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TONBRIDGE FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY, 1881–1900

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The first mention of the possibility of providing a free public library in Tonbridge appears in a letter written by James Foster Wadmore of Dry Hill, Tonbridge, and published in the *Tonbridge Free Press* on 12th March, 1881. Mr Wadmore was a professional architect who had been educated at Tonbridge School and who in 1857–58 became Master of the Skinners' Company.

By 1881, there had been some substantial legislation regarding public libraries. The Museums Act of 1845 empowered boroughs with a population of 10,000 to levy a halfpenny rate for the establishment of public 'museums of art and science'. Canterbury – the oldest public library in the country – ingeniously took advantage of this Act to establish a combined museum and library in 1847, soon to be followed by Warrington and Salford.

Other legislation followed, and Mr Wadmore drew attention to the provisions of the Public Libraries and Museums Act, 1855, and the amending Act of 1866, under which the smallest town or parish was empowered to raise a penny rate for the provision of a free public museum and/or library, if a majority of the ratepayers so desired.

EARLY LOCAL LIBRARIES

The immediate reason for Mr Wadmore's letter was a crisis in the affairs of the Tonbridge Mechanics' Institute.

Records show that as early as 1826 such an institute existed in the town, but this almost certainly lapsed, and a new Mechanics' Institute was founded in 1850. This provided a library and a reading room, as well as lectures, penny readings and entertainments, but by 1880 the organisation was facing acute financial and accommodation problems.

Two other organisations provided reading matter for the people of Tonbridge during the nineteenth century. In 1836, the Tonbridge

Literary and Scientific Institution was formed, which by 1847 had a reading room and a library of 2,000 books. It evidently catered for a rather different clientèle from the Mechanics' Institute as it is recorded that the Literary Institution 'is well supported by the principal inhabitants in the town and vicinity'.¹ In 1873, however, it was in decline and the Tonbridge Local Board accepted its books and portraits for the town.

Another source of books became available around the middle of the century. William Bridger, a thriving local printer, added a Circulating Library to his wide range of activities, and in 1854 this was offering '3,000 books, mostly novels'² for a membership fee of £1 per annum. In 1887, to mark Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, Mr Bridger donated the stock of his Circulating Library – then between 1,500 and 2,000 books – to Tonbridge Free Public Library as a Jubilee gift.

ADOPTION OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARIES ACTS

Following Mr Wadmore's proposal, made on 12th March, 1881, the Tonbridge Local Board at its April meeting considered 'a requisition numerously signed'³ asking for a meeting of ratepayers to be convened to consider adoption of the Public Libraries Acts. The Board agreed but, on 4th May, it had before it a further requisition as the promoters of the movement for a public library considered that it would be more satisfactory to determine the matter by means of voting papers than by a meeting. Again the Board concurred.

On 14th May, 1881, the *Tonbridge Free Press*, recognising, as it said, that the following week people 'will be asked to vote on a question which probably many of them know very little about', carried a long editorial on the subject. The provisions of the Acts were defined in detail, and examples given of what a penny rate would cost various classes of inhabitants, and it indicated that 'something like 100 towns in the Kingdom . . . have availed themselves of the provisions of this Act'. A detailed diagram was given showing how even one large room could be laid out to accommodate a museum, library, newsroom and workroom, with space for issue counters and wall-space for pictures. 'The charm of such a place',

¹ S. Bagshaw, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of the County of Kent* (Sheffield, 1847).

² *Tonbridge Miscellany*, January, 1854.

³ Minutes of Tonbridge Local Board, iii, 114.

wrote the editor, 'is its absolute freedom', and he urged everyone to write 'YES' on the voting paper the following week.

Voting papers, accompanied by an explanatory statement signed by a committee of nine townsmen, were distributed to householders on Tuesday, 17th May, 1881 and collected on Thursday, 19th. The result was declared as follows:

Ayes	659
Noes	499
Majority in favour of the Act	<hr/> 160 <hr/>

The date of adoption was declared to be 1st June, 1881.

