 22 for the Liberals. The Conservatives consolidated their victory at the first meeting of the new council when the councillors elected the first ten Aldermen, almost all of them Conservatives – five for a normal six year term, and five for an initial term of three years only.⁵ There was no appetite for public libraries in the three years of control by the Conservatives.

The Liberals win power

The council's attitude to libraries changed after the sweeping victory by the Liberals who won by 39 seats to 21 in the elections of November 1903 – the only time

the Liberals ever controlled St Pancras council. It was now the Liberals who used their majority to elect five of their own as Aldermen for a six year term.⁶

The Conservatives feared the worst after the "astounding defeat" of eight of their nine councillors in Ward No.3.⁷ A meeting of the Ratepayers Association of that ward on the day after the election was told by their Chairman who had just lost his seat that he "hoped he would live to see the time when it would be illegal to knock at anyone's door to tell tales about an election. He knew of cases in this very election where Radical canvassers called and told people if they voted for the Progressives they would have electric trams, free libraries, better streets, and - here was the lie - lower rates." Another defeated candidate thought that "the question of free libraries would be certain to come up again". All they could do now was "check the extravagance which would in all probability be brought about by the new Progressive Council".⁸

Who were the key Liberals? Some but not all are remembered on the foundation-stone or the opening-day plaque inside Highgate branch library. They include the three Liberal mayors from 1903 to 1906 - Alderman T H W Idris, mineral water manufacturer ("I drink Idris when I's dri") and member of the London County Council (LCC), originally elected as a councillor for Ward No.1 in 1900, Alderman Frederick Purchase who gave his name to Purchase Street, Somers Town, and Cllr George Hickling whose 69 per cent in Ward No.2 was the highest for any party in any ward of St Pancras. Cllr Joseph Prag, re-elected for Ward No.1, became Deputy Chairman of the Finance Committee while Cllr S Lamble, re-elected for Ward No.2, became an Alderman and Chairman of the Sites and Buildings Sub Committee. We can also single out two men whose success in Ward No.3 was so resented at



the Ratepayers meeting

Alderman Idris's son William who topped the poll in that ward, and Cllr Henry Ashby who would eventually become Chairman of the Education and Public Libraries Committee.⁹

Paving the way for libraries

It was not easy for the Liberals to put their new public libraries policy into practice. Many preliminary steps were required, and it was not until 1906, in what was to be their final year, that there was anything to show on the ground.

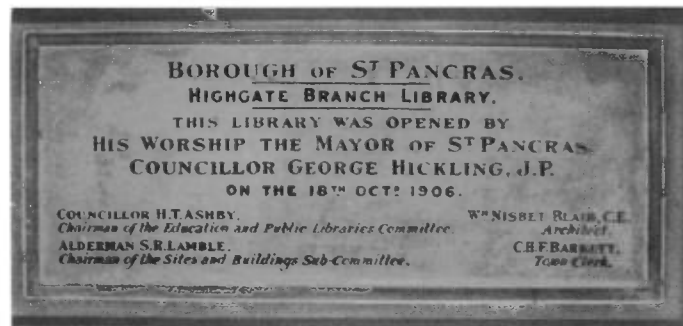
At the time of the 1903 election, St Pancras had only six standing committees – Finance, Parliamentary and General Purposes, Public Health, Electricity and Public Lighting, Baths and Cemetery, and finally Highways, Sewers and Public Works.¹⁰ Schools were the responsibility of the LCC and there was no obvious committee for libraries. However, an Education Committee was set up in 1904, mainly to deal with the borough's role in relation to voluntary schools with Cllr Ashby as its first Chairman.¹¹

By 1904 St Pancras was one of the two remaining metropolitan boroughs (out of 28) which had not yet adopted the Public Libraries Acts (the other being St Marylebone). Towards the end of his mayoral year, Alderman Idris took two key steps. He made an informal approach to the Scottish-born American steelmaker and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, who had recently offered £40,000 to Islington MBC for public libraries in that borough; and he obtained the signatures of a majority of the 70 St Pancras members (councillors plus Aldermen) for a special meeting to adopt the Public Libraries Acts.¹²