Having received a mandate for the provision of a free public library the Local Board acted swiftly. At its meeting on 6th July, 1881, a committee of five members was appointed to confer as to the best way to proceed, and in August the committee reported that a double-fronted freehold property on the east side of the High Street, just north of the Big Bridge, was available for £1,600. This had come on to the market following the death of Mr Henry Larking, a timber merchant, and with certain alterations the property would enable all the municipal offices to be brought together on one site. The ground floor would be very suitable for use as a free library, the first floor would provide accommodation for a board room, with clerk's and surveyor's offices and muniment room, and apartments for the librarian as well as a science classroom would be available on the top floor. There was a large garden and extensive outbuildings where accommodation could be found for a Fire Brigade Station. It was unanimously resolved that the premises be purchased and application made to the Local Government Board for sanction for a loan. Tenders for the necessary alterations were invited, and from the five submitted the Board accepted the tender of £230 made by Mr Quelez Austen of Tonbridge.

At its meeting on 5th May, 1882, the Local Board appointed a Free Library Committee of twelve people.⁴ As the reading room of the

⁴ The Committee consisted of Messrs. A. Chesterton, E. Plowright, G.D. Warner, J.F. Wadmore, R.W. Annison, J. Baker, F.T. Bridger, J.S. Charlton, G. Dadson, J. Fagg, C. Pugh and J.C. Rice. The first three were members of the Mechanics' Institute, Mr Wadmore was an obvious choice and the remainder were members of the Tonbridge Local Board. The principle of inviting certain interested ratepayers to serve on the Library Committee jointly with members of the Local Authority was continued until the Committee disappeared at the time of Local Government Re-organisation in 1974.

Mechanics' Institute had already for some years been situated in Mr Larking's house, the brief minutes of the first meeting of the Committee are concerned with *ad hoc* arrangements concerning tables, chairs, etc., obviously designed to allow uninterrupted use. It was decided that the newspapers and periodicals provided should continue as at present, and the Local Board subsequently agreed to a recommendation that they should purchase the books and other property of the Mechanics' Institute for £20.

The next few weeks were busy ones. A Book Committee ⁵ was appointed to arrange and classify the library, with power to employ an assistant, if necessary. As no book-shelves were available, the library of the Mechanics' Institute having been in another part of the High Street, the Committee ordered the erection of a few sets, as well as two gas chandeliers for the reading room and two for the library at 90s. each, subject to discount. The donors of two small sums given recently to the Mechanics' Institute were willing for these to be handed over to the Free Library, and Mr Thomas Kibble of Greentrees Park, Tonbridge – a generous supporter of the Institute – forwarded a cheque for £50. The response to a circular letter asking for gifts of books was evidently gratifying, as the Book Committee reported in June 1882 that they had been compelled to erect even more shelves.

The official opening of the Library on Saturday, 22nd July, 1882, was preceded by a luncheon at the Rose and Crown Hotel and the company then adjourned to the Free Library 'where there were already assembled a very large gathering, including several ladies'.⁶ Some idea of the premises may be gained from the local paper's account:

'The rooms thus opened consist of a spacious reading-room on the ground floor, looking into the street and entered by a vestibule; a still more spacious library behind the reading-room, approached through the latter and also by a side-entrance; lavatories and offices in the rear; and a commodious science class room on the second floor.'⁷

Mr J. Fagg, the Chairman of the Library Committee, introduced Mr Edward Cazalet of Fairlawn, Shipbourne, who declared the Library open.

Thus, in typical Victorian fashion, the Tonbridge Free Public Library started work. It might be situated in premises formerly

⁵ The Book Committee comprised Messrs. Chesterton, Plowright, Wadmore and Rice.

⁶ *Tonbridge Free Press*, 29 July, 1882.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 July, 1882.

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occupied by the Mechanics' Institute and its stock might still consist mainly of donated books, but no longer was it dependent on public-spirited volunteers for its very existence: it was now a municipal service provided by the Tonbridge Local Board and was freely available to all who wished to use it.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LIBRARY

Although the records which have survived are far from complete, it is still possible to gain considerable information about the early years of Tonbridge Free Public Library.

At the meeting of the Local Board held on 5th July, 1882, instructions were given to the Library Committee to make arrangements for the appointment of a librarian/caretaker.

From three applicants the Committee appointed Mr Abraham Boosey (a basketmaker by trade, who had acted as librarian for the Mechanics' Institute) at a salary of £40 per annum. This type of appointment was by no means uncommon in small towns, where former workers for a Mechanics' Institute often became responsible for a new Free Public Library. The terms of his appointment were:

Hours of attendance:	9 a.m. – 1 p.m.
	4 p.m. – 6 p.m.
	7 p.m. – 10 p.m.

His sons to sleep upon the premises.

To keep clean the reading room, library and lavatories.

Mr Boosey was a total abstainer, and Mr Arthur Chesterton, writing in the local paper in 1900 following the opening of the purpose-built library, recalls that it appeared almost irreverent to see papers signed 'A. Boosey, Librarian'.⁸

When Mr Boosey tendered his resignation two years later, the advertisement for a replacement stated that a 'man and wife (without incumbrance)'⁹ would be preferred, a salary of £50 per annum being offered. However, from the eleven applications received, Mr George Pressnell (alone) was appointed at the same salary as his predecessor. By 1896, his salary had risen to £57 per annum and remained at this figure until the new library was opened in 1900. Mr Pressnell continued to serve until his death in 1923 at the age of 63. No other member of staff was employed.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3 November, 1900.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17 May, 1884.

The reading room was open every day from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., except on Sundays, Good Friday and Christmas Day.

The reference and lending libraries were originally open from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. and from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. When Mr Pressnell was appointed in 1884, it was decided that these should close at 9 p.m. with an additional hour of opening on Saturday nights only, and that on Wednesdays they should close at 1 p.m. These departments were closed on Bank Holidays as well as on Sundays, Good Friday and Christmas Day.

In October 1894, the Committee recommended that the reading room should be opened on Sunday afternoons and evenings during November, December and January. This proposal provoked some letters of protest, as well as a memorial urging rejection signed by about a hundred residents. The Local Board was divided almost equally, but the proposal was carried.

Sunday opening was from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. and from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. under voluntary supervision, and all daily and weekly papers were available, with the exception of *Punch* and *Moonshine*. In addition, the *Weekly Edition of The Times*, *The Pall Mall Budget*, *The Westminster Budget* and *Great Thoughts* were provided, and an appeal made for books and magazines suitable for Sunday reading.

At the end of the three-month period, it was reported that the library had been well used, and the Committee recommended that Sunday opening should continue for a further three months, under paid supervision, but to this the Tonbridge Urban District Council¹⁰ did not agree.

In the second year of its existence the Library had a total income of £155 19s. 9d., the main items being £130 from the rates, £2 10s. 6d. from three individual subscriptions and £5 16s. 9d. from an entertainment arranged during the winter. The rent charged to the Library by the Local Board was £25 per annum, although this was reduced to £15 in 1887.

When essential working expenses had been paid, little was left for the purchase of books, and it is evident that the Committee was active in seeking gifts – and not only from local residents. In March 1884, a copy of Queen Victoria's new book *More Leaves from the Journal of a Life in the Highlands* was received. This was sent from Buckingham Palace by command of the Queen to Mr A. Chesterton, who made the application. The *Tonbridge Free Press* reported 'Her Majesty has greatly enriched the gift by graciously writing her name

¹⁰ Tonbridge Urban District Council succeeded Tonbridge Local Board on 1 January, 1895.



(Photo.: J.L. Allwork Ltd.)