The special meeting did not take place until 23 November 1904, in the mayoral year of Alderman Purchase. There were deputations for and against the proposal, but the resolution to adopt the Acts was then carried "by a large majority", 54 years after the Act, and responsibility for implementation given to the Education Committee.¹³

Implementation

In February 1905 Andrew Carnegie formally offered £40,000 for a central library and



four branch libraries, subject to various conditions – the council had to provide the sites (their acquisition could not come out of the Carnegie money) and the running costs had to be met by the council from the product of one (old) penny in the pound on the rates. It was decided that Highgate library in Ward No 1 should be the first branch library, and £3,200 from the Carnegie money was earmarked for this purpose.¹⁴ (The proposals for the other three branch libraries and a central library in Prince of Wales Road need not concern us here).

By the end of 1905 several further steps had been taken. A site in Chester Road had been purchased for £500 from Mr W L A Burdett-Coutts, the Conservative MP for Westminster and husband of Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts, a major land-owner in Ward No 1 (who twelve years earlier had officially opened the first public library in Westminster, also funded by Carnegie). The £500 purchase price of the Chester Road site had been met by a donation from the Duke of Bedford, and so this site was not a charge on the rates. And the Education Committee had been expanded to become the Education and Public Libraries Committee, once again with Cllr Ashby as its first Chairman.¹⁵

1906 – the crucial year

The actual construction of the branch library did not start until 1906 – a year which at national level began with the Liberal landslide in the January-February general election. The Liberals emerged triumphant with 399 MPs to the Conservatives 156, with Labour on 29. All four St Pancras seats in the House of Commons went to the Liberals.¹⁶ Alderman Idris, who had by now moved with his family into Millfield, 14 Highgate West Hill, became Liberal MP for Flint in

his native Wales.¹⁷

Against the background of these momentous events at national level, "the first public library in St Pancras" (as it is described on the foundation-stone) was built to the design of W Nisbet Blair, the Borough Engineer and Surveyor who had held a similar post in the former Vestry. He is described on the opening-day plaque (Fig 2) as an architect, which by modern terminology he was not, but in the 1900s this was a role which anyone could claim until the Architects (Registration) Act 1934. However he did acknowledge the help he had received from Henry Hall, FRIBA, a Conservative councillor for Ward No.8 who was an architect by profession.¹⁸ The work was undertaken by direct labour, following a request from the Kentish Town Branch of the Social Democratic Federation who were concerned to maximise job opportunities for the local unemployed.¹⁹ Mr Blair eventually reported that the cost was £3,300 for direct labour with a further £900 on "special lines of work".²⁰

On 14 June there was a foundation-stone ceremony "which need not be of an elaborate nature".²¹ Perhaps for that reason, Cllr Ashby as Chairman of the Education and Public Libraries Committee is the only person named on the foundation-stone, but it is appropriate at this stage to mention the other members of the 25-man committee. It comprised the Mayor *ex officio*, himself a Liberal, four Aldermen, all of them Liberals, and 20 councillors – 14 of them Liberals with 6 Conservatives. Aldermen Idris and Purchase had both taken a keen interest in the library project during their mayoral years, and Alderman Lamble was a key player wearing his other hat as Chairman of the Sites and Buildings Sub-Committee. Liberals from Ward No.1 (Councillors Prag, Beaton and Gauntlett) all had a special interest in a library located in their own ward. The

2 Plaque at Highgate Library celebrating its opening (photo: Paul Jameson)

Conservatives on the Committee included Cllr Edmund Barnes, a former mayor, and Cllr Hall, the architect mentioned earlier.²²

The committee was concerned not only with the library as a building, but also with how the library service was to be run, and Mr Henry Bond, the first Borough Librarian, was appointed in February 1906.²³ As well as his role in buying books and planning for the other three branch libraries and the proposed central library, he also had to decide how to spend the £48 a year allocated for periodicals, bearing in mind a council resolution "that the betting news be obliterated from all newspapers supplied".²⁴