Tonbridge Public Library and Technical Institute, 1900.

in the book; and it is sent as a memento of Her Majesty's connection with the Parish of Tonbridge in early life.'¹¹

It is evident from the Library Committee minutes covering the period 1882–1887 that some of the gifts could hardly be described as 'bedtime reading'. On 30th June, 1887, the Librarian reported the following donations, which are typical of the stock of many local libraries of the period:

Trustees of British Museum:

Catalogue of Fossil Mammalia, Part 4

Catalogue of Lizards, Vol. 3

General Guide to the British Museum

Guide to the Galleries of Reptiles and Fishes

Miss Moore Smith:

The Mystery of Pain

¹¹ *Tonbridge Free Press*, 22 March, 1884.

Mr W. Baker:

The Indian Mutiny (2 vols.)

The Bosphorus

The Danube

Mr Barcham:

Reading Fifty Years Ago

Mr H. Hoare had also presented five photographs in frames of the recent earthquakes in the South of France and Italy.

This minute is followed – perhaps fortunately for Tonbridge readers – by Mr Bridger's offer (already mentioned) to donate the stock of his Circulating Library to the Free Public Library and the offer was gratefully accepted.

The following table shows the total number of volumes in the stock of the Library at four different dates and indicates the classification of the stock:

Year	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J	K	Total
1882-83	—	334	969	117	329	968	587	204	459	305	4,272
1891	135	301	1,291	175	459	1,531	771	256	573	634	6,126
1893	150	281	1,253	158	430	940	450	260	260	600	4,782
1895	156	290	1,300	164	440	1,200	458	276	228	620	5,132

Classification:

- A. The Physical Sciences
- B. Art, Philosophy, Political Economy
- C. History, Biography, Travel
- D. Poetry
- E. Miscellaneous Literature
- F. Prose Fiction
- G. Magazines
- H. Theology
- J. Juvenile Literature
- K. Monthly Magazines

Annual issues for the first 13 years were as follows:

Year	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J	K	Total
1882-83											17,856
1883-84	176	293	1,842	247	542	12,091	2,361	180	1,587	184	19,503
1884-85	179	277	1,609	198	550	12,206	2,335	172	1,552	273	19,351
1885-86	119	162	1,259	204	333	11,623	1,879	112	1,492	226	17,409
1886-87	97	198	1,070	175	346	11,592	2,022	125	1,432	263	17,320
1887-88	70	158	1,324	144	349	12,326	1,781	92	1,128	231	17,603

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Year	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J	K	Total
1888-89	88	183	1,040	120	272	11,525	1,295	72	772	233	15,600
1889-90	80	121	915	97	265	12,040	1,202	50	1,018	230	16,018
1890-91	50	70	660	60	161	7,328	899	45	840	98	10,211
Aug-Mar											
1891-92	89	112	830	69	211	11,193	1,272	134	1,290	252	15,452
1892-93	84	124	932	104	283	10,052	1,128	99	1,124	257	14,187
1893-94	118	91	937	85	292	8,032	514	80	731	380	11,260
1894-95	131	116	772	90	278	8,938	556	92	724	359	12,056

The decline in the number of books issued can probably be attributed to two causes: firstly, in the earlier years there may well have been an element of novelty in borrowing a book; and, secondly, as this wore off, many users of the library probably found it more to their liking, after the long hours of work common at the time, to spend an hour or so reading newspapers and periodicals in the company of their friends.

A century ago, when comparatively few people could afford a newspaper or periodical, a good selection of such reading matter formed an important part of the stock of any library. In 1883-84, £30 13s. 0d. was spent on newspapers and periodicals and £14 18s. 2d. on the purchase of books. In that year the following were provided in the reading room, those marked with an asterisk being presented free-of-charge:

<i>Times</i>	* <i>Methodist Recorder</i>
<i>Standard</i>	* <i>Animal World</i>
<i>Daily News</i>	* <i>Our Work</i>
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	* <i>Banner of Faith</i>
<i>Daily Chronicle</i>	* <i>Baptist</i>
<i>Evening Standard</i>	<i>Field</i>
<i>Globe</i>	<i>Punch</i>
<i>Echo (3 copies)</i>	<i>Fun</i>
<i>Pall Mall Gazette</i>	<i>Spectator</i>
<i>Graphic</i>	* <i>Alliance News</i>
<i>Illustrated London News</i>	* <i>Liberator</i>
<i>Building News</i>	<i>All the Year Round</i>
<i>English Mechanic</i>	<i>Cornhill Magazine</i>
* <i>Kent Messenger</i>	<i>Chambers' Journal</i>
* <i>Kent & Sussex Courier</i>	<i>Century Magazine</i>
* <i>Tonbridge Telegraph</i>	<i>Argosy</i>
<i>Tonbridge Free Press</i>	<i>Good Words</i>
* <i>Tunbridge Wells Advertiser</i>	<i>Cassell's Magazine</i>

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* <i>Churchman</i>	<i>English Illustrated Magazine</i>
* <i>Church Times</i>	<i>Leisure Hour</i>
* <i>Fireside News</i>	<i>Bradshaw</i>
* <i>Nonconformist</i>	

After use, daily and weekly papers were offered for sale, and, in 1896, it was decided that those remaining unsold should be given to the Union Workhouse and the Isolation Hospital.

It is significant that as late as 1900 a higher sum is still included in the annual estimates for the purchase of newspapers and periodicals (£38) than for the purchase of books (£35).

Both the Library and the Reading Room were originally heated by open fires but, in 1894, it was decided to hire two gas-stoves for the reading room as it was felt 'that this would check the practice of sitting round the fireplace which has formerly caused some inconvenience, and at the same time enable the room to be kept cleaner'.¹²

A complete financial statement for the two years ended 25th March, 1895, has survived and is as follows:

<i>Expenditure</i>	£	s.	d.	<i>Income</i>	£	s.	d.
Newspapers, &c.	76	3	4	G.C. Blamey (Legacy)	30	0	0
Printing	3	14	6	Subscriptions	3	0	0
Stationery	2	3	6	Donation		5	0
New Books	78	7	6	Sale of Papers	11	4	2
Librarian	104	0	0	Sale of Catalogues	8	6	0
Rent	30	0	0	Sale of Tickets	5	14	7
Gas, Coal, &c.	26	17	7	Fines	8	7	6
New Catalogue,				General District			
Balance of Account	22	9	0	Rate	321	11	4
<i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i>							
and Case (Blamey)	30	0	0				
Incidentals	5	10	1				
Balance in hand	9	3	1				
	£388	8	7		£388	8	7

The sum of 1d. was charged for a borrower's ticket. Fines were charged on overdue books, but it would seem that in general the early borrowers were fairly law-abiding, as not until eight years after the opening of the Library was the Librarian authorised to issue a County Court summons against a borrower and the guarantor over a book not returned.

¹² Minutes of Tonbridge Local Board, ix, 235.

Having secured a Free Public Library at an early date for such a small town, Tonbridge then seemed to follow a pattern typical of smaller libraries in the late nineteenth century, having a sole member of staff, with long hours of opening, and being largely dependent on donated books. A more surprising aspect was the opening of the reading room on Sundays – and particularly during the time of evening worship – and it is unfortunate that it is not known whether the experiment was repeated.

THE BUILDING OF A NEW LIBRARY

Less than three years after the opening of the Free Public Library, the Local Board had before it a letter from Mr Wadmore asking about the possibility of enlargement of the library. In addition, requests were being received from a variety of organisations for use of parts of the premises, including accommodation for an art class. In 1886, on the Board's instructions, the Engineer drew up plans for a three-storey building at the rear of the premises which would include a classroom and a museum, as well as additional library and office accommodation, at a cost of £700. However, no action was taken.