The official opening and its aftermath

By the time the Highgate library was ready for the official opening on 18 October 1906, the borough was well into an increasingly acrimonious campaign for the council elections to be held on 1 November. Libraries were a major issue in the campaign. An advertisement (Fig 3) by the Conservatives, or 'Municipal Reformers', gave five reasons to "vote against the (so-called) Progressives" – including the accusation that they were "'Pawning' Your Rates for Library Sites".²⁵ This was a reference to the decision by the Liberals to borrow £13,500 for 60 years, repayable from the rates, to acquire a site in Prince of Wales Road for a central library – a 'loan sanction' that was approved by the Local Government Board only after a public inquiry.²⁶ Fortunately this criticism could not be made of the Highgate site, following the donation by the Duke of Bedford.

By contrast with the "not elaborate" foundation-stone ceremony in June, there were five names on the opening-day plaque and no fewer than 15 speeches at the opening ceremony. The three politicians on the

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ST PANCRAS
Borough Council Election,
1906

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 1st.

VOTE AND WORK
FOR THE

MUNICIPAL REFORMERS

Purity, Economy and Efficiency in Local Administration on **NON-POLITICAL LINES**"

VOTE

<p>FOR</p> <p>THE MUNICIPAL REFORMERS</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AND</p> <p>St. Pancras Work for St. Pancras Men Properly Kept Roadways Cheaper and More Efficient Lighting Justice to Voluntary Schools Honest Finance, No Juggling A Non-Political Council</p>	<p>AGAINST</p> <p>THE (so-called) PROGRESSIVES</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AND</p> <p>Supporting the Wasteful London County Council "Pawing" Your Rates for Library Sites Annoying and Worrying Your Shopkeepers Cruelty and Mismanagement of Horses Waste of Your Profits and Funds And the Increased Rate</p>
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plaque were all Liberals mentioned earlier as members of the Education and Public Libraries Committee (Cllr Hickling as Mayor, Cllr Ashby and Alderman Lambie) while the other two people named were council officers - the Borough Engineer as architect and C H F Barrett, the Town Clerk, who had held a similar post in the former Vestry.

Press reports of the 15 speeches make the ceremony sound like an election meeting for the Liberals, with support from their new MPs and some genteel asides from the small number of Conservatives present. The very idea of a public library still rankled with some ratepayers who resented a free service being offered to the working classes, and this is reflected in the defensive tone of some of the speeches by the Liberals. One Alderman was reported as saying: "If the opponents of the scheme only knew the great longing the working classes had for public libraries, he was satisfied they would see the absolute necessity for them...If he suffered defeat at the election over his attitude in this matter he would at least feel that he had taken part in benefiting suffering humanity." The mayor added that: "The action of the committee had been criticised. But was not every new movement criticised?

...There was also the outcry against the Factory Acts.... But these Acts were passed, and now everybody was quite in favour of them. And so he believed it would be with regard to the Public Libraries".²⁷

The result of the election on 1 November, only two weeks after the new library opened, was a shattering defeat for the Liberals, who were left with only 12 seats against 48 for the Conservatives, even though the Liberals had won their landslide at the general election earlier in the year. For the Liberals on the Education and Public Libraries Committee, it was a bitter blow. The Aldermen with their six year terms survived of course, as did the out-going mayor Cllr Hickling who again topped the poll in Ward No.2, but the Chairman Henry Ashby, Cllr Prag and three others lost their seats - indeed the Liberals lost all nine seats in Ward No.1, the very ward where the library was situated.²⁸ Cllr Prag was particularly incensed and wrote a long letter to the *St Pancras Gazette* detailing the "lies" he had encountered in the campaign, admitting that "We could not cope with the mass of misleading literature with which our Borough was deluged". They had been "termed 'Wastrels' by the 'Daily Mail'" and "We were accused of engaging our Librarian too soon, and yet

working early and late he has not been able to get his books ready for the Highgate Library. Will the 'Municipal Reformers' be true to their pledges and abandon the remaining libraries?"²⁹