Soon, the need for extra accommodation became acute. Not only was more space needed for municipal offices, but a Fire Brigade Station was vital, the Library was over-crowded and the Technical Education Committee desperate for accommodation.

In February 1891, application was made for sanction for a loan of £1,200 for the erection of a Fire Brigade Station and extra accommodation for the Library at the rear of the premises. Following an enquiry, the Local Government Board sanctioned a loan of £470 for the Fire Station, but requested further information showing what means would be adopted to meet the increased expenditure if a loan were granted for an extension to the Library, as it appeared that a penny rate would be insufficient.

In view of this setback, the Local Board felt it unwise to incur further expenditure on their present premises, and the General Purposes Committee was asked to make recommendations as to a site where accommodation could be provided for all these purposes. They reported in July 1893 that, although they had considered a number of sites, they had not found one which combined the advantages of the present, and they had therefore approached the owner of the adjoining grocer's shop who had intimated that he would be willing to sell. They submitted plans and estimates prepared at his own expense by Mr Wadmore's son, Beauchamp – also an architect – with the

recommendation that new and larger premises should be erected on the present site.

The Local Board seemed strangely loth to make a decision, although the General Purposes Committee continued to press for purchase of the adjoining property for £900 and re-building on the enlarged site. Added urgency came in June 1894 when the County Technical Education Committee indicated that the accommodation in Tonbridge was not good enough for them to continue the annual grant of £100.

From 1891 until almost the end of the century the question of providing suitable premises was to prove a major preoccupation. One site after another was proposed and rejected, and it seems strange that a Local Authority which over the previous twenty years had shown itself swift to adopt new Acts and to provide better facilities should present a picture of such vacillation in resolving the question of municipal accommodation. Even the knowledge that the County Technical Education Committee wished to make Tonbridge a centre for work with the rural population did not concentrate the Council's mind sufficiently for it to come to a conclusion.

Eventually, in August 1895, the local Technical Education Committee took the law into its own hands and directed that a joint meeting of their Committee and the Library Committee should be called. Basing their recommendations on the plans prepared two years earlier by Mr Beauchamp Wadmore, they considered that a building adequate for all technical education, museum and library purposes could be provided for £4,500, including the cost of the site, and made definite recommendations as to how this sum could be raised. After some members had visited Maidstone, Rochester, Chatham and Gillingham to inspect the accommodation provided in those towns, the Joint Committee recommended that they be empowered to invite competitive designs for a building and to offer premiums for the two or three best sets of plans.

In May 1896, a site at the junction of High Street and Barden Road came under consideration and negotiations were started with the owner, Mr George Manwaring. Eventually, the three shops on the site, together with four cottages at the rear, giving a depth of approximately 100 ft., were purchased for £1,900, and the blacksmith's forge adjoining, owned by Mrs. M.E. Hodge of East Peckham, was acquired for £400. This site seemed ideal – not only was it near to the expanding end of the town, but it was within a stone's throw of the railway station which would be convenient for those travelling from the rural parts of the district. The purchase was financed by a loan of £1,925 from the Yorkshire Penny Bank at £3 per cent per annum.

In March 1897, the Local Board agreed that an open competition for plans for the new building should be held, with prizes of thirty, twenty and ten guineas for the three best sets of drawings. By July, the Plans Committee, comprising three members of the Council, with Mr F.W. Hunt of Portman Square, London, as Professional Assessor, had considered 28 sets of plans and awarded first prize to J.H. Phillips of Cardiff, the second and third prizes going to John Jackson and H.A. Cheers, respectively, both of London. After Mr Phillips had submitted a revised sketch for the front elevation his estimate amounted to £4,250.

Eleven tenders for the building were received, the lowest being from Merredew and Wort of Stevenage. Replies received concerning their financial position being satisfactory, their tender was accepted, and following a Local Government Board enquiry held on 20th September, 1898, sanction was received.