The Conservatives were delighted, not least because this time they won all nine seats in Ward No.3 where the son of Alderman Idris was among the losers, and H D Widdicombe, editor and managing proprietor of the *St Pancras Gazette*, was among those elected. Commenting on the "rout" of the Liberals, his paper offered its own explanation: "...the sober-minded middle classes of the Metropolis have taken fright at socialistic experiments carried on at the ratepayers' expense under the thin veneer of Progressive municipalisation. And then the Radical Party has been weak in its central Press, and silly in its local. Pop-guns can't fight cannons".³⁰ The Liberal Party never again controlled St Pancras MBC.

References and notes

1. The Progressives sometimes had pacts with various categories of Labour candidate - see Kevin McDonnell, "The representation of Labour in local government: St Pancras 1894-1922", *Camden History Review*, Vol.19 (1995) pp 27-29.
2. Alan Willis & John Woollard, *Election Results for the LCC (1889-1961) and London Metropolitan Boroughs (1900-1928)* (Local Government Chronicle Election Centre, 2003), p vii.
3. For other wards and polling districts, see *St Pancras MBC Minutes* Vol.1, November meeting. The *St Pancras MBC Minutes* for 1900-1906 are in 12 half-yearly volumes, hereafter cited as *Minutes* followed by volume number and either date of meeting or page number.
4. *The St Pancras Book of Dates*, 2nd edn, Feb 1908. The vote against was 6248 to 4574 in 1894, and 8278 to 4849 in 1898.
5. *Minutes* Vol.1, November.

6. *St Pancras Gazette*, 7 Nov 1903: "The Borough Elections: Sweeping Progressive Wins: The New Aldermen". See also *Minutes* Vol.6, November.
7. Ref.6, 7 Nov 1903: "The Borough Elections: Sweeping Progressive Wins: Extraordinary Moderate Rout in Ward 3".
8. Ref.6, 7 Nov 1903: "Ward 3 Ratepayers Association".
9. Ref.6, 7 Nov 1903: "The Borough Elections: Sweeping Progressive Wins: Counting the Votes: The New Mayor: The New Aldermen". For results with percentages, see Ref.2, p 103.
10. Ref.6, 14 Nov 1903: "First meeting of the new council: The Standing Committees".
11. *Minutes* Vol.7, pp 689,695-697, 865, 1039-1040; Ref.12, pp 726, 764.
12. *Minutes* Vol.8, pp 710-711.
13. *Minutes* Vol.9 January; see also Ref.14, pp 678-679, 710.
14. *Minutes* Vol.10, pp 678-679.
15. Ref.14, pp 678-679; also 527, 710.
16. Peter Joyce, *British General Elections 1832-2001*, (Politico's Publishing, 2004).
17. For address of T H W Idris MP, see *Who's Who of British MPs 1886-1918*. For address of Ward No 3 candidate W T W Idris, see Ref.18, p 748.
18. *Minutes* Vol.12, p 763.
19. *Minutes* Vol.11, p 591.
20. Ref.6, 19 Oct 1906: "Opening of the first public library in St Pancras" (remarks by Mr William Nisbet Blair).
21. Ref.19, p 722.
22. Ref.14, November.
23. Ref.13, February.
24. Ref.18, p 669.
25. Ref.6, 26 Oct 1906: advertisement by Municipal Reform.
26. Ref.18, pp 762-763.
27. Ref.6, 19 Oct 1906: "Opening of the first public library in St Pancras".
28. For results see Ref.18, p 748, and Ref.2, p133. For biographical information, see Ref.27: "The Borough Elections: Who the candidates are".
29. Ref.6, 9 Nov 1906: "To the Editor: The Borough Elections" - letter from Joseph Prag.
30. Ref.29: "Pen Points".