In November, however, the Council had before it a letter from Merredew and Wort declining to build: although the minutes do not reveal the reason for their withdrawal, one can infer that they were not happy over the specification, as the Council decided 'that the quantities be submitted to Mr C. Norton of Tunbridge Wells for his advice as to whether they are workable'.¹³ Mr Norton, a surveyor, considered that amendments were necessary and the previous tenderers (excluding Merredew and Wort) were invited to submit revised offers. As a result, the tender of £5,650 from Mr R. Langridge of Tonbridge was accepted, and it was agreed that £6,500 for technical instruction purposes and £775 for public library purposes should be borrowed from the Public Works Loan Commissioners at £2 15s. 0d. per cent per annum, to be repaid over 30 years. On 3rd July, 1899, Mr G.T. Richardson took up his duties as Clerk of the Works at a salary of £2 10s. 0d. per week.

With the new building nearing completion the Council decided that the Technical Education and Free Library Committees should be combined. Mr J.W. Little, an architect, was appointed Chairman, and the Rev. C.C. Tancock, Headmaster of Tonbridge School, and Mr F. Collins, Headmaster of the London Technical Schools, agreed to serve.

Mr W.H. Cooper, the Art Master, was appointed Secretary and Organising Master of the Technical Institute at a salary of £130 per annum, Mr G. Pressnell Librarian at £100 per annum, and Mr F. Shaw Caretaker at £1 per week, with rooms in the building and gas, coal and uniform.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xi, 303.

On 26th October, 1900, the new building was opened by Lord Avebury. The choice was an appropriate one – as Sir John Lubbock, he had become the Parliamentary champion of public libraries and had sponsored the Public Libraries Act of 1892 which consolidated the legislation for England and Wales, and in 1899 had been made an Honorary Member of the Library Association. His name lives on in Tonbridge, for after the erection of the building a road was cut from the High Street along the northern side of the premises and was named Avebury Avenue.

The building was of brick with a tile roof, the arms of the Tonbridge Urban District Council being set in a floriated panel at the front, together with the words 'Technical Institute' and 'Public Library'. Heating was by means of hot-water pipes and radiators, gas-lighting was installed, and the large windows were arranged to open inwards at bottom and ceiling level.

The Library, on the ground floor, was entered from the High Street. On the left was the reference library measuring 26 ft. \times 17 ft., on the right the reading room 42 ft. \times 23 ft., and facing the entrance, at the end of the entrance hall, the lending library with an area of 980 sq. ft. Also included were a librarian's office, store-room and lavatory. The floor was of wood blocks, and the adjustable shelving and newspaper racks of pitch pine with brass fittings.

The Technical Institute was entered from the side street. The heating chamber was situated in the basement, together with a plumber's shop measuring 23 ft. \times 18 ft. 6 in. A joiner's shop 24 ft. \times 19 ft. and a secretary's room were on the ground floor. On the first floor was a lecture hall 50 ft. \times 24 ft., capable of being divided into two rooms, a chemical laboratory 31 ft. \times 18 ft. and two classrooms, 26 ft. \times 17 ft. and 21 ft. \times 19 ft. The second floor comprised an art room 50 ft. \times 24 ft., a modelling room 31 ft. \times 18 ft., the art master's room and a large store. The caretaker's quarters, also on this floor, consisted of a living-room, parlour, scullery and pantry, with two bedrooms above. The building contained two staircases, for males and females, respectively, and cloakrooms and lavatories were arranged on mezzanine floors over the entrance.

After many years of indecision, Tonbridge now had a purpose-built Free Public Library and Technical Institute, ample for its needs at the turn of the century, and erected on a site providing plenty of room for expansion. An entirely new chapter was about to begin.

TONBRIDGE'S CLAIM TO FAME

Over the years the comment has been made in a number of guides and handbooks to the town, and in newspaper reports, to the effect

that in 1881 no town as small as Tonbridge had adopted the Public Libraries Acts. Does Tonbridge really have such a claim to fame?

At the luncheon held at the Rose and Crown Hotel prior to the official opening of Tonbridge Free Public Library in 1882 the Headmaster of Tonbridge School, the Rev. T.B. Rowe, proposed a toast to Mr Edward Cazalet of Fairlawn, Shipbourne, who was to perform the official opening. In reply Mr Cazalet said:

'... It is not a small matter in a town like Tonbridge to have succeeded in establishing a Free Public Library. It is comparatively an easy matter in large and opulent towns, where a small rate is sufficient to cover the expense; but the fact that Tonbridge is one of the smallest towns that has succeeded in establishing a Free Library greatly enhances the merit of the undertaking, and is especially creditable to the public spirit of its citizens.'¹⁴

After adjourning to the Free Library building Mr Cazalet, in declaring the Library open, commented:

'... indeed I am informed that scarcely any other town in the Kingdom with a similar population and equal resources has succeeded in bestowing upon its citizens an institution equal in accommodation to the one in which we are now assembled.'¹⁵

In 1900, when the purpose-built Public Library and Technical Institute was opened by Lord Avebury, the *Tonbridge Free Press* reported that Mr W. Baldwin, Chairman of the Tonbridge Urban District Council, said he believed they were one of the smallest towns in England to avail themselves of a Free Library when the opportunity was given them, and he was sure the town had profited by the step that was taken.¹⁶

From this evidence, it seems clear that at the opening of neither library building was it claimed that Tonbridge was the smallest town, but only that it was one of the smallest, to have adopted the Public Libraries Acts.

On nine occasions between 1853 and 1912 Parliamentary Returns of Public Libraries were called for, and during the period now reviewed such Returns were called for in 1885 and 1890. Examination of the 1885 Returns ¹⁷ shows that 81 places in England had adopted the Acts earlier than the District of Tonbridge, and three of these had smaller populations than the Tonbridge figure of 9,400. The relevant details are as follows:

¹⁴ *Tonbridge Free Press*, 29 July, 1882.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29 July, 1882.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3 November, 1900.

¹⁷ *Parliamentary Papers, Session 1884/5, lxi. Return showing the Names of all Places in England, in Scotland, and in Ireland, that have adopted the Public Libraries Acts. . . (1885).*

	Population	Date of Adoption
Bideford	6,499	28/2/77
Hertford	9,000	1855
Lichfield	8,360	1856
District of Tonbridge	9,400	1881

It would seem, therefore, that the claim made in more recent years that no town as small as Tonbridge had at the time adopted the Public Libraries Acts cannot be upheld; nevertheless, Tonbridge can claim an honourable record at fourth place in the league.

What circumstances combined to bring into existence in a small country town such as Tonbridge a Free Public Library at such an early date?

A Local Board was not formed until 1870 and the minutes of this authority reveal the enthusiasm of its members to take advantage of new legislation and to develop amenities of all kinds by which the town might benefit. When the opportunity to provide a Free Public Library arose, the Board lost no time in making arrangements for such a service.

The Library accommodation provided in 1900 was to serve the town for the next 80 years, although the rapidly-increasing demands made on the service after the Second World War meant that additional space was desperately needed. During 1980-81, extensive alterations were made to the original ground floor and a two-storey extension added at the rear, thus providing a self-contained library, approximately three times the size of the 1900 building.

With the constantly growing demand for adult education, over the years the Technical Institute, too, has expanded on the same site. In addition, when the University of Kent at Canterbury decided that a Centre must be provided in West Kent, Tonbridge was chosen for its location largely because of the convenience of the site and its proximity to main-line train services, and the University Centre was opened in 1984.

Although the search for a site in the 1890s must have seemed interminable, the choice eventually made by the 'City Fathers' has enabled Tonbridge to-day to have a complex of buildings housing University Centre and Adult Education Centre, as well as a Free Public Library, on a central site which still provides space for further expansion.